

down in the dirt



v023
July 2005

revealing
all your
dirty little
secrets...

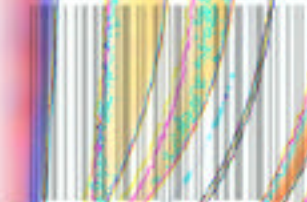
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Scars Publications art:covers
(U.S. flag photographed on a dirt hill
in Bedford County, Pennsylvania
January 2005), 1, 11, 19, 23

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Of this Wilting

Michelle Greenblatt

"Eulogize the mundane." -- William Kissinger

a body is trembling in the sand
the color is sandy pink a little girl's
curls with ribbons
head rocking for a moment with death's seizure

the man who shot her is more than a little unsorry
smiling hideously upon the dawn guns drawn.
the noise less of a scream than a victory whoop
when the bullet shot thru

a radiance the sand so opulent
although dreaming is better / it would make
for a good photograph
& as the girl lies in the sand

he peoples the murdering ruthlessness:within
the tiny shot star the bullet left
in his stomach he says wait i am an american
which makes me & pretty much everyone

else laugh in tune with the subharmonic
music of shells dropping & of this wilting
we read the story eating toast over newspaper
talking shit over it like a bird in a cage

3.25.2005

HAPPY HOUR

Chris Major

Saturday night,
the town centre's litter strewn
and can cluttered.
Teens swagger and sway
passed the fluid windows
of heaving bars,
underagers swilling furtive swigs
from a communal can
as their cig smoke hovers
like steam over quenched youth.
Squatting, a young girl,
crumpled as a tissue on the club steps;
and as her boyfriend
writhes on the dancefloor,
she sobs,
shocked by the awful noise,
the flashing lights,
and being shoved aside
by rushing paramedics.....

Barely Legal

Jen Gabrielson

Six-inch heels
jeans size five
shirt small
to expose your new
silicone imitations of
knowledge that were
conveniently left out
of that blonde head.
It was peroxide, not nature,
that made you the ideal
image for 13 year old
boys to fantasize about,
hiding behind locked doors,
hoping no one will catch them
with their pants down,
the same way their fathers
do in the next room
thinking the exact same thought.

Spanish Influenza

Sharon Ellis

Mrs. Carpetti says that if the flu is coming for me, it's going to get me no matter what I do to stop it. She's old and Italian, so when she's gone from the hallway my father does an impression of how she talks. His voice goes up three octaves and into an irregular lilting singsong. He says, "A-coming for you," and "A-going to get you," but she doesn't really sound like that. Mrs. Carpetti has hardly left the North End since 1891 when she came to this country, but that is longer ago than when my father came over from Ireland. That doesn't matter to him. He swears he hears her Italian accent spread thick over every word, like butter over bread. He likes to do comical impressions of the neighborhood Italians in a loud voice, right here in my apartment when he comes to visit. The walls of the tenement house are thin, and I have to keep telling him that there are more Italians in this neighborhood than Irish, so he'd better watch his tongue.

My father can't understand why I stay. He thinks I should move back in with him since Shane is hardly ever here. My father says that in the rare moments when Shane is here, he is nothing but a no good drunken bum, but I tell him that I can't just pick up and leave my husband. I remind him of my sacred marriage vows and he says, "Rubbish to your sacred vows." I recite a quick prayer to Saint Joseph, the patron saint of fathers, and my father rolls his eyes. Except to pass me to the priest through the church doorway on the day of my christening, my father has avoided all things sacred since my mother died. My father tells me that if I don't have the sense to leave Shane, I should at least live in familiar surroundings, among our own kind of people, but I shake off his talk as foolish. I've become attached to neighbors like Mrs. Carpetti, and I kid my father that the Italians are not so different from us. An Italian drunk off wine is just as good as an Irishman after too many pints. "Have some respect," he snaps. I end the discussion saying that either way, this is a good place to live, and it couldn't be closer to Shane's job with the distillery.

Shane works just across the street. From our small window on the second floor I can see through the shadows of the elevated train tracks running down Commercial Street to watch the men walk out into the street in the evening, on their way home for supper. That way I have a plain view of Shane's back on the nights when he turns the other way, letting me

know that he has decided to make a detour in search of gambling, or women, or drink. In all this time it hasn't once occurred to him to glance back at my face in the window. Or maybe he is only pretending it hasn't.

This night, my father is visiting because I have invited him to celebrate Shane and my wedding anniversary. Maybe I knew all along that Shane wouldn't come home, and that's why I invited my father.

Last year, on the day of the wedding, I was worried that January was a bad month to get married, but my father reminded me that he and my mother were married in June, and that didn't stop her from dying from an infection after childbirth. "Besides," he said, "you should be more concerned with who you're marrying than when."

I was in love. My father knew as well as I did that he had a better chance of stopping a tidal wave than of talking me out of marrying Shane, but that seems like a long time ago now.

Today, on my first anniversary, I think constantly about the fact that I will forever be associating my marriage with ice and snow. I worry still that I have made a dreadful mistake by getting married in the wrong month, but my father says that I shouldn't be insulting fate by troubling myself with silly superstitions. He believes that whatever is meant to happen will happen, come hell or high water.

I usually bake cakes only for birthdays, but early on the cold morning of my anniversary I rubbed my swollen belly and told myself that the heat of the stove would do the baby good. I decided on a molasses cake, but when I had the ingredients laid out on the table with the mixing bowl, cake pan, and wooden spoon, I noticed that I was short of molasses. I went to the window and called and called for the boy in the next building who runs my errands for me, but he never came. I had my heart set on molasses cake, so for about an hour I sat at the window looking across the street at the molasses tank. It dwarfed the other buildings around it like a giant tree stump in a field of delicate wildflowers. The railway sheds, the blacksmith, the fire station, even the railway tracks and the harbor itself, seemed to be gathered around the tank at attention, as though they were waiting for it to speak.

In one of the increasingly rare moments in recent memory when Shane had decided to be sociable at home, he talked about the distillery's vat of molasses. He told me with no little amount of pride, as though he had something to do with it, that the massive cast iron tank is the largest storage tank of its kind in Boston. He said that with any luck the whole lot of molasses will be made into rum just in time, before they pass, what he calls, "the god-

damned prohibition.” I asked him how they do that, make molasses into rum, but he didn’t know, so he complained about my cooking.

That night I had a nightmare about sinking into that vat and drowning in molasses, all warm and sticky. In the dream they didn’t notice I was in there, and I ended up trapped inside a bottle of Shane’s rum.

Looking up at the tank and thinking hard of molasses cake, I willed the molasses to find its way down the street and rescue me. It was a nonsensical thing to do, like hoping for time to pass more quickly, but no more lacking in sense than not allowing myself to leave the apartment for fear of the Spanish Influenza. In the end, I sweetened my cake with sugar.

Shane doesn’t come home for our anniversary dinner. My father and I both watch him turn his back and walk casually up the street away from us and out of sight. My father stiffens his lip in a gesture that is meant to tell me that he is doing me the favor of restraint, but this movement is only a disguised lecture on how much effort he has to exert in order to hold back all he has to say on the subject. I suggest to him that we celebrate my anniversary by eating the cake before our supper. My father’s expression turns itself over on its head and he forgets his opinions on Shane in his eagerness to eat dessert first.

I mention to my father that it was meant to be a molasses cake, but I couldn’t go out for the molasses, and I know right away that I have made a mistake.

He says, “Well, why didn’t you go out and get some bleedin’ molasses, then?”

I can’t explain it.

“Well?” he insists.

“You know perfectly well why not,” I remind him.

“I know why. It’s just a whole lot of nonsense. Spanish Influenza my arse,” He says.

I know that my father will never understand. He is the kind of person who will have the speed and reflexes to jump out from in front of a speeding train, where I am the kind of person who will wring my hands worrying about speeding trains with such intensity that I will not notice the roof caving in above my head. My father says I don’t make any sense, but sense has nothing to do with it.

“The longer you have that baby in you, the stranger you get,” he says.

I say, “I’ll have you know that I am perfectly normal,” but I think to myself that I am not.

At the beginning of my pregnancy I thought a great deal about what

it would mean to be a mother. I thought about things I would never say out loud, like how I often believed it irresponsible of my mother to die so soon after I was born. I thought about the things she could possibly have done to prevent it. Perhaps she should have washed the birthing sheets a little more thoroughly beforehand, or taken better care of her health. In my mind there were a thousand possibilities. It made sense to me, while I sat awash in the glow and excitement of my maternal prospects, in the happy days before swollen ankles and back pain, that it was my responsibility to do everything possible to be here as long as I could, and to ensure that my child would be as well.

I heard the stories after armistice came in November. There were boys who had fought across France as heroes and were finally on their way home, but who had died on the way of Spanish Influenza. Some right here in Boston harbor, just feet from their own front doorsteps. There was talk of people in the neighborhood who were struck down with the disease at church, or at the grocer's, and had died within the hour. This was a bad strain, people said, the worst ever. Influenza was often accepted as something only small children and old people caught, but I heard that this time it could take anyone, no matter what age or how able. I reasoned that if I stayed as close to home as possible, I could keep my baby and myself safe.

At first I kept my errands to a minimum, running out early in the morning long before even the housewives ventured out for their morning milk, and running home as quickly as I could. Soon that was not enough, and I wore a kerchief over my face when I went out. Finally, I gave in to the pull of the safety of my stuffy little one-roomed home and paid the neighbor boy a few pennies a week to do my shopping for me. Shane yelled at me on and off for two days over the extra expense, but finally caught himself up again in his other activities and forgot all about me and my fears.

