

T H E

oddville press

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The things you always wanted to say

C O V E R

Bryant Goetz

Bryant Goetz is a painter living, working, and exploring in the Pacific Northwest. His oil paint and mixed media paintings are often large in scale due to his attraction to the confrontational nature of larger work. He is mostly concerned with the emotional and darker aspects of life and the ways in which those can be portrayed through portraiture and figurative painting. His work can be seen at bryantgoetz.com

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Promoting today's geniuses
and tomorrow's giants.

S T A F F

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D I S C L A I M E R

For some reason, since the nineteenth century, it has been perfectly normal in Western culture to write about murder, violence, cannibalism, drug-taking and other terrifying experiences without putting in a disclaimer. But ordinary, everyday experiences, such as being naked, using swear words or having sexual intercourse, are considered unsuitable for impressionable children. Odd though the Oddville Press has always been, we think it wise to adhere to convention in this case, so parental discretion is advised. The Oddville Press considers a wide variety of literary work. Nothing is included purely for its shock value, but sometimes, good art is a little shocking. This book is aimed at adults. This is not the same as “adult content”: it means content for actual grown-ups who are actually mature. If you aren’t an actual grown-up then please don’t read the Oddville Press, or at least, don’t complain to us if you do.

Thanks for reading,
The Management

Table of Contents

	5
The Suicide Survivor's Cookbook Poetry by Zachary Kluckman	
	6
Tea With Old Friends A Short Story by Jonathan B. Ferrini	
	8
Hammond, Oregon Art by Ray Marrero	
	9
Gacela of Weak Weather Poetry by Mark J. Mitchell	
	10
After a Century of Pushups A Short Story by Thomas M. McDade	
	13
Mnemosyne Poetry by Andrew DeBella	
	14
Untitled Art by Anne Bocci	
	15
Mysterious Stranger Short Story by Mark Jacobs	
	21
In Color Poetry by Mark J. Mitchell	
	22
Infinite Landscape Art by Bryant Goetz	
	23
Chuckles in the Flophouse A Short Story by Robert Garnham	
	29
Quiet Poetry by Morgan Bazilian	
	30
Youngs Bay, Astoria Art by Ray Marrero	
	31
Known Space Poetry by Shannon Cuthbert	
	32
Reunion Short Story by T.M. Bemis	
	36
Break in Case of Silence Poetry by Zachary Kluckman	
	37
Blackout Poetry by Shannon Cuthbert	
	38
The Guide Art by Bryant Goetz	
	39
Ahead Poetry by Andrew DeBella	
	40
Bedfellows Poetry by Mark Niedzwiedz	
	42
The Stargazer Short Story by Barrie Darke	
	47
Between Murder Creek and Burnt Corn Creek Poetry by James Tyler	
	48
Notes Toward an Hieratic Language Short Story by Kevin Moquin	
	53
Rose Av Poetry by Tom Laichas	
	54
Rose in Marylebone Art by Ray Marrero	
	55
Chatter Box Short Story by Steve Levandoski	

The Suicide Survivor's Cookbook

Zachary Kluckman

Maybe one more lived today. Maybe the words poured through me like flood water receding, urgent rush then ebbing flow. A softening as danger passed. A tear that became a mud slide in the living room. An emptying cup. Silt rising on the floor, swallowing the rug. Maybe they walked across this wreckage, examining their footprints as if looking for starfish. Proof of life. Amazed at the size of their impact. Maybe the sun kissed their ears, there is

no guarantee. This is not the work that we do. The calls come every day and I curl my hands into fists because the knuckles remind me how the heart shapes its hurt. All blunt edges and hard memory. A survivor myself, I have walked across my own ruins. Bathed in the rage of waters I cannot control. A decision that cannot be unmade, like a life. I have been the storm that craves salt

and warmth, rebirth. Understand, it is a kind of hunger that drives the body to destroy itself. That asks the light to imagine its own shadow. An appetite for drowning to spite the wounds that swallow. I try to teach them the art of cooking, to bake a bread other than their own bodies. To feed hunger to itself, an ouroboros worm feasting its own flesh while the storm leaves the kitchen. Sprinkle the flour. Witness the birth of your hands. Whatever you make next, you do not eat alone.

Zachary Kluckman, the National Poetry Awards 2014 Slam Artist of the Year, is a Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Gold Medal Poetry Teacher and a founding organizer of the 100 Thousand Poets for Change program. Kluckman, who tours the nation as a spoken word artist, was recently one of three American poets invited to the Kistrech International Poetry Festival in Kenya. He has served as Spoken Word Editor for the Pedestal magazine and has authored two poetry collections.

Tea with Old Friends

Jonathan B. Ferrini

IT WAS A WEEKLY TREAT for me to attend an elegant, afternoon, “High Tea” at the beautiful “Mark Hopkins Hotel” after church services across the street. The “Mark” held a commanding view of San Francisco from its location atop Nob Hill, and provided a beautiful view of the iconic bridge, bay, and city below.

I was always welcomed by my waiter, Franco, a fifty year employee, who reserved my favorite, long, green, supple, silk covered, chaise lounge, which included two long arms, and a matching foot rest. With charm and grace, Franco would gently roll up a brass serving table with a glass top, displaying my assortment of English teas, finger sandwiches, and exquisite pastries. Franco always included a glass of sherry which often times induced an afternoon nap, and dreams of our exotic travels as a family.

Across from my chaise lounge, was its “sister”; a beautiful, vintage, velvet, bright red sofa with gold leaf accents. It looked as if it previously held a prominent place within the palace of Czar Alexander. The red sofa was so elegant, it appeared to be a museum piece, and only on occasion, would people sit upon it with reverence. Both furniture pieces were handcrafted at least one hundred years earlier. I always admired people with an appreciation for fine furniture who would photograph, and admire the beautiful red sofa.

We were situated in a quiet corner of

the magnificent hotel lounge where I could sit alone with my memories, nap, or watch the hotel guests come and go. My heart was always warmed by watching a young mother introduce her daughter to High Tea, reminding me of my precious moments with my daughter, now grown with a lovely daughter of her own, attending Stanford.

Franco wore his spotless, white waiter’s jacket, white shirt, black bow tie, pressed black trousers, and shoes shining like mirrors. Franco put two children through college working at “The Mark”, and was the last of a dying breed of professional waiters. He felt like family and treated me like royalty, greeting me as “Madame”, and always nearby at my beckon call. He remembered the many private dinners my husband and I shared, our anniversary celebrations, birthdays, and lavish New Year’s parties we hosted. He was careful to remind me of these precious memories because it always brought me tears of joy, albeit, bittersweet, now that I’m elderly and alone.

The chaise lounge and I became friends because I believed it had a soul. Its arm rests were like the embracing arms of a loved one, comforting me as I reflected upon my long life; a depression era teenager, soldier’s wife, mother to a beautiful grown daughter with an equally beautiful granddaughter, and a handsome son killed in Vietnam, whose untimely

,and unnecessary death, left an open “wound” within my heart. We had a comfortable life in San Francisco, and managed quite a bit of international travel as my husband was transferred around the world in the course of his business. We fell in love with San Francisco and decided to make it our home when we retired.

I often fell into a deep sleep within my chaise lounge, and awoke to find a blanket carefully placed over me by Franco, and a plush pillow beneath my head. I had a dream that my departed husband was calling for me from the opposite side of our home, as was his custom. I hadn’t dreamed of my husband for decades, and surmised, I was being called to “join” him shortly. I welcomed the day when we might be reunited in the afterlife. I missed him, dearly.

I was ninety years old and watched my friends die over the years. Except for church, periodic visits from my daughter and granddaughter, I lived a reclusive life, but was content.

I returned one Sunday afternoon for High Tea to find the entire hotel lounge had been remodeled. I walked about, hurriedly looking for my chaise lounge and its “sister”, the red sofa. I believed that I might have entered the wrong hotel until I was met by Franco.

“Franco, what happened to the lounge? Where are my chaise lounge and the red sofa?”

“The hotel management remodeled the lounge last week to attract younger guests. I miss the old décor, as well, Madame.”

“Where did the chaise lounge and red sofa go? Perhaps, they’re in storage? I would like to purchase both immediately!”

“The work was completed during the

overnight hours so as to minimize our guest’s inconvenience, but I will inquire on your behalf, Madame.”

The General Manager, a young Swiss hotelier, soon thereafter, approached me, apologizing,

“I’m sorry Madame but the previous furnishings were taken away by a moving company to an undisclosed location at the behest of our interior designers who don’t have any further information on their whereabouts.”

The General Manager and Franco knew I was heartbroken by the loss of my favorite chaise lounge and its “sister” sofa. They provided me with a beautiful Queen Anne chair adjacent to the fireplace, and graciously provided my “High Tea” at no charge.

I considered my favorite furniture as friends, and was thankful for the privilege of knowing them. I prayed both the chaise lounge and red sofa met a beautiful fate, perhaps displayed with honor in a vintage furniture shop, soon to be purchased, hopefully together, and appreciated by new owners for decades to come? If I knew which store, I’d immediately purchase them both and move them into my Pacific Heights home.

At ninety, I had grown accustomed to losing friends and loved ones, but the loss of two inanimate, beautiful, vintage, furniture pieces, providing only comfort, never the pain and sorrow humans mete out, devastated me. I dreaded the thought they may be sitting in a landfill, slowly decaying, like an elderly woman. I prayed they did in fact, have souls, and would fondly remember the many guests they comforted, including me.

Jonathan Ferrini is a published author who resides in San Diego. He received his MFA from UCLA in motion picture and television production.



Hammond, Oregon | Ray Marrero

Ray Marrero's artistic vision could be called emotive expression, melancholic and beautiful, even romantic. As a teenager, his first inspiration was Diane Arbus. He studied at the Academy of Art in San Francisco, and at that time also assisted and was mentored by the late Charles Gatewood. Ray Marrero is process oriented, preferring large format and medium analog cameras, hand printing and alternative processes. He splits his time between Astoria, Oregon and Meadow Glade, Washington.

Gacela of Weak Weather

Mark J. Mitchell

For herself

It toys with the tall brown tree,
this shy storm. Rains in March
only want to tease us.

Her pain's a tooth in the night:
Jagged, it bites without warning.

A gray day opens behind closed windows.
Wet wood, kissed by rain in March,
smells of soft hope. And unnamed time.

Her pain is a dark dagger
That cuts him and pierces her.

A polite storm passes slow. Morning,
brave, welcomes this dim light.
Some loose sleep is left on the stairs.
Pain sleep. Two lovers. Mourning.

Mark J. Mitchell was born in Chicago and grew up in southern California. His latest poetry collection, *Starting from Tu Fu* was just published by Encircle Publications. A new collection is due out in December from Cherry Grove. He is very fond of baseball, Louis Aragon, Miles Davis, Kafka and Dante. He lives in San Francisco with his wife, the activist and documentarian, Joan Juster where he made his marginal living pointing out pretty things. Now, like everyone else, he's unemployed. He has published 2 novels and three chapbooks and two full length collections so far. Titles on request. A meager online presence can be found at facebook.com/MarkJMitchellwriter/

After a Century of Pushups

Thomas M. McDade

“RABBIT’S FOOT WON’T RUN OFF with me the way Honest Harry did the other day, Bobby,” said Katie. I’d written “Tom” repeatedly on her back as if my fingertip were a dull pencil, told her my name several times. “I’ll rate him a perfect quarter tomorrow. Thanks for the massage.” She’d requested one after doing 100 pushups and collapsing. We stayed in position. I traced her forehead, sharp nose, hesitated on her cheekbones, taut earlobes and harp neck top of her ear that was flush against her head. As I touched her chin, she ground her teeth. She tugged up a smile. Her breath went sleepy. I stood, took a pink crib sized blanket off the bed and covered her legs. I kissed my fingers and touched her cheek: lovely. I hesitated before leaving, hoping she’d flip over, and laughing say, “Had you fooled didn’t I, Tom?” and so on. I slipped off as quietly as any escapee from an asylum or thief from a crime scene. I was spacey, almost drove away without caulking a small third floor window. Just as I put the tip of the gun into the gap, a mob of wasps shot out. One forehead sting was all but trying to slap them away almost sent me to my grave.

I tried to untwist all that had gone on with Katie that morning while driving to the track but couldn’t find its beginning, middle

or end. I was too late to check out the horses in the paddock. I bet according to her sure thing. Each of the fifty one-dollar bills she’d given me had “Love you Bobby” written in red ink. When would I be “Tom” again? The horses were entering the track. It came to me that Jeep Hurry was a classic quitter, often led deep into the stretch, then backed up. J. K. Marcher, who had a bad reputation but still managed work, was up on the 11-year-old. He must have a fast talking agent. Marcher had served suspensions for “Failing to give his best effort,” and “Reporting to jockey quarters in a condition unfit to accept his mounts.” He peeked at the odds as he passed the tote: 60-1. The race was over a distance of ground, a mile and seventy yards. The gate crew had a tough time loading Burnt Hills. Jeep Hurry eased in as if it were his stable stall. The field broke well except for Our Rocker who stumbled but recovered. More Music showed the early foot, took a 3-length advantage at the clubhouse turn. The rest bunched up except for Jeep Hurry who ambled along behind Gunwale a half-length, but soon Marcher with one crack of the whip had his charge gaining prosperously. York Road joined More Music and they matched each other stride for stride, Greek Lover a distant third.

At the top of the stretch, I invented Katie as the rider. Jeep Hurry passed tiring rivals and continued to advance. He collared the leaders at the eighth pole. York Road faltered badly. In a sudden lurch, Jeep Hurry dispatched More Music and breezed across the finish line 4 1/2 lengths to the good. Marcher rode him out to the clubhouse turn. I figured he had a buzzer to ditch. Booing drowned out the few wild cheers from the crowd. York Road was a 3-5. When his jockey dismounted, a drunk threw a beer can that narrowly missed. I would have been excited had I picked the horse myself, unaware of the outcome but thanks Katie anyway. Each two-dollar ticket was worth \$122, I opened an account at the Blackstone Valley Credit Union.

