

Scream

A Collection of Dark Prose
by Kyle Hemmings

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paper Dolls Paper Dolls

You have reduced your ex-lovers to paper dolls. Each one has a name inked over the heart or where the heart should be. You glue them together and when that doesn't work, you try masking tape. Now they are holding hands. With a little imagination, they can almost stand up. You wash your pots and pans, meticulously scraping off bits of meat, but you can't forget your paper dolls. Do paper dolls get hungry and why do you starve them until they are paper-thin? This love is wasteful and sad. You can't even fuck a paper doll.

At night, you sleep with them. They are snug next to your pillow. In dreams, in dreams of empty rooms, the paper dolls follow you wherever you go. They need instructions. They never complain of how you once cheated them out of love, dirty love, the exquisite feel. They are still, perhaps in a deep trance they cannot recover from. You ask them if they can still feel something. They ask you if you ever felt anything.

But you have a premonition that they will fall apart like so many traumatized girlfriends who will remain folded for life. You awake. Brush off that dream. You let your paper dolls stay on your bed because nothing matters.

You notice that at least one is crumpled, another, almost shredded; perhaps, you tossed and turned too many times during the night. Perhaps you reached out and attempted to grasp and grope. Perhaps during a dream, you spoke to them and they wouldn't listen and you attacked.

You take a cab to work and no matter how many times you look in the rear view, you cannot see the whole of the driver's face. His accent reminds you of crossed borders, refugees who left too much behind. You leave a generous tip. Because you're still able to work up a dollop of pity. You take the elevator to the 13th floor where you network with three law partners. In the office, several women with legs crossed, faces expressionless as stone, are waiting for you.

Edie Sedgwick and the Dog that Will Not Forget Her

I'm waiting for Michael at the train station. How romantic to fall in love with a fellow mental patient. Do we have tentacles and talons? Do we speak the slippery code of starved fish? Of course, the rest of the world thinks I only become addicted to men with incurable stones in their eyes. I hope he didn't forget the Quaaludes and the three-grain Tuinals. The windows at this station are mighty foggy. I guess no one wants to be seen clearly.

And what does Michael bring me? A cute Chihuahua who's as tiny as its own bark is high. After Michael hands him to me, I say What is its name? He says You tell me. I name him Wannabe. Because that's all I ever was. Now I'm the returning little duchess who dropped acid at all the wrong parties, who puked over all the wrong fashion-freaks. I was such a nuisance.

Wannabe licks my face then manages to spring from my arms. I'm too scrawny to hold him. I think he can fly, like it's some silly magic that's true. Things and people are always flying into and out of my life. I'm growing frantic looking for him. He might get crushed under a train. Or the wrong stranger will bring him home and spike his dog food, make him think that he's something other than a dog. In time, Wannabe will be nothing.

I find him sitting near a turnstile. Children hold out hands to play with him. His huge dark eyes speak fear of the unknown. I squat and coo to him. "Come here, my little man. We all need a home, now don't we?"

He's back in my arms. He knows my girly scent.

I'm pushing my way through the crowd. I'm hoping Michael can see us. But with Wannabe so small and me being so skinny, it's like we're invisible.

Wistful of Fender

There you were back in '72 sitting Twiggy cross-legged under acrylic mini, easy care, wearing Paco Rabanne's body jewels, your thoughts like cars with locked windows. You claimed you hid hairstreak butterflies in your foam mattress. I lectured you about how one can never get off the ground without a jack. We lost touch. The broken bridges of years. Later, you started small explosions in the lives of married men. Were disfigured in Tunisia. Died D.W.I. , your soul reduced to chassis and rear axis. I died from a faulty transmission, blue smoke in a Paris bathroom.

In the junkyard, we hang tough now, memories in heaps, dinosaur speechless in the sun. A scavenger will steal your parts, piece by piece: the wipers— the rhythm of your apologies. He will use your flattened butterfly wings for a sunroof. If I could speak, I'd say We never did travel that far. And if you could feel anything under the world's weight of scrap metal— you'd smile.



We trek and slip-trance into the night. Me, hung over from a breakup with a girl who collected butterflies and Gothic art, and Munch, still looking for the perfectly human man, one who could rectify bad body image, make one forget the cheek holes, the mismatched eyes. Munch, still weighted down with the ghost of the father who had too many hands and sour puns, has learned to take small elegant mouthfuls at the dinner table where silence is the main course. Choking on it is strictly forbidden. In our apartment with mirrors that never see us as we want to be seen, a Play Station thrown in for distraction, and a little mechanical dog with a broken bark, Munch poses, practices the sleekest dance steps in an effort to attract Mr. Fix-Me. He wants to prove that he is both bone and amenable soul, not simply the android he feels himself to be. Last month was the third time I found Munch swinging in a failed noose. The ceiling is beginning to crack. (Around here, we imagine death as the curves of a loose busty woman addicted to going down.)