I fully realized how little sense it made to think that by staying home I would be immune to disease. I was willing, on milder winter days, to cast open my window and share the air with the outside. I stood face to face inside the apartment with whoever decided to visit, but I had it firmly planted in my head that as long as I remained within the four walls of my own home then no harm, no Spanish Influenza, could come to me.

I tried and failed many times to explain this to my father.

"What if my baby turned out to be a boy," I said carefully to him one day, "and he was destined to be a great man, but I went out one day to buy eggs, and the man at the grocery was carrying the Spanish Influenza

but didn't know it, and as a result I died with the little one still inside me? I would have forever robbed the world of the great man my son could have been."

"Well, if he's never born I don't suppose he's destined to be much of anything."

"What if it's my job to save him?" I ask.

"Believe your old man for a change when I tell you that if God wanted the child saved he would find a way to do it."

"What if he's meant to be a great president who will stop all of the wars in the world?"

"Ha!" my father laughed. "An Irish president? Not likely! It's not too long ago, I'll have you know, that an honest Irishman was hard put just to get work in this city. And you talk of an Irish president!"

I had heard this lecture before. I sighed and told him he was missing my point.

On the night of my anniversary my father and I finish the cake quickly, and he gets up soon after for his long walk home. He hugs me in the doorway and says that one of these days I'll want to come back home without Shane, and when the day comes he'll be there waiting with open arms. I'm glad the hall is dark enough that he can't see me crying.

Shane comes home so late that night that I have already been asleep and can't guess the time. He has the sweet-stale smell of hours of drinking, which almost hides the stinging scent of cheap perfume.

In the morning I make Shane's breakfast without a word. He eats and leaves the apartment equally silent. I stand with the door to the hall open and lean on it while I listen to Shane's steps fading away down the stairs. Mrs. Carpetti is there in her doorway, but I hear her before I see her and she startles me.

"You are such a nice girl. Why don't you get out of this house and find a nice Italian boy who will take good care of you?"

I shake my head and smile at her as I always do when she calls out her advice.

The day is warm for January, especially compared to the stinging cold of the days before. My feet and ankles are swelling with the change in temperature, so much so that by mid-morning I feel as though they are ready to burst and I have to sit down by the window and prop them up on the other chair.

I breathe in the breeze from the harbor and feel grateful. My apartment may be small and dark, but the window is a luxury that makes all

the difference. I know that the Carpettis don't have one, and neither do two of the four families upstairs. I have asked Mrs. Carpetti a hundred times to come and sit by the open window with me, but she says that she has too many things to do to sit around sniffing at the air. I know she is proud and thinks of my offer as charity. Mrs. Carpetti sees herself as the kind of woman who gives charity, not the kind who accepts it.

I pass the rosary through my fingers and the baby rolls around in summersaults. I listen to the sounds of the street. I hear the horses' hooves and their drivers yelling to each other. The tracks of the elevated train hum and clang with each passing car.

As it gets close to noon the workers begin to straggle out into the street, looking for a nice place to eat their lunches outside on a rare mild January day. I hear one man say to another, as he pulls a hard-boiled egg out of his lunchbox, "It's nothing but luck to have a day like today, and that's for sure."

His companion says, "I would say it could be almost as favorable a day as when the Red Sox won the World Series." The first man nods so hard in agreement that he almost drops his egg.

I wonder how long it will take for them to forget about that victory. It's already been four months.

I am sitting and listening for so long, and with such concentration, that I barely notice my water has broken. When I finally do feel it and see it, I look out into the street and see that the men eating their lunches have vanished. I call out a feeble and tentative, "Hello?" to the street from the window, but there is no answer. I shuffle to the doorway with my knees together in an effort to slow the inevitable, and call down the empty hallway to Mrs. Carpetti. Nothing.

I drop my rosary and I am out in the street in a housecoat and stockings. I have no fear or thought of Influenza, and think only of finding help. A wagon rolls by, but the hooves of the horse pulling it pound the snowless pavement with such force and speed that the driver cannot hear or see me as he rolls past. I think that I must find Shane, but I am turned around in pain and urgency, and before know it I am running in the opposite direction from Shane and the molasses tank. All I can think to do is climb the hollow steps up to the train tracks, looking for help.

Above the street, on the platform along the tracks, I find a moment of calm between contractions. When I look down there is Shane below me in the shadows behind the blacksmith's, throwing dice. Instinctively, and without thinking that he cannot see me, I wave and call his name,

but I cannot even hear my own voice over the sound of the train approaching from Battery Street. In the second before the boom, I think Shane sees me and I wave harder.

There is a loud dull noise. I think at first that the vibration coming up from my feet and through my whole body is the train, but when the train is just past me the rumble grows stronger, not more feeble, and I know it must be something else. The ground seems to growl. Down below, Shane has a look of surprise on his face. I laugh for a second at his confusion before the scene sinks in. Shane disappears beneath the tide of the sticky river that rushes past me only a moment later, under the tracks and trellises beneath my feet.

The thin winter sunlight grows momentarily thinner, and everything is sucked from sight by the force of the brown and bubbling beast. The firehouse is pushed towards the water, and pauses at the edge as though it is trying to decide if it will go in for a swim. Not far away from me there is a crash, and a nearby building is tossed towards me, riding high on a thick wave. It smashes into one of the tall legs of the elevated track, which buckles, bends, and breaks. The train grinds to a halt and stops just short of careening headlong into the street as the track ahead of it sinks down to the ground like a sapling under heavy snow. Horses and men shift and sink in the wave below me. I don't know what is worse: the ones that scream as they are pushed and pulled by the boiling mass, or the ones who are sucked under quickly and silenced. Machines, homes, and hardware bob and dip below me until it all grinds slowly to a stop and all that I can see of the city is suffocated. When it becomes quiet, the unmistakable scent of molasses comes up to me in a thick and overpowering swell.

People try to climb out and away, only to be sucked back down the more they struggle. The rescue squads come, but lose their boots and socks to the bog of molasses now settled silently on every street. The rescue men have to rescue each other when they struggle to walk through the mess. Horses yell and strain to move from their sticky prisons. They are quickly put down in favor of ending their pain. I watch for as long as I can before a policeman sees me and knows that I am only minutes away from parenthood. He breaks me from my trance by carrying me away in his arms as fast as he can. The baby comes only seconds after I arrive screaming at the hospital.

The damage is devastating. Twenty-one people are dead, and dozens of others are injured. Tumbling metal and other debris have crushed and

broken what is not smothered with molasses. When I go back to see it days later they are still hosing off the street with gritty salt water pumped in from the harbor. I stand in the sand they have spread on the street in front of my old building and look up at what I once thought of as the safest place in the world. All the windows below the third floor have been smashed in with the force of the tidal wave of molasses. I look at my window, which has been sliced in two by a long, arced piece of jagged metal. Through the hole the metal has made in the window and wall, I can see that it goes all the way back inside and is held aloft above the street by its own weight, anchored to the back wall of the room.

I find Mrs. Carpetti with a neighbor. She cries when she sees me, and tells me that the day of the molasses flood she was six blocks away in her church, praying for the healthy birth of my baby.

Shane is not found until the week after the accident. When they recover him they tell me that I am better off not having to see him “like that,” but I hear rumors later that when he was found both his fists were clenched tight. One held dice, and the other held a half-filled flask of rum. My father and I bury him quickly and quietly.

There is ample blame after that, but nobody wants to take responsibility. The distillery blames the collapse of the vat, and ensuing flood of more than two million gallons of molasses, on sabotage, or the stress of quick changes in weather. The inspectors point to the company, and the company points back to the inspectors. Although I will later be counted among the survivors to seek and receive compensation, I never think anyone could truly be found culpable for such a thing. It seems too big a mistake to be human.

Sometimes since then, on hot summer days when I walk hand in hand with my son in my old neighborhood, I can smell the distinct, sweet odor of molasses. When the familiar scent hits me I look down at my perfect son and think of one of the few things I know now for certain: if God wants a tide of molasses, he’ll have one.



Still Life

Phong

Peter picked through the mail on the sofa. The mail oozed with credit card advertisements and life insurance pitches, magazine offers, clothes catalogs, free CD offers and coupons. “The last guy who lived here must’ve had money to burn, or else he was totally bored.” he said to his sister on the phone.

The phone cord, whose coils were stretched to capacity, ran from the mounted unit on the kitchen wall to the living room couch. The mid-day sun streaked through the windows and shone on the bare, dusty floor of his apartment. As he read the contents, Peter would let the discarded envelopes fall on the ground, to populate the empty room.

“I bet they were bored.” She said.

“They? How do you know it’s more than one guy?” He asked.

“Why are you so sure it was a guy?”

“You should see the magazines he gets.” He pulled out a bottle of heart medication from his pocket and popped a few pills down his gullet.

Suddenly the taut cord pulled the telephone receiver from his ear, disjoining it from its snug shoulder and firing it across the room. It raised such a clamor when it smacked the refrigerator that the whole room recoiled. “Shit. Now I need a phone.” Peter said.

* * * * *

A block down from his new apartment, Peter found an antique store with some old yellow chairs and a big sturdy desk in the window display. Inside, the walls of the store were covered with shelves on which rested equal portions of popular Americana and real antiques. Peter let his eyes scan across the rows of blank-eyed dolls, unlit lamps, silent radios, and stalled clocks. A full-sized statue of Elvis, bellowing into a microphone, governed one corner, facing off with a stark painting of Jesus surrounded by innumerable crucifixions.

