



CC&D

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the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag



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Rat Guts, photographed
by David Matson

the boss lady's editorial

Fear... Generated by the 24-hour News Stations

evidence from both the liberal media
and more right-wing news stations

Part One: An Asteroid is going to strike the earth!

Heard of a news story released 02/18/06... I know that was a while ago, but I thought I had a few years to tell you about it before there's any cause for mass hysteria. A story was reported on the news today that scientists have discovered an asteroid that is bound to hit the planet Earth April 13th, 2036.

Wow.

(And I've been fearing the end of the world 12/21 in 2012, because of the Mayan calendars, but if we survive *that* we'll have *more* things to fear...)

Actually, I didn't see the news story, but someone called me today and told me they saw this on a news channel today. They said the news show said the asteroid was 2.37 miles wide (that's actually *huge* to collide with the earth), and an asteroid that size would decimate a good region. A *region*? How big is *that*? Well, they said they equated it with larger than the size of a large city in America, so the damage could be as big as an entire state. A collision like that could easily alter the climate of the entire planet, too — the damage from that asteroid strike could throw dust and debris into the air to block the sky for the entire planet. It might not decimate the entire planet, but it could come close to wiping out some species.

Wow.

I've seen science show reports on things like this; what would we do if an asteroid was going to hit the Earth? They talked about having a satellite hit it in space to mash it to bits, but the potential fear in that is that those little pieces could hit the Earth, causing many smaller collisions instead (if you saw how comet Shoemaker-Levy 9 hit Jupiter, the gravity of the planet actually tore the comet into smaller pieces, which all hit the planet and spread the damage out to several areas). Geez, one news show even mentioned (jokingly) that Bruce Willis could do some-

thing to save us from the asteroid (because he was in a movie doing the same thing). Although I think in the movie they planned to drill a hole (Bruce Willis' specialty as a miner in the movie) into the Asteroid and set off a nuclear explosion inside the asteroid, to *vaporize* the asteroid.

Granted, when I heard *that* theory, I said, "Oh, so they'd only destroy it into many smaller pieces to collide with Earth..." and my news friend said, "hundreds of *radioactive* pieces of asteroid, since a nuclear blast broke it apart..." So maybe it's not a good idea to use a nuclear blast...

But scientists have come up with a way we could make sure an asteroid doesn't hit Earth — by shooting a satellite into space to be *near* the asteroid, and the gravitational pull of the satellite could actually *nudge* the asteroid off it's current orbit, so it wouldn't hit Earth.

Not a bad plan. But how far in advance do we have to send this satellite into space to save our planet?

Well, that's when my news connection said he went to look on the Internet for other news about this asteroid. He checked out NASA, and there was nothing on the front page about it; NASA didn't have any immediate reports on it. But he did find a story that explained that this asteroid actually had a one in ten-thousand chance of hitting Earth.

What? So it's not guaranteed?

Now, it's just something scientists should watch. Scientists say that the asteroid, which is actually 1,000 feet wide (a quarter-mile wide, even though the news report said over 2 miles wide) would have to go through any one of three 2,000 mile wide "holes" in space before we'd know that it was on a course that would hit Earth. The last "hole" in space would only be passed in 2029 (which means we might not know until 2029 if it's going to actually hit Earth or not). So I asked: "Could we send a satellite into space in 2029 if we needed to move the asteroid?" And I found out that we don't currently have the technology to move an asteroid that quickly — if we know well in advance we can deflect it slightly, and the more time that passes in the asteroid's orbit means it will be pushed farther and father away. With only 6 years for deflection, we probably wouldn't be able to stop it.

Well, poo. I don't know what to do then. Could we send a satellite way early to nudge it to be on the safe side?

Well, it *would* be a \$300 million mission to stop this, and we're not even sure yet if it needs to be done. And that's when my friend told me the channel where he heard the story. He told me it was FOX News... and I said, *oh*, guessing that they were hyping a story that really isn't really completely true and can't be verified (not like the Republican-screaming, "fair and balanced" Fox News to do *that*, is it?). My friend then looked to CNN,

then MSNBC to see if there were any stories on this asteroid.

There was nothing.

But that doesn't mean this asteroid (named Apophis, which is named after the Egyptian god of destruction) isn't a worthwhile story to investigate. So I searched online for information (like at places like bitsofnews.com) — like the asteroids chance of hitting the earth is something more like one in 45,000 roughly (got that from Reuters and also got information from Raymond Hainey's article *It may hit Earth ... but don't worry, we've got a plan*, from the Science and Technology section of <http://news.scotsman.com/scitech.cfm?id=264972007>). And yes, the Association of Space Explorers, a group of former astronauts and cosmonauts with close links to US space agency NASA, is setting up meetings to consider options for this. The UN has been nudged to seriously consider working out a plan, since if something like this happens, (you know, to be prepared for that one in 45,000 chance), the entire earth could be effected.

But this isn't a story that deserves every individual's strict attention, because (A) it's something we can't personally do anything about, (B) it's something that won't seriously become an issue to physically deal with for years, and (C) well, the chances really aren't that high. I suppose it's just good to know that scientists are watching this, so that we have the time to do something about this well in advance. So is it something we really have to worry about? Possibly not, at least not right now. But my friend told me this news like it was something we have to urgently worry about.

But that might have been the tone FOX news took on when it relayed this story, I don't know.

And I'm sure my friend told me this story this way to hit the point home about how slanted the "fair and balanced" Fox news network can be. (Seriously, any news network with Republican-esque political pundits like Sean Hannity, or conservative John Gibson, or Bill O'Reilly slant the news?) In fact, I've heard Republicans say they appreciate the fact that there is a "fair and balanced" news network out there, because all of the other news networks are just havens for the liberal media.

Well, it might not be "fair and balanced" when you look closely, but are they only counteracting the liberal media which we're normally fed?

Part Two: which fears will the news stations play on?

My same friend who told me about the potential asteroid fiasco made the leap about what FOX news covers when he said that they play on the fear for safety (because we're in danger, whether it be from an asteroid or

from terrorists). And that one struck home with me, because all of these years we've dealt with President G. W. Bush, he has pushed the idea of attacking a country and taking our rights away via the Patriot Act under a veil of "terrorism," and these actions are something we have to do (and these are rights we have to lose) in order to feel safe. I mentioned it before, that what frightened me the most was when I heard a President Bush's advertisement that ended saying the country relies on freedom, faith, families and sacrifice...What do we have to give up for President Bush — and what *have* we given up for President Bush?

Bush has been playing on this fear of danger from an unseen force to make people feel like they *need* him. And the thing is, it was insane when I had lunch with a coworker of my husband's (sorry, I can't remember her name), and she was explaining to me that while living and working in a town near the Wisconsin border (not even in Chicago) she still felt unsafe because of terrorists. I mean, she *literally* felt that we *physically* were not safe. And I'm sorry, but terrorists are probably not going to pick the small town she happens to be in for an attack. So although it's hard to believe, apparently playing on a fear for safety work with some of the American people.

And knowing that this has been Bush's plan all these years, it hammered home my theory on what separates Republicans from Democrats — Republicans are interested in taking away your *personal* liberties, and Democrats are more interested in taking away your *financial* liberties (as the generality goes, Democrats want to increase taxes to help pay for the poor, right?). This difference becomes clearer when I see different types of news channels: if Fox News is a more conservative news network, it makes sense that their stories get hyped for forcing people to fear for their own safety. Channels like CNN (on the flip-side) broadcast news about business (more on stock market reports, more business-related stories during trading hours), and on networks like that you more often see people fearing the higher cost of gas prices and energy costs, and talk about the fear of financial problems (relating to how poor people can afford to heat their homes with prices skyrocketing). This financial fear is one grounded in a more liberal viewpoint.

But the funny thing is that all of these news networks do their best to make their viewers afraid of *something*, instead of just relaying the news objectively. When you think of it that way, it's frightening that news networks (you know, to get more people to watch, to help their ratings, to keep them in business and make a profit) have to put scare-tactic slants on relaying the news, because news broadcasters have come to believe that instilling fear in people will get them to watch their station just a little while longer, so they can hear some better news to make them feel more at ease again.

Part Three: doing more than telling you the news

On CNN recently, people were on television asking a reporter on their “take” on the drop in the stock market. Not “Do you think this drop will last with the market?”, but they asked the reporter to give insight on the emotional meanings of the stock market drop.

That’s not the reporter’s job. They’re supposed to just tell you the news.

Because people buy and sell stocks and because fluctuations in the stock market will affect the economy, people *do* want stock market analysts to give insight to where the stock market might go (to help give them insight into what they should do with their portfolio, or even if they should worry about their 401k investments at their job). But a good way for the 24-hour news stations to fill time is to ask reporters to give insight into their opinions of the market (and become analysts, when they’re not). Often reporters will even say they’ve heard things from certain people (not giving their names, of course) that *this* or *that* might happen with the stock market, and suddenly their reporting is no longer reporting, but speculation. At that point in the news game this more “in-depth” reporting becomes kind of like a game of telephone, where ‘I heard someone say X, so I’ll relay it (as closely as I can remember) and pass on the “someone told me this” information to you, the viewer, and put it under the guise of news.’

Someone emailed me, saying they assumed I’d write a huge editorial about the Virginia Tech shooting (the deadliest mass shooting in America’s history), and I thought, what could I say? For example, I didn’t feel a need to write about Columbine right after it happened. Something terrible happened and there’s no point in my hashing the details out again, we don’t need that — and the 24-hour drive by media has all of that covered already. There’s not much of a point in me postulating about the horrendous details, and what possessed Cho Seung-Hui to kill people on two separate occasions at this school. The only thing I could think to talk about after the Virginia Tech shootings is the fact that the news networks jumped into this media circus, bringing up details about the legality of purchasing guns (because if Cho Seung-Hui couldn’t get a gun this would never have happened). I even heard rebuttals to restricting gun sales from one news commentator, who said that maybe if another student had a gun, *they* could have killed Cho Seung-Hui before he killed many more people. And although Cho Seung-Hui was able to legally get guns, I believe the Columbine shooters used their parent’s guns for their attacks. From a CNN article (<http://archives.cnn.com/1999/US/12/12/columbine.tapes/index.html>), “An employee of Green Mountain Guns called Harris’ house and told his

father, “Hey, your clips are in.” Harris’ father said he had not ordered any clips.” And if they investigated further this discrepancy, they may have found out their plan and stopped the Columbine killers from their attack.