At Club Post-Berlin, while I glide over my shadows, toe-heel-toe over my slinky solipsists, Munch finds the perfect human, dances face to face until his cheeks are purple in a flash of light. I rush over to the bartender with alien-shaped ears, I mean, pointy or put-on, and order another gin and whatchamacallit. By 5 a.m., the time on any planet, I've lost Munch. Figured he went home with the perfect man so he can get reexamined and reassembled. By late afternoon, my phone is still not ringing. I can't leave Munch alone too long with a stranger, not with all those phobias involving wrong angles and obsessions over tangents. I'm calling his cell and feeling wasted in mirrors. In a groggy voice, scratchy at times, he calls back. He says he's too weak to move. But I get the address. In the apartment, five stories up in a high rise, Munch answers the door. He is shaken, blue-bruised, blood stains on his shirt. The stranger is gone. I place my jacket over him, coddle him, ask what happened, as if I couldn't guess, and say that it's going to be alright. *I know*, he says, pressing his face against my chest. *And the funny thing is*, he says, coughing and catching breath, *for a moment, I thought he might be the one. He took all my money.* Outside, we make our way through the commuter rush, through inner section of inner city, past the curious stares of stragglers and left-over drunks. Everybody is moving. Nobody talks. Everyone must catch the right train. Nobody's on time. Dinner will be cold or not there. Who can read these schedules? Everyone must be hungry by now. Everyone is eating their words.

big City

Big City

She enters the city with the windup and silent tick of the best sex toy, a bounce and a slow burn, recent advances in plastics have made rabbit hearts obsolete. The man with the pug-ugly nose and fat lip tells her to sign on the dotted line and asks her to dance nude. He dims the lights and she's no choice. Her body turning to wisp and sunblind movement, she dances to an old Edith Piaf and her steps are out-of-sync but below the concrete floor the rabbits of despair swoon and blush. You're hired, he says in mud-stodgy tone. He proceeds to penetrate her from behind; there is no other way, until she forgets the Plains and the too seldom rain, an angel's piss, her father used to joke until his rubber band of a heart stretched and nearly killed the both of them. After she found out he had buried The Last Dead Indian, she no longer slept with him. In the city, the evenings take on a purplish hue just before sunset, not entirely toxic, claims the half-blind paperboy who delivers each day's news with a rasp and a pigeon's smeared blood across her door. The apartment is paid in full by the club, which is really an after hours hangout for the grifted and the philosophically maimed. She takes her hamburgers medium rare and the pickles remind her of the taste of last night's penis before she stuffed the stranger's hypoallergenic apologies in a jar. He made a slow rattle on the way out. Over time, which is kept and set without fail by the rabbits underground, she falls in love with a club-footed mute whose hands play her like a cello. But he too disappears into the London Fog of his own inarticulateness. She cries for days, for no one, really. Then, one evening, the half-blind paper boy knocks, offers her a fistful of damask-scented plastic flowers, cheaper than what she can find on any street corner below neon and electric unblinking eye. No, she says softly, not wanting to wound him any further. She covers her breasts in a blue terrycloth bathrobe and closes the door. That night, on her way to The Strip, she finds a dead pigeon outside her door. It's wearing a tag with her apartment number. She brings it inside, holds the carcass, petting it, refusing to let it go. She wants to feed it. But that, she knows, is another of life's great hoaxes and anyway, she's out of bread.

Munch II

Near the rim of the city, Munch met a man with hook nose and leaky ear. The ear leaked the useless soliloquies of others. It was in a bar where couples rarely looked past each other and secretly discriminated against certain colors of intimacy, denied the depths of falling into pure longing without starch or feathers or correct hue. “Call me, Captain Hook. All my friends do. It works for me,” said the man, before downing a lager and making obscene swipes at his lips with three melded fingers. One side of his mouth drooled dirty hope. The man kept Munch in his apartment off Waldo and Saint, rent and paper free, offered to own him in exchange for warmth and seductive charades by candlelight. Again and again, Munch stated that he was too old to be a house boy and his wrists still burned from the matchsticks of his last lover who chose The Brando Method over sublimated Southern Gothic. As time went by, Captain Hook revealed in bits and pieces that his mother tortured him with unworkable umbrellas, left magical wounds that disappeared by day; his mother was the world and when turned upside down it was called night. *Omniscience. Omnipotence.* Captain said those words while munching crackers and goat cheese in bed, later, cried himself to sleep, curled himself into a round of darkness. He later died by failing to wake up in light. But the coroner’s office pronounced it as death by frostbite. Munch had drilled a hole in the bedroom wall facing ice and wind. Midnight sun, in that section of the city, was a myth. Freedom for Munch meant going solo, slipping his tiny bones into strangers’ pockets for warmth, with their permission, of course, cursing gout and the arthritic flare-ups, at times, walking on his knees, getting lost with frigid hands. Numb from the cold, they would soon no longer be his.

