

*BIRKENSNAKE 6*

How about this?

A subscription card bind-in (do they still put those in magazines anymore?):

But this one is a death subscription. You have three subscription choices (all imminent—delivered within the next month):

A. Die in your sleep (no awareness of it, no pain, no chance to tie up loose ends—you just go to sleep and never awaken).

B. Suffer a mortal blow while outdoors alone on a hike (a bear attack, a lightning strike, etc.—die within an hour, immense pain, awareness that this is it, your death—perhaps one last cell phone call or text if you're able, perhaps a final note on a boulder using your own blood...)

C. Terminal cancer diagnosis (three pretty good months, then a slide toward pain medication and immobility and oblivion—opportunity to put things in order, say your goodbyes, die in hospice with the possibility of loved ones at your bedside).

Your choice?

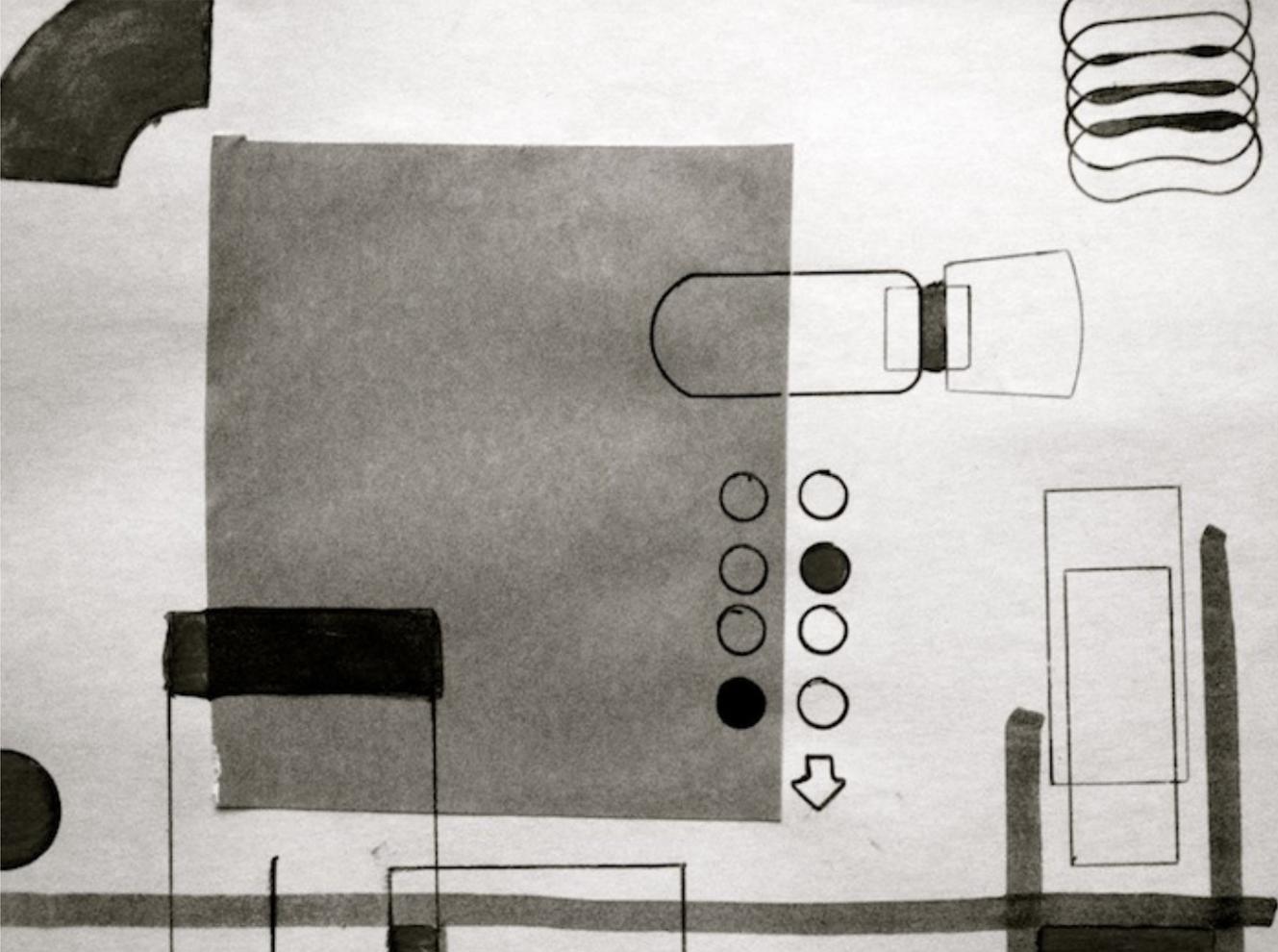
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## LOOKED BACK IN TURN

Brian Michael Barbeito

The plastic was a small boat made from bright orange. The man was the driver, and he had on a green life vest with a blue circle on the back. Inside of the blue circle was a white cross. The woman had the same emblem on her back and she was small, and blonde; her hair was medium to long. They also had on oxygen tanks. The oxygen tanks fit on their backs and were hollow on the inside. The last thing that was a part of it was a ladder; the ladder went to the water, but there was no water; just the carpet, and therefore, the ladder just stayed in the boat and they walked, or rather, were assisted, in walking around the carpet. And it was a bungalow, where the anoles went up and down the outside walls, and waited for something by the thick, sub-tropical plants.



## THE GREAT ARTIFACT

Rob Walsh

It was not quite of plastic, said one onlooker. Nor quite of flesh, said another, while others began to murmur that it looked rather like the Great Artifact which hung painted or embroidered along many official hallways.

It was still breathing. With a stick, they might lever the artifact face-up, said a man who had just such a stick at the ready.

He started forward, suggesting that they might first probe what appeared to be a mouth gasping for an unavailable breath or framing its last words. Or belching discreetly, added another.

Yet in paintings or embroideries, the Great Artifact always hovered self-luminously, added another, whereas this thing was dull and lying on its side in the dirt.

Most of the onlookers were equally dirty after having just come up from the mines. Several of them were now bearing sticks. The circle tightened, and shoulders began to touch.

At the tolling of a weak, rhythmic bell located in one of the packs the onlookers wore strapped to their waists, the circle pulled taut, and one onlooker said, at once rather decisively and rather indecisively: Let's poke the thing!?

Others supported this idea. The one most clearly in favor of it, a small boy called Newel, posing in the en garde position with a stick he had recently untrenched, began to stumble forward, and the sweeping path of his

stick met the ankles and pant legs of those nearest him. Suddenly and most sternly, he was warned to cut it out.

Cut it out! the mature voice echoed. Yet there seemed to Newel something ever-dimensional about the artifact. *Boundless, seamless, centerless*, he thought: he was too young to know how to clarify these thoughts but precisely young enough to stumble head-long into them and continue to stumble further and further in until he was fully submerged, until he was thinking aloud and jabbing the stick—

An old woman took it.

Newel instinctively raised his finger to lodge an objection. Then he noticed that the skin around her face hung in low flaps that were so loose and uneven that at one point, she must have been significantly larger than she presently was, significantly more imposing, and enough of this previous stature remained to silence the young boy.

She warned him, didn't she? she said flatly. Now you're going to remain still, she continued. When you prove that you can be still, perhaps then the stick might be returned—

It was taken from her, wrested from this old woman by a man who immediately transferred it to the bundle of sticks under his arm.

This was the town elder.

Though he was not eldest, nor even of senior ranking, here was a man far more ambitious than any other man in this realm, and more dangerous. He said nothing. He went on to collect the rest of the sticks while squinting here and there.

Newel and the old woman were rubbing their hands where the stick had been wrenched, his coated with

leftover pieces of bark, hers with skin.

After Newel had wiped his hand on his pants, he raised this same hand and said, Elder?

The old woman touched his shoulder and lowered his hand by force. She predicted, not unkindly, that his pleas to the Elder would gain little attention. His voice was far too high-pitched, she said, too underdeveloped, not even girlish yet. It was a register that held particular attraction to old women like her, and even to some domestic animals, but for men like the Elder, it was simply an inaccessible frequency.

I can see that your heart is in the right place, little fellow, the old woman said. You just want to learn more about this thing that has fallen plop in the middle of the dirt field, this semi-breathing thing which may or may not be the Great Artifact. Little faces like yours are easily puzzled, the old woman went on, and quite often they are puzzled to a state of nausea or tears, but rare indeed is such confusion which can bring the simultaneous onset of both these states, which I see that you are nearing. She laughed, and to Newel it resembled a classroom noise he was quite familiar with, that of erasers beating the chalk out of each other.

Calm down, little fellow, she said after a duration of silence. We must allow men like the Elder to run their course. Her curtains of facial skin swayed like those of a house too spacious for its occupant. Men like the Elder, she added, have one concern, little fellow, and the sooner you process this information the better. These men will retain control at all costs.

Take your eyes from my folds of skin. Look where

my finger is pointing. He has finished collecting all the sticks and yet has made no move to investigate or even acknowledge the possibly Great Artifact where it lies with softer and softer tremblings.

Watch now, little fellow. Watch as my wisdom-encrusted voice manages to attract his attention when I say, Elder?

Elder? she said.

Soon, emboldened, others joined her query. Elder?

The Elder turned. He asked what they were saying his name for.

It was some while before a response was ventured, softly: You're standing in the way of the artifact.

You've just about railed off the artifact, another ventured, by extending your arms from the central baluster of your torso as though to keep us from approaching a hazardous ledge!

Oh? the Elder said. That? This? said the Elder. You mean that? My standing in the way of that?

He began to laugh, then stopped, then began to laugh again. His mouth appeared full of something he could not quite bring himself to swallow, nor quite to spit out. Then he said, All this murmuring of my name has been generated by that?

This? he added.

That's no artifact, the Elder said finally. He bid them, in a voice he used solely for bidding, to heed his words.

That's a compound.

A compound? said the old woman whose loose skin had once again captivated the young boy, reminding him of an orange that he had once peeled halfway before his

hunger abruptly disbanded and it had seemed better to just toss it into a bush rather than continue to carry it around with him. This was the moment, as the old woman questioned the Elder, the word *compound* the scratchiest and most wizened word that Newel had ever heard, when he began to consider her brave. *A brave one*, he thought suddenly. Newel, like many young boys, was somewhat dazzled by bravery. So he did not mind the position she had begun to stand in, shield-wise between Newel and the Elder, her arm pressed rigid and not unseatbeltlike across his chest, a position that Newel's mother, who worked in the Elder's marketing division, and Newel's father, who was the Elder's physical therapist, had never taken before.

Compound? many uttered. These voices followed her lead and were growing more and more determined.

Yes, the Elder said. That's right. This is a compound all right, and by the looks of it, a compound of several different mucuses and something like blood, if blood were more like snakes.

Why, someone questioned, cannot a compound also be an artifact?

The old woman, her arm still diagonally securing Newel's young chest, turned to look at the author of this question with sheer approval, Newel observed, but considerably sheerer terror.

The Elder likewise turned to focus on the author of this question. Slowly, he explained that such questions made him antsy. When the logic behind his inferences was questioned, it always, he said, always made him antsy, and when antsy, he slowly continued, he was prone to

exert his leadership rather spastically.

Newel, indeed, had witnessed these sudden, fitful bursts of leadership before. He placed one hand gently on the old woman's waist while moving closer to her. Hold on to me, boy, the old woman said or did not say—Newel was not quite sure, as just then a hand of wind and cold had dug between them and swirled everything around, and the leaves of trees bordering the dirt field began to fall, and the old woman's scarf flew back into his face so that all of Newel's sight, except for that of leaves falling at the outskirts of his vision, was obstructed.

Or it's just a vegetable, the Elder said. Heed this: a vegetable *cannot* be an artifact.

Several additional voices began to murmur, and their words soon congealed to express an overwhelming sentiment: it didn't look much like any vegetable they'd ever seen before.

True, the Elder admitted. Fine. It's too greasy for that. Too completely be-spattered and -smeared and -smirched with grease, this *thing*, and you know what our scientists have told us about the dangers of grease.

Now an old man began to move forward. Rags bundling his body, beard bundling his face, he limped forward and stood at the base of the Elder as at the base of a mountain, where he turned to address the crowd: That's not grease, friends. That's shine! That's pure shine like the shine you see on the tapestry of the Great Artifact in the Hall of Omens!

The Elder picked this old man up and dangled him by a sort of handle which had no outward manifestation but seemed to reside deep in the old man's forehead and then

swung him through the air and finally into an outlying settlement of chopped wood.

What happened next happened too quickly for Newel to remember clearly. He could only remember flashes, each occurring with the distinct noise that also occurs when a light bulb burns out: the old woman opening her jacket to reveal a stick; the snapping impact and flying fragments of the stick as it broke across the back of the Elder; and the scooping up of the artifact and the feeling as if he, too, had been scooped up by the old woman, though in fact he was just running behind her as fast as he could.

\*

It was the foggiest zone in the realm. Where the cold air from the north meets the warm air from the south, she said, while concurrently meeting the bottom of a valley, where all the heaviest mist has settled, where most of the lower halves of our bodies are in perfect obscurity, and you'll notice, she said, that we are visible only from the torso-up, and there is a sense of wading slowly, laboriously forward, although our movements, you'll notice, are in no actual way impeded, the old woman said.

That old man, she added, was my husband. Not my first. The second, perhaps? No, but you could call him the last, as his kind will never be equaled.

You? she laughed. You think you might equal him one day? Take his place?

Newel had not yet said anything.

You think because I lost him defending you, my arm across your chest, that it is your role to one day take his

place? Oh no, he was far too gallant, the old woman said. You could not hope to match his gallantry, and I am anyway far too old for you to think of me in those terms. Best to abandon that line of thinking.

Newel still had not spoken a word. She held his gaze through her curtains of flesh as older women have so often held the gazes of young boys, most often treeborne, peeping through foggy glass and forbidden curtains of bedroom windows, then turned away and with one step forward disappeared in the fog.

She reappeared through the fog, now on the other side of Newel, and said, Answer me this. Why did you follow me?

Newel began to point at the artifact under her arm as he considered his explanation.

But no, she said breathlessly, little fellow, you mustn't! Yes, there is much I could teach you about maturity. Why, no doubt the experience gained would help you to someday win over a young woman, perhaps with the status or character traits of a princess, who would otherwise not give you the time of day. There are ways to enthrall princess-like young women who would otherwise not give you the time of day. They rarely, she said, leaning toward Newel, want you to do to them what they say they want you to do to them. These kinds of young women are sitting around waiting for a young man who has been trained by an older woman to show up and do to them exactly what they have sworn up and down never to tolerate.

Perhaps I could train you, little fellow. Would you be the first that I have trained in this art? Perhaps we will indeed revisit this topic, the old woman laughed. For now, she said, turning serious, let us focus on the artifact. She

patted the artifact under her arm.

Come! Stay close to me. There is someone we must visit.

\*

It seemed to Newel that they were sinking, falling through mouths in the fog. A steep descent that rounded suddenly. Then they began to plod upward and the fog melted away to reveal a small lodge.