Behind a locked display, odd stones and jewels, small metal bicycles and comic book superheroes in glorified poses mingled happily. Peter inspected a coffee table with detached legs. He held up the four posts and measured their length against each other. It might be a wobbly table, he thought. Peter didn’t really want a wobbly table, no matter what its kitsch

value. He glanced at the pricetag. Fifty dollars! He put the legs of the table down on the floor gently.

He shuffled past the furniture, in the direction of the dishware. At the end of the aisle, he spotted a skull from behind, its cranium sharply contoured and its sutures seamlessly interwoven. Curious, he walked toward the skull. As he neared the shelf where the skull stood watch, he noticed it wore a blanket of dust, as if it were a fashion. He looked intensely at the skull for a time, now from the side, until he became self-conscious and turned away suddenly. She had certainly noticed him staring.

“Can I help you with anything?” The skull asked. “Or are you just browsing?”

“No.” Peter felt compelled to explain himself, “I’m not interested in antiques. I’m looking for a new phone for my apartment... and some furniture.”

The skull laughed through her full-toothed smile. “Well,” she said, “an old antique store isn’t really the right place to be looking for a new phone, I’m afraid. But we do have furniture.”

Peter laughed too, feeling slightly ridiculous. “I’m sorry. It’s just, I’ve never even been in an antique store before. I think the oldest store we have in Atlanta is Woolworths, and that just closed.”

“So you’re from Atlanta?” She asked, surprised. Peter figured she got mostly local shoppers in an old haunt like this.

“Well, originally. I moved here this weekend.” He said. “So, you work here?”

“Yes. I’m sorry, my name is Cyril.” She said, grinning.

“Peter.”

“Pleased to meet you, Peter.” Cyril did look pleased. Peter too was pleased, but he had found it hard to smile ever since the whole ordeal with Melissa. He had thought that they would be always friends, at least. What was with this list all of a sudden? “So what are you looking for in the way of furniture. You’ll need a bed first.”

“Actually, I have a sofa bed. It came with the apartment. Everything else I need, though.” Peter felt awkward sharing the gritty details of his spartan life with this sweet antique-seller.

Cyril directed Peter to a display of ornate chairs, a blond wood table, and a vanity table. Without stopping to look at the pricetag, Peter moved past the display to pick up some foldable plastic chairs. “I think I’ve found my home furnishings, Ms. Cyril.” They exchanged a friendly smile.

“I can see that you are a man of refined taste.” Cyril commented.

“I do have refined tastes.” Peter insisted, “I just don’t express it materially.”

Peter picked up his things and moved toward the register. He glanced back at the skull resting atop the high shelf. She had no hair, and to the traditionalist within him this was a defect of sorts, but the smooth curve of her brow, and the subtle indentation at her temple, had an appeal to him that he could not deny. He had an impulse to pick her up and take her with him too, but he reminded himself that she worked there at the antique store, and his hands were full besides.

“Listen,” Cyril said, “if you’re new to Savannah, you’ll need someone to give you the tour around town.”

“Yeah, I could use the company too.” Peter said, trying to withhold his excitement. “When do you get off work?”

Peter and Cyril stepped out into the spring light, a light that made the inside of an antique store feel cavernous. Together the couple walked over cobblestone streets, and under iron footbridges, settling into a lover’s lingering pace at a park uptown, where myriad mansions competed in the scale of their gothic morbidity.

Cyril named all of the parks, monuments, and buildings that they passed, adding bits of history when she thought it appropriate. Both of them sensed that the topic would quickly lose its novelty. Names of places meant less and less to Peter as the places themselves grew more familiar, so that his experience of them began to be more essential than their role in such and such a movie, or in the scheme of naval history.

“To be honest, Cyril, I am much more interested in the people around here.” Peter announced in the middle of their tour. “Who lives there, for example?” He pointed out a great stone-walled building with elaborately sculpted reliefs in its walls.

“Oh, this is where the old Southern aristocrats have come to spend the last of their fortunes.” Cyril responded with a tinge of sarcasm in her voice. “Every one of these little hamlets is its own little Xanadu.”

“You seem kind of bitter over some harmless old folks.” Peter said.

“Not at all. The rotting rich are what keeps antique stores like ours in business.” Cyril said.

Rows of weeping willow trees lined every street, forming a kind of ceiling to the city that made everything going on within feel intimate and comfortable. The vines that descended from the weeping willows brushed the tops of park fences and dodged one another in the breeze. Peter thought how the proximity of the trees must make their roots intercede, and what an intricate network their branches must make underground, where they are hidden from human eyes beneath that blanket of earth.

That the two could walk along in mutual quiet was assuring to Peter,

and he began to measure their moments together against those he and Melissa had spent, strolling the sidewalks of outer Atlanta. But the two couldn't be compared. He had been in love with Melissa, and he and Cyril had just met. But Peter recognized the warm coil unwinding in his chest, the cords of love that wanted pulling, and which would not be satisfied until they were entwined with some other's grappling wires.

Along the waterfront, Peter and Cyril paused under the restaurant marquees, surveying the menus first for good seafood dishes, then, as they became less discriminating, scanning the menus for decent dishes under four dollars. They settled on an outdoor café where the waiters were not so attentive, and the food cheaper.

"Well, this was a nice find." said Cyril, but Peter waved his hand at her.

"Shhht," he said, pointing out toward the dock, to where his eyes were fixed, "Look at that."

Nearby, a painter had set up an easel where he looked out onto the watery horizon. He stood there slowly priming his canvas with a wash of white, then added a wash of yellow, waiting for something. Cyril sat facing Peter, Peter facing the artist, he facing the water, all of them quiet and expectant. Then, just when the sun crowned on the water's edge, the artist attacked his canvas with a meticulous ferocity, now slashing in broad strokes, now moving the brush in fine, controlled dashes. Peter watched the performance in silent rapture, and when the spectacle was over the sun had set. The artist packed up his things and moved toward the lights of downtown.

Peter would have liked to paint that sunset himself, though he hadn't even the money to buy a canvas. Yet the blissful coincidence of that moment made him feel exalted by fate. "We are lucky to be here now, eating this lousy bread, down by the waterside, in the dark. I don't even have enough cash to buy a grilled cheese sandwich, but it feels right being here with you right now."

Cyril had been staring at Peter for a long time. "You paint, don't you?" She said, almost nastily.

Peter nodded. "Still want to have dinner with me?"

Cyril jiggled as if there were beneath her the ghostly pair of skeletal shoulders shrugging. "I'll give it a try."

* * * * *

The screen door opened and a young, freckled woman walked in carrying Cyril in her arms. "Hi Peter. This is Moira."

“Hi Moira. Hey Cyril, I am so sorry that I forgot to pick you up.”

“Don’t worry about it. You shouldn’t have to worry about where I am all the time and stuff. I have friends.” Cyril smiled. Moira put her down on the corner table, by the lamp. “Do you want to stay for some coffee or something, Moira?”

She shook her head gravely, and spoke in a low, quiet voice, “That’s okay. I think I’m needed back at the shop. Thanks anyway. Nice to meet you, Peter.” Moira shuffled out in her floor-length dress. She dressed darkly, even in the summer, from head to toe. Peter wondered if she was a Wiccan or Pagan or what.

After she had left and the screen door shut behind her, Peter went over to stand next to Cyril. “Are you sure you aren’t angry at me or anything?” Peter asked.

“I’m sure.” Cyril’s smile brought instant comfort and relief to Peter, who for his part had taken to worrying about Cyril, her whereabouts, her safety. “Is this what you’ve been working on all morning?” She asked.

“Yeah. What do you think?” Peter squinted his eyes, and leaned back, studying the masonite as if it were his first time seeing it.

“Its gloomy.” She said. “Don’t you like painting nice things? I mean, you’re not unhappy are you? What’s wrong with painting pretty things? Isn’t art about beauty, after all?”

“You don’t think it’s pretty?” Peter asked her, genuinely surprised.

“Well... it’s just too... dark, you know. So many people think art has to be dreary and depressing all the time. But I think art can just be beautiful... even quaint, like a bowl of fruit or a vase of flowers. Still lives.”

“You don’t like it?” Peter said, disappointed but far from angry.

“Hmmm...”

“It’s you, you know.” Peter said, but before Cyril could argue, added, “I mean, it’s like the idea of you. It’s conceptual.”

Cyril was unmoved. “I don’t like it.” She said with finality.

“Hmmm.” Peter said, in response. He fished a prescription bottle out of his pocket, opened it, and gulped down a little white pill.

* * * * *

Peter held Cyril under his arm as he walked the stone path up to the gallery. Peter worried about Cyril falling out, and clutched her tight enough that it constricted her temples. She had joked that he handled her like a football. “Let’s wait.” Peter said, before bringing them inside. He placed Cyril on a ledge at eye level. “We should celebrate with some wine.”

“Can’t you wait until we get inside?” asked Cyril.

“Well, I suppose. But out here it’s just us. Inside there are people, there is mingling, and conversation.” Peter insisted. He popped the cork off the bottle, and poured half a glass.

“Well, I happen to like mingling and conversation, and I don’t drink wine, and you know that, Peter!” her voice was urgent, and made Peter flush with embarrassment.

“You don’t eat either, but that’s never stopped me,” he said, “but today is your day.” Peter raised his glass. “To you.”

Though he turned away and chugged the wine in one gulp, he felt Cyril’s two deep sockets fixed on him in profile, and for the first time those beautiful vacancies struck him as cold in their neutrality.