alice is in a 70s Movie

Alice Is in a 70s Movie

Which is not to say there won't be sequels and new cultists who hold mirrors to every plot point. Alice is not exactly happy or unhappy. She skims off the average wave, never had sex with her boss in a locker room smelling of mint aftershave, a clique of dirty feet, the aftermath of body steam. She'd like to live with a Latin American dictator with a tragic sense of containment, a drug runner who can recite Rimbaud, verbatim. Instead, she meets a disheveled young man in a park. Something about him makes her follow him, perhaps the camera angle of her eyes, some underfed impulse causes her to want tattoos and foreplay on fire escapes. He tells her he has an incurable disease. It's a selling plot point. He tells her that on most days, his voice is too flammable to escape his lips without self-injury and his skin is scaly, will someday fall off. How easily he could catch on fire. He is doomed to be encapsulated within the memory-bubbles of others. Alice shelters him, hydrates him with her painted flower-girl love, digests whatever he is willing to give away. She saves the leftovers as if she is a cross between a squirrel and a tinderbox for cold days. In the director's cut, the man leaves to burn somewhere else and Alice discovers that her belly is swelling. She gives birth to what he would have been in a different movie.

~~i'll Eat your angst~~ **I'll Eat Your Angst**

At bus stops, or with our backs to antique shops, Zin & I dare each other to swallow Buttercups whole. Seemingly, not a big deal. But no chewing, she reminds me. The thought of sugar dissolves me. My throat tightens. You'll see. I tell her. I can still make distress signals with one hand. We hit Central Park, maybe play games in a row boat, sitting in the lap of the water, so still & greyish. Somewhere, mothers are dying. Zin's been feeling empty since this guy from her World Religion class went too far with her after a party off campus. She said she was too drunk to fight him off, but now all she does is fight with herself. I try to keep her distracted: Baker Street puns, anecdotes about celebrities in tight shoes, the latest Indie flick at the Mercer Theater. James Franco is involved in a scandal with Wyona Ryder. She doesn't buy any of it; her eyes are boats adrift, blue sails down. She announces that she will dive into the water, clothes & all, just to get a reaction from strangers, just to see who will save her.

The Old Woman Will Remain

As a kid, I loved exploring the abandoned house near a burnt-out factory. It stood near center in a barren field that stretched for generations. The stairs would creak and the empty rooms would whisper. I'd hear a woman's voice from the top floor. Slowly, I crept stair by stair, listening to my own chest wheeze. In an attic room, I found her smiling in her rocking chair. Her hair covered with cobwebs, bees buzzed around her ears.

"I've been waiting to see you," she said, staring past me.

Then she mumbled that I was her lost son.

And though I was illegitimate and had cause her so much trouble, she said in a dry voice that she did her best to hide me. For years we lived on scraps. How cold these rooms were, only you and I for warmth. Remember, she said? Are you still starving?

She asked what had taken me so long to return.

I ran.

Out of curiosity, I returned days later. But there was nothing in the room but her voice.

I carried her voice inside my head for years. That voice kept me from walking blindly into certain fires, drew me into others. I judged people by their ability to like me and how light they were on their feet. Sometimes their fingertips burned me.

And as I matured, if that is the right word,, the women around me, old girlfriends and what have you—disappeared. Many never said good-bye or that they would miss me. Some insinuated that I had hurt them deeply by never listening, by having only a superficial roving eye. They never delved further into details.

My current wife, No. 3, the most forgetful of my soul mates, keeps burning the stew while she's off on errands

freakbeat #1

I met her on the Japan Tour, late in '66, a diminutive smiling girl called Ali. I couldn't pronounce her last name, so she wrote it across the back of my briefs, laughing like a child inventing myths. On plum wine, we were limitless. She said she had aspirations to be a pop singer but she hated her own demos. She gave me some. Mostly songs of love and loss in Japanese, she said. Well, what songs weren't about love and loss, I thought.

One night in her apartment, over a crowded Meiji Street, she handed me what she called John Lennon's left shoe. She said he and I had similar shoe sizes—an intuition on her part. I asked her what if he returns and wants it back? She said he would never come back, a gut feeling. When I told her my band would soon be leaving for the States, she said we must not say good-bye abruptly. It's better if we part by expanding distances. It's how she was able to cope with her grandfather's death, until he became completely inarticulate.

We stood and gazed at each other across a wood bridge, from opposite sides of a stream, or with her behind a tree and I gazing up, so many deceptive branches. With each distance, she grew progressively smaller. I imagined fitting her in my palm, protecting her from the rain, from people who pretended to be John Lennon. Until I shouted good bye over the ocean.

Back in London, I had her voice on tape and I hired a translator. While playing the recordings, I would open my mouth during a chorus. The translator kept saying You are so far away.

winter Education **Winter Education**

Sitting too long in public waiting rooms, or in his own rooms, thinking of her hands as white flowers, erotic sonatas of bone, he grew saddle-sore on the cushions custom-made from dead birds. She wore mittens in bed. Everything else was a scam. She taught him pain by neglecting him in increasingly longer increments. He recalled her crazy signatures on his pillow, the too deep curlicues and serifs.