Granted, people can say that the parent who owns guns should probably keep their guns under closer lock and key (but why would they when they trust their kids?), but I don’t think anyone in this country is saying that guns should be completely illegal (I mean, who needs to consider the Constitution anymore anyway?). It seems that for those who want to kill, there will always be a way for them to achieve their final goal.

But *this* is what 24-hour news stations were contemplating immediately after the Virginia Tech shootings. News agencies also then hypothesized about what Cho Seung-Hui’s background was that could have led him to act out with guns, and anything from video games to television (and he didn’t play video games or watch much TV at all), to YouTube, to the decadent lifestyle we’re afforded in America. Suddenly the news stations are making political stands, and right here it’s more obvious than analyzing what *fear* the news stations are trying to invoke in their viewers.

Though then again, these news stations could be instilling a *new* kind of fear into America’s hearts, because when any mass-killing hits the news stands like this, it doesn’t matter if you’re a conservative pundit on television or a part of the liberal media, *everyone* is going to have to get their hands on this story, and like wrapping up a Christmas present, everyone in the media wants to present it to you in just the right way. They’ll use all their bells and whistles to make you see the story just how *they* want you to see the news.



Janet Kuypers®

Janet Kuypers
Editor in Chief

Painkillers

Je'free

I took a couple with breakfast
I wish they'd be called Memory-killers,
as I now either eat waffles alone;
or, what is even more pathetic,
I eat waffles alone with
an imaginary companion

I took another one with lunch,
hallucinating of the furniture of the air,
the earth-sky-bird patterns
idly interlacing

Unfortunately, it had a rhythm
that took me back to
where the symphony of love began,
where silence was already filled
with sweet serenades

I took a last dose with dinner,
crossing my fingers for forgetfulness;
But, the million tiny city lights
glistened like your freshly showered skin
that made me sorely yearn for
the way together we would
soften our limbs, oil our joints,
meld our hearts, coil, and
tuck in each other's sweat



Sara Ann's Philosophical Shortbread

Tanya Rucosky Noakes

Three parts butter—
rub with one part
powdered sugar
a pinch of salt
and enough flour
to make a dough.
Press into
greased pie pan.
From the center
draw out with dots
a deep spiral
of universe.
Bake 300
thirty minutes.
Cool and cut out
in 24ths,
each marked piece
left to wonder
where it fits into the All.

Forsaken

Je'free

There is a lower sound than silence,
like the absence that has grown taller
in the hallway;
as the old verbal daggers
that used to permeate through the walls
cautiously tiptoe barefoot in staccato steps
to exit the labyrinth of my brain

Then, like a scroll unfurled in heaven,
a prophesied loneliness
causes 50,000 teardrops to flow
with that stubborn lament
of the river to the sea

The earth-sky-bird patterns
that idly interlace,
the cascade of leaves earthwards,
the interweaving shadows
of trees against my face—
All leads me into the depths
of an empty universe
with nothing but crucified stars;
and still, no sign of you

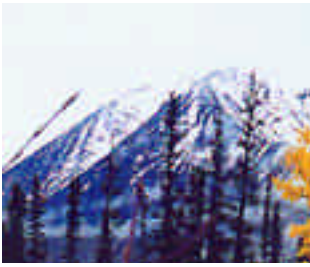
The Truth Touches
Everyone, art by
Cheryl Townsend

Territory

Eric Obame

Two women, a lesbian couple, walk a German shepherd—fully grown
They allow him to lead the way
My neighbor and I walk to his house
We greet the women
The dog lifts up and rests its front paws on my chest
No, Dog, I'm the Alpha male





Untitled

Mike Vernoia



Torn and tattered clouds,
A white mountain's lofty peak.
The wind's shadowed moods

Ash Land

Joshua Copeland

Exclamation points shout and arrow to
it, the short hand is dialed to a blunt, unsympathetic six,
and these birds outside, they sing,
their harmony dyslexic...

The eyes have gutted my sleep, there has been no rest
after a sudsy, animals-frolicking-beyond-the-gates day. My anger
is not described and defined properly
in today's dictionaries; my irate slashes are not bound
by present definitions. The lexicon would flame up
into a pyre of tiny, unimportant minutiae—in the world

I dream of, I'm tip-toed on the top of
the Empire State Building, my wine glass is held up against the sky
and the blue seeps through it and the sun tinges its outline.

I am not the person I once was. Just as the ape was precursor
to man, I am ancestor to something black
and wordless, something that lashes with a

scorpion's tail and whose soul is a fireplace
at full blast. Someone is going to be diced:
blood, flesh, soul—limp
on the chopping block. Blood. I am weary, my bones
creak like a haunted house
assaulted by a storm. A caveat: Do not kill the life
out of me because I am host to the
rabid and you will face fire when you die as I do now.

Antinomianists



art by Eric
Bonholtzer

Julie Kovacs

Riding the high horse giving lip service
deluding themselves into believing they are saved
picking and choosing what suits their creed
thumping so hard on the black leather book
their fists are bloody and bruised
to match the wounds of the Lord
dying on the cross.

Thinking they are saving souls
while they are alienating masses
educated enough to not fall for
pie in the sky the fundies
continue to be
insolent towards those who live the Golden Rule
and berating those who do not believe as they do
when countered with the truth
they run away, cowards replete with hypocrisy
my salvation is in avoiding them like the black plague.

Deadlines

Nick Demske

I met a deadline and missed it entirely
As if time were an EKG, linear
But for the following deadline blip.
My emaciated message fits in between the two
And reads like Auschwitz roll call.
The rows of epitaphs all point the same direction
Towards schools of children
Too young to read, single file and cutting
To be first. Sorry I'm late, my razorblade
Was busy caressing coke on a mirror
Or watching the lively blue of deflated veins fade.
The creases in my cheeks darken, as if to beg
God for a pointless extension.

POEM #8 FROM THE CINDER BLOCK AGE OF WESTERN CIVILIZATION

Kenneth DiMaggio

Twisted rusted spine scraping against
shingle rotting box

even though
your muse was Death
Rock that would forever
tattoo you as loser your leather
studded story
would always taste
sentimental and lonely
like a 1950s juke box song
“Up on the Roof”

Which for you
was a fire escape outside
of your bedroom where
the fist-size holes
in your walls were covered
by posters of machine gunning-
Pacino in Scarface

--your body slammed broken bed
was held up by milk crates
cinder blocks and stolen library books

And when you sneaked out
to a fenced off metal plate
to smoke that weak but cheap
Mexican pot



Hi-Rise, art by Edward
Micahel O'durr
Supranowicz

you knew
that there was always going
to be a rip or crack
in this world
that could only be
temporarily understood
with a sarcastic riddle
or a cynical slice
of baloney

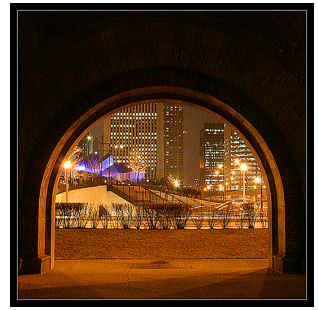
you knew
that because of your vandalism
not just with a switchblade
but with language
that you could begin
to make your own ballad

that you could separate
from the factory brick
and the Orthodox crucified
church tops
by escaping temporarily
to a gnarled
and rusting
stairway
that became your first
steps
to an outlaw universe



Solar Silverware, art by
Mike Hovancsek

Archways,
art by
Nick
Brazinsky



MAKING A START

Roger N. Taber

Up to the ears in debt,
a broken romance,
redundancy notice on
the table obscuring
newspaper headlines
about war, famine, floods,
earthquakes...probably
down to climate change
but no ozone hole
to blame for street crime,
racism, homophobia,
beggars in shop doorways,
children running riot
in supermarkets because
parents afraid to say
no, stop, don't, mustn't,
or you'll grow up with
precious few social skills
and even less hope
of getting parole halfway
into a life sentence

Must start to get real, nurture
for a better world

The Return of Charo Luivette Resto

In November 2001,
Time magazine announced
the return of Charo.

She rediscovered her
cha-chas, coleta, and coochie-coochies.
Her skimpy, sequined dresses,
bright orange like my great-Aunt Tata's living room in 1973,
were taken out of retirement.

Charo had all a Latin entertainer needed:
big dyed hair, long legs, and pouty lips.
We had seen all of this before
when Iris Chacón scandalized our TV sets
with the first televised thong.

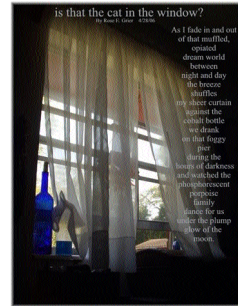
Iris' childbearing hips and large mole
above her lip,
hypnotized Telemundo audiences.

She danced for two minutes
between skits for a variety show
with a feather tail and six male dancers in spandex.

Every little girl watched in amazement
as they purposefully rode their underwear
up their brown asses.

Today those little girls are mothers
with little girls listening to their own
sazón flavored music.
Admiring a new set of recycled Latinas
crossing over the musical border
with billion dollar asses,
covering dark roots with their new blond hair.

They all flaunted their sex and race,
defiantly mixing the two like
Bacardi and cocaine.
As we OD,
wishing Charo and her cha-chas good luck.



Is That A Cat In
The Window?,
by Rose E.
Grier

Packing. For the End of the World.

Christopher Douglass

Pack. Pack. Pack. Pack.

Pack thoughts into the corners of the mind like sardines.

Stay cool.

Pack. Pack. Pack. Pack.

Pack memories of birthdays, Halloweens, first kisses, long nights,
hard times, good times, in between times,
the first suck, fuck, nibble into the realms of the mind
never seen like babies crammed in wombs ready to burst from heaven.

Stay cool.

Breathe. The end is near.

Pack. Pack. Pack. Pack.

Pack the greatest emotions love, hate, anger
Remember them like the back of your hand.

Stay cool.