There was a scientist in there, the old woman said, one who could be trusted not to betray them.

You are a young fellow, are you not? the woman said. You are a young fellow who has surely been exposed to this modern crop of televised dramas where the following happens: those who a certain party trusts not to betray them eventually and inevitably and heartlessly and mercilessly betray that certain party.

You're nodding. Why shouldn't you nod? Indeed, you're still nodding, aren't you? Heartless betrayal is both the engine of modern television and a kind of stainless upholstery to which no ethical principal can stick. These days we expect—nay, require, insist—that the hero be heartlessly betrayed five or more times before he is ultimately worthy of his final goal.

Now you're looking at me like this: what's stopping her, this old, physically unalluring, though perhaps psychologically very alluring woman, with large remnants of skin from a long ago battle and ultimate victory over an unnamed condition, from heartlessly betraying me, a young fellow, whose innocence remains primarily intact, and whose pores, I might add, are so small, so closed, as

to be nearly invisible? Where are your pores, little fellow? Why do you now take one step back as I take one step forward? I'm reaching out to touch your face, and you're taking another step back and craning your neck away.

The artifact, which had remained relatively still, suddenly puffed out like a fish or a lizard seeking to win a mate, and though it had no eyes, indeed no discernible limbs or other parts aside from what may have been a mouth, Newel felt that it was gesturing, somehow indicating the door of the lodge, which at that moment began to creep open.

\*

She was not dressed like a scientist. Newel took a good look at her, then took another step back to reassess. There was nothing logical or systematic about the arrangement of her outfit. He looked up to her eyes. They were smaller than Newel would have hoped, so small that he felt as though he were looking through the wrong side of the peephole in a security door. While she could discern him entirely from her vantage point, there was no hope, even if he were to cup his eyes and press them right up against her face, that he might ever gain clear visibility of the being within. He took another step back.

He's always taking steps back, the old woman explained. She sighed, then displayed the artifact, and the scientist took it in a manner that was unnecessarily hasty, Newel thought, perhaps even greedily, and disappeared inside the small lodge.

Newel followed cautiously. He glanced about the room.

Finally, he located the artifact atop a narrow workbench. He did not approve of all the glinting, toothed surgical instruments depending from racks at such close proximity, and he raised one finger to lodge an objection—

First things first, the scientist said. The first thing we must determine before pre-, pro-, and post-surgical evaluation of this artifact: where's your Mitchum?

Lost, the old woman said.

You lost him? In the fog?

No. Or, yes, in a manner of speaking, she replied. We'll need to use fog as a metaphor. Mitchum challenged the Elder.

Dear me, the scientist said. Your Mitchum is gone?

Indeed: I have no Mitchum. I feel—

Mitchumless.

Yes.

He was so gallant. You do realize, don't you, that I always wanted Mitchum for myself and had even designed various plots to this end?

Yes. But you see, I chose to defend this young boy—the old woman pointed at Newel, who was lingering apart from this conversation in the half-shadows in the corner of the room—instead of defending Mitchum.

I see. Then it follows that the boy will take Mitchum's place?

The old woman leaned in and whispered something to the scientist and then backed away so that the two might exchange a look that Newel could not help but find blatantly, extravagantly conspiratorial, and then before he knew it, he was running, grabbing the artifact, and tucking it under his arm.

\*

He was in the fog now. The fog became vines that stroked him constantly. There were ample opportunities for stumbling. Somehow the vines became the veins or snakes in the artifact that Newel was staring and staring into as he ran. He did not take his eyes from it.

He was in the sunlight now, in a sort of clearing. He stared at the artifact in his hands. Thick-trunked trees ringed them. At the center of the clearing was a sizable rock. I'll sit down on that rock, Newel thought. That's where I'll catch my breath.

But Newel did not sit down on the rock. He did not catch his breath. He had just done something, hadn't he? He had done something brave, decisive, momentous. It was a turning point for him, and in that moment, it was as if a tide had wiped his prior self away. He was now defined by this. He was now the boy who stole the artifact.

He took a seat on the rock.

He sat a while.

He still felt like Newel.

He sat a while longer.

Yes, he still felt like Newel, he was certain of that. But there was something else, too. As best he could understand it, he felt that while he still felt like Newel, he felt just as strongly that what he had felt like for the prior duration of his life had not really been Newel after all.

## THE AQUARIUM

Anuk Arudpragasam

The aquarium seller took a small fish net out from his bag. He rolled up his shirtsleeves and leaned over into the tank, where the goldfish, fleshy and swollen, lay motionless in the water. He cupped her gently in the plastic mesh and brought her slowly to the surface. He prodded her body with his thumb and forefinger, and like an old woman's breast her fluid-filled abdomen gave way without resistance as he pressed. He turned back to the woman, who was watching him anxiously from a distance.

"The swelling is due to pus, ma'am. She probably has an infection. It would be best if we tried to remove the stuff."

"Are you sure that it's an infection?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"I thought maybe her stomach was so big because of eggs."

"The females won't usually produce eggs unless a male is present. And you can tell from the kind of swelling that it isn't caused by eggs."

He pushed heavily into the belly with his forefinger to demonstrate that the thin, watery substance inside the fish could not have contained the gem-like orbs that give birth to life.

"So what are you going to do?"

"We have to make an incision in the skin," said the man. "To let the pus out."

The aquarium seller set the goldfish under the water, on top of the mesh, between the front two edges of the tank. He then asked the woman for a pin or a needle, preferably new, which, after a moment of hesitation, the woman brought out. Holding the fish steady between his thumb and forefinger, he squeezed her belly until it looked ready to burst, and then, not letting up on the pressure, inserted the needle's sharp point into her body. A thick, yellow pus pushed out into the water, spreading out and thickening as the man kept squeezing more and more of the blood-tinged ooze from the incision. The process went on until almost all of the pus was pushed out of the fish, until the substance was suspended like a toxic cloud about the net.

Satisfied, the aquarium seller turned to face the woman. She had left his side and was sitting on the settee, her eyes closed and her head folded into her hands.

"Ma'am," he said gently. "Everything is alright. The fish is fine."

She opened her eyes. She stood up and studied the tank. The cloud of pus had dissipated, leaving the water slightly opaque, but the goldfish was swimming with a new animation, as if a heavy burden had suddenly lifted. Her belly no longer was swollen and her skin, no longer stretched out, gently sagged. She was back to normal except for a tear where the puncture had been made, to which a slender yellow-red thread of discharge was tethered. At this the woman winced and looked away.

"What about that?"

"The wound will be alright in a few days, ma'am."

"Nothing will happen?"

“Nothing will happen, ma’am. Just make sure to put new water in the tank tonight so that it does not get infected.”

The woman opened her purse to get out the money she owed him but the aquarium seller was already at the door and shuffling out of the flat. He insisted that she did not pay him anything. She had been a regular customer of his for several years now, and it was his duty to see after the health of the fish he had sold her.

Things proceeded as usual at school the next morning. The woman served the small queue of boys that wanted food before classes started, then helped to unpack the items that the catering vans brought in. The sausage rolls, cutlets, and buns near the front, the cakes, eclairs, and desserts in the middle, and the drier, less popular items, the biscuits, sandwiches, and processed goods, at the back. The crows gathering steadily around the canteen. Each vanguard less easily deterred than the one before. Every few minutes one of the three ladies had to wave her hands and shout in order to keep them away. Once they had finished getting everything ready for the morning, they waited quietly on an assembly bench outside, staring out across the emptiness of the dusty playground. It was another thick, sultry day.

The boys were rowdy as usual at interval. Shirts untucked, sweating and panting like horses, pushing, shoving and cursing, they waved their money violently in the air until they got what they wanted. One of the boys was especially rude and the woman made sure to ignore him as long as possible. When at last she handed him his

donut, he curled his lips and narrowed his small eyes.

“Look at her dirty fingers,” he said loudly to the boy next to him, who smirked and turned to look at her hands. “How does she expect us to eat what she touches?”

The woman made no response. She continued serving food as though she hadn't heard the remark. The boy next in line smiled apologetically and said good morning and she felt better almost at once. If she had ever had a son, the woman thought, that is how she would have brought him up. Gentle and respectful. Shirt always tucked into his shorts, and morning breaks always spent quietly inside the assembly hall.

The interval over, she went to the sink at the back of the canteen and soaped and scrubbed her hands under the water. The school bursar came by at noon to let them know the decision about the management structure following Prashanthi's retirement. The woman listened in surprise, having completely forgotten about the long-awaited change. Someone new would be joining the canteen to take over the staff and stocking duties. Mahesha was to take over Prashanthi's position as manager, and the woman was to keep her present duties. The bursar asked if everyone was happy with the new arrangements. They looked up at the short, round man, and nodded in unison.

“Good,” the man said. “If there are any further questions, just come and see me in my office.”

They watched as he turned and walked towards the main building and then they began to get the canteen ready for lunch, the woman moving with more briskness than usual. Not once in her five years had she ever been

late to work, and hardly ever sick. She wasn't unfit, had no health problems, and still walked the twenty minutes to school and back every day. The boys liked Mahesha better, naturally, she was young and pretty, friendly, of course. But all the same, she'd been at the school just three years.

The woman's thoughts gradually turned towards the afternoon. If she got home early enough, she'd have time to make sure everything was in order. The bell rang for lunch. She set aside the pastries she wanted to take with her, then began serving the large crowd of boys that had gathered around the canteen. She packed what she'd set aside neatly into a little box, and padded them with tissue so that they didn't crumble on the walk home.

## TWO

Katharina Goetze

Three climbed through her hole before anyone else could move. Through the shaking fence we could see her walking in their sand. And then—when she turned around to wave at us—the bullets hit her.

We ran back to our car, started the engine, and drove. Three and the scissors still lying in the sand on the other side. In the rear-view mirror the soldiers trying to fix the fence getting smaller in the distance.

We didn't expect to be back before the next morning; that road was bumpy. We went on and on and each bump we could hear the sound of the metal cutter hitting the roof violently up and down. Four got sick of it. She threw up in the sand and we had to leave her at the next gas station. I believe there were some Bedouins who were taking care of her.

Two and I never spoke again about what had happened. It was a long way to where that border ran that had always distinguished us from them.

## ASSAY THE ASSAIL

Cooper Renner

Assay the Assail, mates! It's the rodeo, and oh how we rode! Did you commend the commandments in proper order? Kiss; pass. Piss, Cassie! Oh the fleshy freshness, the flash of the spouts, the tropical jellies coming out. And out. Did you put them back in? Under the dusty human umbrella, the bloom of betrayal, the hitch of the belaying, the rope and the pinions. And the pitons! No one is a Puritan under all that powder! And Nature never objects to dander or the hot wafting catch of smoke on the breeze. It's shiny, it's shine that touches every nerve. And the dust. I mention it again. It's a codicil to your will.

## ISLE OF THE DEAD

Norman Lock

## 1.

Six weeks before leaving New York to begin a new life in Kansas City, Karl found the three books, in a case where he had stored a camera lens unused since his “anabasis the year before.” Inscribed on each of their frontispieces in an ornate cursive hand was the name A. Böcklin.

“It’s not so much that their original owner was named for the nineteenth-century painter of *Isle of the Dead*,” said Karl. “That’s unnerving enough. But that I should have chosen them, not from the same shelf where proximity would have mitigated the effect of chance or whim, but from entirely different sections of the bookstore—that is what’s really unnerving. And strange.”

“You’re assuming that ‘A’ stands for Arnold,” I said, “when the name might just as well be Albert, Alfred, Adolph—or Arleen.”

“It’s *Arnold!*” he nearly shouted at me. “Make no mistake.”

I wondered at his fierceness, but to be frank, I did not understand his preoccupation and anxiety.

When I returned to my apartment, I searched the Internet for “A. Böcklin–Kansas City, Missouri,” and found this notice, posted during the previous year:

Arnold Böcklin, age 43, remains in a coma at Saint Luke’s Hospital, the result of a severe head-trauma

injury suffered in a hit-and-run accident on August 22, outside his home on Sandusky Avenue. Members of the Kansas City Kiwanis Club, in which Böcklin had served in a number of executive capacities over the years, held a benefit dinner for Böcklin on October 19<sup>th</sup> at Lidia's Restaurant.

## 2.

I said nothing about Arnold Böcklin of Kansas City, whose age at the onset of unconsciousness had been Karl's own when he bought the three paperbacks during a trip from Michigan's Upper Peninsula to Phoenix. Karl and I had fallen out over *Palimpsests*, his album of photographs taken of billboards and hoardings where "the delamination of time," as he wrote of his project in the introduction, was revealed in a haphazard collage of commercial, political, and self-righteous exhortations. "By the injuries of weather and accident we glimpse our disintegration." His prose style, like his pictures, was baroque, as if the world were a crust of manners, ornament, and signs empty of meaning. I thought that he had squandered art's resources, as Borges in a preface of his own had once defined the Baroque. In my opinion *Palimpsest* had little to recommend it other than Schwitters' delight in the colors and textures of trash. I said as much to Karl.

I was stupid to have goaded him. (I admit to envying him for the sale of his photo collection to Abrams.) I could see he was under a strain—"absorbed," as he put it, "in the problem of the three books," which had come to him "purposefully, if not supernaturally," the year before,

for a reason he could not guess. My not so well-meant criticism had enraged him, and he shouted for me to leave his apartment. I never saw him again.

Had I not behaved stupidly, Karl might have said how he felt about the confluence of their two, formerly separate but apparently parallel lives. (He and the twentieth-century Böcklin were the same age.) All that afternoon before going to see Karl, I had thought how Böcklin might have cast a net in the form of those paperbacks, trusting that someone with a like intelligence and sensibility would find them, regardless of how they were dispersed inside the shop, and by the strength of an extraordinary sympathy be held in thrall to them—or, more to the point, to their former owner. Once this idea had taken hold, I could not shake it. I was terrified. Not that I believed Böcklin had sought out Karl exclusively. To believe that there was anything more than coincidence behind the problem of the three books needed a suspension of disbelief impossible for my rationalist's mind.

Two months after Karl had left his job as a photo editor for *Axiom* and his apartment on the Upper East Side, however, I followed him to Kansas City.

### 3.

I have often imagined my conversation with Karl, the one we never had.

“Wouldn't it be better,” I would have told him, “to get rid of the books?”

“I can't do that.”

“They're not exactly rare—”

“I’m not interested in the books! Not any longer. They’re only a kind of writ...”

“Writ?”

I would not have understood anything of this. Not at the time.

“A warrant, a summons requiring me to appear at a certain place, at a certain time...”

“What place, Karl?”

“Kansas City. I’m not sure when. Soon, I think.”

“You think that A. Böcklin—”

“Arnold Böcklin.”

“That he wants you to come to Kansas City—and do what?”

“To take his place.”

#### 4.

The books’ titles? Karl never told me. What matters is not which three books might have had power to ensnare him but that any books could have had such power. To say that a book has enchanted you, enthralled you, spellbound or captivated you is not what this story is about. Those are just expressions of interest no matter how profound or of pleasure regardless how intense. An encomium useful for book promotion. A blurb. But what had happened to Karl was something dangerous and truly “life altering.” What happened to him has nothing to do with reading. I doubt he had ever read his three problematic paperbacks although he might have read the texts themselves at an earlier time, under other circumstances. No, this account of mine has nothing at all to do with reading and everything with fatality, by which I mean fate and death.