On some days, snow belonged to the Prussians or the men with big wheels. Coming down with a nasty cold, he thought of winter as an unyielding bitch, a revengeful bastard child of North and South Pole. Why, across the world, Moscow could be burning and no one would send good will packages. He now stood below her fifth story window in the 6th Ward—his muffled shouts, inaudible to all but winter ghosts, suspended in frozen air. He realized that he had never owned anything—only borrowed what could never be his. He froze to death but some part of him continued to walk for many years.

Pringles

After the funeral, I sat in his mother's kitchen, watching her sprinkle cardamom and curry flakes into a large pot of soup. She turned, picked up a saltine, and munched. The crunching filled the room, then a long break of silence that made me uncomfortable. I could see in her eyes what she really wanted to ask: Was I gay and did anything ever happen between me and Malloy? She probably thought now was not the time to ask.

In the corner sat a small black-and-white TV, the one that Malloy had always lied to me about—boasting that it was really color and much wider. It was really just a matter of adjusting one's definition of grayscale, he always said. His mind, I imagined, full of complex calculations and saw-tooth wave patterns, full of saddle-shaped objects echoing across space.

On the TV screen, some soap opera tycoon, who cheated on his last three wives because they always gave him inconsistent answers, was lying on a gurney. I asked Malloy's mother what do they call those rubber wheels. What? she said. I repeated the question, pointing to the screen. Malloy always asked me questions about things that were seemingly insignificant. Like rubber wheels.

"Caster wheels," she said, and why do I ask?

I shrugged and said, no reason. Actually, Malloy, who was in a wheelchair since the car accident five years ago, said the wheels were rubber to absorb static cling. You know what static cling can do to you? he once asked me. It can paralyze you. It's the worse fear not being able to move when something unnamable and strange is making you inert, stuck. Mobility, he pointed out, was embedded onto our genetic blueprint. He was always up on all kinds of science and math trivia. Like the uses of castor oil, not to be confused with caster wheels. Or the smallest distance between two cars before they collide.

In the last months, his face was pale and drawn, and I remember this uncanny look in his eyes, like he was carrying some nightmare with him for days. I think he knew he was going to die. I think he knew it and wouldn't tell anyone. I think he was imagining the closest he could come to death before something "snapped."

I remember reading about this lethal comet that Nostradamus predicted but everyone else believed was harmless. That's how Malloy explained it. He knew all the lies about harmless comets. He said it made him yearn for some distraction, something light and salty. Something that could make you giddy.

Across the kitchen table, I reached for a can of Pringles. I listened to my teeth chomping, the crunching and the futile attempt to chew softer. Those were Malloy's favorite potato chips and sometimes we would sit across the table and chew Pringles to see who could chew the loudest and who would crack up laughing first.

"Malloy," I said. "Not now. Don't chew like that now. It's not funny anymore."

Malloy's mother turned and said what? Who are you talking to? she said. Him, I was going to say. But I caught myself.

The old Malloy was not here. Who or whatever was sitting across from me now was invisible and real and wasn't who Malloy once was. I mean the limitations of body, of disability. The new Malloy was formless, colorless, could move in silence and infiltrate past all kinds of borders. My skin was itching.

Malloy's mother kept staring at me and asking if I was okay. She really wanted to know if I was cracking up but was just too polite to ask. But cracking up is something I don't do anymore since Malloy's death. Cracking up and pushing wheelchairs over hard two-dimensional floors. Malloy was a paraplegic with a knack for memorizing everything, for prizing amazing facts as if family members. For example, the paradox of a ghost's fingerprints on a potato chip. In the last weeks, Malloy was trying to bridge whatever distance between us. More and more, his eyes were looking droopy, but he was smiling more often.

If I ever make it to grad school, I will title my dissertation, *The New Physics of Distance*. I will steal Malloy's insights into speed constants and how someday the universe will split many times over. I thought of all that boundless heat energy, abstract energy. He said some things that made no sense, that went over my head. Other things did make sense. Before he died, he told me that he loved me right down to the last snap. We both could have died smiling.

alice's interview
with helen gurley
brown concerning
her first love

Alice's Interview with Helen Gurley Brown Concerning Her First Love

First memory? Good or bad? Or are we going too far?

It started as being each other's pet turtle, lost and found. Dime store love. Later on we grew into sea turtles. Exotic and more sophisticated. I turned him on his belly until he could have cried "Right side up! I'm a shallow homebody, a flat-back with coastal dreams."

He could have meant "wet".

Really? My kind of boy. A poet stuck in a shell.

Foreplay in the Harrisons' garage. A yelp when a poke didn't feel quite right. I was gangly and freckled. He was bony with shifting eyes. A hedonistic boy with three pimples dotting his chin. Me? I could stretch and wrap around like leather. I was his favorite scarf. By the time, he wrote his first prize essay, he called me his Cosmo girl. (She laughs).

How long did it last? I'm talking relationship.