“To you.” Peter repeated, putting his glass down on the ledge. He lifted Cyril in his arms and stepped inside the gallery.

Together they strolled through the pacific landscapes and ocean views, the colorful abstractions, the geometric configurations, whispering conspiratorial likes and dislikes to each other. Peter stopped in front of a photo-realistic painting of a man and a woman standing naked in the middle of a Japanese rock garden; comfortably naked, not defiantly naked.

“What’s so special about this one?” Cyril asked him.

“Nothing.” Peter replied. Then he turned them around to face a wall-sized canvas, painted so heavily that the work was almost three-dimensional. A bowl of bread, a jar of olive oil, and a tall, thin vase with fern leaves and baby’s breath flowering from its mouth shared the table with a human skull, rendered onto the canvas with russet, white, and yellow ochre. The title, Still Life with Cyril; the artist, Peter Bond. “Surprise.” Peter said. “I painted it while you were asleep.”

Though the restaurant was busy at that hour, they had found a booth away from the commotion of a late evening dinner on the waterfront. Peter pleaded while Cyril sat quietly on the table. A candle in a cup lit the table with an orange tint, and made the silverware glint with reflected light. “Please, Cyril. Just tell me why you’re so upset, at least. Please, tell me?”

Her quiet was penetrating, and Peter found it difficult to bear. “I just want to know what upset you so much. I don’t think that is so unreasonable.” He sat there and tested her quiet, though every second pained him. He let his silence compete with hers.

“I think we’ve had enough of each other for a while.” She stated coldly.

Peter poked at the food on his plate nervously, then put his fork down. “Okay, why?” He had gotten her to speak, at least. Now he challenged her with his eyes.

“Do I have to say it?”

“Yes.” he declared.

“Your love for me is selfish, and I don’t think I love you.”

The waiter walked by, but Peter curtly waved him away. The conversations of neighboring tables provided an almost melodious counter-rhythm to their grief. Peter took out a pill for his heart, and dropped it in his glass. He gulped it down quickly.

“See there you go again. It’s always medicine for your heart, or food for your stomach, or alcohol for your blood. I mean, you spend so much time on your body, your organs. Is that what love is to you?” Cyril demanded.

“Cyril,” said Peter, “I have to take care of my body. My heart, my stomach, they are parts of me that need my attention for survival.”

“Aren’t I a part of you too?” Cyril glared across the table with meaningful intensity, “Love is supposed to be a meeting of the minds... or... or a communion of souls! But what would you know about that. You spend so much time feeding yourself, replenishing yourself, that you have nothing left over but to spend making these... crass monuments to yourself.”

“Would you prefer if I were dead?” Peter asked simply, reservedly.

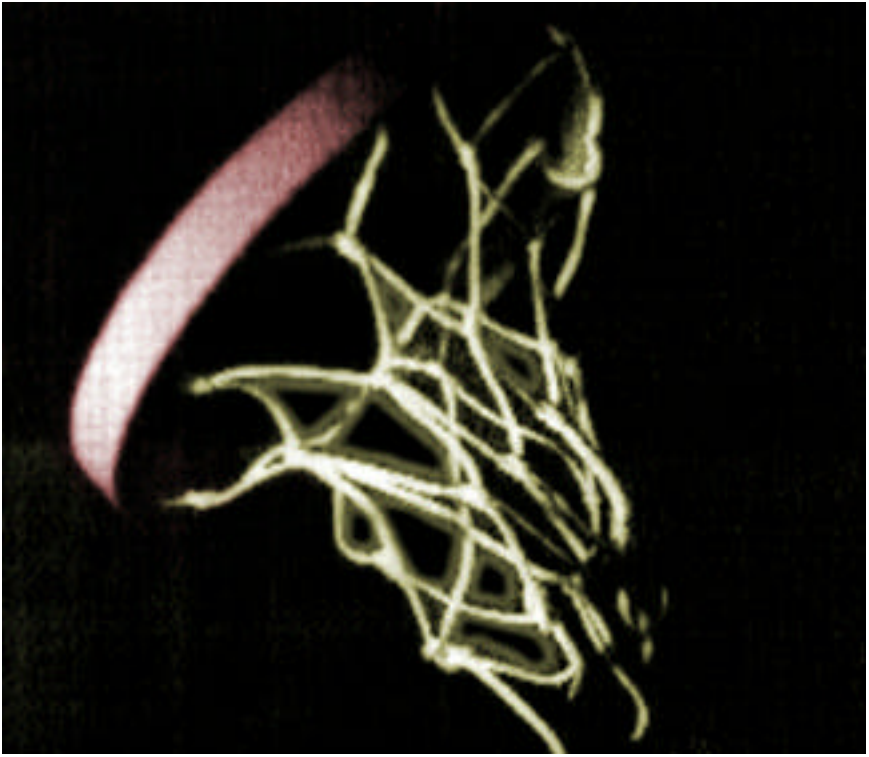
“Don’t be silly. But it’s not about that. You don’t think I’ve wondered if you wouldn’t love me more if I were a head of flesh and blood, or a whole body even? That isn’t it. It’s just that... our love isn’t healthy anymore. It isn’t good.”

“Love is always good. It doesn’t matter who you are, or what you are. I love you, Cyril. I’ve always loved you, and you know it.” Peter ran his finger along her jawline.

“No, your attraction for me is... morbid. It’s sick. It is like my attraction to dust.” Cyril’s voice dropped off at the end, as if she spoke these words against her will-- a deeper confession than she had wanted to make.

Peter sat stunned in his seat, thinking about their times together, when they first met, their promenades through the city. He remembered the thick coat of dust that lay so heavily on her head when he first saw her. It was so obvious, and he was so blind. All the time she would spend in the old library, the antique shop, the tunnel (her favorite hideaway). How else could she have loved his apartment so much, but that it was coated with layers of unswept dust? Her infidelity touched ten thousand motes of dust, and now she would not even welcome one of his embraces.

He stood up suddenly, jerking the table backward, and stormed out of the room, and left Cyril sitting alone in the wan flicker of the dusty candle-cup, smiling as always, with her broad white teeth gleaming.



* * * * *

Peter lay out on his sofa, popping a baseball up and down in the air. All of his possessions were packed up into two suitcases by the door, and the room was empty again. When he dropped the ball, it dribbled across the room, forcing him to leap up

Peter knew where these conversations led, and he dropped it first. “Hey Pam... Can you tell me why Ma didn’t let me know about Aunt Esther’s funeral? Can you tell me that?”

Pam sighed, and left the dead air lingering. “Okay. She thought it would upset you. She said death makes you uncomfortable, and that you start getting your heart palpitations when you think about it too much. She worries about you. So she said I shouldn’t say anything. I mean, I don’t want you to have a heart attack for Chrissakes.”

“Hey,” he said, affecting his best paternal voice, “my heart’s okay, you hear? You have other things to worry about, Pamela. It feels great when I’m moving around, you know. It’s just when I slow down and stall for a while that my heart starts to bother me. All I have to do is just to keep going. I just can’t stop, that’s all.”

Bookeater

Adam Burnett

My little brother has a habit of eating books. He got the idea from my mother, years ago, when he heard her mention that *her* brother Jack “absolutely *consumes* books! He can’t get enough of them.” My brother took it the wrong way. Now his lips are always black and my father can never find his copy of Newsweek.

Once I had a book report due on *Moby Dick* so I purposely hid it between my mattress and my bed. When I came home the lump was gone. I accosted Johnny in the hall. “*Johnny*,” I began, but he cut me off. “Call me...Ishmael,” he said, and then patting his belly in a grandiose gesture he added “And call me *stuffed*.”

He could tear out the pages with a blazing speed you wouldn’t believe. His hands were so small they were almost invisible. And he would always tear only one page at a time, never clumps, and in a perfectly straight line. I told him he should have been a magician and he told me “Watch: I’ll make this book disappear.” And he did.

He would order books on the Internet the way others ordered pizza on the telephone. He would check the number of pages, and were they matte or stock, was it a cardstock cover or a glossy deal. Acid-free was his favorite. He said recycled paper tasted the worst. I told him that I guessed the recycling guys didn’t really have people *eating* the paper when they designed a scheme to save the planet but he only shrugged his shoulders and asked me if we had any sour crême.

He said the best book he ever ate was this one from the seventies called *The Hole Town*. It began with the discovery of a pothole, and workers are trying to fill it in but the asphalt just keeps going and going – more holes begin appearing, seemingly bottomless, until the entire town looks more and more like a great piece of swiss-cheese. How strange. The world draining through an hourglass! Johnny said it was drivel, *actually used the word* “drivel”. That kid killed me. He makes me laugh so much I wanna cry. He said he ate it just so no one else would ever be infected with it’s claptrap.

He said the more of it he ate the emptier he felt inside but he laughed when he said it so he might have been joking. And then he used the word “poppycock” and I damn near bust a gut. I mean, can you believe it? A lit-

tle kid like that sayin' "Poppycock" like he was sayin' his own name.

Sometimes he'd roll the pages up like little cigarettes and suck on them slowly. *Appetizers* he'd say if you happened to catch him. He reminded me of a dog at a bone, sucking out the marrow.

He told me that not all books get better with age, though this was the *general* truth. Some were like cheese, and just developed mould. Others were like wine whose flavor became richer with each passing year. I told him he had some Faust on the corner of his mouth.

He called the library 'the buffet'. He'd go into Tourist Offices or Red Cross Societies and pick up a whack of pamphlets for a "light snack". Once I made him open his mouth and there was a neon post-it note stuck to his tongue. "You have to let it settle on the palette," he explained.