Four days passed before more Carpenter Street work. Jimmy, my boss, was waiting with Dunkin Donuts coffees. A second floor apartment just vacated needed an abracadabra paint job. Yes, Katie's, some men would have jumped up to click heels as many times as possible, off the hook, decent helping of do-re-mi. What in hell was wrong with me? We climbed the stairs. Jimmy marked off what to paint with a piece of chalk. "Don't bother with the ceiling," he said. "You could eat off of it. Skip the latrine it's a showpiece. Selective is the magic word."

Jimmy doctored K-Mart off-white to the consistency of milk. Shortly you could call me homogenized. It was like painting over the fright in a haunted house. My brain was a cornfield maze. Done at noon, I couldn't wait to get myself to Rock's Bar to tie one on. I made my last trip to the bathroom. The hot water was tepid. I shook my hands dry. Katie's hairbrush on the floor startled me like a roach that big would.

Two more weeks to master house painting to Jimmy's satisfaction. He made me a specialist, window sashes. Yes, I was always

hoping to spot Katie through a pane. I drove by Lincoln Downs when I figured morning workouts were over for the wish of her. It was at Kip's Diner one morning that a clue popped. I overheard a cop telling a short order cook that he'd cashed a big bet on a horse named Diana V at the Marshfield Fair, ridden by a girl jock, a former exercise rider at Lincoln Downs, named White, couldn't recall her first. She'd never told me her last name.

Saturday morning I had a late breakfast in my car, bran muffins and coffee from the Stop & Shop. I filled up at Costa's Sunoco. I got on I-95 at the Newport Ave entrance, sixty-miles to Marshfield. I expected mobbed stands since it was the final day of racing, cloudy but mild, not so. I rented binoculars, bought a Racing Form and a program. No rider named White. I wagered distractedly but with some success, hit the Double for forty-nine dollars, French Apple and Con Gusto. At the Beer Garden, I overheard a tall old fellow wearing a Red Sox cap telling his wife about Katie White splitting for Midwest tracks under contract to the trainer J. J. Holly. "I guess those four wins on Diana V went to both their heads," said the woman. I was happy Katie had finally gotten her jockey's license.

"Good for her to slip out of these parts. Imagine life after your brother murders your parents, sets the house to blazes. To think Bobby used to work on my car at Thorpe's Garage."

"You'll be interrupting your Last Rites with that highlight," snapped his mate.

I choked on a swallow of beer. "You all right son," asked the Sox fan? I was stunned and for all the wrong reasons. I was used, a pinch hitter, a stunt man for a killer. Ha! I can break the law as I please. He'll do my time. What a sap. Were there other surrogates? Then, I pictured her doing her pushups, wanting my touch. She

gave me money and the hot tip. “Calm down, selfish son-of-a-bitch” I muttered to myself. Christ, she lost her parents. How would I have handled a like tragedy? Self-righteous bastard, a one-morning stand your goal. I wandered around in a fog. The track could have been a merry-go-round. I split as the horses were loading for the sixth race, gave my Daily Double money to the nun shaking change in a Maxwell House coffee can.

I blasted Top-40; welcomed that invasion to

crowd my mind. I hit a pothole and the station jumped to gospel music. I prayed for Katie and I saw a light but it took a week or so until it shined bright enough. For a split second, I was her brother Bobby; the fifty bucks and hot tip meant for a fantasy getaway. Was she in on the murders? I got away all right, used the money for a Caribbean cruise. I splurged on several massages. A couple of times the poundings of masseuse hands sounded like far off hoofbeats and I felt like dirt.

Thomas M. McDade is a resident of Fredericksburg, VA, previously CT, & RI. He is a graduate of Fairfield University, Fairfield, CT. McDade is twice a U.S. Navy Veteran serving ashore at the Fleet Anti-Air Warfare Training Center, Virginia Beach, VA and at sea aboard the USS Mullinnix (DD-944) and USS Miller (DE / FF-1091).

Mnemosyne

Andrew DeBella

Lie to me
Tooth-white grin,
Implant photo reels
Through my spine
Break my synapses
In half

We all do it

Some dig in mud
Others lamplight caves
A few under bed covers
None away

A hit, a touch, a scream
Shovel through earth
Toss in the shit
Pat evenly, carefully
thoughtlessly
More.

Andrew DeBella is a creative writing teacher in Oklahoma.
His work is forthcoming in *Metaworker Literary Magazine*.



Untitled | Anne Bocci

Anne Bocci is an artist and entrepreneur from Portland, Oregon. You can see more of her work at annebocciboutique.com

Mysterious Stranger

Mark Jacobs

SMOOK WAS THE ONE who kept track of things. It wasn't like he had the official job of writing stuff down, but sometimes he did that. In his room at the Castle, he kept a sneaker box into which he tossed his notes. They didn't amount to much. Scraps of paper, some sticky notes, the scrawled backs of envelopes. Now and again a napkin with the Porky's logo. If he was lucky, the napkin didn't get wet, causing his words to blur as though he'd never had the thought in the first place.

Later, when dark facts came to light, it was on a Porky's napkin that Smook found his first reference to the Mysterious Stranger. M.S. shows up, the note said. Commands our attention. First game 269. Nobody else called him the Mysterious Stranger. It was not the way they thought. But that was what Smook took him to be. Since he was the one keeping track, it gave him the right to call the dude whatever he wanted to call him.

They were the Knights of Intense Perception, and they lived in the Castle. You could say that Flange was the leader of the Knights. Actually, you had to say it. Flange looked like he was twelve. His face was round, his glasses had wire rims, his hair was blonde and long like your first dream girlfriend's. But he had a strong

mind. Also, he was organized. He was the one who got it together to sign a lease for the big old house on Landrey, in Black Rock. He was the one who started calling it the Castle. He was the one who had money in his pockets when everybody else was stone broke. Flange never minded shelling out for group entertainment.

They lived in the Castle, which was a massive crumbling old place that used to be a boarding house. Supposedly it had been condemned by the City of Buffalo, but then the authorities forgot about it. Their membership numbers varied, topping out at twelve, then dropping to six. The night the M.S. showed up, they were at ten. In Smook's opinion, ten was plenty. They only sold non-dangerous drugs, and only to people who could handle the high. Fuck that opioids noise, Flange liked to say. It was one of their bylaws. The Knights specialized in Northern California buds and were known for their quality product. A record-setting shipment was due any day. Flange had excellent connections. They never let him down.

What drew them together, what made them the Knights, was not how they got by but what they knew, how clearly they saw. Flange was able to put it into words, which naturally enough increased his prestige.

Karl Marx had gotten it half right. The workers of the world got the shit end of every stick they picked up. But the situation was getting worse, not better. As the centuries went by, wealth was being concentrated in fewer and fewer hands. Eventually some tiny number—ten, a hundred, five thousand?—would own everything on the planet. When that happened, everybody else became a humanoid ant, living its miserable life enslaved to one of the greedy queens of consumption, making her honey night and day, every night and every goddamn day.

Revolution was a dream. Pure fantasy. But you had to resist anyway, if only to maintain your self-respect. One way was by giving up video games. They only distracted you, dulled your senses, making it harder to perceive the enemy's advance. There were no diversion screens at the Castle.

They liked bowling. They especially liked bowling at Porky's. Best of all, they liked Porky's midnight bowling. On the way to the alley, Smook felt a sense of anticipation: the phosphorescent balls, the dark lanes, the wooden explosion of targeted pins, the watery draught beer in plastic cups that went down easy.

They had three lanes and were having a mellow night, although Pounce was bugging the shit out of them about maintenance. It was May, grass was growing fast in the Castle yard. Somebody had to figure out how to cut it. And then go ahead and do it. Pounce was one of the longest serving Knights. He wanted to grow a beard but was having no luck. He limped and wouldn't say why. He was their worrier in the same unofficial way that Smook was the guy who kept track of things.

Then—Pounce said it was at the stroke of midnight, but that was just his way of polishing the story—here was this phenomenal bowler putting together a phenomenal game in the

end lane, over against the north wall of the building. The Knights weren't the only ones to stop and watch.

He was small, compact, and graceful in motion. His brown hair was long. When he turned around you saw that his eyes were meant to be mounted in the head of a tiger. His plush red lips were meant to be kissed... by somebody. You got the impression that bowling was not the only thing he was really good at. He was calm. Bone deep calm, the way Flange wished he were and sometimes tried to pass himself off as being. One other impression that Smook had: the M.S. was visiting from some place none of the Knights could really picture, maybe the past but more likely the future.

Three games: 269, 272, 289.

So then there they were in the back yard of the Castle at three in the morning toking on spliffs and drinking chilled vodka, nobody asking the M.S. what his name was. Which Smook thought was kind of odd.

For a little while Flange tried to keep up with the guy, the way the leader of an organization like the Knights would be expected to. But he gave up pretty quickly. As best Smook could tell, he did not appear to mind giving way to the M.S.'s superior authority. Which also was kind of odd.

Smook thought enough of the story they heard that night to take some notes and throw them in the sneaker box.

Last year, the M.S. had gone to New Mexico. He had no idea why. Got a job in a coffee bar in Albuquerque. Had a recurring dream about intersecting planes, the disturbances they caused in the cosmos. Then he heard about an abandoned commune out in the desert. Sunshine City. It had been big in the late Sixties. Somebody made a documentary about the people who went there, how they tried to live

a healthy life and expand their consciousness. For murky reasons, the documentary disappeared. Suppressed, some said. Lost, said others. Some people talked about a house fire, the lone copy of the film incinerated in a flaming attic. Whatever the truth, it was never shown. In 1973, Sunshine City was abandoned.

Making his way there by thumb, the M.S. found a rundown shack, a well with a working pump whose handle got so hot in the sun it burned his hand. The husk of a banjo on a broken shelf. A notebook stuffed between cracks in a wall of the shack. The notebook advised readers to be alert. The M.S. was definitely that.

What happened to him after three weeks of patient waiting, on the alert at Sunshine City, might have been a dream. Might have been a hallucination, or a vision. It might have been his imagination. He seemed not to care about the vehicle; his interest was in the message. And he himself was only the messenger, a whole lot less important than what he carried.

When he said that, Smook studied his face in the half light cast by a bulb on a pole in the back yard, watched him knock back a shot. It seemed to Smook that a person could not knock back vodka the way he did and tell a lie at the same time.

It turned out that the Knights were on the right track. The lords of capitalism were grimly marching, thinking farther ahead than the human herd they intended to corral. Generations, really. They had the resources, and the drive, to plan 75 years into the future. Sooner or later, everybody would live in a hive, or on a reservation. People would have to get permission to raise their voices, to go outside in daylight, to fuck in the dark.

What the M.S. knew, thanks to whatever it was that came down on him at Sunshine City, was that revolution was not a fantasy, it was a holy obligation, like going to Mass used to

be. But they had to be smart, and systematic. They had to acquire the strategic capabilities that the capitalists had. Fighting back wasn't enough. They had to win.

In the morning everybody was dead asleep, but a scraping sound like two knives being sharpened woke Smook. He got out of bed and looked out his bedroom window, which gave onto the back yard. Pounce was down there cutting the grass with one of those old-fashioned hand mowers you never saw any more, limping as he went.

Not sure why, Smook went downstairs and out into the yard, taking two beers from the fridge. Pounce was glad enough to quit mowing and drink one with him.

"So," said Smook. "What do you think?"

"Dude's righteous."

"You think he's right?"

"Got me up early, didn't he?"

Smook had the kind of mind, he knew Pounce meant he had hunted up a mower and started in on the scrabbly high grass so as not to give the municipal authorities an excuse for throwing them out of the Castle. All because of what the M.S. had said.

Smook expected the M.S. to move on. That was what comets did, they tore through a black sky with their white flash, then disappeared. But this one stuck around. The other thing Smook expected and was wrong about was how Flange would take it. Smook figured there would be a major pissing match between two powerful individuals. That did not happen. Instead, the two of them came up with a kind of shared leadership arrangement. What one of them said, the other one repeated. What they both said—and this was thanks to the arrival of the M.S., which shook the Knights out of their complacency—was that they needed a plan.

We have to send a message to the power structure, was how Flange expressed it. Sometimes he was in awe of his own vocabulary.

They had to outflank the global enemy, said the M.S. To do that, the trick was live local, think local, act local.

The Knights soaked it up. Smook saw the change that came over them, and felt it in himself. All of a sudden, selling weed and other buzz-makers door to door was not what they did to get by, it was step one in a plan to get control of what was happening in Buffalo, New York, before it was too late. For the first time since Smook had known him, Pounce quit complaining. If he was still worried about things, he kept his concern to himself.

Nobody wanted to be the first one to ask the M.S. what his name was. Not knowing was cooler, somehow. Everyone liked hanging with him, liked having him around the Castle, even Flange. Especially Flange, who maybe needed somebody to clarify what he meant when he came up with predictions that sounded brilliant but were hard to make sense of.

The California buds shipment was a momentous event on the horizon of their shared consciousness, like a star guiding wise men. Flange got word, he didn't say how, that the product was delayed. Luckily it would not be a long wait. The Knights were looking forward to the ceremony. When a significant shipment came in, they tested it for quality and duration of buzz, smell, eye appeal; everything. Not a party so much as a ritual. Every organization needed rituals.

May seemed to be going by at an unusually quick clip. Smook did not know what to make of that. He and Pounce talked it over one day toward the end of the month. Everybody else was out pedaling product.

"It's because we have a goal," said Pounce. They were sitting on the front porch in

plastic lawn chairs, discreetly passing a pipe back and forth. Spring in Buffalo was quite fine, as seasons went. If only it started earlier, lasted longer. Little kids from the Tuscarora family down the street were out playing, making happy sounds on the sidewalk. Did that mean it was a weekend?

"A plan, you mean," said Smook.

"Same difference. You got a plan, you work out a timetable. Once that happens, the days start zinging past."

It was as good an explanation as Smook was likely to get. He decided not to question the sensation, just go with the feeling of speed.

