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Cobalt Review

Baltimore, MD

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Submissions for the quarterly Cobalt Review are accepted at all times. The 2015 Cobalt Writing Prizes are currently open for submissions; and we are now reading for the 2015 annual print issue.

issue fourteen

march ten,

twenty-fifteen

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(prose)

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INNA TELKOVA

IN COURT AT TWELVE

“Don’t look at your feet. It makes you look guilty,” my sister Maria whispered, her Trident tropical breath tickling my ear as I sat on a polished, russet bench in the Scott County Courthouse. At 9 a.m. on May 25, 2006, I should have been leaning back in a navy chair during Language Arts class, passing a note from Emily to Ricky, drawing in a few hearts and kisses just to mess with their relationship. Instead, exactly two weeks before summer break, I clutched my hands in my lap and forced myself to stare into the distance.

Seven jurors—Sandra Freer, Charles Kaiser, Matthew Masica, Helen Shannon, Stephanie Thissen, Marijo Thomforde, and Cheri Yanghans—wore their poker faces¹. They nodded their heads as the lawyers spoke, but their pens doodled on the government issued notepads. Measuring by the size, repetition, and pressure exerted on the words, one juror begged for my father to get an interpreter, but during the two day trial, my father refused. Despite living in America for six years, his English sounded primitive. His faith in the government also remained shaky, so he chose to be his own lawyer, and to avoid any false interpretations, had denied Maria Petrenko, his interpreter, the ability to translate.

On a typical day, sometime between January 18th and May 24th, two lawyers pulled me out of the class line as Miss Greer led us down to the gymnasium. I followed them into an office that I never knew existed, my pink and white Airwalks dragging across the carpeted floor, too cool to tie my shoes. Grey suits grilled me. They thought they could turn me into an informant just because my parents gave

birth to me last. I stood my ground. When asked if my dad allowed me to go to the movies, I lied.

“Of course. Why wouldn’t he?” They tried a new approach and probed my dad’s choice of discipline when I came home late from the movies.

“Nothing.”

“Absolutely nothing?”

“Nope...He never grounds me...I never get in trouble...No big deal...He’s a great dad.” After several minutes of my repeated answers, they left. I trembled as I walked down to gym class.

“What did they want?” Emily asked. My best friends Meghan, Sammy, and Gretchen joined the conversation. I teared up.

“Nothing. They just asked questions. It’s just nothing.” I only gave the details of the interviewee to one person: my sister Svetlana. They interrogated her as well, but unlike me, she mentioned that my father grounded us, a lie, but not an obvious one.

In 2006, the Scott County Child Protection Department received 1,541 reports (including my father’s case) of child abuse. A disgustingly low number of 333 actually got investigated. That means that at least 1,208 cases (keeping in mind that most families, like mine, have multiple kids) passed under the nose of justice. Even worse, only 165 of these cases received child protection.²

Minnesota requires the local welfare agency to decide in less than 24 hours whether or not to investigate or assess a child abuse report³. According to statute § 626.556, Subdivision 2, the state recognizes the following as physical abuse:

- Throwing, kicking, biting or cutting a child
- Striking a child with a closed fist

- Unreasonable interference with a child’s breathing
- Threatening a child with a weapon
- Giving a child poison, alcohol, or dangerous, harmful or controlled substances not prescribed by a practitioner
- Unreasonable physical confinement or restraint not permitted by law including, but not limited to: tying, caging, or chaining

Once, Maria called the police after my dad grabbed her barely highlighted hair and smashed her head into the white wall above the piano. By some miracle, the bruise refused to appear until after the officers arrived at the crime scene, talked to my dad, and left. These professionals ignored the signs of physical abuse and decided not to proceed with an assessment, and why, well because my two other sisters and I hid our discolored bodies in an upstairs bedroom. However, on the second day of my father’s trial, he defended himself not against Maria, but my other sister, Kseniya.

Carol Hooten, the judge in courtroom one, instructed the officer to swear Maria in as a witness on behalf of my father. She placed her hand on the bible and promised to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, and the first thing out of her mouth contradicted that promise. She shared tales of a knight in shining armor, of the wise man who reached enlightenment, of the demigod whom the heavens praised. She knew she lied, and so did I, but I refused to look at my feet because it made me look guilty. Then came the cross examination. Tanya O’Brien asked a question that I still ask today.

“If you are such a close family as you claim, then why were none of you present yesterday, supporting Kseniya?”