As long as clouds. As long as tomorrow and next week and the semblance to yesterdays. I had nightmares of Carmelite nuns checking our bed-sheets for stains. As long as the time it takes to realize that the sky is the future moving in circular motion around the earth.

What does that mean?

That we'll meet again.

Who ended it?

A car accident. A what and not a who. Must have been thinking of me while driving. Maybe a cloud resembled me. He wrapped himself around a telephone pole. The pole survived. He forgot that of the two of us, I was the one who could stretch into improbabilities, could contort snake-thought, could meld, could drive blind.

I survived and lived to be a guilty bitch.

How so?

I only loved him for his curls.

freak beat II

You have to escape through a snare-hollow of night. The daylight ruins all sense of fuzz on happiness. After our spouses have died from thump-heavy sex, or rolled over like forgetful children, we tap a Morse Code against the walls of our apartments, your bedroom against my thin ear. We flee to The Mercy Club where The Oblong Cyrcles are playing “Isn’t It a Blammy-Shame?” We dance until our heads fall off, until the dense human vapor rolls off the skin, until we admit our love-hate for kitchen sink and empty rooms. At last call, an angry compressed vocal through the speakers, we feel the grass grow beneath our wounds. But we are only wobbly guests and sheep-in-love are destined to be shorn. Dawn is a music sheet of bleeding pink. Back home, our spouses beat us up, until we are as broken as our secret stash of scratched LPs. Steadfast in corners, we remain deeply grooved.

anastasia

Anastasia

1.

I tell her not to stand too close to windows. Trying to protect her from the soldiers of the night. From the rats pretending to be rabbits. Tell me again she says with that accent drifting from Eastern European train wreckages, the lips of women waiting for a body to fall. I tell her there are so many causalities under Avenues A, B, C, and D.

2.

There's this recurrent dream she has of a man from the old country entering her between rest stops and strategic points. When he's inside, she says, (while sitting erect on the small cot I prepared for her,) he feels like a snake slithering this way and that. Until he coils around my spine and I can't move or breathe.

How does he get back out? I ask.

She gives me a threatening look, the scowl of a gangster.

He sheds. He sheds himself. He becomes part of my waste and removal.

3.

She sits on an old cushioned chair auctioned off after the 2nd Nameless Revolution. Its cover is decorated with yellow and red flowers. She's smoking a cigarette that she's rolled with great delicacy and precision. She repeats with greater detail the story of how a thick-lipped man with grossly small ears sold her to the skin market in Belgrade. The name she was credited with on screen spelled lunch ticket and left over *sarma* with potato dumplings. After she was fired for puking in a sex scene, she ran across the border. She wanted Switzerland but was afraid of heights. She wanted Morocco but was afraid of drowning in crowds. And the sun would not be good for her skin.

4.

Whenever I make love to Anastasia, I feel as if I'm entering and leaving a country of doe-eyed snipers. Ones who become very small when cornered, who give up everything when pressed. I try to imagine myself behind the scope of a high-powered rifle, how I could zoom in on a small piece of the world. After we both fail a climax, Anastasia pushes me off, says she couldn't love me for long. She could break me so easily. As if I am her prisoner.

5.

It's true. As a child, I never felt wanted except for telling stories, for smuggling tall tales. I kept Icelandic princesses in the attic. One died from inhaling too much asbestos. At night, I could hear the others crying through insulated walls.

6.

Anastasia spies on the faces passing under our no-frills second story apartment. What are their lives like? she asks. The blatt of a taxi in the distance. She says as if trying to compose a song—the mommies and the daddies—why so many mummies in bed? How do they turn so cold? Why so many zombies walking around during the day? And the vampires, I say, don't forget the vampires. She becomes very quiet and sullen. She says she's been raped by both men and women vampires. Their histories still infecting her under her skirt. Stop thinking, I say, it's not good. Why don't you go take a shit? she says. She apologizes and laughs. In the bathroom the size of a broom closet, I listen to her make child-like noises behind the door, hisses and indistinct whispers, as if I am being watched and ridiculed, smothered by her silliness, by her morbid playfulness. I can't shit. Everything's stuck inside me.

7.

One day I return from the bakery with some fresh raisin bagels and coffee, although she prefers croissants and a small café mocha with whipped cream. But today, I'm broke and stingy. I find a girl hanging from the ceiling, slowly turning. I drop the coffees. My legs are soaked and burnt. But it is not a girl. It is one of my sister's ragamuffin dolls that she never took with her after she married and moved away. Anastasia sits on the leather sofa, shaking her head. I'm so tired of walls, she says. My only company is walls. I rush over and lift her chin in my hand. Anastasia, I say, did you take your meds? All of them? From now on, I will sneak pills into her breakfast, her pancakes and eggs. Or perhaps she would be better off as a ragamuffin doll, slowly turning in the air, no strings attached.

8.