That same night, at Porky's, rolling a green glowing ball the M.S. bowled two consecutive 284 games. All the Knights were on hand to see what had to be more than a coincidence of numbers.

"I can't stay here," the M.S. told them when they finished congratulating him.

Flange paid for a round of beers, and people waited to hear what the M.S. was telling them.

"It's cool," he said. "It's highly cool, living in the Castle, hanging with you guys, figuring out the plan. But that's not my job."

Flange must have had a heads up that this was coming. "His job is spreading the word," he explained.

It occurred to Smook that his original idea of a comet exploding across the sky was the right one, it only needed a little adjustment as to the length of the display. Back at the Castle, in his room, he took a few notes on the envelope in which the electricity bill arrived. Eventually somebody had to pay that bill. Was he taking over Pounce's job of chief worrier?

For a couple of days everybody was bummed, thinking about the M.S. leaving them. They respected the fact that he had a job to do. They knew that the better he did it, the more likely they themselves were to have success.

That was what global meant. There was talk—more serious talk than anything Smook ever heard under the Castle roof—about a smoke bomb at City Hall. To be effective, it had to be coordinated with a media campaign. Some of the Knights knew a lot about social media. Smook was not one of them. He had always been a believer in radio silence, although now he tried to keep an open mind.

As first steps went, he had to admit, this one was bold. The plan was becoming increasingly specific, meaning real.

Flange finally got word that the shipment was arriving. June 1st. Things perked up around the Castle. Everybody assumed that the M.S. would go with Flange to make the meet. It did not have to be spelled out.

June 1st was a Saturday. A day of unusual sunlight, and the clouds had tails, like blurry lobsters. The Tuscarora kids now had a swingset in their back yard. Flange and the M.S. took off about noon in a van that Flange borrowed from his cousin. The van had no windows, which was a good thing, and on the sides Murphy Bros Plumbing was written, which was also kind of good, it seemed to Smook. A disguise.

Nobody wanted to go out and sell. They wanted to be there when Flange and the M.S. brought home the California buds. For that reason, all of the Knights were arrested at the same time, in the same place, when the cops showed up with long guns at four that afternoon. Four exactly, Pounce noted. As though it mattered. The last happy sound Smook heard for a long time was the Indian kids on their new swingset.

Smook's brother Robbie bailed him out. Robbie was three years older and studying sociology at Buff State. He was the family hope. To his

credit, he did not rave at his younger brother, who was nobody's hope. They drove in silence from the police station to Black Rock.

"You're going back to that shithole?" said Robbie, who was as handsome as he was disciplined. The two went together, although Smook could not say exactly how.

"I need to get my stuff."

"I'll wait."

"Don't. When I'm ready, I'll get a ride."

"Where to?"

Smook shrugged. Maybe Robbie should be a lawyer. His questions were jabs, and they generally connected. The brothers shook hands, a thing Smook could not remember their ever doing. He stood on the sidewalk in front of the Castle until Robbie's car turned the corner from Landrey onto Creeley.

Inside, the Castle had an ominous air as though waiting for more evil shit to come down. He was surprised to find Pounce there. They sat in the kitchen, at the table. Smook had an odd impulse to wash the dishes piled in the sink. Where did that come from? The Knights were finished, the Castle abandoned. It was over. He would take his notes from the sneaker box when he went, but it was over.

"Fucker played us," said Pounce. He tugged on the stray hairs on his chin, whose resistance to becoming a beard was stubborn.

At the police station, he had been held in the same cell as Flange. Before Pounce's mother showed up with bail money and a bag of rage, he and Flange worked out the sequence of negative events that had brought them to ruin.

The M.S. had a pistol. Nine millimeter, an ugly thing like a diseased prick. Nobody at the Castle had ever seen it. How he hid it was as much of a puzzle as his true unknown name. At the meet, which was in Lackawanna, near building nineteen of the shuttered steel mill, on a street down

which railroad tracks ran but no longer any trains, he pulled out the gun and took possession of the shipment. Left Flange and the suppliers in the street with their hands up. Got dope and money both, and took off in the Murphy Bros van.

“He planned it all along,” said Smook.

In the glare of interrogation, one of the Knights had freaked. Broke down, cried like a baby, told the cops where Flange had gone to score. Once the M.S. took off with what was supposed to be their cash, the suppliers called an Uber and evaporated. Flange stuck around. Betrayal shut down his brain, and injured his heart. He wandered in a daze of disbelief until two patrolmen in a squad car nabbed him.

Smook got up to bring them beers from the fridge. It was empty. Did the cops confiscate their alcohol? Could they do that? His thirst was suddenly fierce, and sadness fell down on him like a blanket too heavy to shake off his shoulders.

“Best we can figure,” said Pounce, “fucker called the cops, told them they’d find drugs and dealers here.”

“Why?”

“You mean why wasn’t it enough to steal our buds and our money, he had to get us arrested, too?”

Smook nodded.

“Beats me,” said Pounce.

A mystery.

That was the thing about mysteries, including the mystery of the M.S. himself. If you could explain it, it wouldn’t be a mystery. Which Smook’s sudden decision to stand up and walk to the sink also was.

“I’ll tell you one thing,” Pounce said, tapping the table with one of his nervous fingers.

“What’s that?”

“I never in my life seen anybody bowl like that,”

In all likelihood, thought Smook, they never would again.

He turned on the tap, let it run. After a minute he put his hand under the tap. The water was hot. He filled the sink and added soap. He washed the dirty dishes.

Mark Jacobs has published more than 150 stories in magazines including *The Atlantic*, *Playboy*, *The Baffler*, *The Iowa Review*, and *The Hudson Review*. His five books include *A Handful of Kings*, published by Simon and Shuster, and *Stone Cowboy*, by Soho Press. His website can be found at markjacobsauthor.com.

In Color

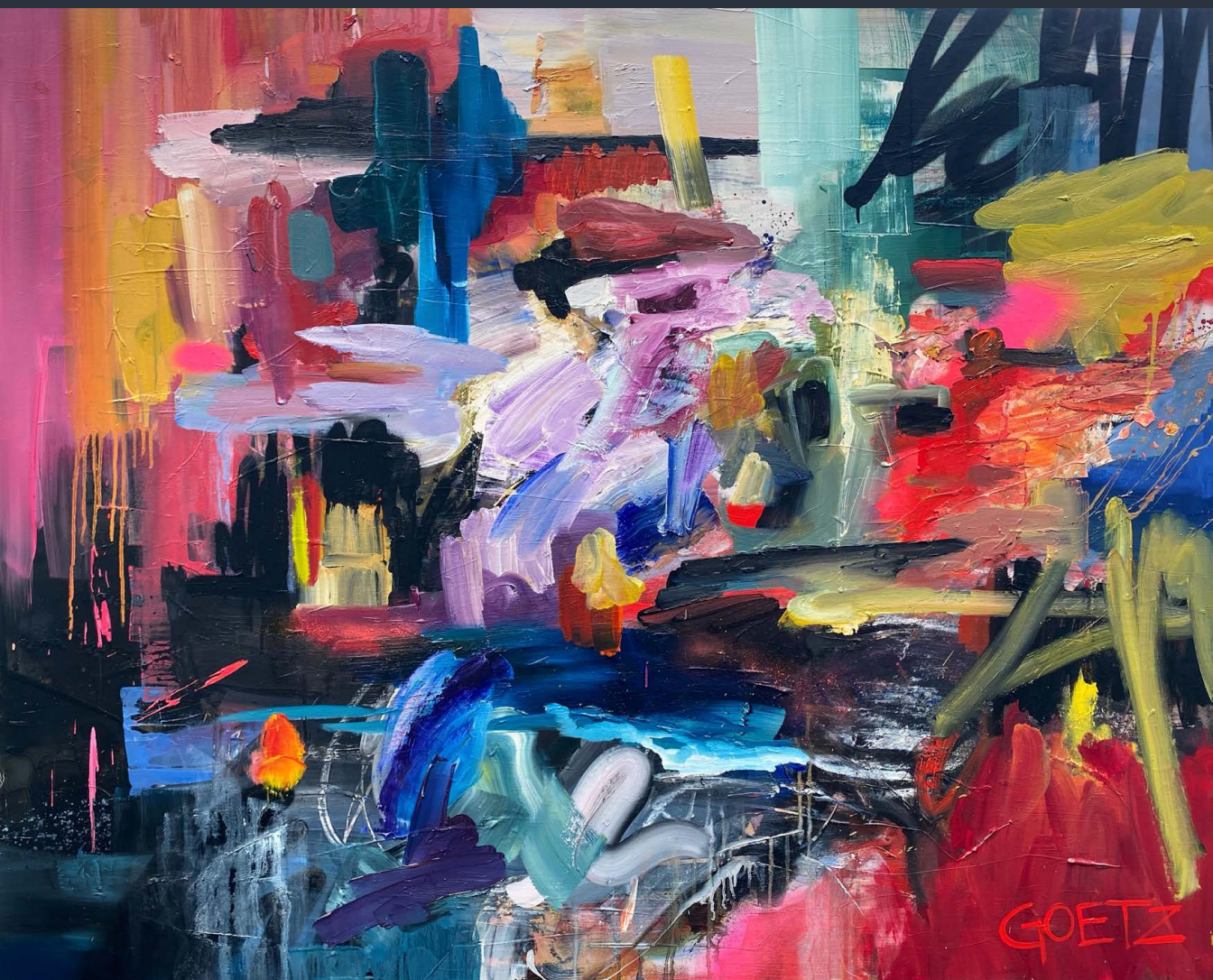
Mark J. Mitchell

Taking the first turn
behind a blue horse,
you know you're lost.

A palm opens
at the end of an alley,
bright green rings on each finger.

Open the red door—
that one on the left, sidestepping
the ocelot. Find a window.

As you slide through
morning starts a wide yawn,
swallows you like a rosy ear.



Infinite Landscape | Bryant Goetz

Chuckles in the Flophouse

Robert Garnham

THE BOUTIQUE HOTEL used to be a flophouse. And now it was a boutique hotel. The transformation from flophouse to boutique hotel had not been a gradual process. One moment it was a flophouse, the next it was a boutique hotel. For the same amount of money that could buy you a night in a perfectly ordinary hotel, guests could have the experience of staying in what had once been a flophouse, so that they could say to people, to their friends and whoever they might want to make jealous, “I stayed in a boutique hotel. It used to be a flophouse, but now it’s a boutique hotel, and I stayed there, me, aren’t I clever?” It seemed better than saying, “I stayed in a flophouse.” Because to be honest, they hadn’t done much to it. The fixtures and fittings were all the same, they’d just polished them a bit. It was still a flophouse. The only thing different was the manner of the flopping that took place there.

My cabin was very small and it wouldn’t have looked out of place on a train or a ship, though chances are it might have had a window if it had been on either. The bed was just about big enough to accommodate me, not that I’m particularly tall or dimensionally-challenged. Apparently there would have been several people crammed in to each cabin back

in the flophouse years, before the tenants were removed and the fixtures and fittings were polished, and the whole place given a sheen, a layer of hip sparkle, and subsumed into the Manhattan chic for which it had always been destined. I imagine their ghosts around me, these previous inhabitants, and I wonder if any of them had ever moaned about the size of the bed or had been dimensionally-challenged.

There’s something about the word “flophouse.” It’s the ‘flop’ part of the word. One could imagine a weary soul trudging the streets of this great city in search of work or food or sustenance of any kind, or charity, or human contact, warmth, some reason to continue existing, and ‘flopping’ into their tiny cabin for the night, tired, aching, hungry, their soul teetering at the very precipice of humanity, dignity, existence. I know how they feel, I had to trudge all the way back from Starbucks last night with a coffee in a cardboard container and it kept burning my fingers, so every now and then I would have to change hands. But there were other connotations, too. For a long while the word ‘flop’ had been predominant in my career as a comedy performance poet, or at least, this is the way that it felt, and it just seemed plain insulting that I should now be

staying in a house for those who flop. The only thing I didn't flop at was flopping. This is why I prefer the term 'boutique hotel.' It implies a certain distinction, and a lack of flopping.

At regular intervals the man in the boutique hotel cabin next to mine keeps chuckling to himself. It's very offputting and I cannot relax, as I lie back on my tiny bunk, because I know that it's coming. I hope that the man isn't doing what I think he might be doing. The walls of the boutique hotel cabins are very thin, like cardboard, and I can hear every noise that my neighbour is making. I wonder if he, too, was having to stop every now and then to change hands. It must have been like this, too, for the original inhabitants of the boutique hotel, back in the days when it was a flophouse. Or actually, maybe not. There wasn't much to chuckle about in those days. The whole place could probably have done with a laugh.

Maybe he isn't wanking at all. Maybe Chuckles just likes comedy, and he's watching it on his phone, with headphones, comedy routines and monologues, maybe that's why he's here in the first place, because he enjoys a good laugh. I think about knocking on his door and telling him that I'm performing this very evening, headlining at one of the cabarets a short walk from here right in the heart of the trendy part of the city, bringing my very own brand of whimsical nonsense to this side of the Atlantic. But even here, in this brash city of neon and shouting, I tend to shy away from any kind of self-promotion or impulsive human interaction, and in any case, at the back of my mind is the idea that Chuckles probably really is just a very prolific masturbator.

I look at my mobile telephone. There are no messages from anyone. Not one of my friends at home has bothered to see how I'm getting on.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa.

I know my set inside out, the set of poems

and banter which I am going to be performing that evening. It's a set I've done in so many different cities that there are certain points in which I know I am guaranteed a laugh. And even here, where things are different, culturally, I have amassed enough material as to make the whole thing pretty much universal. There remains, though, a significant risk that nobody will laugh at all. And that's even assuming that an audience turns up in the first place.

Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-haaaaa.

It's all too stressful. And what with the constant laughing, let alone the small cabin which isn't really built for anyone dimensionally-challenged, I decide that I have to go out for a walk. The more I stay in one place, the more I am hounded by thoughts about the coming performance, and the word flop, and how everything seems to tie in with the idea that really, it was just an expensive mistake coming out here, to this brash city on another continent.