My parents, without ever explaining, banned me from attending Kseniya’s day in court when the prosecution laid out the evidence against my dad. Eight years after

the trial, I finally decided to storm the county court house and demand to see the trial transcript. A homicide researcher informed me that the court would not provide a transcript because that took too much work, but random documents existed that I could get my hands on. He instructed me to find out the basics of my dad's arrest.

After walking through a security check point at the court house, I approached an office window with circular holes to speak through.

"Hi. I was hoping to get someone's court records. The case number is 05000084."

"That's not a court number," responded the clerk.

"Oh," I stared at her. She stared at me.

"Fine, I'll look it up. What's the name?"

I pulled out my license because after 20 years, I still have not learned how to spell my middle name which is my father's name. She typed in his information.

"The case number is 70-CR-06-1695. Let me go look for it." It turned out that due to a renovation, they had relocated the file into a storage area, so they asked me to come back another day after they retrieved the records.

Three days later, I poured over those documents, reading every word, even the judge's instructions to the jurors on how to analyze the information provided. The first page claimed that the plaintiff presented four pictures: victim, victim's arm, victim's leg, and victim's second arm, but no copies of the photos existed in the file. I had hoped to see them because I could not recall the result of my dad's discipline on Kseniya's body.

I assumed it looked somewhat like my butt did at the age of 9 after my dad caught me watching *Along Came Polly*. Back then, he worked evenings at some factory.

Minutes before his shift ended, two friends, Svetlana, and I sat inches away from the TV screen as we watched the movie that I discovered in my dad's drawer while rummaging through it for some noble purpose. As the movie neared its one passionate sex scene, my dad turned the handle of the front door. We scattered. Of course, not one of us thought to turn the movie off.

For over an hour, my father used his methods of enhanced interrogation to find out who stole that movie. Svetlana looked over at me while on her knees, and as the leather kissed her bare back, she mouthed, "I'm sorry," and turned me in. Afterwards, my dad made sure that I would sleep on my stomach that night. When mom came home after working at Walmart, she chopped up onion, wrapped it in a lint, and placed it on my behind.

The next morning daddy brought me tea with honey and told me he loved me. No nurse could compare to the gentleness of his care. He replaced the lint with a new one, brought me meals all day, and brushed my hair out of my still sticky face. I told him I loved him too.

Kseniya's story resembled my own. She did something (stayed out late with her boyfriend to be exact). Dad didn't like it. She attempted to be Speedy Gonzales as he put on the role of Mr. CIA, acting as if my sister embodied Osama Bin Laden, chasing her through the bedroom. From the corner of my room, I heard bangs and booms, screams and shouts. My mom never went in to help. None of us did.

The criminal complaint states that Jeff Wycoff, the officer assigned to patrol the Shakopee High School, interviewed my sister after Alexis Tripps, a teacher, reported seeing multiple bruises on Kseniya. On January 3, she disclosed having trouble sleeping and getting up on her left side. On the 18th of that month, Erron Balfanz (I tried to figure out who he was, but got no luck in the documents) filed this criminal complaint and called my father into the station. Dad showed up and casually

confessed to adding color to my sister's skin.

Stop It Now! Minnesota, an organization dedicated to educating adults about child abuse, reported that 63% of child abusers understand what they do, don't like it, and wish to change.² My father, on the other hand, told the police officer that he would, without a doubt or second thought, lay his hand on my sister if she came home late, continued to date her boyfriend, or break one of the thousand rules set up in our house. Asked if he knew that his behavior broke a law, he didn't play the foreigner card. He admitted that he knew.

I didn't look at my feet during the trial, but I also didn't pay attention. How could I? It was my dad on trial, my sister, me.

At 2:25 the judge dismissed the court to let the jurors deliberate.

At 4:40 they came back with their verdict. On the count of malicious punishment of a child, Victor Victorovich Telkov was found not guilty. On the count of domestic assault-bodily harm, Victor Victorovich Telkov was found not guilty. He would not serve a year in prison or pay \$3,000.

No smile appeared on my face. No tears rolled down my cheeks. My heart continued to beat. Unsure if I accomplished my duty as a daughter or if I sentenced myself to torture, I walked out of the courtroom.

Notes:

1. Names and details come from official court records retrieved from Scott County Courthouse.
2. Hogendorf, Shawn. "Confronting Child Abuse." Southwest News Media. 5 April 2007.
3. Ann. Stat. § 626.556, Subd. 7, 10.
4. Hogendorf, Shawn. "Confronting Child Abuse." Southwest News Media.