Anastasia and I stand looking through each other at the train station. A man is waiting in the crowd and I will hand her off to him. She takes two steps closer; my breaths could coat her words. But for now, she has none. I tell her that she will be in good hands, that he will give her the kind of shelter I could never offer. You will have the best doctors, I tell her. But there are other neutral countries where the sunset doesn't sink you, she says. Couldn't we go there? You and me? I've gotten used to you.

You get used to so many people or things that are not good for you, I say. You will adjust.

We embrace but do not touch. The man with the briefcase takes Anastasia by the hand. The ticket collectors yell out to please board the train. Anastasia turns around and yells out through a crowd of crunched bodies—Did you ever love me? I smile at her. My throat tightens. I won't give her the satisfaction of an answer because that word, love, always causes me to self-destruct. To become phobic to light and go underground. The train pulls away. There are so many faces in the passing windows. They could all be Anastasia.

Munch III

A war of stray bullets is raging. Toxic rats sneak into our homes, draw blood from the deepest well of our sleep. Ghosts are driven under the streets. In dumpsters, weeds grow out of crumpled Starbucks cups. Avenue D is being overtaken by radioactive clowns. Avenue C can go either way. In a loft, in a space of air on loan, I nurse a cat back to life, hoping this will get me closer to Buddha, while my sleep-deprived roommate, Munch, texts a supplier of pills that turn you virtual, a smiling zombie with no bite. And although Munch always wants more, he is getting skinnier and skinner, flesh on wire hangers, and the pills do nothing but keep his weight impossibly down. Until he evaporates in his sleep. Until I dream of green eyes and a mystical lover who can spin me. Until a distant voice in the middle of the night, perhaps across town, calls out that we have won, that ghosts, reformed as humans, are ascending subway stairs. That we no longer have anything to fear. That we need to learn to love again.

blue baby Blue Baby

Hermie & I were babysitting for old man, Henley. He had won custody of his daughter's baby after it was discovered that she abandoned it to score drugs. She even denied making it with a guy whose name she couldn't recall. The old man told Hermie's mom, always in that deep scratchy voice of his, that she loved to drop acid and that's what destroyed her, made her see all kinds of colors where there was only black & white. Later, she moved out to join a commune & no one heard from her since.

The old man himself was becoming increasingly forgetful, searching for keys, for spare parts for his truck that he had already used, for the wife who had died a month before. Perhaps he thought of still sleeping beside her as his thoughts leaked out, random & fragmented.

One night, while the baby slept, Hermie & I explored the old man's basement, lights off, guessed our steps with eyes closed. Hermie said that it would help to sharpen our senses. She said it was more fun trying to name the objects we'd touch if we couldn't see them. A form of sex.

Even in our teens, Hermie was always curious about death, how many ways one could die, the varieties of self-inflictions, self-negations. With her father gone, her and her mom rarely talked. We ran our hands over what we pronounced as old wooden horses, ones the old man carved himself, old tires that could have used as swings when the old man was young, maybe right out of a Norman Rockwell painting. We traced the edges of hack & circular saws, imagining the drop of blood from our fingers leaving a trace on the cracked concrete floor. We bumped into work benches & old motors no longer salvageable.

Then, we started to explore each other's parts, the way we did with eyes open under a moon-licked field. We explored the parts that rarely became exposed. We dug deeper & deeper until one of us sighed in pure pleasure or a pleasurable agony for more.

Then, Hermie covered my mouth with the soft palm of her hand. She said, Listen. She said she could hear a baby cry. I listened but heard nothing. That night, after we trudged upstairs, exhausted from feeling too many secret places we'd never own up to, we found the baby face down, not breathing. For years, Hermie insists that we made that baby. I keep denying it.

Edie Sedgwick: Flashes of Her Childhood Are Flaky at Best

As a child with five pairs of black buckle shoes, Edie had a parakeet she named Jimmy Durante. It was given to her by an aunt who complained of hearing helicopters over her neighborhood every night.

One day, Jimmy Durante became very sick. Edie believed this was due to the fact that Jimmy Durante wanted to talk but his beak was too sharp for long vowels. He chirped like a child half-choking on hard candies. This happened around the time Edie's father was having an affair with a Beverly Hills foot doctor who kept finding bugs in her bed sheets.

Edie took Jimmy Durante to the veterinarian, an old man with a squeaky voice and floppy ears. At home, Edie dutifully fed Jimmy Durante nutrients through an eye dropper. Neither her parents nor her brothers took much interest in Jimmy Durante. Edie feared he was slowly being poisoned by her father, who adored caged silences.

Jimmy Durante died.

Edie called it murder.

At the dinner table, Edie placed feathers on each of her family member's plates. They sat stiffly, folded their arms, and flapped their elbows, breaking out into laughter as they did this.

Edie cried for two years.

After she left the crazy nest of her home, she searched for fame. In New York City, she found Andy Warhol. She said, "Andy, make me 100 reproductions of a bird."

When Andy couldn't pay for her work in his films, she thought of Jimmy Durante.

When a lover said that this is quits, she thought of Jimmy Durante.