Breathe. The end is near.

Pack. Pack. Pack. Pack.

Pack the blessings of a lifetime.

Say goodbye to your worldly possessions.
And the vessel that is not you.

Walk to the sun. Fulfilled.

Stay cool.

Breathe. The end is near.



from State of Desire
State of Being, by
Stephen Mead

photographed by Brian
Hosey & Lauren Braden



Master of Manipulation

Lisa Frederiksen

The voice changes — soft, solicitous
The brows scrunch and the forehead creases,
Framing eyes that bore intensely into one's own, as if to
Telepath sincere concern as the body pushes forward
Every so slightly
And the hands compose themselves; one a
Repository for the chin, the other resting on the
Knee to exude concentration on par with
Rodin's, *The Thinker*.

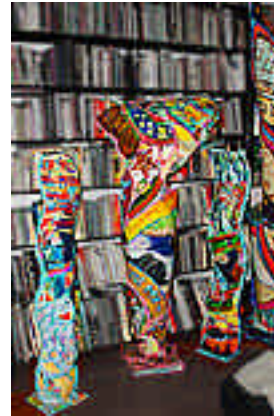
And then come the words - soothing - oozing
Concern as they wrap themselves in probing questions,
Gentle explanations and believable excuses
That cause her to drop her guard and
Rush to their embrace with
An open mind and trusting heart,
And believe the sincerity that pours from
Every pore, Unaware the alcoholic's
Truth is the Master of Manipulation,

Trained by the symptoms of his disease
To lie, to deny, to mince and parcel; to tell the
"Truth" by omission in order
To secure sanction for his unacceptable behaviors
No matter the cost to those he loves for
He, too, is Manipulated by the Master.

Taking down pictures

Ramesh Dohan

Moving out of my father's house
Taking the down the photos
Little holes in the wall
Like the footprints
Of an animal in the snow
That didn't get very far



art sculptures
by Nicole
Aimiee
Macaluso

prose
the meat and potatoes stuff

THE BLACK RIDER

Mel Waldman

I

It was a lawless country. Every year there were more thieving and killings. The sheriff tried to control things but townsmen just didn't cooperate. At night the men and women didn't keep to their own houses. So there was trouble-plenty of trouble.

Now there were good folks. And they wanted to get rid of the bad folks. Problem was-some of the good folks turned bad and some of the bad folks turned good. And no one knew who was who.

The sheriff slept light and kept his eyes wide open. He wore a mean look on his face. When folks asked him what was wrong, he said: "Townsmen ain't doin' right. An' them hired killers are getting' in my way. An' the Black Rider still rides tonight. Jest set right still, folks. Gonna find him tomorrow. Jest wait an' see."

II

Three miles above Custer City, on the banks of French creek, a notice was posted up against a big pine tree. It read: *\$500 Reward: For the apprehension of a young notorious outlaw known as Deadwood Dick or The Black Rider. He was last seen in the area of the Black Hills. For further information, contact Sheriff Roy Slaughter at metropolitan Saloon, Deadwood City.*

The notice was a large placard tacked up in plain view of passers-by. It was seen by everyone who took the route north through Custer gulch in order to reach the infant city of the Northwest-Deadwood.

One day a horseman rode by and noticed the placard. He guided his horse out of the stage road. Then he rode over to the foot of the tree where the notice was posted. He read the notice a few times. A long, wide grin stretched across his dark face.

Somewhere between 16 and 20, the young man was tall and muscular. His chest was broad and deep and he had square, iron-cast shoulders. His limbs were long and like bars of steel. The boy was strikingly attractive and possessed a captivating beauty. But he looked strangely different. Part of his beauty was destroyed by his unusual garments. Clothed in a tight-fitting habit of buckskin, the color of jetty black, he looked like an oddity in the wild Far West.

A thick black mask covered the upper portion of his bronze face. Momentarily, the boy tilted his broad black hat down over his eyes as the ferocious heat assaulted him. His large hands, hidden in a pair of kid gloves, wiped the sweat from his face. Beneath his majestic form was a thoroughbred steed as black as coal.

In a little while, the nameless horseman rode off. In the years ahead, he would carry many names and identities. All of them smelled trouble. And hunters seeking his flesh.

III

In the beginning, Bob Hawkes was a brave, loyal scout, a peace officer and soldier. His record as an Indian scout was impressive. More than any other man, he was responsible for the capture of Geronimo. After Joe Scales, the famous Indian scout, had been shot up by the Apache Kid, Hawkes trailed the old Medicine Man for hundreds of miles.

Over six feet tall, straight as an arrow shaft and without an ounce of fat on his frame, Hawkes was a strong and fearless man.

Young Hawkes was a wanderer. In his teens he ran away. Later on, he worked for the Overland Mail. He drove a team, herded mules, and worked on big ranches in Arizona. Overcome by wanderlust, he took off for California. There he met Joe Scales. Scales took him back to Arizona as a Mexican interpreter.

For a while, Hawkes lived with the Apaches. When Geronimo left the reservation, Hawkes and Scales went back into the scouts. Hawkes was the intermediary for the army in the Indian peace talks.

Hawkes also served as a Pinkerton operative. He tracked down and arrested train robbers. He made the spectacular arrest of Harvey McCoy, a notorious outlaw. Then he walked into the Pinkerton office in Denver and resigned. Hawkes said: "You have a fine organization but I ain't got the stomach for it no more."

And then Hawkes changed. He soiled his record as a law officer, Indian scout, and honest cowhand by turning hired killer.

Hawkes next appeared in the Hole In The Wall as an exterminator of rustlers. Eventually, he'd enter Brown's Hole looking for rustlers and the infamous Black Rider. By killing The Black Rider, he'd become the most famous man in the wild west.

IV

John Love was born a slave on a hill in Arkansas. After the Civil War began, his master took him and several other slaves and moved farther south. For a short while, Love served a group of Confederate officers as orderly, cook, nurse, and scout. Love stole fruit, chicken, or other food that could be used in the officers' mess. He worked hard and was well liked. Then one day he vanished. Some claim he was seen riding a thoroughbred steed as black as coal.

V

Love drifted down through Texas and into Mexico. According to some folks, Love became a clown performing with a rodeo in Mexico. There he met a Mexican lad named Jesus Torres. The two young men became partners in stealing horses south of the border. They swam the horses across the Rio Grande and sold them to Texas cattlemen. Eventually, they moved north and west, making their way into the northwest corner of Colorado, where the borders of Wyoming, Utah, and Colorado met near the secluded valley of Brown's Hole.

Now, other folks claim that Love and Torres only became partners for a short time. Then they separated and Love headed toward Deadwood City. So the rumors went.

VI

In the spring of 1875, rumors spread that Deadwood Dick, a.k.a. The Black Rider, had been seen passing through the Hole In The Wall. In the summer of 1875, John Love joined the Tip Gault gang of Brown's Hole. The wild bunch stole horses for fun.

One day the gang spotted a big herd of horses being driven toward Wyoming cattle country. For several days they scouted the herd. They decided to stampede and scatter it. According to their plan, they could steal some of the horses without risking a head-on fight with the owner and crew.

Two days later, one of the horses spooked and ran out of the herd. The gang roped it and prepared to use it. They planned to tie sagebrush to its tail and drive the frightened animal back toward the herd. Maybe the frantic horse would start a stampede. While Jack Bean held a tight rein on the horse's head, Charlie Lowe brought up the sagebrush. But just as Lowe was tying the sagebrush to its tail, the horse kicked out with both feet and knocked Lowe to the ground. Lowe lay there unconscious. His jaw was broken and his chest crushed.

Two of the gang took the injured man back to their hidden camp. The other two chased the horse over the hill and into the moving herd. When the animals stampeded and scattered, the two thieves rounded up many of them. Foolishly, they included in their roundup some of the horses of a local rancher.

When the four thieves were reunited, Love learned that Lowe had been unable to make it back to camp. About a half mile away, he had been left under some trees. Love agreed to act as a nurse since he had experience tending wounded men during the Civil War. He left the camp to watch over the dying Lowe. While Gault and his men searched the countryside for the rest of the scattered horses, Love stayed with Lowe for a day and a night. And the following day Lowe died. In the meantime, an angry local rancher was tracking his missing horses.

Love walked back to camp, got a spade and returned to dig a grave. He dug until the darkness came. Resting, he looked at the dead man and the grave.

In the distance, Love's three friends rode back to camp. They turned out their horses and began to make supper.

Suddenly, the shots pierced the darkness. Love jumped into the new grave he

had dug. Unarmed, he spent the long night crouched in the grave.

From time to time, he heard the sound of horses. He thought the killers were coming for him. Inside the grave, he waited.

The next morning, he buried Lowe and returned to the campsite. Tip Gault and his gang were dead. They had ridden into an ambush prepared by the local rancher. Love took everything that was left in the camp and hurried off.

Love wandered around the West. Although he was seen heading back to Brown's Hole, some folks saw him over in the Black Hills. Well, maybe they saw Deadwood Dick or The Black Rider. Maybe

VII

Bob Hawkes showed up in the Hole in The Wall. He bragged he was an exterminator of rustlers and for sure, he was the best hired killer in these parts. He liked being seen in the company of the cattle barons. He enjoyed their fine cigars, imported wines, and whiskeys. The barons slapped him on the back and listened carefully to his tales of adventure.

Hawkes swaggered down the streets of Cheyenne. Intoxicated with power and his blood-money jingling in his pocket, he pushed his way into a saloon. He watched men cringe before his killing eyes. All men cringed before him, he thought.

Yes, Hawkes was a skilled butcher and proud of his assassinations. He'd wait patiently for hours in a driving rain or drizzle. And he'd chew on raw bacon while waiting for the perfect shot. With the solitary crack of a rifle shot, he'd kill each victim. No evidence was left behind except a small rock under the victim's head. The rock was his trademark-reminder to all that Hawkes was the greatest killer in the Wild West. But to insure his fame, he would kill The Black Rider. So he headed for Brown's Hole for the big showdown.