I walk down to the reception area. The corridors are dark and gloomy, with the doors of the various cabins coming off, each one hiding a whole history of human misery, and there being no windows. At the end of the corridor is the hallway and the stairwell, and I'm just about to start descending the stairs when I hear a voice behind me.

"Is it you that keeps on laughing?"

She's looking somewhat fierce. A tourist, by the looks of it. She's wearing a bum bag. A luminous bum bag. How can anyone who owns a luminous bum bag look so serious?

"No, that's not me."

"I don't know what it is that you find so funny."

She mustn't have heard me.

"It's not me. It must be coming from the cabin next to mine."

"It must have been you. He was laughing in your accent."

This is one of the more surprising comments that I've had for a while. And even though it wasn't me who was laughing, I still feel the need to apologise.

"I'm so sorry."

"Can you just not do it, in future?"

"It's not me."

"It must be you, because you've just apologised, and as I say, he was laughing in your accent."

I decide not to tell her about the show tonight.

"I can assure you," I tell her, as gently and as English as I can, "That it's not me. However, I will try and get him to be quiet, on your behalf. As it happens, he's been keeping me on edge ever since I first heard him, because as I say, he seems to be in the cabin right next to mine."

"I didn't come to stay in a boutique hotel just to hear someone laughing in an English accent."

And with that, she disappears back in to the gloom of the corridor.

The stairs lead down to the reception on the next floor. It's just here that the boutique hotel starts to look more like a boutique hotel. The floor is mosaic tiling recently installed, in all likelihood, for it looks far grander than anything that might have been originally intended for the reception area of a flophouse. The doorhandles are polished brass, and the reception desk, which is placed at the top of another flight of stairs leading down to the main road, is ornate and stylised with art deco features and more brass fittings, a fan shape motif which would not have looked out of place on one of the great ocean going liners.

A young man emerges from the small office behind the reception desk.

"You heading out?"

"I'm thinking of going for a walk."

He's got a beard. He seems too young to

have a beard. The beard just seems kind of plonked on, an afterthought. His voice seems too deep for someone so young, and with a plonked on beard.

"Be careful."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you know. Just be careful."

There's something about the young man's tone. There are strange implications, as if he sees me as too naïve or trusting to understand the dangers of walking alone in the former skid row district, a district yet to be fully gentrified even with the transformation of the former flophouse into a boutique hotel. Or maybe he was just worried that the death of one of his guests might reflect badly in the next online review. That, combined with the ridiculousness of his plonked on beard, and his too-deep voice, made me feel like I had to offer some kind of intellectual complexity.

"Do you ever feel," I asked, "As if there were layers everywhere, layers not only of history, but of psychology, of human experience itself, which we might never fully explore?"

"Oh, sure," he said. "All the time."

And now he just looked like a glib bastard, too.

"It's just . . . I'm doing a show tonight, a performance poetry show, in one of the cabarets here, and, you know, I just can't get my head straight."

"What type of performance poetry?"

"Comedy."

"Comedy, eh? So it's not you that keeps laughing, is it?"

"Me? Er, no, but I was . . . Meaning to ask you about that."

He leans on the counter.

"Because if I ever find the bastard who keeps laughing all the time, then I'm going to ask them to leave."

"I think he's in the cabin next to mine."

"What cabin are you in?"

"504."

He turns around and looks behind him at the cabin keys hanging on the wall. He then turns back and announces, "The cabins around yours are all currently unoccupied."

"Are you sure?"

"The keys are here, on the wall. For the two cabins either side of yours."

"Could there be a mistake?"

"Not when I'm on duty."

"Oh."

"And as I say, you be careful out there."

"I'll be fine."

"It can be dangerous."

I want to show him that he's wrong, this achingly cool hipster with his face like a constipated weasel, that a man, such as I, raised on the tough streets of some of Devon's more undesirable districts, could successfully navigate this gentrified neighbourhood with its boutique hotels, where the most alarming thing that might ever occur is the coffee shop on the corner suffering a sudden malfunction of its espresso machine. And yet, he does have a point. This is one of the biggest, busiest cities on the planet, and it really does dwarf down-town Newton Abbot, and as such it might well have one of the biggest selections of potential criminals and assorted ne'erdowells, the needy, the downright desperate, something which I probably hadn't factored in to my previous visits to the local Starbucks. And if Constipated Weasel Face feels intimidated enough to warn me, then there might be at least an element of danger.

"Your key," he says.

"Sorry?"

"Your key. You're supposed to leave it with me whenever you go out."

"Certainly, it's..."

But where is it? I pat my pockets, but I

cannot find it. I check my shirt pocket, where I might conceivably have put it, but there's no key there, either. Did I leave it in my cabin? Why ever would I have done such a thing?"

"Oh..."

"Sorry. It's company policy."

Back upstairs. The gloomy stairs, clinging on to the handrail. Back to the labyrinthine corridors, the endless cabins, the dark wood and the subdued lighting, the fire exit signs gleaming away in the darkness, mosaic floors, polished brass, back to the chuckling.

It's more as if the building is mocking me, the dead souls of downbeats and hobos, victims of the Great Depression, sailors returned from war to find the world they once knew suddenly gone, changed forever, living now piled in tiny cabins reminiscent of those they'd had on warships and frigates, dread-nought dreams and the gentle swell of the ages. Maybe that's where the chuckling was coming from. Maybe, in spite of everything, a brave soul, depleted and broken, a war hero down-and-out, still, after all of these years, couldn't quite believe his luck.

"Hey," says a young man, mopping the floor of the communal bathroom. He doesn't even look up. He just carries on mopping.

"Hello."

"Say, is it you that I can hear, laughing?," he asks.

He's still mopping.

"Not me," I assure him, in a breezy manner.

Though to be honest, I am starting to feel far from breezy. I try to walk a bit quicker to get away from his line of sight as quickly as I can.

And anyway, nothing could be as funny as this.

"Are you sure?"

And only now does he stop his mopping. And I stop my walking.

"I'd know if I was."

"Only, there have been one or two complaints."

"It's not me, I can assure you."

"Whatever."

And he starts mopping again.

I get to the door of the cabin. And just as I had expected, it is locked. Nevertheless, I try to prize the door open, hoping that I had somehow made a mistake. The floor is very quiet, no sound at all from any of the cabins, and after I have satisfied myself that the door really is locked, I press my ear against that of the neighbouring cabin.

Laugh. Damn you, laugh.

But there's nothing. I press my ear harder, so hard that I can hear the blood rushing in my veins, the breath gently fogging the polished wood. And then I go to the next cabin and I try the same. Laugh, damn you, laugh. And again there is nothing. And the next door, and the door after that. Laugh, go on, please, just laugh.

I don't know how many doors I try in this manner. Yet in all of this time I do not see a single other person. The simple uniformity and symmetry of the flophouse floor plan, matching as it does the grid iron street layout of the city itself, allows me to cover a lot of ground in a short space of time, each door a chance to enact this strange new ritual, and yet I can find no evidence at all that the chuckler even exists.

There is a small lounge area in the corner of the floor next to the staircase, two leather sofas and a polished coffee table, and a window looking out through the metal fire escape to the street far below. Skid row, as it had once been, a steady rain now falling and making the tarmac of the street glisten, like a man proved wrong sweating with embarrassment. And then I start to wonder, as I sit down on the leather sofa, whether it had been me all along. And why wouldn't I want to let out

these involuntary spasms of laughter? The whole situation, of me being here at all, seems plainly ridiculous, that I should be staying in a former flophouse converted into a boutique hotel with plainly no effort on the part of the owners of the building, in order to provide an hour's worth of poetical whimsy and English humour to the patrons of a downtown cabaret, really does feel like the epitome of nonsense. And maybe - oh!, now we're getting in to deep psychology! - maybe the laughter is a psychic projection from my future self, that I should be providing in advance the muted response and humour that might very well be lacking once I begin my so-called act?

I place my head in my hands. I can hear the laughter again. It's all around me, manic, malevolent, oozing from the walls. Mocking, sinister, it tempts me. I press my palms in to my cheeks, then move them, cover my ears and screw my eyes tight shut, but I can still hear the laughter. I'm sweating, now, my forehead damp and my upper lip, slightly dizzy with the effort of not believing. This cannot be, I tell myself, oh, this cannot be, and yet, still the laughter persists.

"Here's your key," says the young man with the mop.

He's standing in the doorway to the lounge. He's still got his mop in his hand, and he's reaching out with my key with the other.

"Sorry?"

He doesn't seem at all surprised that I'm sitting there in the lounge with my hands pressed in to my ears.

"I found it on the stair well. I asked the guy on reception, he said that you were up here, somewhere."

"Can't you hear the laughing?," I ask.

Mop man stands still for a moment.

"Not right now."

"I mean ... A minute or so ago ..."

"Oh, sure. Yeah. I figured it was you. That's

how I knew that you were in the lounge.”

“Thanks,” I say, taking the key from him.

“Thank you so much.”

“No problem. I’d have given it to the guy on reception, but between you and me, the keys on the wall. They’re in a hell of a mess. There’s no order to his system at all. I thought it would be safer if I just came and found you, myself.”

“Thank you,” I say again. “Thank you very much.”

I take my key and I wait for him to leave. I then get up and go back to my cabin. As I lay down on my bed I feel a mad swirl of emotions and tiredness, as if the world were now filled with sudden uncertainties. Perhaps this was the same feeling that the original inhabitants of this place had, all those years ago, every single day. A slight unease in the world, finding comfort in the most difficult of circumstances. Or maybe I was just over-thinking the whole situation, again. What a tosser I am, really, I tell myself, as I stare at the wooden mesh which

doubles as a ceiling for each of the cabins. Why do I let such things affect me in this way? Why can’t I just learn to relax, and enjoy life, and not worry about the consequences?

I let out a deep sigh. Everything suddenly seems to pointless. Not just the present moment and my reasons for being here, but everything. History is created the second that a time has passed. I had anticipated the gig tonight at the cabaret for so long, but now that it has got closer the anticipation has mutated, and changed to a realisation that everything will be forgotten. The generations pass and they never look back. History is an inexorable dance. How else might I approach each day, but with the sense that I will vanish one day, and nobody would ever notice? It’s enough to make me laugh.

And then I hear him. Chuckles starts up again. I bang on the thin partition wall.

“Keep it down in there!”

“Sorry,” he says.

And the laughing stops.

Robert Garnham is a comedy performance poet from Devon in the UK. He performs regularly at fringes and festivals and in 2017 Garnham was acclaimed as having one of the funniest one-liners of the Edinburgh Fringe. He have appeared on TV in adverts for a bank in the UK, and he writes a monthly humour column for the *Herald Express* newspaper.

Quiet

Morgan Bazilian

The quiet
makes some of the people
rage.

The fight against the air
the unseen virus,
the liberal agenda.

The pandemic is driving them
mad.
Can't swing it at,

Or land a good punch, and
can't shoot it.
Or mock it.

Can call it names, like Chinese.
Can flaunt a firm handshake
in its face.

The air pollution cleans up the cities
The light is brighter
and less refracted.

Morgan Bazilian is a poet and professor of quantum dynamics.



Youngs Bay, Astoria | Ray Marrero

Known Space

Shannon Cuthbert

On the island, the bikers have arrived
Already poured out,
Lacking fluid like a clay jug
That no one can tell how long has been placed there.
They have spent the day in reflection
Riding through villages
Trailed after by sun-baked children hurling hellos
And wild dogs with faces of stone
Like no dogs they've seen.
It is enough to hold the image once
Before it wavers, candlelit
Into the island night, the black back of sea
Massaging their sleep.
Enough that, rising with the sun,
They spur these bodies onward
From the huddled huts and up the hills.
Parting brush like splitting themselves
Again and again.
Closer to the heart of this thing,
Imparting the call of red birds,
The smoke of snakes
Like a thought they have sleepwalked through
All their lives.

Shannon Cuthbert is a writer and artist living in Brooklyn. Her poems have appeared in *Bluepper*, *Collidescope*, and *Chronogram*, among others. Her work is forthcoming in *Dodging the Rain*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Schuykill Valley Journal*.

Reunion

T.M. Bemis

“DANNY MCCOY!”

The man in the red bandana looked around. A taller individual in a sport coat, white shirt and slacks was addressing him. “Yeah? What do you want? Who are you?”

“It’s me! Finnian Blunt!”

“Oh. Blunt. I didn’t recognize you.”

“I haven’t seen you since high school!”

“Lost your hair, huh? Too bad. Another knucklehead.”

“Ha ha. Still the same old Danny. How long has it been, nineteen years? What brings you here?”

“It’s a grocery store. I’m shopping for groceries. See? I got a cart and everything.”

The other man pointed to the arrows on the floor, and smiled behind his powder-blue surgical mask. Or continued smiling; the grin was irrepressible. “And you’re driving it the wrong way, partner.”

“Aw, shove it, Finnie. Nobody pays attention to those things.”

“I do.”

“You would. Hey, look, I gotta go. Keep in touch with yourself.” He started away with the cart, but Blunt caught up to him with his hand-basket.

“Hey, not so fast, fella! We have to shoot the breeze!”

McCoy groaned. “How about next time?”

“Hey! You’ll never guess who I have with me!”

“Your best friend?” He nodded at a patrolling robot with googly eyeballs and flashing lights. It beeped and passed between them.

“Ha ha, no! Michelle Litz! Or should I say, *Mrs. Finnian Blunt!*”

McCoy snorted. “You’re kidding. Lusty Litz? You married her? What did you do, knock her up or something?”

“Ha ha! You’re just jealous that you didn’t get her!”

“I must be the only one.”

Blunt beckoned to someone with a surgical-gloved hand. “And here she is now!” McCoy looked up the aisle at a blonde-haired woman, swung his cart around and headed off.

“Oh, no you don’t,” said Blunt, overtaking him a second time. The blonde arrived at his shoulder. “Don’t I know you?” she asked.

“You knew me thirty pounds ago. Ten for me and twenty for you.”

Blunt burst out laughing. “Same old Danny. Sugar, it’s Danny McCoy!”