THOMAS COURTNEY CLICK

DEEP BLUE SALOON

It was a clear day, and a stout breeze pushed the Ogygia over teal waters, heading south along the windward shore of Chinchamos island.

“Sure, I feel bad about the old lady,” the Grouper said to Bali and Branch. His curly, blond locks flapped in the wind as he pushed the wheel of the sailboat towards the southeast. “But there ain’t much we can do. Omar’s got Pam in the jail and we can’t do nothin’. I say we point this yacht towards Honduras and never look back.”

“Drop me off first,” Bali said, her blue eyes and black hair lighting up in the afternoon sunshine. Her wetsuit was pulled down around her waist, her golden bikini top in perfect creamy contrast with her dark-coffee skin. “I’m not going anywhere until she’s free.”

“Honduras? Panama would be better,” Branch said. “Get it through the canal and out into the Pacific as soon as possible. Who are you renting it from?”

“Chinchamos Outfitters,” the Grouper said. “It’s also for sale. But that kind of cash? Fuck it. Forty-two damn beautiful feet of waterline. I could live on it. Why not steal it?”

Branch took a sip of rum, closed his eyes and enjoyed the quiet power of the Ogygia, easily turning eight knots, he figured, under only the main and jib sheets.

“Because Chinchamos Outfitters is owned by Omar,” Branch told him. “He’d have someone chase you down in one of his speedboats and shoot you.” And then Branch got a lousy feeling as he thought about who that someone might be.

Bali and the Grouper only knew him as Branch, divemaster at Caribbean Argonauts Dive Shop. They didn't know that Branch's real job on Chinchamos was taking care of dirty little things for Omar. That was something they could never know.

Branch took another drink and looked at the windward shore of the island. He turned around and gazed out at the open water, where the turquoise horizon turned dark blue and then black.

"How much are they asking? For this boat?"

"Half-mil." The Grouper twisted his beard, then spat lazily into the water. "But I hear they'd take four-fifty. Why you care? Tips improving at the dive shop?"

There was no reply from Branch, and the Grouper rambled on. "Panama, huh? Who is it lives there? Is it Mezzicans?"

"Grouper, you're a real diplomat," Bali said. She smiled for the first time in the days since Pam's arrest, and then Branch admired the musical sound of her laughter.

"I believe the citizens of Panama refer to themselves as Panamanians," she said. "Quite a diverse culture there. Lots of Asian influences."

"I just like to get you going," the Grouper told her. Then he turned away from the wheel and looked directly at Branch. "You serious about buying her?"

"If I could, I'd buy it, and we'd all just go," Branch answered. "Put a desalination unit and an air compressor on it, and then just go. But I don't guess it's time for me to leave Chinchamos. Not just yet."

His cell phone vibrated on the teak bench. It was Omar again, undoubtedly wanting an answer about the Cuba job. He didn't know much about it, but it was something long distance, and he detested that kind of work any more; making a mess of a man without having to ever look him in the eye.

Need to clear my head before I talk to him, Branch thought. Need to get under some water.

“Why do you even carry one of those things?” Bali asked, nodding at the phone. “You’re always so worried about your privacy. You know they’re tracking you. Killing the honey bees, too.”

“Good point,” Branch said, turning the phone off and tossing it aside. “What’s this dive site you’re taking us to?”

Bali smiled again. It was an honest, strong smile, and it scared Branch. It was a smile that had its origins in a good family, and it was a smile that beamed at some happy path ahead. It was a straight path that those beautiful straight teeth smiled at, a path with a happy ending. A smile of faith. And she smiled at all those things Branch had never been able to believe in.

“Some sleeping shark caves a fisherman showed me. Really pristine coral. Five degrees to the southwest, Grouper,” she said, shielding her GPS unit from Branch’s view. “Every place gets ruined. Omar building a cruise ship pier right on top of Paradise Reef. So I’m keeping this place a secret.”

If only she could be in charge of things on Chinchamos, Branch thought. “No problem, Bali,” he said. “You can blindfold me, too.”

The wind from the east carried them along on the mainsheet and the jib, and then they were in a patch of aquamarine sandy shoals, surrounded by deep, blue water.

“This is it, Grouper,” Bali said. She powered down the GPS and zipped up her wetsuit. “Drop anchor in these shallows. We can kick out to the reef from here.