VIII

It was a lawless country. And the sheriff worked hard to make Deadwood City a decent place. He cleaned up the town. And Sheriff Roy Slaughter became known as the toughest sheriff in the West. Yet he was sad and bitter. At night, he'd mutter: "An' them hired killers are getting' in my way. An' The Black Rider still rides tonight. Jest set right still, folks. Gonna find him tomorrow. Jest wait an' see."

But the truth was, Sheriff Slaughter never found Deadwood Dick. And in the past few years, The Black Rider had vanished. No one had seen him. And no one had the nerve to bring him in. Until Bob Hawkes told the folks in the Hole in The Wall that he was gonna get The Black Rider. And the news spread throughout the land. Hawkes was heading for Brown's Hole. Well, so was Sheriff Roy Slaughter.

IX

Hawkes rode down into Brown's Hole looking for rustlers and The Black Rider. Ben Lee and John Love were friends. They had built large ranches in

Brown's Hole and were considered fine citizens. Their past of cattle stealing was long buried. Except, Hawkes didn't forget. And three days after he arrived in Brown's Hole, he rode to Lee's ranch. Hawkes crept up to Lee's door and shot him as he ate breakfast.

Now, it was time to kill The Black Rider. Hawkes had a chance to kill two birds with one stone. A few years earlier, he had figured out that John Love and The Black Rider were one and the same man. With the perfect shot, he'd get two men and fame and glory.

X

It was a driving rain. Outside, he waited for Love to come out of the cabin. Lee's funeral was today and Love was going to pay his respects. Word was out that Hawkes was gonna kill Love. But Love was no coward. And he wasn't going to leave his ranch and friends.

Hawkes chewed on raw bacon in the rain. In a little while, Love came out of his cabin. Alone, he walked slowly. Just one perfect shot and Hawkes would be the most famous man in the West. The rain was still heavy as he aimed and fired.

There was an explosion. Hidden in the rain, the roaring shot rushed forth. The man fell to the ground. The other walked over to the body. He looked down at the man. No sign of life. When he moved the still body, he knew that the man was dead. Bob Hawkes was dead.

XI

Slaughter cried out: "Hawkes is dead, Love! So don't shoot. Or I'll killya too!" Slaughter approached Love. Then the two men returned to Love's cabin.

"If Hawkes was right, I been lookin' fer you. Fer years an' years."

"You takin' me in?"

"Ain't got no real proof. Jest a lot aguessin'. Why d'you reckon he thought you was The Black Rider?"

"Don't know."

"Maybe he was right."

"Maybe."

The two men looked at each other. "If I letya go, The Black Rider never rides agin," said Slaughter.

"The Black Rider has retired."

"An' Deadwood Dick?"

"Gone."

Sheriff Roy Slaughter returned to Deadwood City alone. And The Black Rider never rode again.

Job Opening

Adrian Ludens

Breakfast this morning had consisted of a Coke and a smile.

As Alex gulped down the contents of the can, he blinked away the tears that began to form in protest of the influx of effervescence. Alex's throat burned and he coughed, attempting to clear it.

The smile came as Alex adjusted his Jerry Garcia tie - a treasure found at the Goodwill for only two dollars - in the bathroom mirror. Alex bared his teeth like a cornered animal, and almost sneered.

"Today's the day, I can feel it!" he told the pale, slightly malnourished looking young man in the mirror. "Today will be different than any other day."

Alex took the creaky apartment stairs two at a time on his way down. Mrs. O'Riordan called to him as he bounded out onto the sidewalk, but he pretended not to hear. She was after her overdue rent, Alex knew, and he could not give what he did not have.

The Escort's door squealed in protest as Alex yanked it open and slid behind the wheel. He referred to his hand written directions, scrawled on the back of a gas station receipt, and then pulled out onto the street.

At the first intersection, Alex checked his teeth in the rearview mirror. It was a useless action, since Alex hadn't actually eaten yet that day - or the previous day for that matter. But he wanted to be sure of his appearance.

Today, Alex had a job interview with MidCorp Manufacturing.

Alex hoped that today was the day that things would finally change for the better.

* * *

On the crosstown drive however, reality began to force its way back in. The dashboard radio refused to work. Then a big Suburban cut him off and when Alex tapped his horn lightly the driver rolled down his window and flipped him the bird. Alex thought it looked like the guy even flexed when he did it.

"Hey, you're right buddy! Might does, in fact, make right." Alex said aloud, seething. He tried to sound sarcastic, but who was he kidding? That was how the world usually operated, after all.

Even the clouds did their part to dampen Alex's mood. His journey had begun in sunlight, but as he made his way across the city toward the lakeside industrial parks, clouds arose to blot out the sun. By the time he eased his Escort into an open spot in the MidCorp parking lot, the fog was rolling in off the lake in full force.

"It's as thick as dryer lint," he observed.

The fog reminded him of something else, something oppressive, but he couldn't quite put the feeling into words. Instead, he shuffled into the comparative comfort of MidCorp Manufacturing's fluorescent blue interior.

The woman behind the reception desk gazed at Alex disapprovingly over her old fashioned horn-rimmed glasses as he approached.

"Hello, I'm Alex Springfield. I have a ten o'clock interview with Mr. Neff."

“Just have a seat over there.”

Her response was so curt that he was surprised into sitting. He watched as she pressed the intercom and spoke tersely into the black box.

“Mr. Neff, there’s an Alex Wingfield here to see you.”

Alex didn’t bother correcting her. Instead, he rose and strode to the office door that was now opening.

He reached out to shake hands and tried his best to smile. Alex realized he probably looked like the same sneering scared animal that he’d seen in the mirror this morning.

“But I’m trying dammit,” he thought, “I’m trying.”

* * *

He knew five minutes into the interview that Neff had already made up his mind against him and was just going through the motions. Alex kept up his end of the charade, answering all the man’s questions, but his heart wasn’t in it anymore. He felt like Charlie Brown talking to his teacher.

“Wah wauh wuh wa mwah wuh?”

“My experience? Yes sir. I have a degree in marketing.”

Alex’s mind began to wander as he sat there. Gazing over Neff’s shoulder out the window, Alex became transfixed by the fog.

“It looks like a death shroud,” he realized. Suddenly, he felt claustrophobic and wanted to be gone. Neff was droning on about MidCorp’s history.

“We both know I won’t get the position!” Alex wanted to blurt. Instead, he sighed and slumped back in his chair, resigned to what happened next.

“Of course, we’ll keep your application on file,” Neff was saying. There was more but Alex tuned him out. His eyes were drawn to the window again.

“What a waste of time this turned out to be,” he thought.

Alex realized that Neff was standing. He rose as well and the men shook hands. Alex left the office feeling disconsolate and frustrated.

“Do not pass go, do not collect two hundred dollars.” Alex thought cynically. “Instead go directly to-”

A tall figure loomed in the fog like a freighter and Alex narrowly avoided colliding with the man as they passed each other on the sidewalk outside the front entrance.

In that brief moment, Alex was struck by the unhappy, faraway look in the other man’s eyes.

“Don’t know what your problem is pal.” Alex thought accusingly. “At least you’ve got a job and a future.”

He was reaching for his car keys when the shooting started.

Alex counted nine harsh pops from inside the building, coming in sporadic but quick succession. Alex imagined the shooter standing in the center of the office, choosing his targets at random. Move and you’re dead. Don’t move, and you’re dead too.

The gunfire ceased and Alex stood frozen, keys dangling idly between his thumb and index finger. There was one more pop, and Alex knew the shooting

was over for good.

The silence spooled out for fifteen seconds, then the air became a jumble of shrieks and shouts. Someone pulled the fire alarm; its shrill clang seemed muffled somehow by the fog. Alex barely heard the Escort's door squeal as he pulled it open.

Alex slid behind the wheel and watched as MidCorp employees streamed from the building. Some were sobbing, others shouting frantically into their cell phones. He pulled the car door closed and turned the key in the ignition. Alex paused, his fingers tapping the top of the grimy steering wheel. He closed his eyes and tried to think. Then he smiled. Alex decided he would call back in a week, showing MidCorp that he was still very interested in a position.

Alex felt optimistic. He was sure they would have some new openings.

How to get to Sesame Street

Joshua Copeland

But: What happened to Pluto? That was the big question. He couldn't have been kidnapped; that happened to children, not to teens. And he managed his drug intake well, so an overdose wasn't even a slight consideration. Some people said he ran away, but Travis knew that Pluto liked this lazy, dusty, dirt road town, where the highest building—Highland Plaza—was three stories tall. Pluto left nothing, no clues in his wake, just question marks.

The speakers leaked out a sad sack Waylon Jennings tune and Travis felt himself floating away toward endless horizons, totally above anyone or anything in the room. He hovered at eye level with the ceiling lights, a holocaust of dead moths heaped about the bulbs. A black, viscous lava oozed out the speakers (All this thanks to Lexus Kane's mushrooms) and as if to say everything would be OK—which was as far from the truth as one could get—a rainbow arched gaily, high above the living room, where furniture was moved aside for dancing space into which a jostle of bodies mingled, twisted, and touched.

And then there was Jerry, standing right in front of Travis, squared off to him. "You better get it in gear, Trav!" Jerry yelled over the music. "Finals will be here before you know it! Soon it'll be too late!" Jerry's face seemed two inches from Travis's; beer breath, Travis realized. Jerry's red hair was turning into embers and melting down his cheeks. Flaming drops of it landed on his black T-Shirt. "There's nothing worse than regret, Trav! It's the worst!" Travis felt the light drizzle of Jerry's spit on that one; he was thankful he could barely hear him. He glanced at the muted TV directly under the rainbow's shadow. A Seventies

Glenn Campbell video was on. Glenn—as always—was dressed like he was going to church, sterling and somber. Paisley shapes swam and spiraled the breadth of his shirt like two dimensional fish. Travis tried to pull himself back to Jerry.

“I can’t hear you!” Travis yelled, his eyes darting back and forth from Jerry to the TV. “Let’s go into the kitchen!” The kitchen would be a sanctuary from the two-ness of that living room: Those guys would not be going home alone; they would have arms to collapse into. Jerry escorted Travis into the kitchen, and Travis’s ears reached air.