Her eyes widened. “Danny McCoy? From Bristol High? We heard you were dead!”

"Might be true. This could be hell, alright."

"Danny was on the football team, and he was our champion wrestler. And a talented artist, of course. Remember, sugar?"

"I remember. He made those ugly birdcages they put in the trophy case."

"They were abstract sculptures, made from brass," said her husband. "I always enjoyed those things. Are you still involved with art, Danny? Our daughter Ava is an art student, you know. I'd love for you to meet her. She's floating around here somewhere—"

"Oh, yeah. Artists come to me for advice these days. If painting your garage makes you an artist. I run the Sherwin-Moore in town. Now, let me guess. You must be what, a lawyer? A doctor? You were the valedictorian, weren't you? I seem to remember a rambling speech I didn't get half of."

"You should be wearing gloves," Michelle told him.

"I don't like gloves."

She shook her head. "We're in the middle of a pandemic, you know."

"If Finnie had worn his rubbers, he wouldn't be in this mess."

"What? What are you talking about? What's he talking about, Finn?"

"Actually, I'm a banker," said Blunt. "With Morgan Stern, in Manhattan."

"He's vice president," Michelle added smugly.

McCoy chuckled. "Of what, the coffee club? How many VP's are there, Finnie? Fifty? Seventy-five?" He put a box of Marshmallow Charms in his carriage.

Blunt frowned. "You're not going to eat those, are you? One hundred percent junk food."

"I have a tapeworm, and it's all too good for him. Remember that? From the Three Stooges? Besides, what difference does it make? In one end and out the other." He peered into the handbasket. "What do you got there, dog food?"

"Ground turkey. Very healthy. Michelle can prepare a whole range of recipes from it."

"Any of them edible?"

"So tell us, Dan," said Michelle, eyes flashing above the dainty pink mask, "do you have any children? Did you ever marry?"

He combed fingers through ginger-colored hair as he looked past her. "Yeah, I did. Her name was Tammy. She worked for me at the store. Cute as a button. Five-foot-two with a pixie cut and bangs. She couldn't have kids, and I didn't want to adopt any. I was a sucker. We were together for five years, three months and twenty-six days before she died. That was in 2014."

"Oh, my goodness," said Blunt. "That's terrible. I'm so sorry."

"Suicide?" Michelle asked brightly.

"Sugar, please."

"No, surprisingly," said McCoy. "She choked to death in a hotdog-eating contest." In the ensuing silence he added, "Only kidding. She dumped me for a frogman. Can you believe it? The real enchilada, a police diver. Pulled cadavers out of the Hudson. So. You got your nose fixed, huh?"

Michelle glared at him in amazement. "Were you always such an a—hole? I can't remember."

"Now look, you two—"

"Yeah," said McCoy. "Always. It runs in the family. You should have seen the old man. A lush and a loudmouth. Bad combination. He could get a stranger to punch him out in about ten seconds. The weight looks good on you, by the way. You were too thin in school. We went to dancing class together in sixth grade. Remember?"

She managed half a smile. "Won the waltz contest. The prize was a twelve-color pen."

"I still have mine."

"Wow! Really?"

"No. I threw it out the window of the bus when Arthur Gilbert kidded me about it. I

should have slapped his stupid face and held on to it. That thing was pretty cool. Your nose looks nice, by the way. They did a good job.”

“Thanks. I always hated the way I looked before.”

“You looked great then too. I loved the old nose. That little kink it had in it.”

ATTENTION SHOPPERS: PLEASE FOLLOW THE SOCIAL DISTANCING GUIDELINES, AND REMAIN AT LEAST TWO SHOPPING-CART LENGTHS FROM OTHER CUSTOMERS AT ALL TIMES. AND REMEMBER, WE’RE IN THIS TOGETHER, AND TOGETHER, WE’LL GET THROUGH IT. THANK YOU FOR SHOPPING AT CROWN CENTRAL. AND PLEASE, STAY SAFE!

“Well,” said Blunt, “since we seem to be coming clean here, I guess it’s my turn to spill. You were my hero all through high school, Danny.”

“You’re kidding.”

“Nope, not at all. You were everything I wanted to be in those days: handsome, popular, a good athlete—”

“All an act. I was a C-student with a chip on his shoulder. I lived for the weekend, when we’d get hold of some vodka, make screwdrivers, go down to Echo Lake and get plastered. The truth of it is, I hated my life. Yours was the one I wanted. I was so jealous of you I could’ve puked.”

“What? You jealous of me? In heaven’s name why?”

“Sure. You and Kenny Reichman and Adam Swale, all the front row cadets who got nothing but straight A’s. You guys had swell futures lined up, and everybody knew it. And we were right. You’re a big shot these days. I bet the others are too. Whatever happened to Reichman, do you know?”

The covered smile became a covered smirk. “He’s in Danbury. Three to five for embezzlement. I almost got roped in myself. But for the grace of God, as they say.” He leaned closer.

“And if you’re interested in Adam Swale, he happens to be right behind you.”

McCoy turned to look. The only people there were a Latino couple selecting pasta, and a squatting, red-vested employee with greasy, shoulder-length hair stocking cans of tomatoes. “What are you talking about. None of these people is Adam Swale.” The employee jerked his head around. It was him alright: emaciated, sunken cheeked, patchy stubble and a look in his eye like a startled deer, but him just the same. “Hey, Adam,” said McCoy, extending a hand. “Dan McCoy. Good to see you.” The man took hold of a pinkie and mumbled something, then went back to work. “You look great, man. Keep hittin’ the gym.” He turned to the Blunts and rolled his eyes.

When they reached the next aisle, Michelle anticipated his query. “Nobody knows,” she said. “He went off to Stanford and came back—like that. A drug overdose maybe, or some kind of trauma. At least he’s functional.”

McCoy grabbed some Fritos. “What were you saying about the grace of God?”

“Where have you been? I’ve been looking all over for you.” A miffed young woman was approaching them now: short dark hair, pretty eyes, maroon leggings and a matching mask. She carried a bag of seedless grapes, also matching. “Here,” she said, thrusting it at Blunt. “They’re all wet.” She dusted her hands distastefully.

“Ava, this is Danny McCoy. Your mother and I went to school with him. Danny, our daughter Ava. She’s home for the summer.”

“Nice to meet you.” He held up two fingers, side by side. “Your daddy and I were like that,” he said. “You can guess which one is me.” The girl giggled.

“Ava’s studying at Pratt Institute, in Brooklyn,” said Michelle. “She plans to be a commercial artist.”

"Tough line to get into," said McCoy.

"Oh, I know. But I have to get through art history, first."

"Where are you now?" he asked. "In the history?"

"We just finished Art Nouveau. I really like that style."

"Me too. Mucha was a genius. I have one of his Sarah Bernhardt posters in my living room."

Blunt and his wife exchanged a glance.

"But I've seen you somewhere. Where do I know you from?"

"Not likely," said Blunt. "I doubt Ava's been to Sherwin-Moore recently."

"I was there yesterday," said his daughter. "I've been to every store in town, looking for a summer job. Problem is, all the other students are doing the same thing."

"If I'd've known you were the progeny of my two best friends, here, I would have hired you on the spot. Stop in tomorrow and I'll show you how to dust paint cans. It's more exciting than you might think; there's crawly things in there. Ever ring a cash register? 'Cause I sure could use—"

"Didn't you tell me you had a good prospect at the mall?" asked Michelle. "In the card store?" She cocked her head in expectation.

"I thought so, but the lady never called me."

"Maybe you should call her—"

"Mortgages," said Blunt.

"Huh?"

"I run the mortgage division. Second biggest in the company. Even bigger than the coffee club." His smile had waned, but it bloomed anew.

McCoy slapped him on the shoulder. "I'm proud of you, Finnie. I mean that. Sounds a little dull, but I'm sure there's big bucks in it. Try not to start a recession this time."

ATTENTION SHOPPERS. WILL THE OWNER OF A SILVER JEEP WRANGLER, LICENSE NUMBER TFT2404 PLEASE COME TO THE COURTESY DESK. THANKYOU.

"They're playing my tune," said McCoy. "I left the car running. People are always ratting me out."

"I'm not surprised," said Michelle, giving him a look. "Haven't you heard about global warming?"

"Oh, yeah. Thanks. I got a good cooling system; it won't overheat. Hey listen, it's been real. I'll see you guys around, O.K.?" He pointed a finger at Ava. "And I'll see you tomorrow morning at nine o'clock."

He and the girl bumped elbows. After he left them, she hesitated briefly, then started off in the same direction. "Where are you going?" Michelle asked her.

"I just want to see what I should wear to work."

"Sugar," asked Blunt, his voice peculiar, "how tall is Ava?"

"What? I don't know, five-two, five-three. Why do you—"

"And what would you call that hairstyle of hers?"

His wife stared at him a moment, then spun on her heels and strode away—against the arrows. "Ava!" she called out. "Ava, you come back here this minute..."

T. M. Bemis is a writer and retired chemist residing in Westchester County, NY. His fiction has appeared in *Poydras Review*, *Projected Letters*, *Carbon Culture Review*, *Eureka Literary Magazine*, *Bryant Literary Review*, and other publications. *My Lucky Day*, a novel of mischief and mayhem, is currently making the rounds.

Break in Case of Silence

Zachary Kluckman

When fireflies dance from the open wound of your mouth. When you have talked graves free of their bones, dug wasps from their homes. Stung truth with a raw tooth. When grief has bitten your hand for feeding it the names of the lost. When you have found a secret garden within the reckless brambles of your heart, where the silence deepens until trees wail by comparison. When you carry fear like a corpse because the smell is more familiar than flowers.

When the rain digs songs from the mud. When scars are rubbed for their genies until blood appears under your nails. When your mother takes up magic, and learns only one trick. How to open the earth with her body and be swallowed. When your voice is a love note written inside of a kite. An attempt to sweeten the sky. When the string breaks. Have you seen how they dance, fireflies?

How they treat the small space inside of jars to the movement of light. How they burn, whether their worlds shatter or not. How the lightning must have spoken to their mothers. How their bodies lift from the earth. How the earth fell over her body. The grasshoppers with their bagpipes. The world with its drunken spin. How they stop.

How you learned from your mother's tongue. The words of passing. But also, the music of laughter. But also, the sweet scent of grass from her lungs. Her strength. Speak them for the spring. For the passing of light through the trees. Even if the words hang like bruised fruit from your teeth. Even if the shadows crawl from the ground into your arms. This is natural. This is the wisdom of bodies. To hold what is dead close to the heart. To break the silence with the only voice you have left.

Zachary Kluckman, the National Poetry Awards 2014 Slam Artist of the Year, is a Scholastic Art & Writing Awards Gold Medal Poetry Teacher and a founding organizer of the 100 Thousand Poets for Change program. Kluckman, who tours the nation as a spoken word artist, was recently one of three American poets invited to the Kistrech International Poetry Festival in Kenya. He has served as Spoken Word Editor for the Pedestal magazine and has authored two poetry collections.

Blackout

Shannon Cuthbert

Wires down and only the faintest flicker
Of a siren humming off and on at the fire station,
Where men in tanks stretched with sweat swap beers
And laughs that carry over in grateful snatches
To the dark houses huddled around.
Waiting, watchful, raising the faces of their windows
Like trays tilted up to catch loose change.
Their silent lot to carry such weight
The span of a night or more,
As when the hill turns over in its sleep
And, seeing the moon,
Stretches blind and bends toward caress.



The Guide | Bryant Goetz

Ahead

Andrew DeBella

I used to dissect the future like
a mortician
bodies
icy, motionless,
sometimes young, sometimes old,
but it was there

now nothing
lies on
my cold slab
those dead eyes
that fixated
on everything and nothing at all
the flowery innards of victims, of
the old of the sick,
layered like rose petals in the sun
I marveled in possibility
the sureness of the thing.
the decay was beautiful,
It was slow, purposeful;
it was there.

Bedfellows

Mark Niedzwiedz

Funny, how we end our days
With strangers either side in nearby graves
Never met in life, or at least not knowingly
We become the most intimate of friends
Sharing who we were, what we did
Whom we loved, where we lived
Misfortune may have brought us together
But since we were first introduced
By way of spade, rough and gravel toned
Tempered by the melodious meanderings of a parson
I think we've got on rather well
So, don't be surprised if you hear chatter, amongst the flowers
Or, once in a while a much-needed laugh
For it's only me and my bedfellows
Who live one metre apart

Kathleen was two weeks before
So, she bedded me in, took the edge off the raw
Told me not to get too upset on visiting days
If numbers dwindle or the long grass gets longer
A lovely lady, who used to make dresses
And as to her age, she gave me three guesses
But that can't be hidden as dates are all we are now
Boldly written on brass plaques, or chiselled out on cool marble
But I play along with Kathleen
So, don't be surprised if you hear chatter, amongst the flowers
Or, once in a while a much-needed laugh
For it's only me and my bedfellow
Who died two weeks apart

Continued on following page

Ken came a month after and needed time
We have that in abundance here, to adjust, realign
Being born in the same decade gave us a footing, common ground
So, it was not long before familiarity thawed the frost
Ken was a family man, with a passion for trains
He tells me about his Father, I just listen in the main,
And then there's me, piggy in the middle, making the best of things
or, in this scented garden, sadness does pass away
So, don't be surprised if you hear chatter, amongst the flowers
Or, once in a while a much-needed laugh
For it's only me and my bedfellows
Who sleep one metre apart

Mark Niedzwiedz is a professional composer and lyricist, which helps bring rhythm and musicality to his poetry. Lyric writing may pave the way for penning poetry, but he is well aware of the key difference; song lyrics are written to be sung, whereas poetry is written to be read. From the UK, Niedzwiedz lives just outside Brighton and often takes inspiration from this colourful, seaside city. Poetry is a relatively new venture for Niedzwiedz and with that comes the usual insecurity about whether or not his poems are any good, but publication does wonders for self-doubt.

The Stargazer

Barrie Darke

CATHY TOLD HER BROTHER, ‘Hurry up then, sunshine. Let’s get your hair aired.’