So many things reminded her of Jimmy Durante. He had flown back into her life without actually leaving it.

In subways, she dropped pennies to see if anyone would retrieve them.

Only sooty-faced children. Only drooling old men.

Only people she would never know.

She refused to shave her legs.

She slept alone.

Woman with a Tin Can Heart

He marries a woman with a tin can heart. The prognosis is poor: she tires too easily from intense foreplay; she's reduces to rattle and hum when someone a shush away tells her she is loved. Whenever he sleeps next to her, he hears his own words echo as if someone else's. On some nights, he's tempted to smother her with a pillow pressed against her face so her childhood murmur will be cured, so he can hear himself think. Shortly after the simple wedding ceremony, she said, Before you, I had a hole in my heart. I leaked the names of fair-weather men who would never love me. She remembers the days of living in the streets, of being kicked around by outsider boys, how they made her swallow stones or regurgitate their reflections. They made her feel ugly, six degrees of weird. Rarely, she speaks of the father, who boasted about his collection of road kill, about his extra shoestring or two of kindness. One night, the husband discovers that the wife with a tin can heart is gone. His bed is now a one-way street with no signs, only the faint footprints of a small animal. After it rains, he imagines the ping of coins in someone's cup. He listens to the rustle of his own thoughts: dry, unintelligible at the core, never fated to become trains. The weight of his peeping eyes shifts inward. He imagines he has a hole in his head. In that space, the sun will shine metallic. The stray cats will refuse water, will not whine, will remain nameless.

never trust a woman with a pointy head

Never Trust a Woman with a Pointy Head

I took a detour with an actress whose face I'd seen in several Indie films about women terrorists wearing tiger masks. In two of the films, which were sequels, she held up a bank and stole money from her boyfriends who worked as part-time tellers. She was married several times simultaneously and said it's not good if it isn't dangerous. When I refused to give her my car keys, she shot me three times, but only one was a serious wound. She drove me to the emergency room, said Do you have to fucking bleed all over the seats? After they found most of the bullets, I never saw her again and my car was gone. But sometime later, I read in the paper about a bank robbery. My car turned up at my house with several new dents. In the paper, on page 5 or 6, it stated that we're headed for a more stable economy.

hydromatic **Hydromatic**

This is not your father's Oldsmobile, the one with a transmission called a Hydro-Matic. That car could travel. This is only a photo, a still of appearances, shades of grey. Time doesn't lie. But it doesn't tell the truth either. For only one freeze-frame of time, did you remotely resemble, Liz Taylor in National Velvet. This is you back when you wanted to be. Desire was perfect in itself.

While your father was trying to polarize a 6-volt regulator, you imagined your heart with four terminals. You even labeled each one with letters. You pictured your father connecting each jumper wire, alligator clip, to the correct terminal. He could do it blindfolded. You had a weak heart. He said in time, it would need a mechanic. What? you said. He meant the car.

freakbeat #3

Freakbeat #3

We were in the South of France watching a tennis tournament, camouflaged in dark glasses and wigs. Me, the lead guitarist of Discrete Sons, experimenting with tape machines and simultaneous signals, and Johnny G. my secret lover and lead vocalist. Lately, he was looking pale, sickly. The score was 10-Love.

We ate hot dogs with mustard, pretended life was eternal or that The Beatles would last forever. But I couldn't understand why we no longer had sex in the backseat of limos. He later admitted he was just diagnosed with some strange parasitic disease for which there was only experimental treatments. I asked him if it was something he caught from a groupie. He chuckled like the shy child I once knew growing up in a household of too many fly traps.

No, he said, it was probably from drinking dirty water somewhere, maybe on The Asian Tour, exploring too far off the main roads. He said he was going to refuse treatments, that he couldn't envision a life confined to bedpans and creaky wheelchairs.

I reminded him that he had written our best hits, that soon the goons from the record company would greet us with baseball bats, and demand another string of top tens.

The tennis game ended, tied score, superstar vs. the next big thing.

He told me that he had been in love with an older record exec, that the wife would die if she found out about the on and off again affair.

I felt betrayed, small. For weeks, I had no voice.

Johnny G. fled to some mountaintop in India, under the tutelage of a Maharishi Something. Weeks later I received a letter signed by the Maharishi's spokesperson, a young British woman named Gayle Fletcher, a former Carnaby Street model. We kept his death a secret, at least for awhile. By mid 1967, fans kept asking why Johnny G. left the band. We told them he went psychedelic.

Utah Agave

Out from the canyons, limestone on the rim, the girls walk single-file & zombie-eyed. Seep willow is their past; steam orchid is what passes for blood. Now they stand before me & hold hands.

They want to tell me what they saw at the bottom. The schist & the tree frog, the redbud that spoke in riddles & never shed a leaf. How the acacia & the salt cedar betrayed Proterozoic lovers. One girl cries exotic crystal tears.

& even though they are dead, they look like any other girl before a red sun, squeezing cacti in her hand, fire ants across the skin.