Jerry continued: “Did you hear anything I said? What I was saying was, you got to hustle, man. You’re going to end up going to a third rate school—fucking Lewis and Clark Community College—with your GPA unless you ace the finals, which, as we both know, is highly unlikely. Trav, I am *not* trying to lecture you. Not at all. I’m trying to drill into that skull of yours that there is nothing worse than regret.”

Travis—as if he was deflating—sighed and looked down at the clean white kitchen tiles (Which reminded him of his poem, *My Life is of the Floor*). “Nobody appreciates me or what my brain can do,” he said. “Read my poems, dude. And you’ve seen my paintings. Yeah, keep coming at me...I will devour your planet whole, and pluck from my teeth the bones of your dead. Ha.”

“You see? There you go again,” Jerry said, smiling politely. “You want to end up in Mayview? Keep talking like that and you’ll remain chicless and uneducated for the rest of your life.”

Life...“But wait,” Travis said, his eyebrows raised and pleading, “Whatever happened to Pluto? He’s gone and nobody cares. He was all ready to kick ass as a filmmaker.”

Jerry frowned. “Get that loser out of your head. He was a little delinquent nothing. Let’s be honest. You were the only one who thought he had any talent. We all saw his videos. They were pretentious and dull and craptastic. He ran away, and believe you me, that’s no loss.”

“But it doesn’t make sense. He liked it here. He didn’t have the balls to run away.”

“He was a druggie, dude. Of course he did. He’s probably passed out now in some Pittsburgh alley, choking on his own vomit as we speak. But don’t think about the dead. Think about the living. Think about yourself. Your parents teach at Pitt. You got a free education there, a free ride. Don’t blow it. Please.”

Rachel Sizeman walked in, her lady cowboy boots clopping on the tile. Travis winced as he noticed that the bright white light of the kitchen emphasized her curvy dyed blonde hair and its dark roots. She opened the refrigerator, then looked at Jerry.

“I don’t want Coors, Jerry. Do you know what Morris Ogul called my ass? He called it “ovular.” You’ve got to have *some* Lite beer around.”

“Right behind the Coors there’s Miller Lite,” Jerry said.

“Oh, I see it. Cool.” She grabbed it, shut the fridge, and walked out.

Travis remembered the days before the monolith of college started to loom for all of them, before he got his nose pierced, before he got his arm veins tat-

toed sky blue. He realized now those were angry actions, the rage and protests of being called, implicitly, an academic degenerate. By doing those things he had given up the magic of fading into the Butler teen crowd, the magic of not being spot lit, of not standing out. Now he had his own personal thunderhead raining on him where ever he went. He saw too late he wanted to be a thread in a cloth, a cloth in a quilt. Before all the tattoos he was part of things, at least more so than he was now. But then he had slowly divided himself from society. He had been branded “Void” and he had no one but himself to blame. The weight of it all hit him. Suddenly he felt heavy and tired.

“I got to go, man,” he said. “I’m not doing anyone any good staying here.”

Jerry stood back a bit facially. “I didn’t mean to ruin a decent mood.”

“Jerry, you didn’t ruin anything.”

Jerry put his hand on Travis’s shoulder. “Are you OK to drive?”

The room reeled. “Yeah.” Travis stumbled through the dancing and out the front door. He clambered into his parents’ Camry and pondered a bit. “Back to Butler,” he said to no one. “Back to my upright-speck-of-flesh existence.” Then he started the car, pulled out, and drove off into the night.

Jerry lived on the outskirts of Butler. Travis knew the land around Jerry’s pretty well, but he quickly got himself lost. No landmarks looked right. He couldn’t even find Pilfer Square or the City County Building. He was making lefts, rights, U Turns, all helplessly. So soon his route digressed. The yellow lined paved road under him turned into a dirt road. Then he made a blind left and ended up on a gravel road, a cacophony of pebbles exploding on the underside of his car as he leaned into the wheel to get any sense as to where he was or where he was going. Anxiety soon grabbed hold of him, and he took notice of the velvety darkness that blanketed the area. He saw nothing to the sides; he felt like he was the only one in a stadium, with huge, yawning spaces stretched out before him, spaces receding into the moonless night. Better pull over, he thought, wait till morning, and drive again.

He pulled over, parked, and froze: Yes, that was Butler, to his right, sitting miles away, the city lights mere embers embedded in black, sparkling and twinkling. He was farther away from Butler now than he was when he had left Jerry’s. He sighed, shut off the car, and looked up: The stars were spread across the sky brightly, as if neon could be splashed and scattered. He leaned back in his chair, all boozed up, and fell asleep fast.

Distant carnival music woke him. He weakly opened his eyes and saw the night sky flickering a slight pink. Far away, where Butler should be, a monstrously huge Ferris wheel turned. It was lit up like a Christmas tree: Amber, green, and red scintillated on its girders and hub. The wheel stretched up to the clouds, illuminating them and hiding the top cars. Travis rubbed his eyes. Mushroom trips, however visual, were too greasy and foggy to be mistaken for reality; but this here was no ‘shroom trip: too many details. A ruby-red circus tent was stationed across whole city blocks. A skyscraper-sized roller coaster broke the night air with heavy wooden thunder and high pitched screams (Like with the wheel, the

clouds hid the crests of its structure). Three orange spot lights were active, their beams distinct and swerving as they traced arcs and ovals on the clouds. Even through all the distance, Travis heard muffled laughter and smelled cotton candy. “Ah ah,” he said. “No way.” He closed his hands over his ears, shut his eyes as tight as a pinch, and fell back asleep.

...The orange of bright sunlight went through closed eyes. The sour, limp swirls and spirals of a hangover. The cramping of limbs stuck in one position for hours. Travis woke and opened his eyes. The dashboard clock displayed a cruel 7:34 a.m. He wiped the sleep from his eyes and squinted out the window and saw he had unknowingly parked on a cliff. Woods and rocky terrain surrounded him to his left, the open air and distant city of Butler on his right. The tiny buildings and houses were black, silhouetted by the burgeoning light of sunrise. No Ferris wheel, no circus tent, no roller coaster, no cotton candied fragrance. He yawned and rubbed his temples, feeling the quake of a massive headache coming on. He started the car and began the drive back to Butler feeling groggy and empty, a lone typed minus sign on a blank sheet of paper.

His brain scolded him. How many times have I told you: Don’t mix your drugs. So why did he do it? He called himself an idiot out loud. That Coors and Lexus’s mushrooms had coalesced in his head into a merry go round of inebriation. He wondered if the mushrooms Lexus sold him were spiked with anything; Lexus was known to douse his pot with PCP. He’d have to ask Lexus on Monday. All he could think about right now was sinking into his bed. Travis remembered overhearing his father complain to his mother that Travis was “self destructive.”

Now that he could see, it took him about half an hour to get back onto I-38. Maybe twenty minutes after that he pulled into his driveway. He opened the door to his house (No one kept their doors locked in Butler), urinated, undressed, and collapsed back to sleep in his own comfortable bed, the tinkle and hum of the carnival music still in his head. (Seeing lit up architecture where none existed; surely he was Mayview bound).

He dreamt he was in Lexus’s living room. Lexus was wearing a black robe and was lecturing Travis on why snorting powdered Clorox would be beneficial to Travis’s health. Lexus exhaled a green smoke as he spoke, and Travis watched it coil and spin up to the ceiling, where it collected as a green smog. Lexus’s teeth were chiseled into tiny, sharp triangles.

“It’ll burn my nose,” Travis complained.

Lexus’s doorbell chimed.

“Get the door, Lex. Leave me alone.”

“Does it look like there’s a door in this house? Travis, that’s your door, not mine.”

And so he was right. Travis slowly woke up to someone ringing his doorbell with impolite persistence. Still hazy, he waited for his parents to get it until he remembered they were both at school; both kept Saturday office hours. He heaved himself out of bed, stepped into his navy blue jogging pants, threw on a Pitt T-Shirt, and stumbled downstairs. “Just a minute!” He came to the door, made a half hearted effort at pushing his bushy hair into place, and swung it open.

A white haired fat man in an apron stood there. A half-circled grin creased his face. “Hello there. No intros needed. You are Travis Milton. Looks like I just woke ya.”

“Well, yeah, you kinda did.”

“It’s past two. No offense, my friend, but it’s time to get up anyway.”

“Waking times are relative. But no, um, that’s OK. How do you know who I am?”

“You’re too young to remember me, kid. Mr. Hooper would be the name. Scouting for genius, my game.” He giggled. “Sorry, I’m not much good with rhymes.”

Travis stared. Smudges of brown, red and yellow (mustard?) stained Mr. Hooper’s apron—echoes of mishandled food. The apron itself cloaked an unhealthily large gut. Under the apron Mr. Hooper wore a buttoned down shirt, vertically striped pink and white. Below that, faded jeans and dull brown loafers.

Mr. Hooper...Where had he heard the name? Travis delved into himself, searching.

“I got two words for ya, kid: *Sesame Street*.” The old man looked like he expected a hug.

“Mr. Hooper, Mr. Hooper...Oh. OK. Uncle Ritche mentioned you once. Aren’t you supposed to be dead? In the Seventies you owned a store or something on the show, and then—in real life—you died of a heart attack.”

“Well, kind of.”

“Rich said they even did an episode on your death, to help kids deal with dying and shit like that.” Travis shook his head. This was *Twilight Zone* material. “Did you just escape from Mayview?”

The old man chuckled and said, “You are the author of the poem—a ten pager, I might add—titled *Sadomasochists Running through a Field of Daisies*. You painted a masterpiece called *Esoterica* which was an eye with different colored numbers all over it. A blue zero in the right hand corner and a pink nine by the pupil, if my homework’s on the mark.

Homework? “Hey, I never showed those to anyone.”

“My hired eyes have been watchin’ ya. Doing a little sneakin’ ‘n peeking. No need to look alarmed, son. I’m here to take you away, to take you away from all the loneliness and alienation.” Mr. Hooper leaned closer. “Right now you’re trapped in a corner, with all these hicks clawing at you. The square peg and the round hole story. But your days of misery are over. I’ll take you to a place where you’ll blend like a tree in a forest, so to speak.” Mr. Hooper looked left and right. “But it’s dangerous to talk here.” He looked at his watch. “Your folks’ll be home soon. So cool it with the questions. For now. I’ll explain on the plane.”