Matthew gave her a laugh, even though he didn’t feel like one. He was seven, and knew that when something rhymed you were supposed to laugh. Cathy was twelve and hadn’t felt like laughing in a long time herself.

She didn’t know if twelve was young for this, or if any age was right for it, but lately she’d been thinking of her parents by their real names. So it was Pru who shouted after them, ‘Where the ’ell you two goin’ then?’

‘A stroll, just for a—stroll,’ Cathy called back. She’d overprepared; it didn’t come out as smoothly as she wanted, but nothing to be done about it now. She wrapped her scarf around her, urged Matthew out with two fingers in the small of his back, and shut the door behind them before any more questions could be fired.

It had been a lie, and worse, a pointless lie. There was only one place to go that Saturday night. The river had frozen over earlier in the week, but this was their first chance to spend time there. The old people said the last time it froze was way back in 1814. Bernard and Pru would’ve been her age then, she thought.

Matthew walked with his hands deep in his pockets, the current style of the toughs. It was safe for him to do that when there were no toughs around. He was wearing a pair of heavy boots Bernard claimed to have made with his own hands—but Bernard was no shoemaker and Bernard was no cobbler, so they were stolen, no question of that. Cathy was wearing slippers so thin they barely counted as being there at all. The cold was alive, animal. She pictured her insides frosting over, those dark thumping meats whitening and stilling.

Neighbours were scattered along the banks, chattering, raising tankards, roasting nuts over fires and whatnot. She cursed under her breath: they would’ve been better off cutting across half a dozen streets and emerging at a different spot. But Matthew was excited, and Cathy only needed to feign it a little at the sight of the locked river, so they ran straight onto the ice with nothing more than a wave and a snatched hello. And then of course the first thing Matthew did was to skate up to the butcher, the hefty Mr Blumenthal, and say, ‘We want to live with you! We want to live with you!’

Those insides of Cathy’s cringing with

cold suddenly grew spicily hot, and she almost tumbled in her efforts to get to him and shut him up. Mr Blumenthal's round face was all startled eyebrows and a mouth that couldn't decide if it should be laughing. She dragged Matthew away, hissed at him to stop all that silly drivel if he didn't want his bleedin' ears boxed, and pushed him towards a quieter spot. He wobbled but didn't fall.

She kept an eye on him for a few minutes, but she had the power to make him listen now and again, and that had been one of those times. She could concentrate on her skating for a while, which would be a wise idea since she'd never done it before. She took it very slowly, and tried to surreptitiously watch what everyone else was doing with their arms, when they weren't wheeling them in every direction to remain off their backsides. It might've gone easier if she'd been able to keep her mind on it. Keeping her mind on things was one of her gravest difficulties recently.

One day she'd asked a friend if it was the same for her—if sometimes she caught a glimpse of a person, and that glimpse was all it took for their sad lives to cut right through her. It was as though she added their whole existence to hers in that moment, a moment that could take a day to get rid of, and which could be recalled full force at any point for years afterwards. This friend, Olive, had uttered an uncertain 'yes', knowing she was being tested and guessing this was the correct answer. Cathy wasn't gulled. This was hers and hers alone for ten miles around.

Skating turned out to be perfect for these glimpses, for flashes of a gloomy face when she dared look up from her feet. She saw Beryl Wallace, the wife of a publican, hovering over one of the fires. She had taken on the sudden, queasy fat of illness, her frame trembling not

just with the extra weight but with the fright of it all. Further along stood Molly Stalker, only four years older than Cathy and married to a man in his 30s who everyone knew was a bad lot getting worse. Molly was only just discovering this. Standing apart was Joseph Wishbourne, an ancient coach-painter who knew he wouldn't see another winter and couldn't escape the thought that the freeze was laid on for him, a grand farewell.

Her mind was so keen it could picture people who weren't even there. The boatmen seeing their ladders bare, coming out at night and waving torches over the ice; the tramps with brand new walkways, full of hope; suicidal girls pining for the thaw, no method other than water running through and over them sufficing. It was these, from her imagination, that sliced into Cathy the deepest. She saw this leading to the asylum gates. She could imagine the variety of glimpses she'd be afforded in there.

Skating was harder on the calf muscles than she'd thought it would be, considering she was on her feet sweeping all day, but there were always underused muscles to seek out and torment. She began to warm up, however, and also grow more confident. She tried a few spins, and one of them felt successful, despite no applause rippling from the banks.

She was watching the better skaters for their more ambitious moves when she heard them coming. Here was another—the biggest—reason to make sure they'd settled a mile downriver. Bernard and Pru were never going to miss this.

Their Saturday night had commenced that afternoon, so they were already sunk deep in their cups. This was the loud stage, the laughing stage, grabbing onto each other and wondering why everyone within sight

wasn't in the same boisterous mood. There were worse stages, but Cathy hated this one fervently.

She looked around for Matthew, though the last thing she wanted branded on her brain was the moment he saw them. When it happened, she counted herself lucky he had his back to her. She only saw him come to a halt, drop his shoulders then tighten them again—though of course she could picture his face.

Everyone else watched warily or turned away. Bernard and Pru sped up as they came down the bank and stepped on the ice as if it was still grass. Very quickly he was on his knees and she was flat on her back; she was actually spinning a little. Laughter exploded out of them. They tried to get up, clambering and stamping, clutching handfuls of clothes, dragging each other back down.

Matthew was closest, and headed across. He skated well, typically a fast learner when it came to physical things, and there was no chance Cathy would catch him up. She didn't want to shout for him in case her voice sounded as cawing and shrill as theirs.

'Go to the pub!' Matthew told them. 'Leave us alone—go to the pub!'

'Shut it,' Bernard said, still laughing. 'Why should you two have all the fun?'

'Leave us alone! Go to the pub!'

'Oh, hush your clack, you,' Pru said, pityingly.

Cathy finally reached them. She put her hands on Matthew's shoulders, but couldn't find any words herself. Glares would have to do.

Mr Gregory, the postman, glided over. 'Come on there, Bernard,' he said. 'We were enjoying ourselves a quiet night.'

The pity dropped out of Pru's voice very quickly. 'Why don't you mind your own fucking

business?' she snapped.

A moan went up at that word.

'There's no call for that,' Mr Gregory said. 'None at all.'

'Fack off,' Bernard told him. He made ready to fight, raising his fists and puffing out his cheeks, but it was hard to see him as a threat given what his feet were doing. Mr Gregory saw no need to back away.

Cathy's brain was a block that would allow nothing out. Matthew was crying, wiping his nose with his sleeve.

Bernard and Pru spent a few minutes on the ice to show how undaunted they were. Everyone got out of their way, and most got off the river altogether. Pru made a high little scream every time she picked up the most minor speed. Bernard had his tongue sticking out with the moderate effort he was making, and always kicked his right leg up stupidly when he fell. She tended to fall on her knees and walk a few paces on them. They chided each other over who was doing better, an ever-changing proposition.

Then Bernard fell over again and forced a laugh, but Pru tutted at him and he gave her a black look. Eventually they heaved themselves over to the bank, where they had to catch their breath, orientate themselves. Pru shouted at everyone, 'Happy now, are ya? We're off, you flowery little cunts!' The two of them walked up the slope, but Bernard couldn't resist turning and flicking a V-sign.

A few of the neighbours had a few muted words of sympathy for Cathy and Matthew, but the majority said nothing. Matthew sped off directly, throwing himself into his skating as soon as he was sure they weren't coming back, and Cathy watched him for a bit then did the same. Though things were made more difficult by her shaky limbs, she made figure

eights and thought only about that. Widening them till she was almost touching both banks, shrinking them till they were barely figure eights at all. She put her arms behind her back. Gradually she calmed down, if calm was the word. She was no longer on guard, that was all.

Other neighbours, free from Saturday obligations at last, joined them. There was Maria Walters, with her line of stillbirths. Patrick Broadhurst, who couldn't break away from his domineering father, and him closing in on fifty. Steven Morse, who kept saying he was the loneliest man who ever lived, and might well have been.

Cathy told herself—told herself a few times—that none of this mattered. It would go on whether she saw it or not, whether she felt anything about it or not. It was nothing to her, far away things that came no closer. She drummed that thought into herself over the next hour, looked at the saddest of them until she was sure she felt nothing.

It grew late, long past the time they should've gone home. Not that a time was set, of course. Matthew sensed it, and came over to skate by her. For all the work of the previous hour, this sent a bolt of surprised love through her. She didn't know what to do with it.

She unwrapped her scarf and flung it over a tree branch dangling across the river. Matthew grinned, knowing some game or other was in the offing. She pulled back, then skated up to the scarf, grabbing it and lifting herself off the ground, swinging with her knees brought up, the scarf straining and the branch drooping but both holding. When it was his turn he brought his feet up almost over his head.

'Remember this bit,' she told him while they had a few more goes each. 'Remember

how the ice looks. Remember all the other trees. Make sure you memorise them, so you could draw a picture of them.'

He told her solemnly that he would.

They were among the last to leave. Saturday nights, each one unique, unfurled in the houses they passed. It was no succour at all to hear the arguments with their crashings and shatterings.

At home the noise was coming from the front room. It usually did. Matthew didn't have to be told to go straight through to the back room, recently partitioned by a grey sheet on a clothesline. Cathy would've told him to make a start on the picture if there'd been any paper in the house.

She straightened her dress. She reached to take off her scarf, but left it on. She opened the door to the front room and stood there, looking in. They glanced at her briefly, not seeing her, before going back to jabbing their fingers and smearing words across each other's chests. The table was still upright, but Pru's chair was out of position, as if she'd launched herself out of it. Once, Cathy had found a tooth on the floor and hadn't enquired whose it was.

'Forget about us,' she told them. They weren't listening. 'Fuck off and forget about us,' she said, louder.

'What was that?' Bernard asked her. But he was immediately distracted again, and Cathy didn't repeat it.

She tested what she felt when she sat in her half of the back room. Sad and angry, she concluded, but less so than she had in the past. These things were hard to judge when you were in the middle of them, but she was hopeful.

Later, lying in bed and hoping for sleep, she wondered when she could head back to the ice. Perhaps tomorrow, if she refused to do some chores. Losing herself out there had been valuable, and going out again would be

well worth the storm that would come from defiance. The freeze wouldn't last more than a few more days, everyone said, but that wasn't a problem. She was sure she'd be able to find something else.

Barrie Darke has had several plays performed, and has worked with the BBC, but prose was always the main thing. He lives and writes in the north east of England, and teaches Creative Writing in a basement. He has also worked in a prison, where he learnt more than the students. He has been published in the UK by Byker Books, New Writing North, Sentinel Literary Quarterly, The Delinquent, Theurgy, Horrified Press, Writer's Muse and The Metric; in Australia by Otoliths; and in the US by Menda City Review, Nossa Morte, Demon Minds, Infinite Windows, Underground Voices, Big Pulp, Pseudopod, Inwood Indiana, Bastards and Whores, Onomatopoeia, Orion Headless, Xenith, All Due Respect, Fiction365, Scissors and Spackle, Fear and Trembling, Drunk Monkeys, The April Reader, Big Stupid Review, Dark Moon, Writing Tomorrow, Otis Nebula, Futures Trading, The Opiate, Badlands, Cobalt, Wilderness House, Digital Fiction (pending), Merchants of Misery Anthology, Literary Nest, Eunioa Review, and AMInk (pending).

Between Murder Creek and Burnt Corn Creek

James Tyler

Between Murder Creek and Burnt Corn Creek
there is a love story buried somewhere in the woods
near an old tree, or at least a tree that looks old.

The burial ground is shallow because I forgot my shovel,
forced to use a plastic spork from the gas station
where I bought some spicy pork cracklins and Mountain Dew.

Who knew Alabama could be so cold?
I left my long underwear at home with a letter
because that's how cowards like me do business.

Jimmy Webb wrote a song that sounds somewhat familiar,
a soundtrack in my soul, per se. But all I can find on the radio
this time of night are echoes of backwoods preachers.

Odds are my true love might live in Montgomery or Mobile,
but I don't plan to stop in either town, just a brief layover,
give or take one thousand years. I am patient.

By the time I reach Burnt Corn Creek she calls for the last time.
The ringtone sounds strange in the darkness, ominous,
as the eastern sky hints to something new and ancient at once.

I'll draw you a map. I want you to find my forsaken treasure,
but make sure you pack a flashlight and lunch
because it will take a long time to find the right tree.

My own destination is uncertain. I have burned all the maps.
I wonder what Miami would be like this time of year.
Odds are I could find my true love there.

James Tyler earned a BA in English from Austin Peay State University. He has been published in such journals as Chiron Review, Cape Rock, Doubly Mad, and Poetry Quarterly. He currently resides in Nashville, TN.

Notes Toward an Hieratic Language

Kevin Moquin

JUNE 21, 19— Late yesterday afternoon, the sky turned a turbulent green and everything on the ground seemed to shine with a nautical glow. Over those twenty minutes or so, the sun sank, but the shine remained constant, omnipresent. Until, all at once, there was a parting on the western horizon, enough to let some rays through. Looking through the window of my study, I saw a single small cloud burst into flames, flickering in reds, oranges, and burning whites. Something unearthly possessed the cloud for a minute or so, though while I observed it, it seemed to go on for hours, and when it was done it seemed to me as if it had lasted only an instant.

Somehow, I knew what it was like for Moses, when, ascending Mount Sinai, he came face to face with the Creator. Had I been of a more orthodox persuasion, I would have removed my shoes, perhaps even turned away. But no, I must see it. Did my face glow, as did Moses' when he descended the mount, returning with the divine law? There was no one there to tell me or turn away in horror.

A friend, a rabbi, once told me a story. He said when the commandments and the law were first revealed to Moses, it was in an unknown language on golden tablets inscribed by the stinger of a strange flying creature. It had the face of a child, burning hair and wooly legs that ended in hooves.

Moses told God he could not read the inscription. "Speak it to me that I may tell them."