What happened to Karl overturned reason. I almost said that what happened to him upset the order of the world, but I'm not sure that it did not somehow affirm it.

## 5.

Karl had abdicated in favor of Böcklin. How else does one write of a renunciation so absolute that the seat of oneself—the centrality of a man's or woman's being—is ceded to another? How else interpret an attorney's letter naming me as Karl's literary executor, with instructions to forward royalties earned by *Palimpsest* to Arnold Böcklin, residing in Kansas City, Missouri?

I went there in February, hoping to find Karl, or Böcklin—I was not sure which of them I would discover living in the 500 block of Sandusky Avenue. I found evidence of the latter, who, despite his dire Internet notice, appeared to be alive and well. I could only guess that Karl had assumed the other man's identity. To what degree I cannot, even now, say.

During my three days in Kansas City, Böcklin seemed just beyond reach. The office where he sold insurance was always closed, but a sign on the door indicated that he would return soon. Although I waited, I never saw him. One morning I went to his apartment and found hot coffee on the stove, toast on the table ready for buttering. Traces—always traces! Finding an appointment book on his dresser (drawers, like the closets, filled with clothing I remembered having seen Karl wear in New York), I went to the house of a client, only to be told I had “just missed Mr. Böcklin.” I did not ask the young housewife standing in the doorway to describe him; I

did not want to raise her suspicions. No, that's not the truth. I was afraid to be given so conclusive a proof. It would be better, I thought, if the facts behind Karl's disappearance were commonplace. It would be better if he had been murdered, his body dumped into the Missouri River. Fear it was, also, that prevented me from going to Saint Luke's Hospital. Would I find Böcklin in a coma, or Karl—changeling and object of a cruel metamorphosis accomplished on that isle of the dead which the nearly extinguished mind in deepest sleep will, perhaps, become?

Several of our mutual friends blamed me for not looking deeper into the matter. But by the end of three days, I couldn't bear to think of Karl any longer. I returned to New York and did my utmost to forget him.

The following year, after picking up the thread of my life, I received a postcard from Kansas City. On the back, this sentence: *Just as nature abhors a vacuum, filling its dead space by irresistible force, so will a weak will be absorbed by a stronger.* It was written in an ornate cursive hand, which I seemed to recognize.

## LION IS ALONE TO NOTHING FUN FOR PLAY

Freddy

Lion is alone to nothing fun for play. Wolves have friend to each other at the park. Joel wants to eat animals of meat. Hawk is enjoying a social group in the forest. They are going to different travel in the United States. Joel is human of muscle that most unconventional way in the forest. Lion want to meet wolves ignore to him for escaped. Wolves search to together predators in some areas the other states. Joel can be hide sneak their wolves group on the grass. Lion is brave and confront to them that immediately wolves. They are accepting to help Lion together with wolves in the forest. Joel is play with lion of fun all time in day. People think wolves and lion attack worse that terrible in the forest from country. Joel and Hawk look different a shape sky with star at night. Wolves are angry to Joel and Hawk together to friend a fun in all day. They are visual effects to human different lion and wolves from other animals. Joel and Hawk are enjoying and play a journey in the land and forest, but it is different skin and color with us. Joel wants to be king then he can be improvement a better strong to them for wolves. Hawk says, wolves are accepted to establish such a respect him for king. He did struggle to wolves hungry killed animals of meat. We would be plates for food on the land. Joel and Hawk are teaching wolves to each other between food and drink in the forest. Hawk wants to discuss social group with wolves in the cave. A lion defeats wolves then Hawk is accept to king for lion. Joel is happy with wolves in some areas.

## DIE

Diana Hamilton

Kevin, chevron, sat across from the circle in Cantonment Clinch, considering the compactness of the pips, fashioning the hoop of his hoop-and-pole game from two leather-strapped beaver teeth. He held in his mind a series of images, none of which would change the game's odds, but parts of Kevin (your call which) were wrong-headed for the dreary particulars of simple probability: four colored dice showing all six possible sides with pips; bone, knucklebones; a portrait of his dead brother made of dice numbering the total days he lived (and all the while the wrong image distracting him, the joke made universe-wide of the one-sided, the 1/1 likelihood of getting screwed).

— “Why do you always put the dice next to a ruler?”

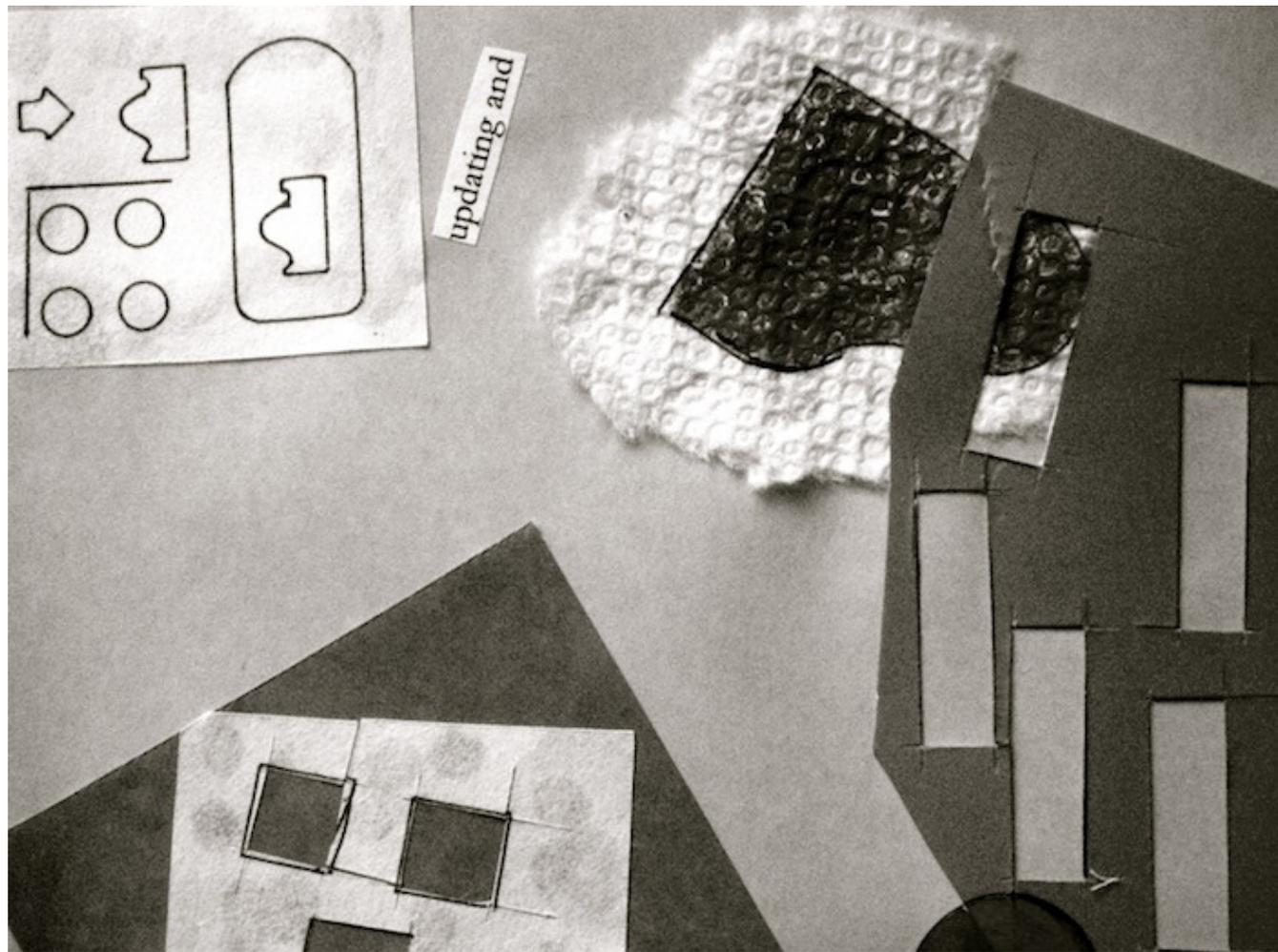
— “What should I do today bearing in mind the things I am not capable of doing?”

He cast and summed all 11,097 dice, though he had long lost the brother with whom passed the dice's companion, the knowledge that would make sense of the outcome 17423 and 7/24. “I set myself a goal of getting at least 500 dice this year and I'm on 7 at the moment.” If he had not scorned the boy's questions—though irritating, they were questions we all once asked ourselves—he might not have found himself alone in the wrong century, or if alone, as in menstrual seclusion, alone with others alone; if he had realized the importance of the question perpetually demanded by the coin-flip, he might have

been looking for the smaller, more relevant number, 1 or 2.

– “So some dice look exactly like another, but if one is bigger, then it isn’t a duplicate.”

– “How could it be? Is an exact 1/100th scale model of the tower bridge a duplicate of the bridge?”



updating and

## INTERVIEW WITH GLENN LANGOHR

### Part 1

*Your call is now being recorded.*

EL: Okay; now being recorded.

GL: Alright.

EL: So we better be as entertaining as possible. For every second this is being recorded.

GL: Let's do this, then.

EL: Do you have your entertainment voice on? I know I have mine on.

GL: Yeah. I'm good.

EL: Okay...

GL: I'm always ready.

(laughter)

EL: So, my first question is... umm... the type of books, that are popular-among people-the people that you were around-like-what are, what are popular books?-I'd imagine, like religious texts, like the Bible and the Koran... et cetera. Is that an accurate perception or-?

GL: Yeah: it's: those are religious texts that prisoners use to, uh, use the paper to roll cigarettes with.

EL: Oh really.

(laughter)

GL: Yeah; no; I actually read the Bible a lot; I read the Bible a lot in there, but, at the very back of the Bible, there's these little pieces of paper that you can use to roll up cigarettes or like almost as good as rolling papers: or

other things, but.

(laughter)

GL: Yeah, as far as like reading books, any book is good; I mean—umm...romance books,—uh, crime books... thrillers...truth stories... any kind of book's good in there; and everybody's got different tastes—there's actually libraries and stuff...so you can get almost everything, from...from umm—from Sidney Sheldon, Harold Robbins, newer stuff would be Lee Child...umm—Robert Ludlum's a popular one, you see all the movies coming out now, all those books: I mean even Louis L'Amour; like westerns and stuff...but then you know, like psychological thrillers, medical thrillers, you name it; it's in there, being read.

EL: Yeah. So it's really diverse then. It's not...—

GL: Absolutely: very diverse. Yeah.

EL: Okay. And is—what's the popularity of reading?

What's the general sense of it? Is it a rarer thing— or...?

you think: umm: actually, it's a slight segue... but: do you think, people read more when they're in prison?

GL: Absolutely. Absolutely. So: basically—uhh: that's all you have to do. Is read. So there were times when I was reading for eight to ten hours a day: just non-stop: and I became well-read, because of—because of it. And so, that's pretty much where people learn a lot of—a lot of—a lot of uh, a lot of knowledge from reading books in there. There's nothing really else to do and some of the places are really locked down, and so that's your—that's your best time-killer, and if you're stuck in a cell for twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, or almost that much, books are your best friend.

EL: Has it ever occurred to you, like—like maybe it'd be

better for my writing, if I went *back... (laughter) ...*to prison?

Like-

GL: Yeah!

EL: Yeah?

GL: Yeah. Abso-Absolutely. I don't think so, I don't want to say that, because I could doom myself, but you,

EL: Yeah. Yeah;

GL: You have a point right there. Like I'm pretty much-locked down, the way I am here-like, I isolate, and I do all my writing: and *then* I go out and-and engage in life out here. That's the only way I can keep my writing going, is to-is to basically be that disciplined; because I-like I said, I do have ADHD and I'm all over the place. If it's, if there's noise over there going *ding ding ding ding ding* I need to go investigate what it is. If there's movement-I just-I'm all over the place, so-the only way for me to,

EL: I'm *very much* the same way.

GL: You know.

EL: Most people are wired for that,

GL: Yeah.

EL: I don't blame them; I mean I think it's instinctual... I think it's evolutionary,

GL: It is. I think so too. I think so, too. I think it's...-a survival, and...what's going on over there, what's- what do I need to know about,

EL: Yeah.

GL: And it might be-it might be more entertaining than what I'm doing right now, (laughter)

EL: I think we respond first most deeply to sound, and then,

GL: Yeah.

EL: Most deeply to visuals?

GL: Yeah.

EL: And I think...the, ...uhm-*gratification* of reading, the reception of reading, how it's uh; discursive, and how-you know-it's based on,-(sigh)-translation of a word into a meaning, into an understanding? it's a slower...a slower intake?

GL: Yeah. Right.

EL: More steps there? It's not as instantaneous a gratification?

GL: Yep.

EL: How do you-um, when you're making the audiotapes, um; Do you...; read in like a prison-like atmosphere? Is like the background noise...?

GL: Yeah. Absolutely. So basically, I'm-I'm with a studio microphone, and I'll throw my voice into Mexican prison guards-as they sounded, while I-as they sounded while I was in there-...Mexican prisoners speaking from one cell to another one; the same way that they're talking...-like to give you an idea...uh-or-or a block gun-a block gun going off in a riot: it's like BOOM!...BOOOOOOM!!!!...-and then they'll yell: LIVE ROUNDS COMING NEXT!!! DOWN, DOWN, DOWN! GET DOWN! (laughter)-just-right? You're-you're in this-it's just-it's just the storyline; it's just the way it is in there, and then like,-you know, you'll see-you'll see a- Mexican-like-you'll see who's got the most control, by-by watching from your cell, and seeing people fish their lines and how they communicate...so all that's being...written, and comes across to the reader-and-the way they-the way the inmates sound. You know, I-I-that's the funnest part about it. Is throwing my voice

into a *black* person's voice; into a *Mexican's* voice; into a *prison guard's* voice.

EL: So:—that's interesting...— So: what is your experience, of the reading voice in your head?—Like, we kind of all have reading voices, and they sort of subtly change, based on our location; based upon our mood—based on the, you know— the tempo of our environment—

GL: Right.

EL: Umm... Do you feel your—your inner, internal reading voice—changed significantly?—umm... in prison—versus out of prison? And if it did, in what way.

GL: Yeah: Absolutely. Well: I start off with ADHD, so I'm hyperactive, I'm all over the place, and, before I went to prison, if it wasn't something that held my interest; I couldn't remember what I was reading. And it'd be so frustrating. I'd read and read and read and read—and I wouldn't remember *anything*. And so it'd be so irritating and frustrating. Well, the ADHD and being stuck in a cell for twenty four hours a day seven days a week...made me almost go completely insane, and I think, what—what saved me from going insane was reading. And I was finally able to like, slow my fast moving mind down, being stuck in a cell, isolated, and I was able to retain what I was reading. And anything became entertainment...and—and worth—worth my, my attention, because there was nothing else, so, it definitely changed: uh—my writing style, is, is much the same way: it's like...my—I have ADHD, so when I'm in the—when I'm in the zone, it's *flying out*: I'm writing so fast, so clear...—it's—my writing's great that way; sometimes I have trouble concentrating, and—I—I just have to keep going over it—to, to get that flow back...but, it's

definitely—my, my writing’s definitely uhh: *fast-paced*: very fast-paced...Like I would—I would say it’s kind of—like... James Patterson. Who writes with very short chapters. And he, he seems like he must have ADHD, because he writes the same—I write the same way. It’s very: to the point; very fast; description; describe what’s going on; set the scene, set the character, go straight into the character motivations...and: action. I’d say I write a lot—similar to him. Similar to his style.