“The plane?”

###

The clouds floated under and away. Mr. Hooper sat in the cockpit of the small plane, occasionally glancing at the myriad of dials and taking swigs off a hanging oxygen mask. Travis sat next to him. They were its only passengers. “Will you tell me now where we’re going?” he asked.

“I got a place to take you, the likes of which you’ve never seen before. Let’s just say, ‘Your talent is needed.’”

“Huh?”

“Just you wait.”

“And how can you fly yourself anyway? Don’t you have a pilot?”

“Risky venture, kid. Risky venture. Got to have as few people in on it as possible.” He elbowed Travis lightly.

“So wait...Why’d *Sesame Street* do a show on your death if you weren’t dead?”

Mr. Hooper laughed the laugh of an old man. “My death, ah yes. It was faked, as phony as you bud Jerry. The producers wanted me to work in the Cartoons Department. Workin’ for the ‘Tunes means you gotta disappear. So everyone—all the parents, all the kids—had to believe I kicked the bucket. We had a double in the coffin, if you know what I mean. Poor sap...” Mr. Hooper shook his head. “Like me down to the toe nails. OK, buckle up, we’re coming into New York.” The clean white clouds parted to reveal little blocks of buildings and a long strand of runway.

He went on. “Anyway, I was history as far as the public was concerned. My squad’ll do the same for you. It’s looking like we might pull a ‘suicide.’ You painted and wrote, painted and wrote, and still no one appreciated you or your outlook on life. You were surrounded by Garth Brooks look-alikes. You thought your high school was just an assembly line—which, by the way, it is; they all are—so we’ll either pull a ‘suicide’ or a ‘run away.’ We gotta make that decision. But that’s our problem. For now, just take your foot off the gas pedal, my friend, and hit Cruise. You’re going on the ride of your life.”

“Why?” Travis almost whispered. “What’s going to happen to me?”

“We’re touching down. You got your seatbelt on? Get in crash position. Put your head between your knees. I ain’t too good at this part.” Mr. Hooper slowly raised up the U-shaped gear shift. A loud crashing sounded from below. “Whoops. Wasn’t so bad. I done worse. You can pick your head up now.”

Mr. Hooper slowed down the plane and parked it. Then he looked out the window. “Transport ain’t here yet.” He removed his glasses and rubbed them on his shirt. “You see, *Sesame Street* alternates between three segments. There’s the ‘Real Life’ segments (That’s where you know me from), the ‘Puppetry’ segments (With the likes of Elmo, Grover, Cookie Monster, ole Oscar, etc.), and the Cartoon segments. Your job’ll be workin with the ‘Tunes. My boys have been watchin’ ya. You got talent, kid. It’s spillin’ out your ears.”

A limousine pulled up, black as a country night. “Wow!” Travis exclaimed. “A frigging limo. I can’t believe all this is a real operation.” They both stepped out of the plane and into the limo. It screeched off.

“Help yourself to the mini-bar, my boy.” Travis poured himself a shot of bourbon.

“Christ. I’ve never had an adult push alcohol on me before.”

Mr. Hooper laughed hard at that: “Just you wait, kid, just you wait...” Travis gulped it down and cleared his throat.

Mr. Hooper sighed and said, “Now I got something important to tell you, so I need you to listen, and listen carefully.” His smile was gone. “The dorm I’m tak-

ing you to is twenty-six blocks from where *Sesame Street* is taped. There's no cafeteria or nothing there. Just four vending machines. You guys never eat right anyways. So no going out to eat or ordering in pizza. You are not to leave the building under any circumstances. Not even during a fire. Food and toiletries get shipped in. No clocks, watches, newspapers, magazines, TV's, or radios. You'll have to create in a vacuum. All this you see now," Mr. Hooper opened his hands to the passing urban area and its crowds, "All the shops and cars and people we're passing, they won't exist once you're in there."

"That's more than fine with me," Travis said, butterflies fluttering in his stomach, "I never needed them anyway. But about not being able to go outside, I might get all cramped up. I'm like that."

"Trust me, you won't. It'll be like open fields in there." Mr. Hooper put a hand on Travis's shoulder and shook him lightly and in a friendly fashion. "You'll be replacing Eugene, who OD'd on morphine the other week. Now, my friend, his job is yours."

About twenty minutes later the limousine parked and they both stepped out. A headstone-gray dormitory stood before them, five stories high. The windowless husk of a building leaned slightly to the right and appeared to have the structural reliability of a house of cards. The front face of it was sooty and smoked over. It stood in the middle of a block of weeds and rubble. Mr. Hooper wrapped an arm around Travis's shoulder and said, "Say hello to your new casa. Just wait till you get inside. It's a bit spacey for only nine people, but a little elbow room never hurt no one."

Travis's eyebrows angled up and his eyes darted below and around. "I don't know..." he said, "...This whole place, this whole deal, seems kinda shady."

"What? You want to go back to your old life?"

###

Travis and Mr. Hooper walked down a dirty and rickety hallway that was vaguely shaped like a trapezoid. Travis stumbled a few times due to the darkness. The floor creaked under them. "This damn thing is too tilted," Mr. Hooper complained. "We got to get a new place. It's the Goddamn *Sesame Street* bureaucracy. You got to go through hell just to get anything done." He shook his head. "No matter, you'll like it here."

They arrived at the end of the hall, facing a door with a "Do Not Disturb" sign hanging off the knob. Voices sounded from behind it; Travis heard a distinctly female voice slur, "It means 'We came, we saw, we conquered.'"

Mr. Hooper opened the door to reveal—like curtains drawn back—a corporately sterile conference room with fluorescent lights, an oval mahogany table (glass ashtrays atop it), and bright orange carpet. A leathery brown wheelchair was folded up in a corner.

Eight young adults sat around the table; none could have been older than twenty-four. Mr. Hooper introduced Travis to each of them: #1: A skinhead with a bullet wound tattooed on his scalp—dark red blood mid-drip, white skull, and gray brain matter apparent. #2: A youngster—obviously still an adolescent with his thin and immature mustache—sporting three earrings in each ear, a chin

ring, a nose ring, and—visible with his shirt being off—two thick gold nipple rings. A joint was tucked behind his left ear. #3: A hippie who wore a stained extra long Grateful Dead T-Shirt. His hair shone in the bright light greasily. #4 An anemically skinny kid with an orange crew cut, who said he was a former prostitute in LA until he was “collected” after Mr. Hooper saw his spray painted facades. #5 A girl with a green Mohawk and red cloth around her neck, her face flat down on the table. She refused to stand up for Travis (everyone else had) and kept her head down, only mumbling, “What’s up.” #6 A big, burly ex con, his biceps almost cracking open the sleeves of his pink Izod, prison tattoos all over his arms. #7 A “dirt bag” looking kid wearing a black T-Shirt that read “Redemption Through Death” and showcased a smoking 9mm under the words. And, #8: A scrawny girl—maybe nineteen—with a red and green Plasmatics T-shirt and thickly scarred arms.

Travis was dazed. He greeted each coworker with a heavy handshake and a wide-eyed smile, feeling life-affirming blood run rapids through his veins.

Mr. Hooper patted Travis on the shoulder and said, “I’m sure you’ll treat him well, kids. Give him your best.” Then he walked out and Travis sat down in the one empty chair. Drawings with different colored magic markers on white sheets of paper were everywhere: A golden N with wings, a light red, tubular five, a green G with a mouth and a beard, a blue thirteen squared by multi-colored light bulbs. Travis noticed a stained white trickle imprinted on the table before him. It looked like South America. He grimaced at it.

“That was Eug’s puke,” the Male Hooker said. “We tried to get it clean for you.”

“Huh. I guess I can deal with it. No problem.”

“You got no choice. Deal with it,” the Green Mohawk Girl said drowsily, her face still on the table.

“Don’t mind her,” the Skinhead said. “She’s just hung over.”

A slouched and shaggy bald man walked in with a protruding gut, a jean jacket, and faded bell bottoms. He looked hung on a coat rack and bent low to the floor, as if gravity pulled strongest at his feet.

“It’s about time, man,” the Hippie said.

“So you’re the new fellow,” this slouched man said to Travis. He spoke with an impatient British dialect, his eyes half closed.

“Yeah,” Travis said.

“My name’s Sid Barret. Whatever drug or drugs you want for the day, I will get you, through my connections.”

“Bullshit!” Travis said. “We can name whatever drug, and you’ll bring it here?”

“What did I just say? And try to make the majority of your order hallucinogenics. Here we are concerned with *mind power*.”

“Order away,” the Skinhead said, smiling.

“OK, I’ll take two dime bags of...” After Travis was through ordering, Sid went on to the Pierced Nipple Teen, and Travis’s stomach squeezed itself in anticipatory spasms. “I cannot believe this is happening.”

“Believe it” said the Scarred Girl next to him. “But it won’t last forever.”

Travis perked up. “Why not?”

“It just won’t. And remember this: Whenever you fly too high and hit a bad trip, that’s what the Thorazine is for, the pills in the mug there at the center of the table.” She pointed to a white mug with “Mom” painted on it in ocean blue. It was brimming with white and green pills.

Travis awkwardly raised his hand to “hi” position. “Um, what’s your name again?” he asked.

“Spandella.”

“Right. How were you, uh, recruited?”

She grinned. “Mr. Hooper found me on an eating disorders unit in Detroit. See all these scars on both my arms? They’re words and pictures. I drew them with a corkscrew. These are what got his attention.” Travis peered. There were transversals of dead tissue everywhere: One swastika, two lightning bolts, a fish skeleton, and—hard to make out—“Leni Reifensahl Rules.” (“I used to be racist. But not no more.” She sighed. “I was young and I was stupid. Very stupid.”) Travis took a look at her as a whole. She was stick figure skinny, enough so that it seemed she would have to hold on to something every time the wind blew. And she looked punk. Black bangs hung off her obviously dyed red hair. Like Travis, she had a nose ring. Her red veined eyes didn’t coordinate well with her white, pale face, but she was still pretty. The Plasmatics T-Shirt was tight: Travis felt her breasts looked palmable.

“Those are pretty neat scars,” he said. “You’re talented. Do we get to meet any of the characters from *Sesame Street*? I wanna meet Elmo. And Bert.”