They will tell me that at the bottom of the creek, a cave wren sings in musical code that only love can save them. There is nothing more and nothing less. I know because I am the secret tourist who was once walked behind them.

They keep trying, Lord knows how, to recruit me back into the life of blind limestone. It was love that killed us all.

the man-butterfly

The Man-Butterfly

She remembered him when he had no wings, was just the cocoon of a man she could own. She bought him expensive shoes, a size too large, and he'd stumbled into her at intersections. She thought he had died in a car accident, leaked toxic substances into the air. Became clap and karma. Now in her room, rehearsing an erotic arabesque for a potential victims, she sees the man-butterfly inside the window. Outside, one of her father's tractors rams against ancient rock; other machines are sleeping out of gear. So are the men. Chasing the man-butterfly across the room, following the shadows of his crazy flight across the ceiling, she catches him in her bare feet. He tries to imitate a swallowtail, but she pronounces him as mourning cloak. She whispers to him as he beats against her cupped hands, "Everything I catch, I destroy. I'll never have children." She keeps the man-butterfly in a glass jar. There is a notch in the lid so nothing will become breathless before harvest. Her younger sister, who lives three worlds apart, opens the jar and swallows the man-butterfly. She knows her children will fly.

freakbeat #4

I met her at a club in Bristol at the time I was changing from saxophone to guitar and fuzz box. She became my groupie who gave great feedback. At the rim of every morning, the harmonies of our voices swept the room of memory-debris. It got to a point where she was always near me by an octave. When we fell out of sync, she called me a “cold monster.”

One night, after a gig performing some frat-stomp with The Brothers Solo, she demanded that I come to her basement flat, the one she always joked about hearing “the buried industrial fog of the river.” She demanded that I sleep with her with my matching suit and white pants, the jacket stitched with the trademark Brothers logo—Lonely Boy.

Then she would take a pair of shears and cut each article of clothing in bed. She said that if I didn’t comply, she’d bleed everywhere, over narrow cobblestone streets, onto dirty windows, bleed under the sheets. She said I must promise not to sleep with anyone else.

She then spoke about the man who once used her like a snare, a drumbeat He had thick hands and was always meticulously dressed. She refused to say anything more. I’ll miss her deep girly-giggle.

In the morning, I woke up bald and alone. It rained clearly for a week.

sweet dream Sweet Dream

Chiemi is in bed with the head of Human Resources, Mr. Yamashita, married, a body builder, shaved head, cruel half-shadow face. She tells him that this is one of the best affairs she has ever had. Later, she makes a joke about “this nerdy guy in I.T. who has a crush on me.” She says she can’t imagine doing it with him, not even for money. Mr. Yamashita passes her a joint.

They both stare up at the peeling ceiling of a love hotel.

He tells her that he is sorry about all the people in his life that he has raped.

“Really,” she says, exhaling smoke. It fades into the ceiling cracks of yellow paint.

“I don’t just mean physically. Mentally too. You have to control people or they will control you. Mild mannered people don’t do well in this life.”

Chiemi, under the sheets, looks at him & smiles. She tells him that she can’t stand guys who have no confidence. Later, slipping into off-white panties, she admits the average life-span of her affairs is about two months.

Mr. Yamashita tells her that she sings like a bird.

At home, Bishamon draws a manga boy & girl. He writes in the bubble over her head—“I don’t want you.”

Bishamon thinks: I will wait you out. Chiemi.

Chiemi jokes on the phone with her friend from Marketing: I guess I was in a mood. I was blowing this guy in a restroom at Club Futura, and I just left him there hanging. I told him I couldn’t go on. Just wasn’t into it. He tipped me, anyway. Three big ones. Sweetheart.

Her favorite nut is pistachio. She hates bedbugs & guys who write poems.

Bishamon likes starfish & girls who can spin yarns. Loves movies built around reshuffled lovers, couples, lost and found, missing decks of mysterious cards. He writes haikus with movie titles.

Chiemi & Mr. Yamashita are speeding up some winding hill. They are both high again. The day is sunny. She is giving him head while he drives. He says This is so good for the ego. He becomes so relaxed that the car misses a turn. They are flying in the air. The ocean is very far below. Chiemi looks down. She closes her eyes but can't scream.

Bishamon removes his artificial eye, inspects it. He lost his real eye in an accident when he was a kid. He imagines that the artificial eye can tell him secrets. Like a miniature world. The secret: Chiemi is a sweet bird who will someday fly into your bed.



Bio

Kyle Hemmings lives and works in New Jersey. He has been published in *Elimae*, *Smokelong Quarterly*, *This Zine Will Change Your Life*, *Blaze Vox*, *Matchbook*, and elsewhere. His latest collections of poetry/prose is *Future Wars* from *Another New Calligraphy and Split Brain* on Amazon Kindle. He loves 50s Sci-Fi movies, manga comics, and pre-punk garage bands of the 60s.

scars

Scream

Kyle Hemmings

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