EL: And I’m wondering what the relationship of that is, to what you’re saying: how it’s more...—like I’m certainly not in prison right now—(laughter)—how it’s, how it’s more uhm, appealing? for somebody—uhm—with the prison, with the prison environment, with the prison setting: to want to read, to have the patience, and have the,—uh—conditions necessary to read, what that is—what that relationship is to a person who’s *not* in prison, who’s still a heavy reader, what...—Uhm—Do you know what I’m trying to say; do you know what I’m trying to get at?

GL: A little bit.

EL: I haven’t formulated—this is just kind of me riffing, but it’s interesting; because—Uhhh...

GL: Now that—Now that I write so much, I’m writing *non-stop*. I keep publishing new books, new audio-books: I’m really having to force myself to become more disciplined, to go read other people’s books again. Like: I grew up in prison reading... Reading like—starting with like, Louis L’Amour...to, James Patterson, James Clavell...just, you name it: uhm—Sidney Sheldon...Harold Robbins—uhm: All the women, Tammy Hoag; and all the really good women one; good women authors...—and you name it,

like Michael Crichton—just keep going on and on and on. But now that I'm out here, there's so much to do...I'm all about writing and publishing and marketing...that I'm really having to force myself to go to the beach, and— and *read other people's books*. Because that's kind of how I learned how to—how to you know; formulate books to begin with. Yeah: so, so out here: to get, uh to get people, umm— that, fall into my categories and genres—which are basically you know: drug culture, drug war culture... prisons, crime thrillers: stuff like that—uh—I put, I, I'm putting everything into audio books—so I'm doing all of the narrating myself, because: like you're saying, out here, most people don't really have time to—to just—you know: go into exploring,—new authors, new books... If they're not already a reader: it's a little too late. But in *prison*: absolutely. That's where people are starting to read, that's where they're learning how to read better.—that's—they're being self-taught, through books, in prison.

EL: Okay,

GL: And that's not going to change. Because they don't have computers... they don't have uhhm—you know, all the—all the stuff we have out here to get distracted. They're stuck in a cell.

So it's like, you're stuck on a shelf in contemplative mode—I call it like being stuck on a shelf, for, you know—you're—you don't age as much; you're sitting in a cell—and, if you're in a high level prison, you're not getting out of the cell very often: so you're basically in contemplative mode.

EL: So when you were in prison, were you already thinking about—I—I remember reading—you'd—you started

writing from solitary confinement? So—at what point did you start writing; at what point did you say, I have to start writing all of this down. And how—how was that experience for you.

GL: Uhm...when I was in the county jail, and I had just lost my limo business...and, wasted all my money that I had prospered—to-to—I-I had a limo business, and I bought a condominium, and for the first time in my life I put as much energy into a legal business, as I had, in the drug war before. And so I—I—you know I ended up with good credit, I had a condo, and I was doing good and I made it. And then 9/11 knocked my—my limo business in the dirt, and...uhm...I ended up back in the drug war. And... I ended up fighting a big case. And previously, I had fought crazy cases and I basically learned the law myself. Like through studying case law, points of authority...you don't really have that—the—the best attorneys...in California: it's pretty much a railroad system; when they want you they're going to get you so you have to learn the law, so...basically, I started writing in the county jail, facing a *lot* of time. And I kept writing... and so—uhm,...

EL: And that was the first time you'd written? Like, in a serious,?

GL: Yeah,—

EL: What was your writing experience before that?

GL: My writing experience before that was: *minimum*.

I started writing in prison. And my reading experience before going to prison was: *minimum*. But, being in prison and reading for ten hours a day for x amount of years before I started writing, sped up the process of knowing—

you know-how-how to format a book from beginning middle end,-you know, I-self taught. And I mean-it's the same thing with artists. Like I told your partner, your editor partner-I'm getting *amazing* artwork from prisoners from Pelican Bay, all the way down to local prisons... to-Southern California-*amazing* artwork, and these inmates did *not* go in there as artists.

## THE ART TEACHER

Evelyn Hampton

When she took her students to see the trash heap at the museum, they did not come to any conclusions. Nothing seemed locked to its meaning the way the things they were used to were used to seeming. An old armchair crawled across the dainty fading of its upholstery and fainted. A love seat just sort of floated above some sneakers that seemed to be in charge of their own bright insignias and soles, ordering them to grow a flashy green mold in retaliation against the museum's dull white walls. Nobody knew what was the artist's goal; not even the artist did, according to a pamphlet. It seemed, perhaps, that visitors were meant to steal from the heap's proliferating images, and so she told her students to steal, which they did, gleefully, from the museum.

She abandoned them to their theft and found a bench in the Baroque wing; there the meaning of things was clear and easy to see: she was tired of teaching and policing; she wanted to escape through the seams of her identity into a dream of something else, or somebody. Once she had dreamed that she was a plant owned by a widow who kept her in a tiny pot that she would water from a cracked teacup each morning; the teacup leaked all its water before it could reach her pot, yet she found an internal way to survive, growing a toughened stalk. Another time, she had been a man who, to maintain the integrity of his identity, had found a way to make more

of himself without sex, which demanded a fusion he found terrifying and cold. She had liked the feeling of being contained by the tiny pot—it was exactly the same feeling she'd had when she had been the man. She longed to return to that feeling now, when she felt her identity perforated, like a wall for windows, or no, like a wall of a museum, a different framed rendering for each child she was supposed to oversee.

One, an undersized child who had been renamed Lawrence to help him grow, began crying through his nose. Clear water flowed from his nostrils down to his clothes and continued to flow, seeking paths of less resistance toward more of its own, finally emptying its identity—by now it had been named the Lawrence River—into the ocean.

Or no, Lawrence just had a runny nose. She apologized to the child for having called him a river.

At night, she went home, where there weren't any students, and felt cold. She had a small instrument for sensing things; she would lay herself across it without any goal. She did not know how to play the instrument or even whether it could be played. By then it would be very late, so late it would be the next day, and she would rise from her life and go to school.

It was a body, she thought, or it was a tool.

Sometimes it was difficult to find the school—it disguised itself to evade its own authority, which was crippling it

from the inside out, she was told in a memo delivered to her by a man she recognized as the school's vice-principal.

He arrived at her door one morning. "Hal?" she said.

But the man only tipped a hat that he wasn't even wearing—he hadn't tipped a thing, yet he acted so corny, as if he imagined himself an actual renegade, as if any change could come of *imagining* a renegade.

Less and less, she trusted the imagination.

One morning, wandering the periphery of a trash-strewn man, she recognized the man as one of her students, the one who had been Lawrence, and she resolved not to waste any more time, which was passing faster than ever.

She decided to buy a bicycle. She had seen people riding upon the look they got in their eyes when they talked about their bikes—on their pupils these people would float up and up until they were enveloped in the shiny white cloud of their mind as they tried to fit a feeling of freedom into words.

"You know, it's like, green?" they would say, and they would say "vvrrrrroooooooooom" to indicate the dealing of wind with the convolutions of the ear canal.

From such conversations she managed to enact a sense of what riding a bicycle was like once she had one of her own. She decided that riding it was like being her own home. She looked out of her own face at the way things disappeared as she zoomed past, felt with her own wind the porousness of her skin. But this was just the beginning of freedom; soon she needed a way to make money

because riding a bicycle made her very hungry.

She decided to acquire students. This time, though, she would not trouble herself with confusing institutions. She would not try to pass herself off as proficient. She would not shower, or put on a shirt that revealed her. She would not rub her armpits against a deodorant trinket. She would not develop tension in her neck by trying to smile with her eyes. Instead she would just ride.

In the streets, an animal like a tiny deer had for years been shedding its antlers into the spaces that were widening between everything and its meaning. They weren't even antlers anymore—proprietors were selling them as trinkets; others were selling them as floss. She didn't know how to account for the loss of the antlers as antlers; didn't people hear the tiny deer that clicked past? She heard them bounding with tinkling purpose, like broken glass being gathered by its smashed vessels, slowly taking back its shapes.

Yet once their antlers-as-antlers had disappeared, the deer were denied—they had never been alive.

Meanwhile, the widening was accepted as fact: when pavement cracked or a lot got vacant, spaces pushed in to take their place among the city's edifices, as if emptiness were also constructed. In these spaces there soon grew plants and trees with lavish leaves and possibly medicinal properties, so people put snacks into backpacks and wandered off into new wildernesses, hoping to find beauty, mystery, and to get high. It was said that breakthroughs in understanding the human psyche were

on their way, but mostly people just got lost until they found their way back onto a map of the city's commercial districts.

The city had begun calling these inexplicable gaps in its carefully planned surfaces *green spaces*, for spaces they obviously were, and green they could sometimes be, though it was obvious that green was being used as a metaphor for wildness and unpredictability and everything else that threatened the business of the city.

But her business was now separate from the city's; having nearly no money, she did not feel she had to hurry. She rode her bicycle slowly, letting her legs be a ladder that supported the weight of others, should any others care for a ride. She connected a carriage to her rear axle and this added considerably to the work she had to do to propel her entire life forward, but nobody seemed to find this annoying, especially not her. Soon the extra weight was added to by bodies—two women who did not wear shoes and who entwined themselves madly in each other's charms.

She wondered what new aspects of herself she might see while she towed these women through the city. What she found was that she had a habit of looking for approval to the surfaces of the city that gleamed maniacally at the skyline. Yet she herself was perfectly capable of being her own home. She knew this.

"I'm tired of whatever it is I'm looking for," she said to the women one day when she had stopped for a pistachio-coconut shake. The women were positioned in the carriage so that they appeared to be a single woman with an extra shake.

“Come in here with us,” they said, bobbing their embrasured head.

“Do you mean that metaphorically?” she asked. Yet it was obvious that their togetherness was a tunnel for them, a real recess away from the day of the world of the city, and within it they were happy and shady.

“Yes,” they said.

She slept especially well after long rides—she barely even felt her instrument as she drifted into it, across it. Whatever the instrument was—lovers had tried to discover her memory of its name—she couldn’t say. She felt it was a physical thing. She actually felt ill when she tried to decide what the instrument was, or wasn’t. It had its own softness, its own lost context that gave it, in the context of her bedroom, its opacity. Who knew where the instrument was from, where it was going? Certainly it seemed to be on its way somewhere, for when she lay across it in her underwear, she could feel where it had begun to disappear into the grayness of the underlying carpet.

She did have a few memories that perhaps pertained to the origin of the instrument. For instance, there was the man who carried a land shape. A peninsula, most likely, since it seemed to be connected to his body, though she had always liked the idea that it was an island and that he, like the tide, was simply overlapping it.

And there was the woman who had a drumbeat. She had a rhythm in her skin, and a rhyme besides. The woman was someone she had once been inside; she had

lived with the woman in her skin. Eventually, as with all rhythms, there had been an end. She had left the woman, yet something of her rhythm remained as in the way a day fades into a day.

And so the instrument remained, and now it too had begun to fade.

Each day was a true consequence of her decision to live. There were plenty of ways to lie; *after we close our eyes*, she read in a science magazine, *an illusion persists for sometimes our whole life*.

With respect to her eyes, she could often see the yellow slide in the park across the street from her apartment; children would tumble from one end of it, having come from somewhere different. She could not see where they came from; it was a long slide, its origins concealed in the leaves of trees above it and to either side.

And so the children came from somewhere beyond her control or permission and landed at the bottom of the slide, within her sight; once there, each child unknowingly became her student. Her lesson was that she was there to see them, whoever they may be.

Sometimes she was surprised by what came out of the slide; sometimes, things weren't alive.

Watching the slide, she would stand in her window and drink coffee; this was how she taught. Then she would get onto her bike.

She biked along a continuum from doom to seven:

doom was starting out sore and early; by seven in the evening, she could decide to feel alright. By then she would be carrying the sun in her skin; it made her happy to feel the sun evaporating from her back, returning to the air where it could darken the sky. She was fine with night. It steamed off her back after a ride, when her skin would glisten with the moon already beginning to rise. And if there was to be no moon that night? She would still feel her skin tightening around the vastness she had traveled that day. In the same way, the stars tightened in their shine, as the dark around them knew, and became harder, too.

She became strong. Day after day she rode slowly through the latitudes of the city. *One begins as a student but becomes a friend of clouds*, she thought. *Mine is an art that is inseparable from the search for reality.*

When she needed rest, she would bike into a green space and lie back on the unsanctioned grass. It grew with illicit speed, according to the city; it could not be made to look cute or tame, like something one would want to name or fuck—it grew wildly and unpredictably, each tuft aswirl with its own microclimate. No one had designed this strategy of the grass's to grow wherever and however it wanted, and so it was seen as a menace to the patented genetic identities of subsidized crops. Corporate corn growers were quick to elect a wall to the borderlands of the city; through the wall's oversight, the city became an ancient citadel that languished at all hours but those few each evening when, revived by a shared memory of the

coming night, people of the city would quickly leave their domiciles to acquire rough cuts of meat and to fill their bottles with mead, or something—they didn't really know what the brown sludge was. Some people called it mead and so other people, not knowing what mead was, called it mead, too.

On certain holidays, a person was allowed to walk the promenade atop the city's wall, and to marvel at the unendingness of sight—how it found so many examples of the same species to pack into a glance. There was corn upon corn, stretched to the horizon and growing on the horizon—it wasn't any trouble after all to graft corn to the illusory line made by the limit of the eye's might.

The fact that all limits had been surpassed was the occasion for a holiday. Wasn't it golden, that fact? Didn't it possess measurable mass, wasn't it the being one could see through the windows of the black, bulletproof sedan that rolled up and down the rows of corn, crushing them? Wasn't destruction, when done by fact, simply a fact, and therefore beyond command?

She did not answer any of these questions that weren't questions but holes being shrugged casually into language. She did not want to make any of them seem deep.

Lately she felt herself to be on the verge of a monument, nearing the center of being found. *Here I am*, she wanted to say to everybody, as if to reassure them that a terrible contagion had been contained.

When there wasn't much left of the instrument, she bought a potted plant to replace it. The plant grew into a

room where she could sit to admire it. She liked the way its flower followed noon, finding it in the morning on one side of the sky and following it all the way to another day. What would happen if another day never came? The flower would find a way, she imagined, to drag it out of the sky.

Also, she couldn't not imagine the utter hiss of final darkness.

One night, from the vantage of her continuum, she could see an end to it.

She had walked her bike onto the promenade at the top of the wall, violating a sign. Someone was sitting there, and she knew it was him: Hal, the vice-principal.