He was the only kid I knew who got excited when the Jehovah's Witnesses came around; he'd take *The Watchtower* over an ice-cream sundae any day. *Prop-a-licious!*

Once when we were driving out into the country to visit an apple cider farm we became completely lost. I was in the passenger seat, with Johnny in the back, and my mother asked me to get the map out of the glove compartment. It wasn't there and I told her so. She told me it *must* be there and she pulled over onto the unpaved shoulder to take a look for herself. A minute later she turned around. "*Johnny!*"

"The east coast was much more delectable than the west. Moist," he said. "B.C. and Alberta were just too...*rich*. Greenland gave me a head rush: too cold. Brain freeze."

"Johnny how could you! Now we're lost. Jesus, what the hell are we gonna do now!?"

Johnny reached over and slowly unwound his window. Then he stuck his hand out and pointed. "Why don't you ask him?"

My mother's head craned right around and she let out a little gasp. There was a police officer standing not a foot and a half from her car, leaning over and staring her right in the face. He was wearing a pair of those sunglasses I always associated with helicopter pilots. "Some kind of problem here ma'am?" he asked, his voice rigid and humorless.

My mother immediately blushed. "No officer, uh, not really. It's just my son here, well, we got a little lost and--"

The police officer, who was not blushing, cut her off. "You do realize this is a no-stopping zone don't you? It's illegal for you to park here."

The crimson on her face deepened. I couldn't take my eyes off the two of them. "Well, no, actually I--"

The police officer cut her off again, this time with a sharp gesture rather than words. He pointed at a sign not ten feet in front of our car. "NO STOPPING" it read. I might have briefly considered whether Johnny had ever eaten a *sign* before but the situation was too engrossing to run off on a tangent.

"And when I came up behind you I noticed that only one of your tail-lights is working. That's a hundred and ten dollar fine you know." I watched as my mother's mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, only nothing came out.

The officer leaned down a little lower and took a good glance at me; I was hard pressed to suppress a shiver of unease. His head craned slightly and he examined Johnny who didn't seem too concerned with the whole mess. I was though. A hundred and ten bucks was a lot of money. I wondered if Johnny knew that. I wondered if he would have been so cool about the whole thing if he knew just how many books that money could have gone towards. *Selfish little spit* I accused, but immediately regretted the thought and mentally took it back.

Finally my mother resumed speech. "Listen officer, couldn't we just...overlook this whole thing. I mean, it was an honest mistake. Everybody makes them, right...?"

The man in the deep navy uniform apparently did not agree. "Honest or not ma'am, it was a mistake. As an officer of the law I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I didn't follow through on each and every offence I'm witness to. I'm not a judge nor a jury. I'm an officer of the law and as such it is my sworn duty to reprimand those that fail to uphold said law." I was so in awe of this man's control and composure that it would take days for me to realize just how rehearsed that whole speech had sounded. Johnny probably noticed right away; he was quick with things like that.

"No, I don't see how I have any choice but to..." He paused, mid sentence, his left hand had disappeared behind his back, but now it re-emerged, empty. He used both hands to pat his pockets, including the breast. Now it was *his* turn for his face to crimson. He rubbed his chin pensively.

"Well, it looks like this just might be your lucky day ma'am. It appears I've left my citation book in my car." He stole a quick glance off behind us and my eyes followed; his cruiser was about fifty yards back. "But make sure you get that taillight checked out. And mind the signs, eh."

"Will do officer, and thank you. I appreciate it."

He only nodded in response while his hands flitted around his uni-

form, suddenly nervous it seemed. He made no move to leave. After a minute or so of him just standing there, staring off into space, Johnny stuck his head clean out his window and stared up at the man. “Thank you muchly officer. You’re a credit to the institution.” I saw my mother wince slightly at this, afraid that the man would take it the wrong way, but apparently he didn’t. He only nodded ‘yeah’ and then slowly began making his way back to his car.

A minute later we were back on the road. “Awww shoot,” my mother shot out suddenly. “I should have at least asked him for directions to the cider farm.” She shook her head.

Johnny’s voice arose from the back seat. “Why don’t we just call it a day mom. I’m not really in the mood for apples anyway.” My mother looked at me and I shrugged and nodded in agreement. I agreed yes, but I didn’t believe him. I had a strong suspicion that Johnny just couldn’t wait to get home. There was a new item on the menu tonight, and this was a rarer find than any old first edition.

Later that night I asked him if he knew what he had done was totally illegal. He only shook his head as though he had no idea what I was talking about. “After all,” he added before walking away, “*possession* is nine tenths of the law...and as you can plainly see...I possess nothing.” To illustrate this point he raised his empty hands high and wide and then swept them up and down the length of his body. A moment later a small gaseous burp secreted from out of his mouth, like air being let from a tire. “Oops,” he said as he placed a small hand to his mouth. He couldn’t fool me though. I saw his cheeks lift slightly and I knew what he was really hiding under that hand; he didn’t have a chance really. Smiles didn’t come much bigger than that.



The Nuclear Blast

Don Berry

When I was about seven my mother gave me a book called *Our Friend the Atom*. It was by then about fifteen years old, published in the mid-fifties, and extolled the wonders and virtues of atomic power and all it could give us to make our lives richer.

My grandfather lived with us at the time. He'd had a stroke about six years before, and while he still had his faculties he'd lost the use of half his right arm and had trouble walking.

He'd had to retire early from his job at the jet engine plant and now lived on a pension.

My mother had told me never to show this atomic power book to him. I showed it to him.

He'd taken one glance at the book and began tearing the pages out. He threw the book into a corner of the living room. I cried.

He had destroyed something I thought at the time was beautiful; a book that talked in children's terms about wonders and made me want to dream and hope and have faith in science and how it could do incredible things and make our world better in the long run.

And he had ruined it.

I hated him for the rest of the week and avoided him.

When I saw him coming out of the bathroom in the morning or when I came home from school at night I stayed clear of him. I had told my mother what he did but she not only looked at me and said that she wasn't surprised.

"He has had some bad things happen to him, Gage. Showing him that book only brought them back."

I didn't understand at the time how things in the past could come back at you or how simple objects like a book could bring them back.

That following Saturday when he was sitting on the front porch,, which was rare because he never liked to sit in the sun or look into the cloudless blue sky, I asked what my mother meant.

He asked me to sit down next to him and told me that he owed me an apology for destroying the book. "Ruining your book won't change what happened," he had said.

He had all of my attention and he talked for about a half an hour, but

it seemed much longer than that, and next to him he had a book of his own, a slim brown leather bound journal of some kind. I had never seen him with it before and it looked beaten and very old.

He squinted up at the sun once in a while as he talked.

“I joined the army during the war but right at the end so I never did any fighting on the ground or in the air. Not like in the TV shows. I was in a special kind of Army that didn’t fight with anybody.”

He saw how perplexed I was at this.

“We experimented with different kinds of weapons.” When he still saw that I didn’t comprehend he looked at me with eyes that even for a man his age looked ancient and stretched into a deep primordial sadness, as if he was trying to take on all of mankind’s worst sins.

“Gage, they made us experiment on each other. Nerve gases, chemicals that made us sick, paralyzed us, messed up our minds, make us see things that weren’t there.”

He saw my next question before I could ask it.

“The work we were doing was supposed to save lives. Because in the next war, whatever it was, they knew these kinds of weapons were going to be used. And if we made them first and know how they worked we could keep our soldiers from getting killed, protect and equip them properly.”

He paused and swallowed.

“Then there was the atomic test. A couple of generals called me into a room one day and sat me down at a steel table and showed me pictures from the atomic bomb blast at Hiroshima.”

He said that I wouldn’t find any stories about Hiroshima in my book.

“They dropped an atomic bomb there, to end the war with Japan, and make them want to surrender. The bomb leveled the city like a cardboard city in a hurricane. These generals showed me pictures, the aftermath of the explosion. There was one of a man, naked, burned all over, standing by a stream. He was holding something in his hand. I realized after a minute that it was one of his eyeballs.”

“They told me that this is what I was getting into. This could happen to me. But they could take steps to protect me. You see Gage, they wanted to set off an atomic blast in the middle of the desert and put me and some other soldiers in a trench nearby and then see what it would do to us.”

He pointed now to the sun, sitting in a cloudless blue sky.

“Gage, you know that looking into the sun hurts your eyes. But even with the goggles they gave us, myself and another guy, they called him Fred, it was like looking into a dozen suns at once. When they set that

thing off, the sound was like the Earth was coming apart from inside out. The vibration shook our muscles, our bones, our teeth, it was like they were being taken apart and put back together again.”

“Then there was the wind. Like a hot desert wind but it was more than that. It had a form, a shape, like a gigantic ballmiles high, pushing and pulling us, like we were rag dolls. But we were in the trench you see and maybe that doesn’t sound like much protection but somehow it was enough to keep us from getting leveled or sucked away.

Did it hurt, I asked.

“Maybe that was the worst of it, because no, it didn’t. Fred and I expected it to, but it didn’t.

No pain. But there were voices. Fred and I both heard them. A chorus, like a million voices all screaming. I’ve thought about that part of it more than any other other over the years and I think that maybe, somehow, when you split atom open and let out all that energy its like going all the way back to where life started. It was like everything that ever lived calling out.”

He leaned back and reached for a cigarette with his good arm.

“I’ve read some stuff since then, and they have theories that maybe everybody’s atoms are mixed in with everybody else’s.”