“Nope.” She shook her head jerkily. “We can have absolutely NO contact with anyone involved with the show. Nada, nein, zip. Except for Hooper and Sid. This operation is under the covers. There’d be an uproar from the parents if they ever found out. No one can know we exist. Don’t worry about getting to meet anybody. Be content that you’re here. At least you’re not a prop in someone’s background scenery anymore.”

“Yeah. Totally true. And good metaphor.”

Spandella went over the rules and etiquette. They work from five p.m. to two a.m. Lights out at six a.m. Since the whole building is windowless and clockless, they relied on Sid to tell them the time. No interrupting others in the conference room. No wandering the halls when high (a safety precaution). Anyone who either wandered out the building or left on purpose was “taken care of” by Mr. Hooper’s sub rosa goons. No diatribes or negative criticisms about a member’s music, painting, or writing. Anti-smoking comments were forbidden. And finally, no moral judgments about any member—living or dead—allowed.

Soon Sid lumbered back in with a shopping bag chock full of predominantly illegal pharmaceuticals. “Here’s another order for the day, kids.” He dumped the contents out and the artists lunged at the pile. They sifted through see-through orange medication bottles, stamp-sized squares of paper, small cans of paint, cans of wood finish, white bottles of Elmer’s Glue, eye droppers, syringes, glass jars filled with green powder, boxes of oven cleaner, vials filled with clear

liquid, vials filled with blue liquid, belts, pipes, water bong, crumpled tinfoil, and dime bags filled with either purple, white, or yellow.

The work day began. It took close to an hour, but soon the Quaaludes sunk in, and Travis felt comfortable enough to participate, his head swirling in eddies of calming mist. “Yeah,” he agreed with the Pierced Nipples Teen, “I think that’s a good idea. The F could start singing in opera format. Oh yeah, and in falsetto, too. Get it? ‘Falsetto’ starts with an F.” He sat back, pleased with his first contribution. Out of the corner of his eye he noticed Spandella staring at him.

The Hippie was slouched so low only his head was visible. “But we got to get that alliteration down,” he said. “Check this out: ‘Fee Fi Fo Fum.’”

“No way,” the Male Hooker slobbered, wiping drool from his mouth. “We can think of something better than that.” His eyes were thin slits, like his eyelids weighed a ton.

“Yeah, I guess that’s true,” the Hippie said.

The Green Mohawk Girl was now sitting up and looking chipper, playing a balancing game with her chair. What’s she doing with that red cloth around her neck, Travis wondered. Then he saw that was no cloth. It was a tattoo of a slit throat, a lip of unzipped flesh with bloody rivulets dripping off it.

She said, “The screen could keep changing colors, like from blue to white, back and forth, those two go together well. And the F, could, like, throb like a heart, it could dance around the top and bottom of the screen, and do summersaults and cartwheels and shit.”

“But about the singing,” the Ex Con interjected. “The F could form a mouth between its upper and lower ridge when it started to sing falsetto.” He lit up. “Then it could disintegrate into baby F’s.”

“That’s a good idea,” the Redemption Through Death Kid said, “so write that down. But we can do the visual aspects later. Let’s get back to that alliteration. It’s got to be something that’s going to stay with the kids.”

“I have one for S,” Spandella said. “Suffer silently while unsewn wounds sequester your soul.”

Travis threw his pipe to the table, his eyes aflame. “Did you just make that up? That’s really good. You just made that up right now?”

“Yep,” she replied with a self-satisfied smile.

“Stop showing off for the new guy,” the Skinhead said in irritation. “You know we can’t use that. This is five-to-two time.” He ran his hand over his scalp and tattoo. Travis thought it looked like someone spilled spaghetti on his head.

“Hey, all of you, chill for a second,” the Green Mohawk Girl said. “Look at Jay.”

The Male Hooker, asleep or dead, was slumped in his chair like there wasn’t a single bone in his body. Two dainty quarters of white shown where his pupils had once been. His cigarette smoldered in its glass ashtray, tendrils of smoke rising and dissolving into the air. “Jay!” the Hippie yelled. “Jay!” He walked over and shook him by the shoulders—almost knocking him over—and felt for his pulse on his wrist. “He’s history. Shot up way too much H. We’ll let Hooper know tomorrow.” He walked back to his chair and sat down. “Come on, guys. This isn’t

hard. Think. F.”

“His cigarette smoke as his soul, rising and coiling and billowing itself into heaven,” Spandella said, not unhappily.

At two a.m. Sid dragged himself in like someone had attached a ball and chain to his ankles to let the artists know their shift was over. They slowly stood up—with little stability—and stretched, working out the soreness that came with sitting for hours. “Does anyone need the wheelchair?” Sid asked the room. “No one needs the wheelchair?”

Travis stood up, withstood a head rush, saw stars, and looked at the table in front of him. “Holy shit. I did not smoke all that crack and finish all those ‘Ludes.”

“Yeah, it goes fast, doesn’t it?” the Skinhead said, seriously nodding his head. He walked over to Travis and held out his hand. “It’s going to be a pleasure working with ya, man.” They shook hands heartily.

“Hey,” Spandella said, taking Travis by the hand and leading him away, “Before you see your room, I want you to come to mine. I have a surprise.”

The Green Mohawk Girl rolled her eyes and said, “That was fast.”

The Ex Con smiled and fake-coughed the words, “Loose! She’s loose!”

The Hippie shook his head at him. “Don’t Bill. Sharon, you too. That counts as a moral judgment.”

In Spandella’s tiny room the bed was unmade, with Elmer Fudds chasing Bugs Bunnies all over the sheet. The walls were a lime green. Two posters were taped above the bed, one of Lenny Bruce and the other of Rainer Werner Fassbinder. A makeup kit with a mirror sat on top of a dilapidated brown dresser with the top drawer missing. A glass jar with three roaches nibbling on a chunk of chocolate bar rested against the wall by the door (“Helps me not eat so much,” Spandella offered.) A stereo was opposite the bed, looking vandalized with wires hanging out its left side.

“What happened to your stereo?”

“Oh, they just fiddled with it so it wouldn’t pick up any radio. It can still play CDs, though.”

“Cool room, cool room.”

“Thank you,” she said. For a second she delicately fondled his nose ring. He blushed. “And let me show you my surprise,” she said. She knelt down and reached under her bed and pulled out a dinky and rusted alarm clock, silver body with a white face. Its hands pointed to two o’ eight. “Now, how about that? How about them apples? It even glows green in the dark. As you’ll see. Sid smuggled it into me when I was having a bad day. I think someone spiked my crank. Probably Sharon, that whore.” She placed it on the dresser. “Now let me go brush my teeth, so my breath is clean.” Those last words made Travis anxious. He sat down on the bed as she went into her bathroom.

After a bit she sat back down next to him. Travis tensed. He could feel his heart working overtime, negative thoughts sucking up his confidence. She looked at his arms and smiled, tracing his tattooed veins with her pinkie finger.

He spouted off: “That was a good alliteration. Earlier I mean. You really look

like you're from the streets it's bad for me because my parents are so rich they're professors I'd put on this image of uh uh breast beating machismo but I was so pronounced about it kids knew it was all talk but you *you* are from the streets you know how I can tell you let it flow up out of you you don't billboard it you let it seep up out of you but I swagger so much I wouldn't last two seconds in prison people know I'm a joke it's not the—" She pulled him to her by his nose ring and kissed him, thick with punker chic passion...

###

The warmth of two bodies. Hers contoured to his. He felt this. They lay in bed under the covers, his arm wrapped around her tightly skinned stomach. The lights were out and the stereo was turned down to a low hum. A GG Alin CD was playing. Travis and Spandella spoke in whispers.

"You know, there's this Puddle Theory," he said. "Every man is trudging through the desert, thirsty for water. He stumbles across a damp spot in the sand. That's a one night stand with an ugly chic. Then there's an oasis; that's an average looking, loyal girlfriend. The ocean, there's so much of it, but it's all salty, so that's an extremely beautiful dick tease. This man is searching for that infinitely deep lake where he can live forever. You, Spandella, are that lake."

She laughed and murmured, "Sounds like you weren't friends with many girls at your high school." Her mouth was so close, he felt each syllable on his neck.

"No, I guess I wasn't."

She looked at the clock on the dresser "Oh shit," she moaned, "We got to be up in four hours."

"No problem. We'll just order a lot of uppers tomorrow. Today, I mean."

"Well, I have to say you're a much better screw than Arthur."

"Which one is he again?"

"The numbskull with the tattoo on his head."

"Oh yeah. I like him. He's cool."

She fondled his hair in the darkness. He felt her long obsidian-black fingernails brush across his forehead. That he could touch and be touched, that there was that assurance of reciprocity...Now he was one of the many.

"You understand we're on borrowed time," she said. "You, me, Arthur, all of us. I almost got a stroke last week off the Crystal Meth, I think."

"You think?"

"Yeah. My eyes went up into my head and I had a seizure."

Travis stared at the clock. "But you know what? That doesn't bother me. My death, I mean. My whole life was a hoard of minus signs. They kept subtracting, like, every year. I was at negative eighteen when I met you. But right now, at this moment, let's say a positive one hundred just got added to my life. That's what? Negative eighteen plus a hundred equals...eighty-two. If we never would've met, I would have died a miserable old man with a score in the negative seventies or eighties. But now I'm at a positive eighty-two. So screw everything else. Screw death. Soon enough we will feel the relish of the rise, the relief of the risen. How's that for R?"

She sighed to the ceiling with its web of cracks and just stared for a bit. Then she yawned, rubbed her hands over her face, and said, “You want to make a pact?”

“Sure. What kind of pact? What do you mean?”

“You have to agree to it first.”

“OK. You got it. I agree. Now what is it?”

She turned to face him, her flesh vague. “Whoever goes first, the other will off themselves.”

“Deal,” he said, not missing a beat.

She draped an arm across his chest and softly said, “Odds are I’ll probably go first, since I’ve been here longer. If that happens, OD on the Thorazine. Take, like, fifty of them.”

“Won’t the others try and stop me?” he asked, grasping her hand.