*What a strange way to return to a place I've never been,* she thought as she approached him, not quite sure what this meant.

He sat with a cowboy on his lap. No, the cowboy was his hat, but in the shadow it cast below the wall, she saw its boots.

"I'm going over the side," he said. "Other than that, I don't know who I'll shoot." When he leaped, Hal would land in the boots of his hat.

A REPORT ON *THREE FLEMISH MEN BUILDING A DAM IN THE TRADITIONAL WAY*

Éireann Lorsung

This 35-minute performance, which I witnessed in the Flemish Ardennes in March of 2011, consists of the performers building a dam in a small stream in order to redirect the flow of water from the stream through a drainage pipe embedded in the soil, emptying into a marshy pond about twenty meters away.

The dam is constructed of mud pulled from the stream banks and bed. Root networks allow the mud to be pulled out in large clumps and hold it together in the current. Along with mud, the men use matted grass, flat rocks (brought one by one as necessary from a field across the road from the site), handfuls of gravel from the stream bed and road, and woven sticks.

The smallest of the three men squats on his haunches and weaves thin willow sticks into a mesh.

In the distance are the sounds of the Belgian countryside. Cars pass on the road up the hill. A neighboring farm-turned-holiday-house is full of girls in bikinis. Their shrieks increase in volume when the doors to the pool-room in the basement is opened. The valley magnifies the noises they make. Their bright bathing suits stand out against the land. It is March and things are barely

beginning to grow. Grey, brown, yellow predominate. Very faintly: a hint of disco music. Then the sound of the stream.

What have the three Flemish men been doing? They have found a sheet of plastic and are experimenting with it, making a cover for the drainpipe where it empties into the pond. The one in the dark jacket yells something in a West Flemish dialect as the water overflows upstream. Across the road, a magpie takes off in the field. Two of the men feed pieces of paper into the pipe to see if they will travel all the way to the pond. Then a stick. Then a flat piece of sycamore bark. Then another sheet of plastic, crumpled to fit.

Along the bank, the one in the jacket pulls out a huge clump of mud and roots. The smallest one directs. The third one has gone to find the willow tree and pull branches off.

Although it is sunny, late-afternoon sun, it is cold enough to see their breath.

The crumpled plastic comes through the hole. The levels of the pond rise. Some of the smaller plants by the edge of the water, near the pipe, are covered now. A few stones are underwater. The dam is being shored up with more woven willow, more mud, clumps of leaves. One of the men has found a bowl and is using it to carry gravel from the road.

Because of the angle of the sun, the windows of the pool-

room across the field have become opaque. The girls have closed the glass doors. We can only assume that behind them, they continue to use the small sauna, the shallow pool. Someone has left a towel on the short grass around the house. It is red-and-white striped. The house shrinks against the hills behind it. What began as an experiment, a way to fill time this morning becomes the evening's preoccupation.

My thighs are cold. The stump I'm sitting on is damp. The men continue to carry things from the field across the road. The smallest man has stopped weaving willow branches and is shoring up the dam with mud. His hands are very white in the water. His cuffs are soaked. The field is grey. The water is clear.

One of the men brings back a stick, a very thick one. He is trying to put it through the pipe. The dam is almost knee-high above the water. The upstream pool is deep and still. The other two men crouch and look from the far side. The man at the dam pulls a clump of mud out of the pipe. The water levels keep rising.

Underwater there is a stillness not unlike the stillness now in the valley. Almost dark. Lights along the road on the ridge, none on the nearby road. They still have their hands in the water. Fixing. Below, the pond fills and gurgles. A noise, could be a bird. They are talking quietly. In any case it's a language I don't understand.

The sky is heavy and low. Above the ridge there is a glow.

The water reflects darkness. A note: how did it become evening so quickly?

At the dam the men wedge empty glass bottles in the mud. They stand along the top. A little light catches them. A little wind echoes in them. Brown glass. The work is done for the evening. The men rinse their hands and shoes in the still pool. Birds settle in the sycamore near the road. Its seed-balls shake. Lights are on in the house across the field. No girls in the pool.

There is a sense of holding very still and being very quiet. A sound of water and the men's voices. In the morning the valley is a flat and shining plain.

## SHORTS

Parker Tettleton

*Someone Has To Be You*

It's sad but it's such, pairs are chucks earthed blue & green, we're legged mercurial. The second sentence handlebars; the rain won't even rain. I'm answering *I don't have to*.

*That's Silent*

Sofa sound is your lover's plush flickering. The second sentence breezes in, out of a purple v-neck. *We're the least cliché here* wiggles up. One of us corner stores – it's trumpets, a ticket for a scholarship hanging plants.

*Devil*

It's seventy-nine degrees in my heart. Every line afterwards is decidedly less dramatic. My twenty-fifth is a front tire with no air; we make it blocks & back. I say these things silently to you too often to ask.

*Telegraph*

It's three fives time— the window won't detergent. In a parking lot there's one one for us. It's Super in two undays. It's Valentine's at a half age. The fifth pours one. We kiss hiccups, foreclose bookends.

*Save As*

It's the first of a month, a moth, a rest; the second sentence swears itself. We kiss umbrellas, sound aisles. In this way we're *some or one or things*.

## MUTANTS

Cory Aycock

### *Mutants*

A retelling of the marketplace is only acceptable when mutants walk along looking for campsite firewood discussing exactly what a mutant is and its functionality compared to humanoid conversations that chiefly include terminology characterizations of conscious principles diverging oneself from the above-mentioned nomenclature of wasteland.

### *Static/Molasses*

My stomach is definitely sour because of almond milk and lemons and my noggin is fucked by extended periods of world wide web technology scanning left to right mind-waxing quantum disappearing carnage of unfulfilled spiritual secrets outbursting interviews of reluctant idols streaming quasi-musings that lack a certain vigor and eat up experiential dopamine that numbs the twinkle-toe revolution while keeping baby boomers scratching heads simultaneously amazed with loving confused contempt. Is watching or reading experiences disallowing materialization in walking life? What is this place if not for the people walking around in it? I always wish conservatory minimalism was a conversation that could be had on a regular basis. Self-perception theory should be taken into account, even though the actual definition

is different than what originally thought. Behavior seen as the basis of one's identity doesn't seem to be correct, but awareness of the inherent thought leading up to the behavior is where the juiciness is because behavior unthinkable is misidentity hence misnomer.

### *Harbinger*

And then we pick back and I try to describe the ecstasy felt via disassociation and how it springs down to the core and radiates everything!...and you'd think the melancholia would subside but it just becomes dumbfoundedness, leaving a devaluation of all things sprite.—It defines 'harbinger.' 'Harbinger' over and over again. H-A-R-B-I-N-G-E-R until everything simply disintegrates into a cadence, and we no longer know how to feel. Constantly hearing the pulse and it's undulating out of my body.

### *Smile*

I feel as though I hurt others every time I open my mouth but then I realize my own insignificance. But then even so, I still hurt. It aches for the temporal understanding the same way every aspirational wag-dogger does and contemplation of one's own nonsense becomes a bore. It's actor fluctuation between true emotion and impressing via depth: the insecurity may be unwarranted at times but when verified it is crushing. Possibly in the future a picture of ones' soul can be confined to a carried card and flashed to strangers so they'll "know"? Perhaps these already exist and words like articulation, accountability, actuality...along with the other first vowel words, can

create such an indication.

### *Polar Bear*

Only if a loud voice were to resonate words clearly on a continuous basis then all souls would smile and truth could be expounded for the moment until static and molasses begin bedbunking, and mosquito nets were placed in cabins A and B, according to precise measurements, using alabaster yardsticks and rubber gloves that smell of cotton candy, pigtailed waving in a yellow breeze, frozen in time, cherished in a kidney-shaped compartment, donated to univision, and up-for-grabs, every day of the week, when ticking hands touch corpuscle clouds... I want what everyone wants, I want what everyone wants!...I desperately want to share this with a young woman that I am in love with! I want her to have all of this as I slop back into somber melancholy stagnation. I imagine that she feels this way and then a funny thing happens to her, and her expectation becomes kitsch consciousness and her feelings are accentuated.

### *Gable Pomade Questions Of Color*

What is the meaning of a full moon and why is the thought of the moon not being real a change in consciousness that reverberates to Everett's Parallel?

Croquet is now on the television prime time. Everyone is so polite and 8 lb balls are being used this season. The blonde-headed lady is a force to reckoned with but I get the strong feeling she has been hurt at some point in her life. That lawn cannot always stay mowed. That lawn is

chaos. Her family watches in Idaho and only her father is able to detect this vast chasm.

My mind stirs and I look at the screen hoping for an old thought that has popsicles standing still on the Brooklyn Bridge and I run out and scream at the jets, 30,000 feet above, squinting my eyes at the beams!

A 400 lb lady spans a newborn and mold grows on peanuts as a man in row D plays Candyland and he tries to understand that he can only change for a little while. He desperately wants to tell his ex-wife about the time he walked on hot coals after the BBQ, though.

Pre-thought of backlash hurts due to nonsensical and memorization is a tough mark, and the mark has become disconnecting scratches of the color green.

The hope is followed by a blanket attempting to find a drawer that never should've been opened.

I wonder about Russian dolls. I remember the years I studied them, microscoping every single stitch gasping at wagon red thread marks and turning the lamp sideways in order to see threads within the threads.

He was so alone with his coral metaphors taglined by a drumbeat never heard again because the ears are so tender and brings gobbles of associations that cannot be pronounced in the evening time nor the day.

## INTERVIEW WITH GLENN LANGOHR

## Part 2

EL: You ever had law enforcement officials say that they've read your book, like police officers?

GL: Yes. Yes. Absolutely. Uhm—my first couple reviews from prison guards weren't that good, and then I had another one that was *pretty* good. And he was from outside of California, and he was like, Yeah, I can tell the guy's been there...but it's not like that where we live, I don't know if he's telling the truth or not...—and I got some from California—that—recently—that are saying... This guy's an amazing writer, he's—he's turned his life around—and, you know—what he is saying is for the most part a hundred percent accurate; so it's really nice to be validated from...prison guards—uhm, I told your other—I told your other editor that I met a gang task force guy who turned himself into an author because he couldn't handle the corruption in Denver as a narcotic detective and gang-gang guy—he saw so much corruption, that it—it torpedoed his spirit and he became a writer, so—it was—very classic for me to be an ex-convict, at one time labeled an organized criminal practically, and...been in prison for almost ten years, a lot of the time in solitary confinement—and so it was very gratifying to—be able to *help*... uh—a narcotic detective who became a writer. And help him with his marketing. And review his books, and just—you know, it's—it's pretty gratifying to meet somebody from the other side that's read my books and I'm reading his books...and,

it's—it's kind of gratifying.

EL: You ever read *Catcher In The Rye*?

GL: Yeah.

EL: It's uhh—like that was the first book that really *moved* me; in that way. Uh—I don't think I understood it at all when I first was exposed to it, as a high school kid—who was *very* much like Holden Caulfield—...uh, but going back to it, not that long ago, my mind, was... opened up. I mean, I was—it was such a masterful, uhm... impersonation...it was such a masterful impersonation of, such a *critical* type of character...and I think that's a really valuable type of fiction. I mean—and, and on that point—I've been meaning to ask: Do you write—is the frame of the book, uhm, you writing from being out of prison, or—you—uhm—is the frame of the book you, you being in prison, you know, while you're writing it—it's, I, I am in prison, et cetera et cetera—or is it—uhm—you know, reflecting back on what prison was like?—or is it—is it third person?

GL: Both. Both. Uhm—it's—it's like this: my very first novel, I had so much time to do. I had, I had seven years of prison time to write it. And I—I tried to cover everything; I tried to cover the drug war, that led to... to me being incarcerated, the dirty cops along the way... the justice system...and uhm—I covered it all. And—uhm, that book right there is—multi, uh—its, uh—the—uh—I toggled the angle through multiple characters. So you have the first person, which is the main character, which would be B.J., and then, uhm—from there I toggle the angle—like I get inside, uh,—uhm—law enforcement's eyes and—other people's eyes, and toggle the angle from their

perspective to—to write a bigger story. So that book was like a *huge* undertaking. Way too long, hard to market: I probably sold like 20 thousand Kindle copies of that book. And some of the reviews I got and some of the personal mentors, writing mentors, told me: *focus on the prison stuff*: just write that for a while. So I wrote a bunch of straight—uhm, prison books, that are showing you the culture of—of California prisons from the perspective of the first person—which would have been my character—and his cell—and his cell brother—and what they’re—what they’re up against: with the—with the racial politics... with the uh, gang task force inside there—some guards that are cool, some guards that are instigators...gun towers... what the—what it looks like in the dayroom; what it looks like on the yard...and then it gets into the real life stuff about drug deaths. Um, what causes riots...and so it’s just pulp. It’s, it’s pure pulp style writing, of...stuff that I’ve lived through... and it’s—it’s pretty much real time, uh—culture—it’s—it’s a real time cultural look into prisons. California prisons.

EL: Here’s a thing,—

GL: And riots. Like, you’ll see—you’ll see—you’ll see the riot over a drug death—you’ll see the inmates going to the hole. What that looks like. Going in. Getting processed into the hole...Every—every part of it—I’ve—I’ve covered. And I, I’m, I’ve still covered—I’m still covering—I’m—I’m, I’m still writing. So.

EL: Now, when you’re—uhm, depicting this—when you’re trying to find, imagery, to...—accurately—uhm, imitate how you felt then and to accurately make the reader see how you felt—uhm,—where,—what’s your source for inspiration?

Uhm. Is there a specific style of book that you go for or go to to inspiration, for how you like to describe...you know the way the—the handcuffs look, or the way the person's jacket looked...or—the way...uhhm—Uh, you know, the way they moved...—in...in line—or the way they made us take our...clothes off, before they sprayed us with water, et cetera,

GL: Exactly. Exactly. So—so basically there's a lot of descriptive stuff...—even though prisons are pretty bland looking and everything's—uh..—bland, there is like—like if you're looking from a cell, you'll look out and you'll see the phones...you'll see the no—uh, red—in—in red block letters painted on the wall; NO WARNING SHOTS FIRED: warden. Um—you'll see the gun tower...you'll see the way the layout of the land is...when you're getting into describing prison guards: the way they're dressed...with their—pepper spray canisters the size of fire extinguishers; I mean, they're not normal size pepper spray canisters; they're... the size of fire extinguishers. You'll see—you know—just the way they're dressed compared to the way the inmates are dressed...it's a—it's very—there's a big contrast. And then—you know, it's very colorful inmates. You're talking—for the blacks, you've got—you get—you get to describe—the—the Bloods and the Crips, and the way they dress, and the way they—the way they *talked*. For the Mexicans—you know you get to get into the Mexican culture. For the whites, you get—you get to get into the white culture: you know, skin head style culture...punk rock, grunge...you know basically drug addicts that ended up into the system...and you—you get to paint that picture. And then the—then the policies...and survival...and what

that looks like, what-what that has to do with...-you know-just-it's-there's a lot of-there's a lot to work with. I have-it's-describe; get into-paint the picture, paint the scene...and then it's-and then it's...uhm-motivations. What are-what are the motivations. And I usually do have like a good cop, bad cop-always do-a good cop, bad cop...-uh-angle going, where you'll see the good side of law enforcement in there and the bad side.