He lit his cigarette and exhaled the smoke slowly. I couldn’t help but watch the burning end, a tiny red inferno.

“The air we breathe right now might be the same air that a dinosaur, or a caveman, or Shakespeare breathed a long time ago. Well maybe that was what we were getting back then except that the blast was squeezing everything into a few moments instead of millions of years.”

He paused. I knew it had taken a lot out of him to tell me all of this. And at my age it was a lot to take in.

I had a can of coke in front of me and I picked it up to take a sip. The sweet syrupy fizz hit my tongue and I thought, atoms, millions of atoms, inside this beverage, in the can itself, all waiting to be smashed open, to let loose their energies, like the ones in the desert with my grandfather so long ago.

“After it was over we spent a year or so in a special hospital. The did tests. And things happened to us, our bodies did start to change. I had a lot of problems with my mind, I slept a lot, sometimes two or three days straight. I had dreams, most of them were about the blast, about being there. But I also dreams about becoming transparent. Like my skin was Plexiglass. All the nerves, and veins, muscles. I could see everything. But

it must have been real because one time a doctor showed me a picture of myself, my transparent body, walking around my room.”

I asked if he still had the photo, looking at the leather bound volume next to his chair.

“The doctor said he wasn’t supposed to show me the picture. But that he figured that a man had a right to know if people could see into him. That doctor didn’t seem to like what was going on, the tests, the other things at this hospital. A couple of days later he stopped coming and he was replaced by a different doctor.

I never saw Fred again after the blast. Although I heard nurses and doctors talking. Somehow he’d been affected differently. Maybe his mind more than his body;. It was like he couldn’t take what had happened and what was now happening to him. I think he lost his mind, Gage. Thank God that didn’t happen to me.”

I asked if he was stronger than Fred, or was Fred weak.

“I got to know Fred when we were waiting in the trench for the blast. He seemed as tough as me, tougher maybe. Sometime being tougher doesn’t mean you’ll make it. Maybe he was too tough to understand what was happening to him. I think I just let it pass through me, but Fred tried hard to fight it. But how do you fight something that big.”

He sighed and stubbed out the cigarette on the porch floor boards.

“It’s been thirty years since that day in the trench. But I still hear those voices sometimes. Millions of them. Reminding me that it happened and that I’m part of it all. Never letting me forget.”

I asked him if he wanted to see a doctor now. Maybe they have some up with ways to help him, after all this time.

“Gage, nobody would believe me. No one has. The Army shut the project down years ago and most people have forgotten they even did those bomb tests. The generals are all dead now and probably most of the doctors as well.”

I heard my mother’s voice calling us in for dinner.

I asked him if my mother believed him.

“She doesn’t really know. She was a little girl when I came home that summer from the hospital. She knew I was different. I tried to explain. But she was young. Younger than you. And she is not the believer-type. Some people are. Some people aren’t.”

“I believe you,” I had said, with the plain matter-of-factness of children.

After we ate I did my homework and was in my room getting ready

for bed when my grandfather came in.

He held the copy of *Our Friend the Atom* in his hands. He had repaired it with Scotch tape, putting back the pages he had torn out the week before. He handed it back to me.

“I’m sorry for what I did to your book. I don’t agree with all of what’s in here. Just because it leaves out so much. But now you have the whole story. The whole story of the atom. You can make up your own mind.”

He laid the book down on my bed and turned to go. Then he stopped and looked at me.

“I would give anything to go back. To the desert, another blast. To feel what I felt back then, all over again. One last time.”

There were tears in his eyes.

The next morning he was gone. We searched the neighborhood, then called the police late that day and filed a missing persons report.

We called the news stations and had his picture put on TV. We waited for word; days, a week, then a month. We never saw him again. He had taken the leather bound book with him.

My mother didn’t take it that hard. Looking back on it now, maybe she didn’t believe that his story was true. Maybe because he was old and didn’t have much time anyway, and that makes it easier for children to let go of their parents.

But I knew what he wanted. And even now, I have no doubts that after that night in my bedroom he went out for the desert. Hoping to find his nuclear blast and all of the sensations and clarity that it must have brought him that first time so long ago.

Nowadays people talk about moments of epiphany that they get from literature, or movies, or religion, or sexual encounters, but for my grandfather maybe the only real moments that he lived were when he was caught up in the man-made inferno.

For many years now, there have been nights I lay awake next to Keira at our house in New Mexico, with the bedroom windows open hoping to hear that chorus of voices,, of all thinking and feeling creatures calling out to me across the desert and across time.

And I quietly weep.

Dirty

Jen Gabrielson

Did it feel good,
dirtying up the little girl
who wasn't even yours?

Did it turn you on
when no one was home,
just the two of you?

Was it exciting knowing
that no one knew,
and no one would
for years,
your little game
could go on.

Does it feel good now,
everyone knows
and it's over for good.

You can no longer have
the woman who was never yours.

Bottle Cap

Raud Kennedy

In a tunnel,
struggling to get to the far end.
Family, friends await.
Refuse bruises, cuts my knees.
Twist off tops, ketchup bottles,
things that snails live in.
Anger gave me a shell,
but now I've nothing,
just the survival instinct
to get to the other end.

Waffles

Jamie Grimes

“What happened to you?” Randall beamed his usual cool smirk as he slid into the booth with such fluidity that the seat cushion didn’t even begin to make that embarrassing mock-flatulence noise. “Never seen one of Satchel’s guys with so much as a hair out of place. And you--”

“Long story,” Martin mumbled through a mouthful of waffle and egg, glancing up from his newspaper to acknowledge his associate’s arrival. Martin’s hair was a damp mess of black tangles that kept falling in front of his face, no matter how often he swept the stray strands behind his ears. His clothes--a dark blue Brooks Brothers business suit--had what looked like mud at the cuffs and at the collar; there was a hole in the right shoulder of his jacket, another through the left lapel, and one that went through the left forearm.

Randall pushed up on the edge of Martin’s paper and struggled through the pronunciation of the headline. “I never even stopped to think that you guys was literate. Figured that, considering the business, you was more, you know, television guys.”

Martin swallowed and readied another bite of breakfast food. “I like the pictures.” He picked up his fork and pointed the waffle-covered end at Randall. “Have you ever tried the food here?”

“Can’t say that I have.” Randall leaned back in his booth, away from the syrup-drenched offering, then he reached between the napkin holder and condiment rack for a laminated menu. “Never eaten at a Waffle Lodge. Sounds yummy.”

“Try the waffles and eggs.” Martin shoved more food into his mouth. “Raisin toast is good, too.”

“I was thinking about the steak and potatoes,” Randall said, tapping the picture in the middle of the brightly colored sheet.

Martin shook his head.

“What?”

“What’s the name at the top of the menu?” Martin asked, tapping the tip of his fork against the top of the menu.

Randall paused, then responded. “Waffle Lodge?”

“Waffle Lodge.” Martin tapped on the menu with his fork again. “Not the fucking Steak Shack. Waffle Lodge. You know what that means?”

“What?”

“Means the steak’s shit. Try the waffles.”

“Right, then. Never had breakfast food this late at night. You mind telling me what’s got Satchel calling around for help at three o’clock in the morning? I’d be home asleep if I didn’t need the money.”

“He didn’t tell you?” Martin made eye contact with a waitress with a Lucille Ball haircut and freckles everywhere on her face except the tip of her nose; he nodded for her to come over.

“No. He just said for me to meet you here soon as I could. Nothing other than that.”

“No?”

The red-haired waitress stopped at the end of the booth and pulled a notepad from her wrinkled, grease-spotted apron. Her look was the picture of utter indifference; her voice was husky and monotonous. “What can I get for you?”

Randall’s finger rubbed the picture of the steak platter on the shimmering menu. He ran his tongue against his teeth and looked over at Martin, who was shaking his head. “Steak and potatoes. And a tea, unsweetened. You can do unsweetened, right?”

“We don’t get many orders for it, but I can brew some up special for you,” she said as she jotted down his order.

“I’d appreciate it.”

The waitress confirmed his order and walked off to greet a family of four that was coming in. After a short conversation with the waitress, she quickly left. Martin smirked and rolled his eyes at Randall.

“What?” Randall shrugged as he removed his silverware from the white-napkin-and-tape wrapping.

“Nevermind.”

“What is it?”

Martin closed his paper and set it net to his plate. After staring Randall down with an apathetic expression, he leaned forward with his elbows on the edge of the table and his hands interlocked in front of his mouth.

“You ever been to Great Steaks Alive?” Martin asked.

Randall nodded.

“Of course you have. And I bet you ordered a steak when you went, didn’t you?”

Randall threw his legs into the empty cushion and pulled a cigarette from his jacket pocket. “Yeah, I had the steak.”

“And it was a good steak, wasn’t it?”

“Christ.” Randall reached into his pocket and took out a silver lighter with a devil’s face etched into the side. He put the cigarette in

his mouth. "Is this why Satchel called me down here, to find out my dining preferences?"

"I'm proving a point. Just bare with me."

"Alright," Randall moaned as he flicked the top of the lighter open with his thumb; yellow fire shot up. He lifted the flame above his head and waved it for dramatic affect. Feigning a British accent, he said, "It was a good steak."

Martin shot his hands forward; one knocked the cigarette onto the table; the other smothered the lighter.

Randall lurched back and shielded his face with his forearms. "Jesus, what was that about?" He glanced through his arms at Martin, watching as he examined the etching on the lighter.

"There's no smoking in here." Martin ran his thumb over the devil's face, then pulled a fresh handkerchief from his breast pocket, cleaned off the smudges, and handed it back to Randall. "That's a quality lighter."