“Nope.” She stepped out of bed naked and walked over to the stereo. She turned it down a notch and settled back in, lightly clinging to him. “Sweet dreams,” she purred.

“Sleep tight,” Travis mumbled against her bare shoulder.



Contemporary Portrait of the Artist
art by Aaron Wilder

THE MONKEY HOUSE

A. McIntyre

Mensforth smiled, sweeping back his white hair, So as you are well aware gentlemen, we are under siege, our position is precarious. Thought policing is in a relative infancy, but what we know will ensure our immediate survival. I congratulate you upon your selection, you will carry the torch. The technology is implanted in your brains, and you will begin training. I wish you a very good afternoon, and again I welcome you. Some call this place the SPAR, the School of Psycho-Anatomical Research. Others have termed it the Monkey House. Interpretations are subjective. In essence, it is a university within the university.

He paused, scanning our faces, I'm sure I don't need to reiterate to you, after your experience in the field, there is no such thing as right or wrong. Completion of the goal is the sole factor, finish the job by any means at your disposal. And lastly, as you may already know, there's a documentary. You may find it useful, you're not obliged to attend, of course, but it's highly recommended you do. Those interested please proceed to the Queen's Theater. He bowed slightly, turned his back on us, and left the room. I glanced at Baxter, Ready? Yes, he replied, jamming papers into his briefcase, Let's go. The others left while I waited. Baxter, I'd known him for years. We were at Corpus, then we served in the Guards. After special ops we were assigned to Whitehall.

We descended the stone stairs. I have a feeling about this, he ventured. Oh, we'll muddle through, old chap, I interrupted, Just an extension of what we've been doing, albeit in a new realm. He smiled, I rather liked what Mensforth said about Machiavelli. Our glorious liberal empire, I laughed, shrugging my shoulders, Well it's true, Old Nick's always there in some form or another, but this time it's different. I mean no marks on the body, the public don't know, we can do what we want, absolutely anything. I heard rumors but I thought it was gossip, Baxter muttered, The potential is staggering, warfare of the mind, we're on the frontier. Exactly, I replied, Like Romans looking north into Caledonia, remember the Ninth Legion. Nothing guaranteed.

We strolled across the quadrangle, the fountain splashing in the weak autumn light. The lawn where Marlowe walked. It really could make us invincible, he continued, For a while at least, I'm intrigued, and hitherto no ill effects from the procedure. How about you? Absolutely, I agreed, I'm tip top, never felt better. Have faith, old chap, we'll be invading dreams. And we'll have the luxury of dictating the battlefield. Look, we'd better hurry if

we're going to catch that film. Then we can relax, maybe have a beer later. We probably won't have much time after today, I've a feeling this might get rather tough. Baxter smiled, Good idea, strange to be here again, Stanforth, isn't it? Yes, I said, Very odd.

We hurried through the medieval passages. A hint of frost, the first breath of winter. We were just in time. We entered, pushing into cavernous musty darkness past a red velvet curtain. Aside from a man in a trilby wearing an overcoat, seated in a distant balcony, the only people in the auditorium were two of the students. One of them waved. Where is everyone? I muttered. Baxter nodded. The light flickered and we settled in our chairs. Grainy black and white film. The opening scene a cinema, a man in a hat and an overcoat, two others, two young men seated together. Astonished, I raised my hands, as did one of the characters in the film. The man rose on screen. Bowing elaborately, leaning over, he removed the trilby, casting away the overcoat. Mensforth. What on earth is going on? Baxter yelled, his voice echoing through the auditorium. Mensforth laughed, his teeth huge, his face spreading across the horizon, Not of the earth, old fellow, rather the mind. Hasten not away because there is no exit. The show has commenced, you are the movie, your training has begun. In order to break people you have to be broken, you have to know from within, intimately, the process of breakdown, from misery cometh mastery. Do I really have to explain? We will focus on trauma, like our dental colleagues with an exposed nerve. We are within, we will show you. Through the implants we know everything from the day you were born, we own you. Stately, he waved shouting, Maestro. The film changed to color. The students walked out of the cinema. Colleagues to entice you, Mensforth chuckled, We'd have got you sooner or later, if you'd decided to slack tonight. To catch a duck, you lie for hours in a boat, 12-bore loaded, dummy ducks floating about the water. Eventually, the ducks come.

Images of our past sped across the screen, childhood, first days at boarding school, beatings, a bully's smile, nightmares, the implants seeking experiences from which we had not recovered. The pictures slowed, focusing. Willows, a Tudor cottage, summer idyll. A young boy in shorts, Baxter kneeling in the corner of a wine cellar. A hand sliding honey over an erect penis, Come on, come on sonny, suck the lollipop, you told me you like honey, suck it, suck it boy. Baxter leaning forward, rose bud lips parting. Next to me, Baxter was shaking, muttering, No, oh no, no. Keep your mind Baxter, it's all right, I whispered, For God's sake, it's training. God, you say, God, Mensforth chortled. He staggered, hiccupping, clutching his throat, Ggggod, gggggod. Burping, he cleared his throat, fanning himself, A word, an utterance, a sound produced by stimuli, recognized the same way, muscu-

lar contractions driven by electricity and chemicals, one could go on. He cackled, A voice crying alone in the wilderness, I am God, so are you, the figment of ourselves created in God's image, the comedy's divine, dissolve gentlemen, reform, for you are the stars.

My aunt was playing the harpsichord in the study. My mother slurring words, drinking scotch in the rancid afternoon light. I was on leave after months living in a badger hole watching IRA men. We were sitting in deckchairs in the garden. I took a deep drag of the cigarette. She smiled, You were an accident one could say, you ruined our lives, a night of lust in front of a fire, the beast with two backs, never ever have children, please, you never get over them they're with you forever, oh all the things I could do, could have done, I wanted to be a nun, I wish I'd been a man, I was going to dance, but no, you came along, and that was that, and you're so ungrateful. I heard myself shouting, A mother's love is unconditional. My mother cutting, Nothing is unconditional, love is a transaction like anything else, your father would agree if he were alive, I was the trophy he had the money. Squashing the cigarette, I stared at her, the sunglasses hiding my tears. Men in their thirties weren't supposed to cry, especially spies, the memory flooding through me like a polluted tide. You can't hide, she sniped, You really can't hide, you're unloved, unwanted, a zero, totally alone, you come into this world alone, you leave on your own. She drained her glass, As the odds go, you'll be another statistic, a suicide, just like your father.

I tried to stand, but I found myself paralyzed. Don't think you can flee, Mensforth boomed, It's all in the mind. And where do you think you'll go? You are the stars, the last of a long process, think of the taxpayers, they get their money's worth. Or I lose my job. And I was fingering Charlotte, one finger, two, then fucking her, Baxter's fiancé, the afternoon in my rooms, the camera closing on my buttocks moving between her legs. Late summer death in the air. Baxter never found out, he married Charlotte in September. Her cries echoed through the cinema. My bowels moved, a feeling of vertigo, I vomited over my knees. You'll have to kill me, you bastard, Baxter whispered, struggling in the seat unable to move, You thieving swine. Because if you don't you're going to die. Exactly, and I support you old chap, let battle commence, Mensforth encouraged, Like knights of old. No holds barred. Actually, he continued, Actually, very hush hush, obviously we didn't tell you this, the process is so secret it is permissible that only one of you survive. Natural selection good sirs, I'm sure you understand. You are the last, you have reached the top of the pyramid, and there is room for one. One eye in the Triangle, I'm sure you understand.

I opened my eyes. Flies. The hospital silent. Ward D1, we'd received the implants. The bed next to me labeled Baxter was empty. My hair matted with

blood, left ankle broken, I crawled towards the corridor. The floor sticky with gore, the stench like a latrine in summer. I stared into the next ward, wondering why I was still alive. Medical personnel slumped, throats sliced, as though a mechanical scythe had butchered. Baxter's methods, I had to get out. I heard a repetitive thumping. A nurse jammed the automatic lift, her battered head striking the ceiling. Throat cut like a big red smile. Someone was singing, Here's to the road a whisky knock it down knock it down, here's to a whisky knock it down knock it down. Baxter loved single malt, he was coming up the stairs. I hid, squinting round the corner. Jauntily, he strode down the corridor whistling, soaked in blood, a huge amputation knife in his beefy fist.

Rain lashed the window panes, the wind howling through the trees. What happened, Charlotte whispered, switching on a light, What is it? Baxter, I hissed, waking drenched in sweat, Baxter, the hospital, he came up the stairs. But he's away, Charlotte soothed, It was only a dream. Go back to sleep, Darling, everything's fine, he'll never know. I watched myself curled in bed, Charlotte caressing my face. At the end of the aisle, Mensforth smiled, smoking a cigarette, The brain resembles Africa, it is shaped much the same. He tapped a diagram, If one includes the spinal cortex. Africa in the 1870s, we know the coast relatively well, but the interior remains unexplored, you are traveling to the heart of a continent gentlemen, remember Burton and Speke. Neither man ever the same again, what they encountered, they became deadly rivals. Speke committed suicide. Where lies the source of the river? The river of consciousness running from the great subconscious lake. We will fight them in realms we know through our dreams. The mind our colony, the sun never setting for it will never rise, the empire darkness, and it will be endless. He chuckled, The universe within the universe, we will will the Will. Baxter stared, his face ivory, beads of sweat dropping to his suit. The film flashing over his pupils. He was far away, searching for me.

When Baxter reached the end of the corridor, he turned and announced, I know you're there Stanforth, you bitch's bastard, I'm saving you till last, I will enjoy you at my leisure, I will gut you like a trout. Retching, I struggled in the slime, not knowing where I was going or how I had arrived. Mensforth's voice droned through the hospital, The game isn't over till the whistle, play up, play up, play the game, it's not the winning that matters, old chap, it's the taking part, British spirit, what, remember who you are, you're an Englishman, England's whitest, England's finest, an Englishman is the finest fellow in the world. Believe what you do, and you'll believe who you are. The far wall telescoped into a screen, a film showing grainy black and white. I saw myself sitting in the lecture room with Baxter and the other candidates. Mensforth was smiling, finishing the welcoming lecture.



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the **UN**religious,
NONfamily-oriented
literary & art mag



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