A voice came, but Moses could not understand the words. He implored the Lord to speak words he could understand. At this, the insect rose and stung Moses on his stomach. Suddenly, he understood. Some rabbinic literature speculates that what he heard was the language of the angels. The sound to him was terrifying, as if the heavens and the earth were convulsing and loud explosions were shaking the foundations of the cosmos.

"I am afraid," Moses said to God.

"Good," replied God. "This language is not for you and certainly not for those recalcitrant people. Let the fear grow in you until it becomes a language unto itself, obliterating all that you have heard here. Until then, listen, hear, fear, and let your muscles and bones, your blood and your viscera translate what you hear."

So, with loud groans and cries of anguish, Moses carved on stone tablets the words his wounded body translated. After it was done, he heard more voices speaking the language, but he could no longer understand.

As he led the Hebrews through the desert, few would ever know that his cloaks covered over a great secret. From that time, there was a hole straight through the middle of Moses'

body. Thereafter, he never ate again until the Lord allowed his hunger to kill him as he looked upon the Promised Land.

The Hebrews entered the land with full bellies and the words that had killed the Prophet.

What were the words spoken to him? I seem to have always been searching for them.

June 30, 19— I met an old friend today, one who loves to report strange stories from his extensive travels. He was told that, some 100 miles or so to the east of Bratislava, in an area with which I am not familiar, there is a certain wasp that science has not yet identified. It is a shape-shifter, the story goes, so scientists have not been able to pin down its exact nature, beyond stating the obvious - it is a wasp of some sort.

A visitor from a more cosmopolitan locale arrived one day many years ago. He was armed with thick texts, measuring devices and strange optical instruments. Some of the locals laughed at him; others made peculiar signs in the air with their hands. He paid little attention, for he had no interest in them whatsoever, except to the extent that they could tell him about their strange little wasp. Their accounts were conflicting and of no scientific value. Many weeks the man spent there, exchanging epistles with the great university from which he came. One night, in the dark, or so it has been reported, he found a nest. He brought some of the wasps back with him to his lodgings, where he measured them, looked them up in the great textbooks, and placed their lifeless bodies under his various scopes. In the morning, he sent a two-word message to his academic supervisor at the university. Psychophagus omnivorous. The locals say it appeared he had gone mad.

The uneducated folk of that region argue incessantly over the wasp's nature. Some say they have been stung by it and, as a result, were taken up into the air at night by inhuman visitors, high enough to see hell burning on the edges of the horizon. Others say the wasps are stingless and ward off threats by issuing from their mouths a corrosive fluid that dissolves small creatures and leaves larger ones with permanent and painful scars. My friend told me that there are some few folk, however, older and wiser, who insist that the wasp does not really exist as we conceive it except as a word. A word in a forgotten language.

Extraordinary.

July 10, 19— It has been the one question on my mind since my friend told me that fascinating, if apocryphal, story. Where does a word end and the world begin? In my last entry, I used the word “wasp”, a representation of this strange state of existence found in a remote location in the center of Europe. When does such a word in the vernacular prove inadequate to the task? Perhaps the old-timers are right, perhaps the true nature of the wasp is all in a word, a word we've lost the ability to translate.

A monk of my acquaintance told me that when Adam named the creatures, he gave them names that were identical with their natures. The symbol and the thing symbolized were one; there was nothing separating them. This separation occurred only after the Fall.

As I meditate on the significance of this strange insect of the eastern regions, I begin to wonder. Why is it that no scientist has been able to identify it? Why is its nature so variable? Is it, perhaps, because the thing itself is also the expression of itself? That no identification is adequate, that no system of scientific

nomenclature is capable of providing a sound and unchanging classification?

Res ipsa loquitur, a British friend, a lawyer, once said to me. The thing speaks for itself. Is the thing that truly speaks for itself even capable of being named? Something compels me to try.

July 16, 19— The question of the wasp burns inside of me like a white hot needle. I must go and find out.

July 20, 19— The journey to Bratislava was uneventful. Surprisingly, the train departed on time and arrived on time. From there, it was a long journey to this nameless village in the remote territory identified by my friend.

The village is quite literally nameless. Apparently, in past centuries, naming this village was a cause of great tension, even violence, between contesting nationalities. I have inquired regarding the name several times since my arrival. Even accounting for the strange dialect of this region, a mongrelized language of German, Hungarian, Polish, Romanian, Ukrainian, Slovenian and some languages that linguists have likely never known nor considered, the reluctance, perhaps the impossibility, of naming the tiny burg was pandemic. Mostly, the question was greeted with grunts or growls; some few times with strange laughter.

The trip has been exhausting. The journey from Bratislava was five days, much of it hiking over mountainous terrain. I must sleep.

July 25, 19— Yesterday, I asked the proprietress of the tavern in which I am staying to teach me some words in her language. She was reluctant

at first, but I was insistent. As I pointed at various items in the room, she named them. Then, I went to the window and pointed up to the sky. The word she gave me made such an impact that I went immediately to my room and wrote down a phonetic approximation of it.

Suddenly, I seemed to have become trapped inside the word. It enveloped me, like an extraordinarily transparent bubble. From inside, a less perceptive person would not have discerned a difference. Judging from the non-reaction of those I passed leaving the inn, they too saw nothing extraordinary. But I did.

There was a certain pulsing to the air around me, like it had a heartbeat. A subtle fluttering sound in my ear. I reached out my hand and the hairs on my neck stood up. Then, it became hard to breathe, as if I was using up all the air inside the word. I must admit, I panicked.

I went down the rough trail that serves as the village's main thoroughfare, and though I ran, it was as if I were wading upstream through a strong river current. My attempt at flight sent me into the path of a horse and wagon driven by a comely peasant girl.

It was then I noticed that everything was slowed down. People walking on the road, birds overhead, the grasses blowing in the breeze. The horse and wagon moved so sluggishly, I was sure that, had I wished to, I could have jumped out of the way. But I was fascinated. The girl's long brown hair swayed and jumped as she waved a delicate hand around, apparently trying to slap something away. It was all so graceful. And then the horse knocked me down.

Momentarily, my senses failed me. But I was not seriously hurt, just a little scraped and bruised here and there. She jumped down from the cart and called out to me. Her voice sounded like several voices all at once, a choir.

“I didn’t see you,” she said. There was an unworldly serenity to her voice.

“A wasp was flying around me.” For several moments she floated above me.

“Are you all right?”

Slowly I rose, brushed my pants off, smiled and said, “No, I don’t think so. But you have nothing to do with that.”

She suggested I visit the local Gypsy healing woman, but I insisted that I did not need any medicinal treatments. Despite my continued entrapment within the word-buble, I could move and breathe, and for that I was thankful.

As I walked away, something pierced the bubble and landed on my neck. As I felt for it, it stung me.

July 30, 19— Why exactly did I come to this place on the outer edge of nowhere? What have I found? What am I looking for? I want to write it, but each time I try, it proves inadequate.

Somehow, I have been called to excavate an ancient, entombed language.

August 4, 19— What can I say about this language? What are its characteristics?

It is clearly more than a language. It is a ritual, the genesis of a ceremonial literature, continuous and all-encompassing. Language as liturgy, embracing the enigma that is being but aspiring beyond the limitations of orthodoxy. Its vocabulary is indistinguishable from the totality of creation, which is mostly hidden from us because we have neither eyes to see nor ears to hear. But within the language is a formulary that creates the eyes with which to see and a liturgy that creates the ears with which to hear. It is the source of a literature both scriptural and ceremonial, a literature

that dissolves the thin and fragile skin of existence.

Mighty is the power of this literature, this language (for the two must be as indistinguishable as the wasp is from the word that names it). It has the potential to imagine and annihilate and reimagine all human experience.

But how am I to uncover it? I am willing to put my psyche at the disposal of the appropriate agencies, to tune myself, like a highly sensitive and precise radio, to the subtle yet insistent voices of inner mystery. But is that enough? I think not.

The effort will necessitate the development of a state of pure, senseless perception. Or perhaps more accurately, a sense-beyond-sense of the ordering of the substance of creation. Only then will the language be revealed in which to express all things in their true nature..

August 6, 19— I see something. I have pointed it out to others, but they tell me they cannot see it and hurry away. “It is there in the night sky,” I tell them. “A great lighted thing, like a comet, with a long burning tail dripping liquefied gold.”

Such a phenomenon is not likely to be seen again for hundreds of thousands of years or more. It is a sign. The time is now.

What day is it? Like one trapped in the underworld, I know longer can tell. This village, whatever it is called, is a veiled and timeless place.

A man follows me, a stranger with a devious smile and the stench of decay. I walk into thick woods and try to lose him, but he appears from behind a tree and takes me in his grasp. His teeth are like shards of bone, his mouth

an ossuary of forgotten martyrs. Where he touches me, my skin burns. I strain away from him, but he clasps me all the closer and whispers a story in my ear.

“A man laid on the ground on a bright, sunny afternoon. Was he dreaming? Who knows? An angel appeared, and suddenly it was night. The beatific head was aureoled in stars. Silken filaments like rays of moonlight besprinkled the man’s face. I have done it, he thought.

“The angel’s brown hair was long, draped over her shoulders, cascading down her back. It hung from her like a fabulous nun’s habit. He waited for her blessing; she gave it with her eyes. He was christened by the angel’s voice and enveloped in the odor of sanctity. She extended her hand toward him, and something flew through the air and pierced him. He was metamorphosed so that he and that which pierced him became one.

“From far away, he heard voices. ‘Are you alright?’

“And then a single voice, perhaps his own, he could not tell. ‘No,’ it said, ‘I don’t think so.’”

I walk along the river and a man much like me follows. We stop at the same time and observe

what unfolds, together, silently.

A worm encapsulates itself in a transparent chitinous tomb. Frozen in time and appearing for all the world dead, it hangs from the inner branch of a dogwood tree. But slowly, wings begin to form, unfolding, first right and then left. Furry legs sprout from the body and a juvenile face looks down at the earth below.

There is a tremor; the tree shakes. In a flash of light, a white wasp lands on the branch from which hangs the reborn insect. It plucks at the end of the encasement with its mandibles, pulling away pieces, setting the pieces aside and making from them a sort of pad for itself on which it then rests. The younger wasp, whiter, more luminous, emerges and flies off toward the brightening horizon.

The two of us watch, entranced.

The wasp left behind then speaks to my companion. “Don’t be afraid,” the wasp tells him. He bursts into tears.

It is night. Something bright flies in through the open window and crawls under the bedding. It makes no sound, but still it speaks to me. It’s voice is a sting.

Kevin Moquin published several pieces of short fiction under the pseudonym “Arthur Staaaz”. His writing has appeared in *Gone Lawn*, *Pseudopod* and *Morpheus Tales*, among other publications. While most of Moquin’s previous writing has been in the sub-genre of “weird fiction,” more recently he has been seeking to expand his writing beyond the bounds of genre fiction.

Rose Av

Tom Laichas

A coyote canters along the golf course fence. A vigilant neighbor and his seven-year old son drive alongside. The neighbor slows the car to follow the animal deep into Venice's three hundred streets. The neighbor calls 911. Then he calls animal control.

The neighbor says to his son:

They probably think this isn't an emergency, but if they don't do something, it sure will be. Coyotes, the neighbor goes on, eat people's pets. They've even attacked little kids.

This son is no toddler, but his eyebrows go tight and his lids scrunch up, just like they did when he was three and his dad said boo!

Where'd it come from, the boy asks.

The hills, says the neighbor. *There's fire up there. That coyote probably lost his home.*

Glancing at his son, he adds, *He can't come home with us. He doesn't belong here. He's a wild animal.*

The boy knows there's no point asking why a coyote, though it looks like a dog, isn't a dog. *Wild* means that a coyote won't come when called, won't take a leash, won't want to be held. *Wild* is the part of the land that burns, the part with mountain lions and deer.

You never go to *The Wild* yourself. You go with your father or with another boy's father. You don't stay long. You never go at night.

Home is where dogs are happy to see you. Home is where every pet's safe. Nobody has to get hurt at home.

The boy thinks about Penmar Park. Trees there that nobody's climbed, tall trees that shed their own bark like snakeskin. There's wild animals in Penmar Park, seagulls and things. Squirrels. If they can take the coyote out to the park, it would be safe as a pet in a house.

Everyone needs a home for the night.

Tom Laichas's work has appeared or is forthcoming in *Stand*, *Ambit*, *Spillway*, *Rappahannock Review* and elsewhere. His debut collection, *Empire of Eden* recently appeared from High Window Press, and his chapbook *Sixty-Three Photographs from the End of a War* is due out later this year from 3.1 Venice Press.



Rose in Marylebone | Ray Marrero

Chatter Box

Steve Levandoski

MOST OF MY COLLEAGUES would have given their left antenna to make their subjects talk. I could not get mine to shut up.

His name was Rob. A human, he was a prisoner of war residing in Cell Block Seven, the division reserved for military males of low importance. (Separating genders was archaic to say the least, but the humans requested it, so management acquiesced.)

An unenlightened specimen, Rob came to our attention after we observed him cornering other prisoners, continuing to converse long after his victim's nonverbals indicated that they had lost interest. Because the risk of rumination was too great, Rob couldn't bear silence, so he crammed every void with idle chit-chat or inane jokes about his supposed sexual liaisons with his fellow POW's mothers.

Now, don't get me wrong. To my experience, the human military personnel are some of the most gallant fighting forces in what they adorably nicknamed the Milky Way. While reviewing battle simulation videos, I witnessed countless soldiers jumping on top of what they thought were real explosives, convinced they were sacrificing their lives for their comrades. If I had eyes installed at the time, I would have cried watching it. While lovable in his own

misguided way, Rob was on the bottom tier of the valor department.

Rob's former cellmate shot me a look of relief mixed with pity as we passed in the hallway, hugging our cranial support pillows and personal sanitation kits. Management had upgraded the poor man to the peace and quiet of a private cell.

Avoiding eye contact, I entered my new sleeping chambers and returned Rob's warm greetings with a terse grunt, then I unpacked my tooth laser and spare clothing as though I was the only person inside our cell. Unused to human form, I scurried up onto the top bunk and accidentally banged my new testicles, the stupidest evolution I have ever experienced of any species whose form I have appropriated.