"Yeah." Randall relaxed as the waitress approached with his platter. He straightened his collar and gave her a crooked smile. "Got it not too far back. Works like a beauty."

"Just give a holler if you need anything else, sugar," the waitress chimed in, sliding Randall's order down in front of him. The cook's rendition of the steak platter looked nothing like the perfectly portioned and garnished dish that was the centerpiece of the Waffle Lodge dinner selections. Instead, what sat before him was a mass of gray meat and an equally-sized lump of off-white potato cream with little green specks mixed into it. Between the meat and the potatoes there was a heap of sliced peppers and soggy onionssitting in a pool of dirty brown liquid. Randall picked up his fork and pushed the heap of mushy vegetables onto the table.

"Let me finish what I was saying before you try to eat that," Martin said, putting his hand over Randall's fork.

"Just get to the point. Unless you're paying me for my charming chit-chat."

"Look. You went to Great Steaks Alive, you got the steak, right?"

"Right."

"Of course. You go to a steak place, you get the steak. You go to a Chinese buffet, you eat the Chinese food. You don't eat those little rubberyfried chicken wings, nobody does. You want chicken at a buffet, you eat the Kung Pao or the General Tso's." Martin motioned for Randall to eat. "Try the steak."

Randall cut into the gray beef with his butter knife. "They could've at least brought a steak knife," he said.

Martin smiled as Randall used his knife to stab the tough meet. “I wonder how many people have ever had the steak. You may very well be the first.”

Just then, Randall bit into his steak and chewed. His face distended with disgust.

“Well, how’s the steak?” Martin asked through a chuckle.

Quickly, Randall pulled a handful of napkins from the dispenser and spit the gnawed meat into them. As he wadded the paper and meat into a ball, he choked on the taste. “Awful.”

Martin sat back and clasped his hands together. “Of course it is. It’s awful because this isn’t fucking Great Steaks Alive. It’s Waffle Lodge. Waffle Lodge.” He scooped a bit of his waffle onto his fork and put it down next to Randall’s steak, just outside the reach of the mysterious brown liquid that was slowly invading the potato mass. “The waffles are damn-near orgasmic, but the salads, the steaks, all that other shit sucks.”

Randall nudged the donated waffle with his fork.

“There are occasional anomalies, but on the whole, if you go to a place and said place has an understood specialization, you can bank on that specialization to be the best item on the menu. It’s an issue of propriety on the part of the establishment.”

“That so?” Randall asked before tasting the waffle.

“It is. How’s the waffle?”

Randall wiped his mouth with the edge of a napkin. “It’s good. Real good.”

“And the point of my little culinary diatribe is this,” Martin said, raising his index finger for added emphasis. “You gotta know what it is you’re dealing with. Not just when it comes to food, either.”

Randall held his tea, swirling it and making the ice rattle. “I get what you’re saying. Deep philosophical shit.” He took a long gulp from the clear plastic mug and grimaced. “Fucking sweat tea.”

“What do you know about Satchel?” Martin asked as he pulled a cigarette from his pocket and lit it with a pink plastic lighter.

“I know nobody fucks with him. I know that.”

Martin took a long drag from his cigarette and blew the smoke up into the air.

“What about no smoking?” Randall asked, glancing down at his own cigarette, which had rolled to the edge of the table.

“I’m a hypocrite. Besides, nobody cares if you smoke in here. Do you see any No Smoking signs? I was just fucking with you.” He took another drag. “You know why it is nobody fucks with Satchel?”

“He’s got you guys, for starters.” Randall picked up his neglected cigarette and flicked the ash over his potato lump. “Gotta go through you to get to him. I don’t think I even know anyone that’s ever seen him in person. Can’t nobody get through you guys.”

“Well, that’s a very humbling sentiment, Randall.” Martin bowed gracefully, humble. “But, no. You see, I’m just a thug, a grunt, a heavy. What Satchel needs done, I get done. That’s what I do. But Satchel,” he chuckled, shook his head, “Satchel’s the sick mother fucker that sets everything into motion. He plans it all out to the letter, makes it real easy to follow. Hell, Randy--”

“Randall.”

Martin blew smoke across the table. “Well, *Randall*, I bet even you could do the stuff he tells us to do.”

Randall lit his cigarette and puffed. “You know what he wants me to do, or what?”

“Yeah, I know.” Martin opened his jacket, revealing the tops of two folded sheets of paper sticking out of his breast pocket. “Got these from Satchel earlier today. Like I said, it’s all planned out to the letter.”

Before Randall could reach for the letters, Martin closed his jacket and began fastening the buttons. “But we’ll get to that soon enough. Let me tell you a little story about how we got to where we are.

“A couple of weeks ago, someone tried to take out Satchel while he was taking a shit at Chez Dante.”

“Taking a shit?”

Martin flicked the end of his cigarette. Ash flicked onto his eggs. “Man’s gotta shit, don’t he? I mean, Satchel’s about as classy as they come, and he probably would have waited until he got back to his place to release the hounds, but incontinence waits for no man. Not even Satchel.”

Randall snickered.

“So, Satchel’s doing his thing when his guy at the stall door gets taken out, right? Wasn’t no gunshot or nothing. Guy got taken down by a dart through the neck and then got dragged off into one of the other stalls. Now, I’ve said that Satchel’s a classy guy, but he’s still a crazy mother fucker if you get him in the mood. And that’s just the kind of thing that sets him off.”

Randall sipped his tea. “He kill the guy?”

“Nah. I was working the same restaurant that night. Neither one of us saw the guy. My guess is somebody else must’ve come in before he could get to Satchel, threw him off. That’s my guess. I got a call on my cell, Satchel in the men’s room, and when I get there it’s just him pacing back

and forth with his pants around his ankles, bare ass to the four winds. Like I said, crazy. He was so set to find the fucker that killed Jimenez that he'd forgotten he had his drawers down. Would've been a funny sight if it weren't so damned scary."

"So he wants me to help find the guy who tried to off him?"

"Call I tell the story?"

"Sorry."

Martin smirked. "Thank you," he said. "So word gets back to Satchel that Tito Cabrone knows the guy, and I get the call first thing this mornin' to go have a pleasant conversation with him."

"With Cabrone?"

Martin put his cigarette out in a pool of syrup on his plate. "You're keeping up. Good. Satchel insisted that I take somebody with me, and since I was going just to gather information, I got the new guy."

"I hate new guys."

"So I'm stuck with this guy, Sammy or something like that, and I can tell he's nervous from the start. Can smell the guy's sweat and nervous funk, even over that load perfume he was wearing. He said he did it for the benefit of his marks; he wanted the last thing they smelled to be something good, since they were going to be stuck for eternity with the smell of rotting ass."

Randall shook his head. "Goddamn."

"I know. I never put much stock in gimmicks. Don't really have any habits, other than smoking." Martin lit another cigarette. "Anyways, I try not to smoke around the new guys out of respect, because most of them grew up with humidifiers and air filters, and I'm afraid they'll rupture a lung or something. But that perfume was getting to me."

"Guy had balls asking me to not smoke in my own car. Did it real calm. Calm is scary, especially when it comes from a guy that size. So I offered him a smoke, real gentlemanly. Of course, I was being a smart ass. Just trying to bullshit with the guy a little, trying to get him to relax. He was making *me* nervous. As much fun as it is watching new guys that close to pissing themselves, it really wasn't the time."

"So we get to Tito's place, and it takes forever for him to come to the door. New guy's getting fidgety, pacing a lot, like a kid that stole a cookie right before dinner. I keep knocking 'til Tito comes, coked up to the moon and back, still got the shit under his nose. He's sopping with sweat like he knew we were coming."

"So Tito lets us in, and I'm not sure who's shaking more, him or the new guy. So I say to Tito, to both of them really, that we were just going to have a little informal exchange and be on our way, trying to calm every-

body down. We sit there watching each other for a few dragging minutes. Nobody's moving, making any noise. so I pull out my gun and start polishing it, because I was bored, mostly--and that's the first thing I think to do when I'm bored--but that seemed to make Tito real talkative."

"Probably thought you were going to kill him," Randall pointed out.

"You think?" Martin responded with narrowed eyes.

"Sorry. Go on."

"So Tito opens up like a paper fan at a Southern Baptist convention. Starts talking about things don't nobody care about. Said his mom and dad molested him when he was a kid, that he took his anger out on stray dogs and cats. He went into this long, autobiographical rant about how he didn't want to get involved with the drug game but needed the money, started crying.

"When Tito starts begging for his life, that's when Sammy loses it. He flies across the room and fucking sacks the guy and starts pistol-whipping him in the back of the head. I hadn't ever seen anything like that, not from a new guy. I thought Tito was dead when I managed to pull Sammy back. He tries to argue with me, *me*, saying that Tito was just trying to bullshit for more time. And I tell him, first of all, that it isn't his decision when we shelve the pleasantries, and second, that I know the difference between the look a man has when he's bullshitting and the look a man has when he's got the fear of God in him. If he'd killed Tito, I probably would have shot him on principle.

"But Tito wasn't dead." Martin patted his right shoulder and tugged gently on the circular perforation in his jacket. "And this was how he said thanks, soon as I turn around to check on him. I'm surprised he managed to hit me at all, frantic as he was. Second shot caught Sammy in the stomach."

"Sammy die?" Randall asked.