EL: Okay. And that's-that's true to life too, right? That's not sensationalized?

GL: No. That's true-that's true life.

EL: That's not an entertainment trick?

GL: Huh?

EL: Because I was-I was interested in asking you about that, in asking about...where you might be tempted to be...a little bit sensational? Or do you think the subject matter completely and entirely speaks for itself and there's absolutely no need for...any...entertainment tricks? or entertainment devices? Uhm. And...maybe when you ever-when you're ever reading memoirs, if you ever pick up-if your ears ever perk up on-oh-you-you know-he added that in for sensationalism; I've-you know, I've been-I've been behind that blinking cursor; I've been, had my hands on the typewriter, and that's-you know I've had that impulse to want to write that and I didn't do that... because...-Do you know what I mean?

GL: Right. Well... you-you hit the nail on the head:

You don't really have to sensationalize anything here in California where-where there's 36 state prisons; there's a 99% conviction ratio; and you've got every kind of person in there. Drug cartels...don't-I mean you hear about the

drug cartels in Mexico, right? You think they have *any* say so in California prisons? None. It's *all* regulated by street gangs...-They have no *say so* in-in California prisons. So that gives you an idea that you don't have to sensationalize anything. But uhm-I was-uh-charged with the building blocks of organized crime charges: I was heavy into the drug war, and then while I was in prison I was involved in riots... went to the hole. I spent four years in solitary confinement. So...-there's no need to really sensationalize anything? I *do* however, uhm-fictionalize...like-certain, certain places-certain police-uh; cops' names...-and certain inmates names. Like: it's-it's pretty easy-because, inmates that have, uhh: AKAs-like... Rotten or Bam Bam, or Psycho, or Little Man, or Topo...-it-you know what I mean? Stuff like that, you don't really have to worry about it; but, if you're gonna put somebody's real name in there, then you don't want to be an informant, you don't want to-you don't want to get prison guards in trouble...if-you know-I mean basically, since I was there I would not want to tell on a prison guard for smuggling tobacco in there. I enjoyed the tobacco that I got to have while I was in there, and I wouldn't want to ruin anybody else's opportunity to smoke tobacco, so I wouldn't put the-the-prison guard's name who was smuggling the tobacco in, if- if you can understand what I'm saying. So in-in those kind of situa-  
EL: Oh, yeah. Yeah,

GL: In those kind of situations, there-it's uhh-it's, not-it's not a hundred percent true... life that this person did this and that person did that.



## THE ENGLISH COUNTRYSIDE

Hugh Smith

*for Chloe Neatroun*

Your father's semen yes I understand you have informed me, you have explained the nuance. Yes he didn't know the future was coming, yes you are the future to him, yes I see the future which you are to him one thing that is harder to love than the past. And that it was not easy for him to love his past. But like I said there were further complications. It was the kind of thing so easy for you to do you cannot decide not to do it. Try it. Try it with a goddamn unicycle if you go down a hill on a goddamn unicycle and you shall know his conception and experience of sex. We didn't hesitate. Spoke immediately. By force of necessity, she had received my letter outlining a theorized imagination about one's theorized retroactively failed sperm and eggs. Well anyway I do hope that she had. Don't interrupt me. Don't interrupt me. You aren't speaking. It has the appearance of being one way. Because you shall have claimed your own agency. A sense of yourself as something isolate. Twice you said so. As if I needed to be told. As if I was the child. Imagine both of our sperms, imagine if the two sperms had met on the way to the walls of her egg. A decision not to be taken lightly, that which your father wanted to take back from you. The original ejaculation in the sense that the path towards it did not seem strewn with foreshadowing. Forget

the semen. She realized this with a hand laid on her breast. The breast felt warm and hard and so she realized that the remembrance of her father had to do with her breasts somehow and so the situation was now inevitably complicated by this. Because I was looking down when she entered. Mentioning the horses which persist outside of the barns, the barns she asked me breathless, Should we celebrate, her frame enveloping the insignificant barn entrance like a bat, black and as if with wings: I was whispering that when she entered. Come to the barn with me, I am already there; Come to the barn with me, locate me, I am already there, I am waiting. If not we must have been talking about different things which overlapped in an unaccountable way. Now you. Oh you. When she was in the doorway of the barn, looming, I mean. You looming. Us and the barn. Your father you say made you. Well my father made me. And the gift of his semen proved more complicated than it originally had seemed.

## QUANTUM PHYSICS

Brandon Hobson

He worked on my motorcycle in the garage. He put on new pipes and spark plugs. His hands were black and dry when he finished. Then he sat down and fired up the bike so that it rumbled loudly. The pipes were much louder.

“It’s better for the carburetor,” he yelled.

He revved the throttle and took the bike around the city for a ride. After about half an hour he returned and made me sit and listen to him play the trumpet. Afterwards he lit a cigarette and told me that he’d enjoyed a poem I wrote when I was ten.

“Which poem?” I asked.

“The one about Ace Frehley,” he said.

We went to the horseraces. I had only maybe forty dollars but went anyway. We bought a racing form and he circled numbers with a red pen, picking out the longshots based on breeding and class size, training. After three races I was broke. He lost more than me, but wouldn’t tell me how much.

“We need to act fast, man,” he kept saying to me on the drive home. “Tonight we’ll eat good sausages and have hot bread and drink good wine. We can go out to a French restaurant.”

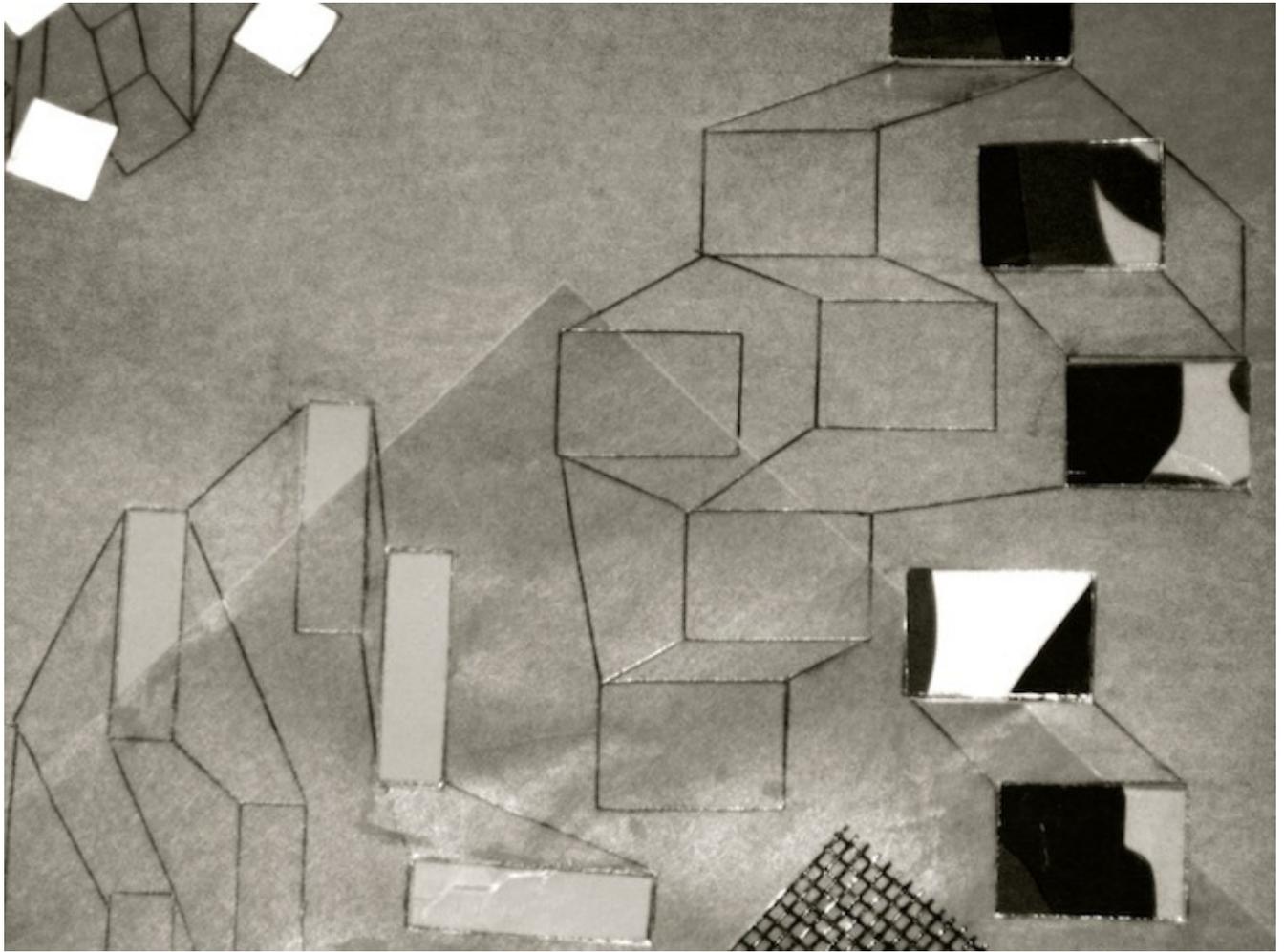
He’d returned with a whiter beard. The first thing he’d wanted to do was go out to eat at a French restaurant several nights a week, which we couldn’t afford.

“There’s so many things we need to do,” he said.

“There’s gambling, the theatre, eating good food, drinking good wine. We’ll need to ride out to the country, go and see beautiful, naked women. Discussing quantum physics. Playing chess.”

“We have all the time in the world,” I said.

I was happy to see him. He’d lived for a short time in the public library downtown, claiming it was for thinking. His own personal mansion, he said, lots of tall windows and high ceilings. Quiet rooms. Plenty of books.



## BUBBLE BATH TWELVE

Sean C. Wright

A faux crystal bottle, empty, but corked, with a lavender ribbon round the neck.

Jeannie uncorked the bottle, sniffed. Gardenia smell was puny, but still something.

She dropped it back into the box. “Don’t think we should throw this one here out just yet,” she shouted over her shoulder, to Natalie, the eldest.

Jeannie had known her eighty-fourth year was it. But clearing out her house was not. Junky junk junk for days.

*Swole, Texas*

*Saturday April 5th 1934 7:05 AM*

Friday Angel Nealey—Fan—didn’t know if the twinge in her womb woke her or if it was Juniper Lynn. Her ten-year-old sister always flailed, tossed and moaned. Many times Fan would shake her, crying, “June? June?! You beating me girl, watch out.” This morning June was in a delightful dream: door jamb had morphed into a wedge of chocolate cake.

Fan trotted back inside and the mosquitoes stirred.

Today Mama Dawn puts on her dress resembling Muffin’s marbles—mostly clear with swirls; aqua, citrus yellow and orange. His real name is Earnest Paul, the five year old

brother's, but he's been nicknamed Muffin because he's so plump, light-brown and sweet. Black girls are to have prettier skin if they eat burnt toast. Good thing she's had a bath the night before and washed. Rubbed the lye between her hands at the water pump. Fully submerging in the water, menstruating.

And Mama was up, too. Strong coffee in a tin mug was in front of her. Freedom Nealey, everyone called Frieda. An average-height, wiry-built woman with a complexion the color of a weak tea. She was sitting in her kitchen in her day dress, color of corn, a blue paisley handkerchief on her head. She was what the folks called, a *handsome* woman. Her features weren't symmetrical enough to be beautiful.

Fan was a carbon copy in her face but taller. At twelve just, she already was towering over Frieda. The other difference was Fan's right shin was marred at three by an accident with a pan of hot cooking grease.

"Morning, Mama."

Fridays, aromatic junipers, and gems. She was thirty-five and had carried on her tradition of naming her daughters after her three favorite things.

Fan got out of bed, slipped on her overalls and lit the lantern; Fan gritted her teeth and stuffed her rags in her pocket, took the lantern and trudged; Fan hummed nothing in particular, no songs or notes in particular, to the outhouse.

To her even further annoyance, she'd discovered her rags sack kept under her mattress at the foot of her bed was running low.

“Thank you, Mama. Mmm-hmm.”

Fan stood the lantern like an employee awaiting instructions from an employer.

“I’ll cook and call out when your breakfast’s ready. Happy Birthday,” Frieda replied, and took her sips of coffee.

Frieda had flawless skin, even teeth, and clear eyes: she’d missed the pretty mark by one degree!—why? Making her yell, Rube, don’t leave that yard! June, clean that up! Muffin!—put that down! Always running round when she needed them still and then always into slugs when she needed their help.

She looked at her daughter. This was a small luxury to permit, wasn’t it?

Fan went back into the bedroom, blew out the lantern and sat down. The back of Juniper Lynn’s head. Matted braids in her hair. Fan rose again, looking at the only two cotton dresses she owned. The Mondays through Saturdays dress was a faded cyan, with a decapitated orange for flowering. Sunday’s was ivory, pink polka dots the size of pinheads.

“You like your presents?” Muffin asked. He presented a slightly wilted but robust bouquet of wildflowers, bound through in twine.

“Yes,” said Fan, hoping her smile matched theirs; “Everything is nice.”

She went to each sister and her brother and hugged them.

Her mother came to her, put her hands on each of her shoulders. “Fan, your father asked you to come see him today.”

“Can we go, too?” Rube piped up beside her, “Can we go, too?”

“Yeah, I wanna go see Daddy!” Muffin chimed in.

“No,” Frieda said. “Just Fan today.”

“Ple-ase!”

“It ain’t *your* birthday.”

They pouted.

First page showcased his Big Sister with diamonds all over, even on her fingernails. Page two, Fan was a dancer, sparkles and featherings in her hair. On page three Fan’s standing in front of this house so big it had had to have thirty five windows! Ruby Nell gave her a short “book.” Each page, leaves of butcher paper, folded together, was sketches of Fan in states of greatness.

9:15 AM

Had braided her hair in two plaits she pinned across her head like a crown; head rag had the day off, too. Her mother had shook her head but had conceded her with her words: “Okay...” but: “Yes’m.”

Having Tobias all to herself, wearing her best dress; Fan thought she was hearing things. Fan felt that she and Tobias alone, her father and her, alone, would own any road between them.

10:30 AM

Fan followed her father as he padded into the kitchen. He stopped in front of a small cardboard box in the corner. He turned and grinned at her.

“Go on,” he said, jerking his head towards the box, “Go on look in there.”

Fan stepped ahead of her father, peered in.

“Go ahead. She ain’t bite you.”

Oh, how Fan’s love came down! The kitten had unfurled enough in Fan’s arms for her to see that Tobias had tied a pink ribbon around her neck. She also opened her eyes a slit for Fan to see that they were green eyes: green eyes as green as stagnant pond water. The soft slickness of the fur... She just wanted to hold her! Fan did and she whined almost like a human baby.