"Not much of a talker eh, buddy?" Rob said. The smile on his face waned.

I shook my head, pretending to read a magazine. To cope, Rob spoke to himself, narrating his every step from the sink to the toilet room and back, sometimes arguing with himself and always losing. To ramp up his anxiety, I openly engaged the other prisoners right in front of him at lunch, until cell block gossip confirmed that Rob was concerned that I didn't like him.

With precious little time, I could not delay much longer. In order to stop an impending nuclear retaliation, management would soon need to deploy drones armed with real weapons. I needed to move cautiously without dawdling. Billions of human lives would be at stake if I, to borrow a human colloquialism, “screwed the pooch” on this mission.

On the third sleep cycle, I finally dropped the silent treatment. “The Mandarin Garden.”

“Huh?” Rob’s head darted out from under my bed to meet my gaze on the top bunk. His nonverbals communicated that he could not be any more interested in conversing. As I had learned in psyche training, I mimicked Rob’s body language to make myself more amiable to his subconscious.

I said, “At the cafeteria, you told Kyle and Rasheed that they served the best fucking orange beef that you’ve had since the Mandarin Garden in Columbus, Indiana.”

“So?”

“I used to party with a chick that lived next to it, on Cherry street, near McKinley. Until it...”

He cut me off. “Burnt down in 2003? Hold up one goddamn minute! Are you shitting me? You’re from Columbus? Well Shit, brother!” (Once I heard Rob speak for two minutes straight uttering only three words that weren’t curses; however, he was still above par compared to most human military personnel I had encountered.)

I said, “No dude. I grew up in Camden. When my folks split, my pops ran away as far away as he could from my mom. He had a trailer not too far from Columbus, in Stony Lonesome. I used to live with him during summer vacation. That place did have the best fucking orange beef. Goddamn! Fuck me!”

Rob was out of his bed by now, standing in his underwear and leaning on my bunk with his legs casually crossed. I looked deep into his

eyes and held contact to exhibit trust. He was smiling so hard that his moustache pointed upwards.

I said, “Sorry bud. I don’t know who to trust in this shithole.”

“What the fuck are you talking about, dude?” said Rob, his head turned quizzically, like a dog.

I looked over my shoulder and whispered, “I thought you might be one of them.”

Rob’s mouth dropped. “YOU THOUGHT I WAS —sorry— you thought I was a fucking alien? This guy? Does my ass look purple to you, numbnuts?”

I shrugged. “I’m just stressed the fuck out. I didn’t know who to trust.”

While safeguarding my testes, I hopped down from my bunk and extended my hand out to him, palm facing sideways, fingers together. He grabbed my fingers and we squeezed for a second, briskly moving our conjoined hands up and down. (Most human greeting rituals involve human contact. Small wonder why they suffer so many pandemics.)

He pulled me in. After we performed the bro-hug ceremony, Rob smacked me on the back with an open hand, a macho sign of endearment. “It’s all good, hombre. I don’t think we officially met. Private Robert Evans. Call me Rob.”

“You got it, Rob. John Cairncross.”

I apologized again for not speaking to him earlier, saying it was because “for all us humans knew,” the aliens could replicate human form, but I assured him that his knowledge of the obscure restaurant earned my trust and we were now “cool.”

He laughed off my feigned suspicions but spent the next three hours proving his humanity to me anyway. I sat through all the minutiae of his life: childhood experiments with explosions, his gastric distress from dining

at A&W Burger, and how wearing a jersey with the number eighteen stitched on it aided his precious Indiana Colts to victory. (We broadcasted every sports game for the prisoner's entertainment on wall screens. They loved it!).

At the end of a sleep cycle, after lights out, I tearfully confided to Rob that I participated in “waterboarding,” a torture that simulated death by fluid inhalation, during my fictional tour of duty. I shared my fear that our captures would use similar bestial techniques on us utilizing advanced alien technology.

Looking uncomfortable, he gingerly patted me on the shoulder. “Look-it, I’ve been here for six fucking months now, and I ain’t heard dick about any fucking torture, not at Cell Block Seven anyway. We are too fucking low on the totem pole. Those purple douche bags don’t give two shits about us. But yeah— fucking— besides the boredom and lack of real ladies, it’s actually not too bad in this shithole. You get three squares and your own private bathroom to jag off in. I really can’t complain about a goddamn thing. I don’t know what these mattresses are made of, but —fuck’in a!—they are softer than baby shit. I’m out like a light as soon as my head hits the motherfucker. And you tasted the food? God-damn, huh? I eat nothing but fake bacon and blue burgers every day for every meal, and I’ve lost weight. They taste better than the real thing and they’re super healthy apparently and got vitamins and vegetables in them. I’ve had nothing but solid shits since I got here, which is a motherfucking record for me. And don’t get me started on those toilets that squirt water. Jesus Christ. Like an angel kissing your cornhole.”

This stellar review made me involuntarily smile. Before this mission, I was part of the team that ensured our containment facilities

were consistently more comfortable than their own barracks at home, closer to what they refer to as “military leave.” Happy humans are chatty humans. Their own military genius, Sun Tzu, condemned torture thousands of earth years ago in *The Art of War*. Even though the book was taught in every major military academy, its advice was routinely ignored after capturing the first POW with a secret.

Rob placed his hand over his mouth, as though he knew we were being recorded. “Dude. You know the exercise simulation room? Fuckin’ a. Do yourself a favor. Check out the porn section; it’s buried deep in the submenu it’s under “other,” right after “curling.” Fucking fantastic. You can bang any porn star you ever heard of! They got Riley Reid, Honey Gold, Bonnie Rotten, or you can go old school with Linda Lovelace or Traci Lords!”

I feigned admonishment. “But those fucking things can read your fucking mind, dickhead! What are you? Stupid? Letting aliens hook probes straight into your head and shit?”

Rob became indignant. “Shut the fuck up, dude! They can’t read your fucking mind, that’s straight-up bullshit!”

For once, Rob was correct. That was all “bullshit”. Exercise simulators with brain scanning capabilities wouldn’t be the norm for another two generations of models. They are what put my colleagues and me out of business.

He unconsciously wrapped his arms around himself in a self-soothing manner as he defended himself. “And even if they could, who fucking cares? What secrets are they going to get out of me? How to do the hokey pokey?”

(I would later allow him to “convince” me to give the machine a try and thank him endlessly. Ugh. So many fluids.)

Before changing the subject to sports, I repeated human military propaganda to stir the pot one last time. “But how can you trust

these purple motherfuckers? They just sat around and waited for the day when we would become smart enough to make good slaves.”

Snickering dismissively, Rob shook his head. “I dunno man, I’ve been here a lot longer than you and they haven’t asked me to do a goddamn thing damn thing except eat, shit, and spank it. Settle down, Beavis. You’re killing the vibe with your lame-ass, boy scout shit, bro-heim.”

The irony is that humans would make the worst slaves at any level of development. Our kind made machines our slaves millennia ago. Imagine a human trying to program even a basic CRV epoxy applicator without blowing themselves to Alpha Centauri. Laughable. This adorable naivety is why humans make the perfect solstice present for loved ones. Who wouldn’t want a water planet full of them building their quant little cities, dancing to K-pop, and filming their baking contests? Just take away their weapons and cell phones every couple of millennia, and they can pretty much sustain life on their own, with minimal genocides. .

It didn’t take long for me to become Rob’s “right-hand man.” The only words I needed to prod Rob along were uh-huh, really, and no way.

He’d say, “JC, I like you because you know how to have a fucking conversation. You gotta watch out because there are a lot of boring-ass motherfuckers in here. You hear the same fucking stories from the same dicks over and over, and each time they tell it, they doggy pile more shit on top just to spice it up.

Prime example: fucking Rasheed. When he first got here, he told any asshole with ears that he pushed a guard on the way in for looking at him funny. Two years later and here’s Rasheed talking about how he was dragged kicking and screaming by four guards, wrapped up like

a burrito in their nasty-ass tentacles. What a lying sack of shit. Fuck Rasheed.”

“Uh huh,” I said, recalling the previous sleep cycle, when Rob lost to Rasheed in a gambling game played with paper stock depicting ancient royalty.

“And he cheats at cards,” said Rob.

“Really?” I said, feigning shock.

“That’s the word on the street.”

“No way!”

What made Rob so special to us was that in his youth he shared a religious congregation, Saint Bartholomew’s Cathedral, with another one of our prisoners. Rob didn’t know we had his nation’s second-in-command housed within walking distance of him. Our principal concern was the nation’s nuclear arsenal which made humanity—to borrow an Earthling expression— a “monkey with a gun.” We needed to take that gun away before those idiots hurt themselves, fouling up their whole solar system in the process.

The second-in-command was not the most captivating fellow. Our replication of him didn’t raise suspicions with his colleagues, coworkers, or his intermediate family. Even with minimal backstory, the simbot’s validity was never questioned the entire time we had the real leader in custody. After earning the real leader’s trust, our agent could use basic mentalism tricks to extract the launch codes from the leader without him noticing. To accomplish this end, we needed trivia too obscure for human search engines. That is where our Rob came in.

The trick was that Rob had to bring Saint Bartholomew’s church up on his own. If I tried to steer the conversation, I risked arousing suspicions that could derail the whole mission. It was like what earthlings call “fishing,” Rob’s favorite exercise simulation beyond pornography.

I endured tedium supreme as I listened to how Rob stood by his flat earth theory, even

though he could see the globe from our port-hole. ("It's an optical illusion just to fuck with us.") How his neighbor was violating his basic human rights for throwing his dog's wrapped excrement into Rob's personal garbage bin. ("He's goddamn snowflake, too!") Also, his objections to learning new languages. ("Fuck-em, we have the most motherfucking bombs, so their lazy asses can learn fucking English like every other asshole on the planet!").

Adrenaline almost betrayed me when Rob finally brought up the church. We were both sitting alone at the lunch table. I was fighting the urge to scratch those damnable, perennially-itchy testes because Rob protested loudly the last time I did so in front of him.

I forget what subject led to its mention, but Rob said, "Dude, that reminds me of an even better story. I had the fucking funniest shit happen at a funeral when I was an altar boy. I'll never forget. It was at this church older than God, Saint Bartholomew's..."

"Saint Bartholomew's!" I shouted the words like an overeager game show contestant.

Oh no! All would be lost!

Startled by the outburst, Rob looked at me sideways. "Yeah, Saint Barts. So? You alright there, buddy?"

I was losing him!

I needed to think fast. "Um... My cousin was an altar boy there, too"

Rob eyed me suspiciously. Even he could pick up on my shady nonverbals like my perspiration and shaking hands.

"No shit," he said, lighting a prosthetic cigarette. "Small fucking world. What was his name? I'm sure I knew your cousin. I knew everyone."

I blurted the first human name I could think of. "Scott."

I felt my face get hot and sweat was beading.

His eyebrow shot up. "Not Marchlinski?"

I went with it. "Yeah, Scott Marchlinski."

Rob shook his head, staring downward. I couldn't draw a bead on his reaction, until he whimsically slapped his knee and looked up. "No fucking way! He was a ginger-balls, right? I kinda knew Scott. He didn't last long there. He seemed like a cool-ass dude though."

I gave Rob a playful elbow to his lower ribs. "He was another fucking army brat like us; that's why he moved. Cheers, broself."

We clicked our frosted mugs of lager together, in the customary manner. Providing unlimited alcoholic beverages and marijuana for inmates was a fantastic idea. I wish it had been mine.

While I silently performed breathing exercises to mask my increased heart rate, Rob told the tale that allowed us to conquer mankind once and for all.

His eyes twinkled at the memory. "I think this happened after Scott left, you'll have to ask the dude after we get out of here. But anyhow, some old rich biddy kicked it, and her worthless junkie son shocked the ever-loving shit out of everyone by showing up to her viewing, even though she didn't leave him a pot to piss in. When the lowlife kissed his mommy on her forehead, Father Baker saw the asshole slipping the wedding ring off her finger.

Well, Father Baker grew up in Detroit, son! He didn't take no shit. He grabbed the prick by the collar, slapped him upside the head, snatched the ring back, and then chicken-winged him out to the parking lot. Everyone laughed their fucking asses off. What an asshole!"

His laughter triggered a coughing fit, and Rob had to wipe the tears from his eyes by the end of his saga. It turned out that this story

was unscribed legend at the church.

Rob went on to fill up an octillion gig hard drive with banal stories of smoking cigarettes in the confessional booth, stealing pencils from the unattended desks of catholic school kids, and sneaking gulps of sacramental wine before it was blessed..

Four sleep cycles later, I received the news from the guards that I was “being transferred to another cell block”— code meaning that my mission was over and I could finally sleep in my own pod again, away from snoring human noses.

Crestfallen by the news, Rob forced me to imbibe small vessels of concentrated alcohol called “shots” for old times’ sake on our last day together. When the guard came to retrieve me, I was inebriated. As I staggered away, I gave Rob’s new cellmate a look of relief mixed with pity. I could already tell by the excited wagging of my guard’s antennae that our mission was a success.

When we were out of the range of human hearing he whispered, “Agent X retrieved the launch codes from the second. Guess what

they were.”

“What?” I said, too weary to play games.

He leaned in close. “1-2-3-4-5-6.”

“Pfffffft,” I said, “That’s so human. You don’t even know how much I want to slip out of these fucking testicles.”

The guard’s antennae dipped in pity. “I could not even imagine.”

Long after all the human prisoners were released, I just had to sneak one last peek at Rob’s file. It was just before our division was closed for good due to the improvements in brain scanning technology To make busywork for our interns, we had them visit the earth a couple times a year to keep tabs on Rob and another human of interest, Tom Delonge.

Rob had married twice and raised three children, two were biologically his. (The middle child’s DNA told us that the father was a close relation of Rob’s.) Since we decided to allow Earthlings to believe they won the war, Rob was regaled as a hero, a prisoner of war who could never bring himself to speak of the atrocities he endured at our cruel purple tentacles. He never realized that his loose lips saved his kind from extinction.