"Sammy got pissed, shot out Tito's kneecaps and started pistol-whipping him again. I try to talk him down, and he tells me to stay the fuck back, that he ain't taking any more from the little punk, and he puts his pistol to Tito's head. Now I'm fucking livid. I'm bleeding from the shoulder, my suit is ruined. I never meant for things to get so out of hand. If things got dirty, I planned on making it as quick and tidy as I could. But now there's fucking blood everywhere, and I'm not sure who I want to shoot more, Tito or Sammy. So I say 'fuck it' and go into the bathroom to call Satchel."

"You left those two alone?"

"Like I said, fuck it. Satchel promised his immediate attention, so I took my time in the bathroom. Cleaned out the fucking hole in my shoul-

der with peroxide and found some gauze and bandages to wrap it with. Checked out the cabinets, found Tito's coke stash. I felt bad taking it, you know, but then he wan't gonna need it once the clean-up crew got there.

"When I come out of the bathroom, Tito's damn-near unconscious in the corner. Sammy's sitting on the couch, holding his stomach. 'Satchel's got someone coming,' I tell him, then I sit down in the comforter by the door. I thought to tell him to go deal with his stomach wound, but at that point I could give a shit. So we sit there, all of us quietly bleeding together, when someone knocks on the door. I was expecting Dimante or Lilly, but no, when I open the door, Satchel's standing in the hall in the sharpest suit I've ever seen in my life. Fucking immaculate. And Nigel and Stitch were at his back.

"Sorry it took so long for us to get here,' Satchel says, 'but we had to take care of something of great consequence.' He looks over my shoulder at Sammy on the couch and at Tito in the corner, and he motions for Nigel and Stitch to go in.

"Satchel,' I say, 'I can't work like this. This fucking newbie--"

"He puts his hands on my shoulders and I go quiet. Don't even feel any pain where I got shot. Just calm. 'Don't worry,' he says. 'We got this under control.' He hands me two letters, the ones I've shown you. 'Seems Mister Cabrone is no longer necessary.' He goes on. 'Take that mother fucker over to the residence of one Mister Jackson Andrews. His address is in the letter. You take that mother fucker, get what you can out of him, then divest yourself of our little scrub. Bury that mother fucker in Andrews backyard, up to his neck, and you cover it with something conspicuous. I don't know, tumbleweeds or something. Here that, Cabrone?' he shouts over my shoulder. His eyes are little red beads. 'You're only necessary as long as you're useful. When you're no longer useful, you're no longer necessary. You got that? That's the way this business works.'

"Tito didn't respond.

"You need anything?" he asks me. 'A beverage or something?'

"I shake my head, tell him I'm okay. Nigel and Stitch drag Sammy out, agreeing that he probably wasn't going to make it.

"Hell, no, he's not going to make it," Satchel says. he backhands Sammy across the face. He says, 'You're bleeding on my gators,' and motions toward the door. 'Get him the fuck out of here. I'll deal with him in a minute.' He turns to me. 'Everything else you need is in the papers. Call me when you're done.'

"Tito doesn't say much in the car, except he mumbles 'I'm sorry' over and over 'ti I give up trying to get anything out of him and tell him to not

bother talking. Then he just cries until he passes out. I'm pretty sure the guy's dead, but when I check, he's still got a pulse, which I think is good, at first, until I remember that he's got no fucking kneecaps and, alive or not, I'm gonna have to lug this guy around.

"When we get to Andrews' place, and I'm sure there isn't anybody around, I gather up my shovel and pickax from the trunk and take them out to Andrews' garden and come back for Tito. Now, I don't think I could have carried Tito too much further if I had two functioning arms, but I try and end up dropping him head-first on the pavement. He doesn't move. If he wasn't dead, he is now, I think. So I drag him around back of the house and go back to the car for my chainsaw."

Martin took a sip of orange juice, then a deep breath. He rubbed his eyes with his thumbs.

"What's the chainsaw for?" Randall stammered, his eyes wide and intense, his forehead beaded with sweat. "What d'you need that for?"

Martin shrugged. "It was in the letter, Satchel's letter. I didn't question it. Not at all.

"I'm about a quarter-inch into Tito's back when he starts screaming bloody murder. Scares the piss out of me. I fall backward, almost cut my face off with the chainsaw. I get up, wipe the dust out of my eyes. Tito's laying on his stomach in the dirt with a spurting gash a couple of inches above his ass crack. He ain't moving his body, just rolling his head around and screaming, gasping for air and screaming. Under normal conditions, it wouldn't have bothered me that he's bawling like this, but I'm not a monster. I do have some compassion, especially when I think that total wrath is a little excessive. So I take off my jacket and cover his head with it, and when I get him to hold still, I shoot him through the mouth, then I finish with the sawing and I bury him up to his neck in the garden, as per my instructions. Satchel wanted conspicuous, I give him conspicuous. I find a bucket big enough to cover his head and use a little of the blood from the corners of his mouth to draw a smiley face on it. Andrews is gonna get a mighty big rise when he finds it.

"Wasn't until I was washing up with the garden hose that I remembered Satchel's letters. That's when I found out I was supposed to meet you here. So you'll have to excuse the way I look, didn't really have time to make myself beautiful."

"You look fine," Randall said. "A little muddy at the cuffs, but not too noticeable." He used his thumb and forefinger to free a dried lump from the cuff of Martin's jacket. It fell onto Randall's plate.

"I don't think that's mud," Martin said.

Randall pulled back. "Well," he said as he used a napkin to wipe his fingertips. "What does Satchel need from me?"

Martin took the papers from his jacket pocket, put them on the table, and folded his hands on top of them. "You know, you never gave an adequate answer as to why it is that nobody fucks with Satchel. So let me ask you this: What do you think is Satchel's business?"

Randall shrugged. "Drugs, I know for sure."

"No. It's a little-known fact that Satchel neither condones nor condemns the use of drugs. He only allows his people to deal if he's got control of the quality, the purity of the product, doesn't even take his cut. He's more like the government regulators in places like Amsterdam. But he's not directly connected. Good guess, though."

"He's killed people, right? He's some kind of hitman?"

"There's no money in killing. Not for him anyways. That's where people like me come in. I don't think he's killed anybody, ever. Not personally. Let me phrase my question differently. Where do you think Satchel makes his money?"

"Well." Randall scratched his chin. "He's not in the drug game, doesn't make hits. Con artist?"

"No."

"He run numbers?"

"Nope."

"Well, fuck, man." Randall threw up his hands. "Shit if I know."

Martin tapped the end of his fork on the table. "No idea?" He leaned forward against the table and gestured for Randall to do the same. "You want to know where Satchel makes his money?"

Randall nodded.

"Waffles," Martin said, his face inches from his colleague's.

"Waffles?"

"Waffles. Satchel's a waffle cook."

Randall relaxed. "You're bullshitting me."

Martin laughed quietly. "Yeah, I'm bullshitting you. He's in coke and heroin up to his hairline. I wanted to see just how gullible you are. Here." He unfolded Randall's letter and held it up for him to read.

Randall's eyes swelled and threatened to break from their holdings. There were many words that he didn't understand, and the few he did recognize made his stomach gurgle.

"I know what you're thinking right about now," Martin said, lowering the paper and replacing it with a gun. "You don't want to die in a fucking Waffle Lodge. Well, you certainly wouldn't be the first. But I've been

thinking, here recently, in the time it took you to read the letter, that if Satchel were a cook, I guess that'd make me one of his waffles. See, if it weren't for him, I probably wouldn't be nearly so good at what I do. Long time ago he gave me the contempt for backstabbling mother fuckers like you." He tapped his index finger gingerly against the trigger. "But after the Tito incident, I'm not so sure I want to be a waffle anymore. Know what I'm saying?"

Randall shook his head frantically, expectantly. "So you're not going to kill me?"

Martin snickered. "No. I'm still going to kill you. I'm just saying, I don't know if I can do the things Satchel wants done to you. Especially after I saw what they did to Sammy. How is the steak?" he added, framing the last word with quotation fingers.

A gelatinous, white fluid trickled onto Randall's jacket from the corner of his mouth, but his expression didn't change, though he was trying to choke down the rush of vomit that had filled his mouth. Martin wiped Randall's chin with a napkin.

"Not that good," said Martin. "I tried to tell you, didn't I? Tried to give you a chance, but you didn't listen. How do you think you'd taste, cooked up and covered with steak sauce?"

Randall closed his eyes to keep from thinking about the steak.

Martin continued. "I don't want you to end up like that. You see, I know that I'm a bad person, can't do nothing about that at this point, far as I can tell. But I don't know whether or not you're deserving of Sammy's fate, but if I had darted Jimenez and payed off Sammy--besides, it wasn't enough to keep him from spilling it all just before, well, you know--but if it had been *me*, I would have either finished the job or made myself disappear, but you didn't know what you were getting yourself into did you?"

Randall whimpered, reached luggishly for the weapon in his pocket.

Martin cocked the hammer on his pistol. "Hands on the table, idiot. You gonna fucking dart me in the neck, too? Take *my* lighter, go ahead; it cost fifty cents. I've met some ridiculously moronic lackies in my day, but you, *you*, you may very well be one of the slowest. Who uses darts, nowadays? What kind of gimmick is that, anyways? So outdated. Now we have these things called guns. You saw what Satchel wanted done to you, and some of it may be justified. And quite honestly, I could give a shit. I've done some heinous shit for Satchel, but that Tito shit kinda got to me. I'm done being a waffle, man. I ain't cutting up nobody else. Fucking done. Not quite sure what Satchel will think of that, but I think he'll understand. I think I can deal with being raisin toast."



down in the dirt

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