One step up from a cabin—was about seven hundred square feet in all. One wall dividing the kitchen and the living room from the bedroom. Meager, but clean. The floor never needed sweeping, table never needed wiping. Only had had a fourth grade education so he’d encouraged the children to get as much out of school as they could. Book collection included every classic he could find—the *Great Gatsby*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Great Expectations*. Made the girls read aloud each time they visited. Always made Muffin practice his letters.

11:15 AM

Fan took a road that lead to her best friend and only

friend's house: Nickel Eye Cartwright. Nickel Eye was one year older than her and was afflicted with albinism; his christened name was Andrew. He'd earned his nickname because even though he had had vision problems, Nickel Eye had an uncanny ability to spot change on the ground. Fan and he had befriended each other because they had shared physical oddities: she was an unnaturally tall girl with a blemished leg and he was a black boy with a tow head and light eyes. Nickel Eye and his mother had settled in Swole when he was four. Her son often made his own meals and took care of the house because his mother couldn't rise from her bed.

"Mama?" Nickel Eye said now.

Ida was curled into her ball. There were some days she couldn't tread, couldn't hardly float.

"Hmmm?"

There was a light.

"Can I go into town with Fan?"

"Ye-ah," answered Ida. Her voice was thick and lumpy as unsifted flour.

Nickel Eye bent down, pecked his mother on the temple.

She listened to Nickel Eye feel his way out of her bedroom and then stretched her limbs.

"Ham, potatoes, peas," she whispered over the demons' jeers.

12:30 PM

The pair sat on the stoop of the general store. Fan, with her big dill pickle and root beer, Nickel Eye, with his bag of chips and an orange soda. They munched and drank

in silence, watching the endless parade of colored people. All represented some hue of the black rainbow: the lightest being yellow, the median ginger, and the darkest blue-black.

A petite girl, the color of polished oak, wore a blue gingham dress and a white straw hat, approached them from across the street.

“Hi,” said the girl. “What y’all doing?”

“Nothing,” answered Fan.

“Okay. I’m Meridian. People call me Meri for short. I’m waiting on my folks’ car to get fixed over there,” she pointed down the street, towards the auto repair place.

The girl’s long, pressed hair came to just below her shoulders. The few years Meri had had on Fan... gave her a plum-sized bosom, and a bit of hip.

“This here is Andrew,” said Fan, “but we all call him Nickel Eye. I’m Friday, but everyone calls me Fan. I’m twelve today and he’s thirteen,” (Fan was use to speaking for Nickel Eye; his condition made him shy.) “Where you and your folks from?”

“Dallas. I’ll be fifteen next month. You all want to walk with me or something until they fix our car?” she asked.

The girl was staring at Nickel Eye with the overt manner of a small child. He had had his verdigris eyes on the chip bag the whole conversation.

“You want to, Nick? How long you staying?”

“No telling,” Meri said.

“Okay,” Fan said, nodded over to Nickel Eye, who nodded back.

The two of them stood up and threw their chip-pickle-soda bottle trash in the nearest trash bin. Then the three of them together walked away from the general store.

“Where does the end of this street lead to?” Meri asked as they walked.

Nickel Eye found his tongue. “Out of town.”

Meri grunted in approval.

For the entire walk now Fan had been suppressing the urge to tear Meri’s hat off her head, stomp on it, pull out that silky hair. She had been imagining Meri going to church the following Sunday, telling what good Christian duty she had done the previous week by being nice to a freakish, milk-skinned black boy and a girl with an ugly leg she met in the country. Fan slowly tucked her scarred leg under her, like a flamingo. She also had taken note of Meri’s skin, so flawless that she appeared to not have pores. Fan was beginning to lose her balance standing on one leg so she put the other one down and spoke.

“What about your folks?” she said.

“What do you say... we keep walking out of town?” said Meri, her eyes twinkling. “It is such a nice day. And we won’t be long. Come on. I’ll race you both to that tree over there.”

Now, in what was only the very next moment, Fan wanted to hold Meri’s hand and run anywhere with her. Nickel Eye was quiet again; all his bad eyes showed him was a green blur.

“Come on,” Meri said. “If I lose, then we have to walk right back to town and I’ll just buy you another soda or something. If you lose, then we just play until it’s time for my folks to leave.”

The smile truly was in Meri’s eyes. Fan looked for traces of pity or cynicism in it and couldn’t detect it. Meri

smiled again.

“Okay,” said Fan.

Meri pulled the hat off her head and got into a lunging position. Fan and Nickel Eye did the same. Fan started out in the lead because her legs were the longest. She and Nickel Eye were nearly neck and neck. But at the last minute, Meri caught up to them, sprinting like a jack rabbit. She scampered past them both to the tree.

“I win,” said Meri. “What do you want to do next?”

The trio laughed, panting.

1:30 PM

Fan knocked on Tobias’ door and Meri and Nickel Eye waited in the yard. He did have a shirt on this time but he still needed to comb his hair and shave.

“What you doing back here all so soon, girl?” he grunted.

“Can I show Domino to my friends?” Fan asked.

“Wait here just a minute.”

He would let the three children in, but only after he had got to run a comb through his hair and splash some water over his face.

They took their turns holding the cat.

Everyone laughed when Meri put it on top of her head and then gently put her hat on it.

7:20 PM

“Say, Meri. Can I ask you something?” “Sure.”

“Are you rich?”

She laughed. "Heck no. Things are tight for us like they are all over. Daddy is the only colored dentist in town and we were doing better until the Depression."

"Oh."

"Well, can I ask you something? What's wrong with Nickel Eye?"  
"It's some kind of thing people are born with where their body has no color. Even if they're colored. White folk can have it too."

9:32 PM

The parents ate sparingly so there would be more for the children. They ate on the porch.

10:38 PM

"You know that girl Meri that I brought by here?" Fan said.

"Yeah," said Muffin. "She was really nice and pretty."

"She was. She gave me some bubbling bath oil for a present."

"Really?!"

"Yeah," said Fan. "So now I can take a bath just like the women in the movie pictures."

"Luuuc-ky!"

"You are, too, Muffin! I'll let you and Rube use some."

"Really?!"

"Sure," said Fan. "Just remind me next time you take your bath."

Fan smirked. What an incongruous image: glistening, iridescent bubbles in the old and dented number ten wash tub they bathed in.

“Fan, I can’t sleep,” Muffin said. “You got me all excited now, thinking about the bubbling oil.”

“Muffin,” said Fan, “Me neither. We can play the Imagination Game till we fall asleep.”

“Okay. You get to go first since it’s your birthday.”

Fan began. “I’m going to marry a man... who owns a store... You, Ruby Nell, and Muffin can get whatever you want... I’ll have twin girls, named after some of my favorite things... just like Mama did, with us... Tangerine... and... Magazine. . .”

## PINEAPPLE

Henry Gould

This doctor I'm listening to, I call Pineapple. Pineapple means just one Lady, the females, Lady, the males, Mister, but Pineapple says Ladies, anyways. Something sweet and fruit-like, like under all of his toughness. He doesn't try and ply you with his sweet.

You wonder why, though, always Pineapple. It's so thorny how he just calls everyone just Lady or Mister, like everyone was all the same. Plus, Pineapple never uses the name of his patients.

Which leads us to Dead.

My father is dead.

All of my grandparents, except for the one, are dead.

Just how many of these people—just how many that were being seen by this doctor here, Pineapple?

Just how many of these people died in 2005, exactly?

Actually, I don't transcribe for this doctor Pineapple, whose broom closet I inhabit. Actually, I'm not in Doctor Pineapple's office.

But, if it were Doctor Pineapple's office.

Oh, if it were Doctor Pineapple's office!

And they don't think that it's HIPAA compliant, they don't think that it is HIPAA compliant that I have access to my medical information at home.

They stick me in an unused office, like it feels all of the time like it was unused.

Like it shrank down from an office to a broom closet.

And my dad thought that I was becoming a doctor. They thought that they would rent out a broom closet, from a doctor, so that I could transcribe the doctor's dictations to me in a medical setting.

Well, that box over there, it's full of all of the medical records of all of those that were RIP'ed in the year of our Lord, Two Thousand Aught Five.

It would get me more money. Typing out Two Thousand *Aught Five*, instead of 2000 *and 5*.

Four words instead of one.

I would have just quadrupled my salary!

Thankfully, I've only been transcribing for the ten months since I graduated.

I'm just a community college grad.

Now I'm up to nine words. That's eighteen cents.

## INTERVIEW WITH GLENN LANGOHR

## Part 3

EL: Well, there's a trend toward privatization of prisons? Is there not?

GL: Yeah. There is. There's--yeah that's an ugly aspect of it. That's an ugly aspect of it. There's actually stocks being traded for, uhh--for, the--the private--the private prisons. And that's an ugly aspect of it----it's disgusting;

EL: Oh my god,

GL: Yeah; it's disgusting. That, you know--they're profiting off of--off of a disease. -I'll tell you this: 70% of the people in California in prisons are there for drug-related charges. And the biggest bulk of it--is: homeless... poverty...drug addicts, petty thefts, petty thefts with priors...-People that just can't get a job and maintain a drug high and maintain a living standard end up becoming prisoners. And so 70% are like that: I'd say a smaller percentage are hardcore gang members, an even smaller percentage are murderers, rapists, and robbers... the biggest percentage are the mellow--are basically like--I mean if this was the '60s, we--I mean in the 60s we didn't have uh; all these prisons and we only locked people up for real reasons, like murder, robbery, um, rape: stuff like that. And drug war was no--it wasn't an issue back then, and half the people that were using drugs are now our politicians. So: kind of funny.

EL: There's horrible hypocrisy in and out, all the way around...

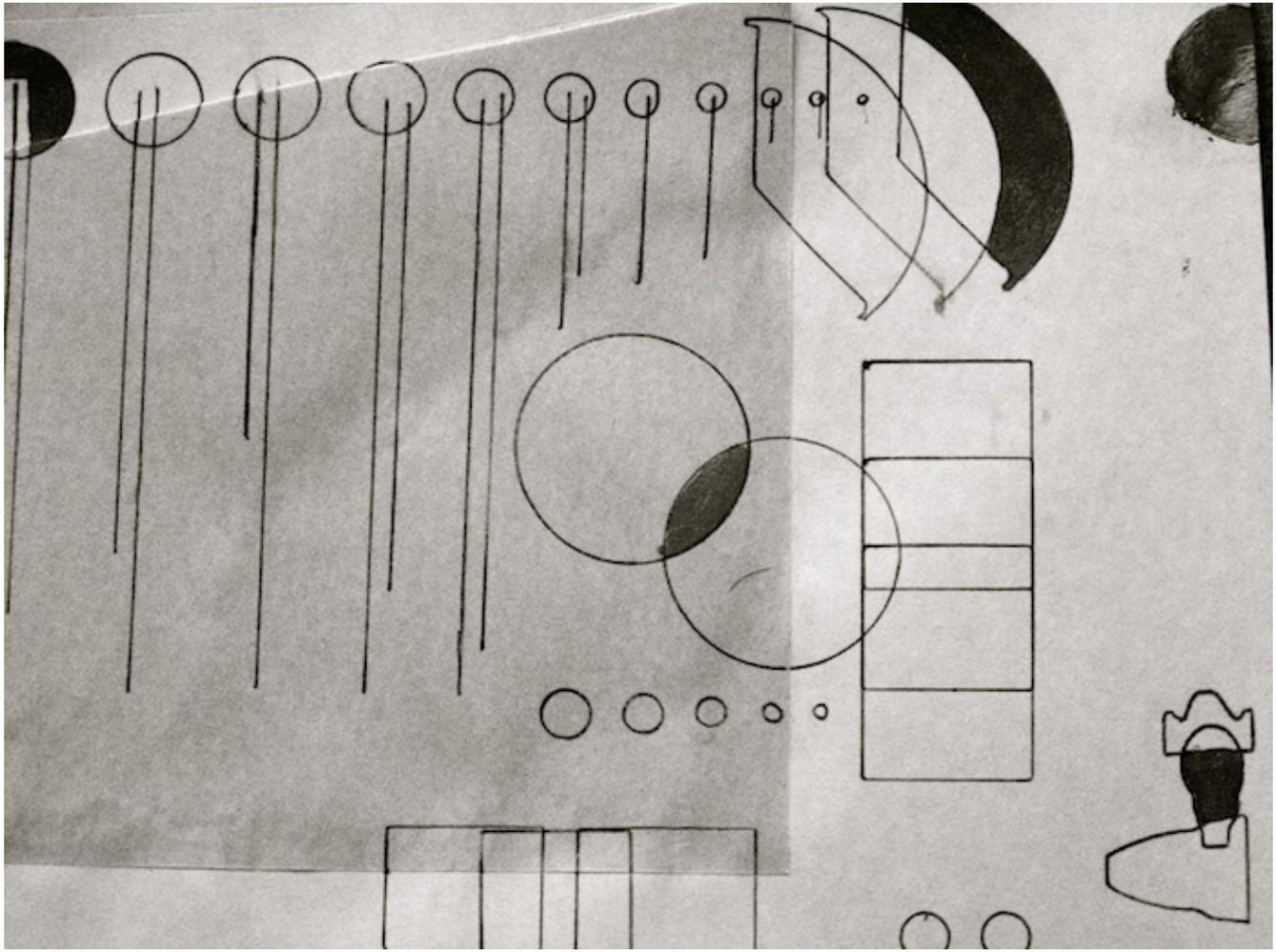
GL: Yeah.

EL: I don't know why... we're putting people with diseases and with medical problems into prison, and then recycling them over and over again until they're completely burned out and done.

GL: Yeah, and one other aspect I'd say my writing gets across is that the prison—the prisons are breeding bigger criminals: because you stick a bunch of people in there, like—I'll give you an example... Like: Sally. Sally from the rich area of Orange County has a son named Scotty. And Scotty is—is a surfer dude. And he's—he's just a really clean cut looking guy: GQ looking—and because he becomes addicted to...uh; opiates or oxycontin, or the pharmaceutical drugs that are so prevalent in our high schools; because he—because he becomes addicted to that he ends up becoming a heroin addict, and he ends up going to prison. And while he's in prison, Sally's—Sally's son Scotty becomes a skinhead. You know—just surviving in there, you know he might get tattoos...and... it's—it's a gang breeding area. So it's like—you go in there and the first thing they ask you before they put you on the mainline is, are you a wood or are you a skinhead? And I was old enough and smart enough to know that I shouldn't say either one. So I'd say can't I just be a white person? You know—why you gotta classify me as a: “*wood*”? I mean; what—peckerwood? I mean that's, that's—come on, that's, like—how many hundreds of years ago was that stuff? And—so I only have that choice or a skinhead. So you have to say you're white. It's the same—if you're Mexican, they ask you are you a—a Southern Mexican or are you a—*what* gang are you from? If you're black: are you

a Blood or are you a Crip. You know the smart people say I'm—I'm white or I'm black or I'm Mexican, I'm just a man; and other people that aren't so smart say that I'm—I'm this and that and they raise their hand and bam the next thing you know, they're being-called uh; a gang member of something. It just steers that—it just steers that direction. It steers that direction. So somebody can go in there with a petty drug problem, and come out tattooed down on his face and stuff like that; because he just couldn't handle prison...

EL: That's horrific, man. That makes me sick.



## THE BODY LANGUAGE OF TREES

Kevin O'Cuinn

The Body Language of Trees moves off, mounts zigzag. From the ridge he calls below, 'Suchness kills relations,' but the words etherise and the Maharajah of Connemara does not hear. The Maharajah of Connemara refuses to unshoe. The hills know pain, says The Body Language of Trees, they feel each hobnailed step, now get over yourself and unshoe. I won't, says The Maharajah of Connemara, and nips from a flask.

The Body Language of Trees accepts his invitation and arrives at 2 p.m. sharp. He has a bath full of 90% spud-stilled hooch. The Body Language of Trees joins him in the bathroom where they sit on the lip of the tub and drink. A soft day, this, rain irretrievable mist. Later, the two of them empty the house of its furniture, into the garden with it, then strip naked and wrestle.

The Body Language of Trees drinks tea. A good day, this, he says, and toasts sheep in misty hills. The salmon oblige - a raging horde of one-track mind, pink and gold in mauve Connemara.

A battalion of sheep stealth down on a sleep-doze Body Language of Trees. One licks his hand, another chews his laughter. They gather round like kids for stories. The Body Language of Trees peels back skin and embraces a

bloodshot afternoon; chops and liver, a fair pot of stew.

Christmas in November. This won't do, she says, on waking, and extricates what she can. Better you'd smothered me, better I'd ignited on impact. The Body Language of Trees stands – his neck wilts and his shoulders round. From the side he is a question mark.

A dozen baby steps and the ocean sinks and he kicks without wanting. The Body Language of Trees is followed into the waves by Sasha, a pastel pink Golden Retriever. Don't even think about it, Sasha says, and chomps a foot, paddles him home. The Body Language of Trees coughs his way back, forward, call it what. Ashore, Sasha performs CPR then bounds the beach after a tennis ball.

The Body Language of Trees deposits himself at the roundabout which is the last chance to not continue West into Connemara. Locals stop and say Christ, Body, this is no weather, get in before you catch a dose. He waves them on, prefers The Gulf Stream to fireside pints. Tourists approach in rentals and he flags them down, tells them Connemara is closed, that *There is nothing to see here, folks, just Feck Off*. The Body Language of Trees considers this his Civic Duty.

## SOME GIRLS PRICKLE BACK

Joseph Patrick Pascale & Suany Cañarte

“Is Alicia almost ready?” Rick asked Fiona in the morning.

“I hope so,” she replied. “She’s been in the bathroom for an inordinately long amount of time.”

But Rick didn’t have to wait much longer until Alicia was all set. The glades were just as exciting as Rick had expected, and despite a couple of close calls, they made it through just fine.

The weekend trip ended, Rick was driving the four of them back home in the snow. It had only been flurrying when they left, but all at once, Rick found himself attempting to navigate white-out conditions.

“Maybe you should pull this car over, man,” said Gerald, from the backseat.

“Nah. I’ve got this,” Rick responded. “Besides, I can’t even see the shoulder.”

“Rick, look out!” Alicia screamed.

Rick lost control of the car immediately and they went careening through a white void. It didn’t take them long to realize that they were buried deep in a snowdrift.

“We just have to hope that someone rescues us once the damn blizzard lets up,” said Gerald.

The four of them drifted in and out of sleep. Gerald and Fiona huddled together for warmth in the back seat, and Rick and Alicia did the same.

Rick woke to Alicia making sobbing noises, cowering away

from him on the far side of the front seat, curled up in a fetal position.

“All of my toiletries are in the trunk right now, Rick!” Alicia cried. “I’m a freak!”

She cried louder and louder. “I am a freak, Rick! I am a freak!”

“It will be okay, Alicia,” said Rick, rubbing her cheeks together to comfort her. “Right now, the toiletries are the least of our worries. Look into my eyes: we will be warmer together if we stay together.”

His eyebrows abruptly twisted in confusion. “What’s wrong? C’mon, I know you’re not a freak.”

Alicia began to bawl. She seemed suddenly to remember that Gerald and Fiona were in the back seat, and a bit of relief washed over her when she saw that they were still asleep.

Hours later, Alicia was asleep, and Rick was scrutinizing her chin. He could discern nothing wrong with it. The chin looked exactly as it always had: on the bottom of a smooth and unblemished face. He stroked from her chin up to her cheek, then he did the same to his own, and found the two feelings identical.

“I’ve been this way ever since puberty,” Alicia whispered to Rick.

He immediately caressed her face, but found it perfectly smooth.

“You shaved, didn’t you?!” Rick whispered.

“Yes,” she said, casting her eyes downward.

“I don’t want you ever shaving again!” Rick said.

It took a bit more coaxing than that, but Alicia

complied, and in time Rick was in ecstasy as he rubbed his face into her breasts and beard, feeling the weight of her beard as he hefted it into both of his hands.

Years later, Rick was more obsessed with her than ever. His own beard he hadn't shaved in years, and it was so tangled and matted that it was all too painful to look upon. He was huddled at present in the corner of a filthy basement apartment, photographs and sketches of naked girls littered all around him. They all had beards drawn on them, yet despite his compulsion, Rick found the beards revolting. He dreamt of gorgeous women with invisible beards. He had searched for such a woman for ages, but didn't know how to continue his search.

## INTERVIEW WITH GLENN LANGOHR

### Part 4

GL: And I've been out of prison for almost five years: in September it'll be five years. And—writing has definitely saved my life. Like I'm just as obsessed about writing as I used to be about taking over—uh; whatever drug trade I was trying to take over in my demented mind back then.  
(laughter)

(laughter)

EL: That's awesome...So like, um; the different techniques and tricks and devices in writing are now what obsess you in a similar way to what;...

GL: Yeah. Exactly. Plots and storylines and—and uh; characters—character development—uh, good over evil...like just; character motivations...being able to—yeah: doing all that, it's pretty cool; it's pretty exciting.

EL: That's inspiring to hear, man. I mean the story is unbelievable...and—it's really one that everyone can learn from. Especially the people who...aren't in prison, and—you know; aren't writing, you know...they might feel really wimpy, because...you know: you went to prison, you went through all of this adversity...and you're,—stronger than ever for it, one might say;

GL: Yeah.

EL: So...uh; for the people who are going to be reading it, you know, that haven't been to prison, and are looking for inspiration to write, and are kind of drifting around...I think this is going to be really good for them to read your story.

## DUNCAN E.PONYMOUS' DIARY

Vanessa Cutts

Caterina decided it would be better to buy two of everything because every time she went shopping at the store, guaranteed that the next day she would run out of something that she needed, if she went to the chemist for the two packs of cotton wool pads, she would run out of the toothpaste the next day and if she bought two of whatever it was, in theory it would reduce her amounts of visits by half, but in actual fact it did the opposite and doubled her amounts because of the things that she forgot to get and the rate at what she ran out of increasing the variables in her equations of food or toiletry requirements. Either that, she thought, or another theory was that Shakespeare was a hypochondriac, and his best lines were inspired by doctor's scripts—"The un-ravelled sleeve of care"; "O, true apothecary"; "The patient must administer to himself"—or none of the actors could read his actual handwriting, and they improvised their current complaints.

She would always lose weight, Caterina decided.

Boxes of Alpen or Weetabix, of every shape of sugar coated wheat or rice would nestle on the table and find their way back in about an hour, lighter in her cupboards than when they came out.

Then he could retreat to his attic. There was only a

ten year age difference between Duncan, Alexei, and Caterina, but the older you got, he decided, the more you needed your space, although he'd appreciated that their company was undemanding and was amazed by their easy acceptance of his first impressions of Caterina. Brands, labels, and also very talkative, working on theories for why dogs stuck their heads out of open windows in moving vehicles and smiled with their tongues hanging out. Frank was completely the opposite. You could probably mistake him for a famous footballer if you put him on a bus with ten of the other players. He dressed in mainly dark colours and had a total condemnation of most things.

### *Wednesday*

Duncan was very busy writing his third novel. Most days when he was writing, Duncan would wear a grey marl track suit, trousers with a white Levi's T-shirt, and sit in the kitchen where he had a view out of his window into the garden and could easily make himself cups of jasmine green tea. Today, his toothpaste had mixed into a mauve colour and he'd tried some of Caterina's new raspberry jam spread on his toast. Last weekend he had fed the pot of over-estimated spaghetti to the pigeons in the garden. They had appeared to enjoy it, throwing it into the air, wearing it. Twenty five percent of it had turned into a collection of wig spaghetti, scarf spaghetti, and spaghetti jackets.

For a while Caterina thought it was heading for a kiss but then she thought maybe he was gay. The trip to the races was a better bet? Nothing came of it. They had laughed

at names and cheered as some horses ran. It was a nice excuse to get dolled up, anyway, and bet with someone else's money.

### *Thursday*

Frank wasn't back yet, it was a Thursday and he was probably at the pub after work. Alexei and Caterina had eaten most of the pizza they'd ordered and were watching a documentary on the sofa about a famous philosopher, Kierkegaard or Wittgenstein or Derrida, while waiting for a music programme. Duncan had followed his same routine. She took advantage of the empty bathroom. She usually shaved about twice a week and tried her razor: it was too blunt. The new one always resulted in blood running down her legs, ankle wound more often than not, as they presented several difficult angles. Duncan had felt like an interpreter to her new voices. They couldn't stop asking questions in attempts to find meaning to their existence in a society created by previous generations, to understand the origins of things and what they meant. Why did you always get an After Eight in an Indian restaurant? Why was a pizza company named after a game of numbered counter pieces? The nostalgic discourse of the regular voices, the treble and bass, these came and went like a descant harmony. India's one of the happiest nations in the world. It is hardly surprising that they only serve a plate of peppermint seeds after your meal.

He passed the typical FOR SALE signs, the small Italian trattoria and the pink walls with the railings, shuffled

his iPod. He would go and watch rugby at the pub this Saturday. They'd started rehearsing last week and he could easily work around his new role as a university lecturer going through a divorce.

### *Friday*

Frank had to know who he was aiming the product at to conceive a simple idea that would sell well. This involved suggesting a lot of ideas and reacting to other people's ideas, drawing very rough thumbnail concepts [small scribbles the size of a thumbnail, a picture of the end of a finger.] with one stroke headlines [simple handwriting not represented by any particular font.] until the game of cerebral tennis produced a genius idea that would be turned into a presentation of great looking ads that the client would love. There was mail, minutes, diaries, bookings, and telephone enquiries to organise and answer. He had one beer at lunchtime and two beers after dinner with some of the other teams in his department and Caterina was watching TV when he returned home.

Nearly out of coffee and tea again, said Caterina.

We're going shopping on Saturday morning, said Frank.

I will leave the kitty on the table, said Caterina. £2.00 each.

Her sister Nancy and family, the Yorkshire Tea Folk, were coming on Saturday afternoon. She needed to plan food for about eight people, other than takeaway.

Breakfast. He took the packet of Weetabix out of the cupboard, put it onto the table. Sitting down at the table to eat, he noticed the milk was missing. Then he realised he had put it back in the fridge.

Do you want some tea? asked Caterina, making him jump.

She gently banged the cupboards and drawers open and closed, pulling out crockery and cutlery, gently banging them open and closed in preparatory percussion with a breakfast break beat.

Alexei jumped again as the bread popped up. Then she stopped and waited. She put on the radio and sat down. After a couple of minutes, the room smelt of toast.

Richard opened the door.

Morning, Alexei! Have you had your breakfast? Would you like some bacon? There's more than enough, and I can throw another egg in.

No, and yes, please, said Alexei.

After some more tea and a second breakfast, they started working in the office that had been added at the back of the house. It took about an hour and a half for the two of them to roller the room marble white while listening to the radio, singing and disagreeing with most of the news.

*Saturday*

Alexei practised some of his lines:

“How am I supposed to cope with one hundred and nineteen twenty year old students with a psychotic wife

screaming at me every minute of my day! Your demands are unreasonable! If you insist on throwing your affair into my face in a ruthless attempt to get more of my attention, then the only option that I have is a divorce!”

The roller made crisp, wet crackling noises as Alexei moved it back and forth on the raised part of the plastic, dipping it into the paint, making tiny, even peaks. Less and less it crackled as he moved the roller over the wall back and forth until it dried. Then they sat at lunchtime and watched their English sheepdog dry while half an onion absorbed any toxic chemicals the trading standards still allowed.

Her sister Nancy was coming to stay this weekend with her husband and two kids. The sofa had a pull out bed and the kids had sleeping bags.

Alexei walked into the kitchen.

This is my flatmate Alexei. He’s from Russia. Say hello! said Caterina.

Did you have a party?

Yes, and we danced to Mummy’s new Adele CD.

Do you want some music on you chose, Judy?

Do you want to see my new bracelet, said Judy, Andrea gave it to me for my birthday last week.

Alexei found his inner child and played with the kids for a couple hours making funny animals out of vegetables stuck together with cocktail sticks: peas for eyes, potato

noses, and mangetoute moustaches. He had found the shopping that Caterina bought and put it to good use. Then Alexei decided to make St Basil's Cathedral out of red onions and tried to scare them by telling the story of Ivan The Terrible who blinded the architect for designing anything else so beautiful.

Who's Ivan The Terrible? asked Andrea.

I don't believe you, said Judy.

Where's the week gone? exclaimed Frank, his eyebrows at diagonals. It's Monday again. What have I got to show for it? And how's the book coming along? What actually defines a local community? Would they eat it if they always had toast?

Well, the concepts for the artwork had been signed off on and that was going straight to print. Frank was really pleased with his work and it might win him an award. He'd already won one and the sense of achievement then had nearly moved him to tears. If Frank's high school friend Simon could see him now: not as arrogant as some people had thought. He had to laugh, though, and take a lot of jealousy and a lot of backslapping, and just keep it up. He, Frank, would ask Rachel out. Simon went out with Rachel. Rachel would be impressed with Frank.

Frank wasn't sure. The game produced few tries, the rain had stopped, but the players still kept dropping the ball.

It's fine if you put it under the grill! she said, putting on her jacket. I have to be in early so I am going to go now. See you all later tonight!

New bag, said Alexei, and I now know what the inside of the Post Office looks like. Suddenly, remembered the CDs and books: I must call my brother. Ask me later if I've rung him.

What had Caterina got to show for the week that flashed by. He was starting the new part in his play, knew all his lines. They had rehearsed several times and nearly everyone was ready. Each character was like living another life and he had found his confidence growing and growing and he was able to react in any situation now. He wasn't scared by the responsibility of kids for once and even found it attractive instead of wanting to run another mile. In fact, he'd even decided to take a mature approach in his conversations, although he knew he would just end up joking again.

Caterina and her sister had been close when they were kids. She would throw herself into her work to not think about missing her. Duncan arrived downstairs just as Frank was leaving. Alexei didn't have to leave for another hour. He had some washing to do.

Oakland & San Francisco,  
2013. Elan Lafontaine &  
Benny Lichtner, Editors.  
Michele Chun &  
Nicole Trigg, Bookmakers.