After Branch helped the Grouper bring the sails in, he dropped the anchor onto the soft sandy bottom. All three divers geared up, rolled in, and drifted down onto

the warmth of the sunlit sandy bottom, and then Bali led them out of the shoal and into the depths.

A school of parrotfish danced fast and wild to be away from the strange, bubble-blowing humans. They were miles away from Chinchamos Island, and Branch noted the absence of the usual banging and grinding noises from the cruise ships. The absolute silence made the water seem wilder and deeper.

As Bali kicked down, the sunlight sliced through the water behind her and illuminated her agile figure. Branch and the Grouper followed her into the grottoes hidden within the wall of coral.

They glided through an archway encrusted with purple gorgonians, swarming with French Angels and blue chromis. Branch hovered at the edge of the wall, then he went vertical after Bali, kicking down hard – 100, 110, 120, passing her at one-thirty. And he kept going.

The dark silhouettes of Bali and the Grouper were up above him, hanging like piñatas from the ceiling of some aquatic cantina. Branch dropped deeper. He floated onto a coral plateau and looked down with delight at the infinite oblivion that opened below him.

Then a little deeper and the pressure was crushing him, pleasantly, and the air from the tank was thick and sweet in his lungs. And in an instant he no longer felt lousy - about what was waiting for him in Cuba, about what he'd done with his life - and he wasn't afraid of dying. Because with every breath he was closer to that place where he could be alive and dead at the same time. He allowed the narcosis to come over him, and then he could almost hear a piano plinking out some sweet turtle-jazz music. His regulator squealed at the depth, but to Branch it was just the singing of some aquatic vocalist on stage in a dark and dingy bar. The bar he knew as the

Deep Blue Saloon.

Open mike night, he figured. Maybe one day he'd work up his own act. He drifted along, his worries over the Cuba job going up with his bubbles, and then at three hundred feet below sea level he hallucinated the watery outline of a girl, wearing a blue one-piece woven from the silkiest Sargasso.

“Hi, Branch,” he could almost hear the girl say to him almost sweetly, and as she leaned forward her cleavage almost bulged out of its watery costume. “Haven't seen you in awhile. Having the usual today?”

His own name sounded strange to him. For a moment he'd forgotten it, was hopeful others had forgotten it, too. He had some important business up above, but the awful urgency was replaced by foggy numbness. “Got to get, to go –”

“To go where, Branch?” he could almost hear the girl ask, and then she was whisking a silver platter in front of him, tempting him with shimmering highballs of amber analgesia. Branch felt himself pouring a glass of the tonic down his throat, and then quickly he was so intoxicated he'd forgotten all about Cuba.

“There's nothing for you up there, Branch. Stay with me. You're always rushing off, rushing away, up there,” the girl almost pleaded, nodding upwards.

Branch looked up at the blue glow of the surface, four hundred feet above him. It looked like some intricate, sparkling chandelier. “Pretty lights,” he said to someone, almost, and he struggled to remember what business was waiting. It was like a phone number some sexy girl had given him in a dream. When he woke up from the dream the phone number slowly evaporated, but he wanted to dial it anyway.

He poured down another drink and wondered - which was the dream? Here, with this almost waitress? Or up there? And whatever was waiting for him?

“Got to get going,” he said. “Got an appointment. Up there. Just not sure what it is.”

The girl quieted his excuses with more shots of the almost tonic, and then she told him, “You should stay. Who knows? You might even see a Maltese Bikinifish!”

This was both encouraging and hilarious to Branch. He smiled, and with the smile he found the regulator in his mouth to be a nuisance. Why should he be bothered with such a thing? He wanted to spit it out, and then at last his life would have meaning. He’d spend what was left of it exploring the mating habits of the Maltese Bikinifish. A real job at last. There had been that year of teaching in Florida, but in the end that had been just almost, too.

Branch’s dive console beeped and buzzed at him, informing him that both drowning and decompression sickness were imminent. He wanted to look at the console, but the girl held his gaze with her beautiful green eyes and her bright smile.

“Got to find the pay phone,” Branch said, and as he did, he forced himself to look at the dive computer. The digits and lights were meaningless. He was too nitrogen stoned to understand them, but he was dazzled by their backlit, fluorescent beauty. He floated off, heard the girl telling him almost goodbye, and then Branch was crawling out the back door of the bar and into the alley.

He lingered in the alley, played with the sand there, admired its silty softness. He glanced out into the interminable depths – looks like they’ve set up a volleyball court out back! – and he saw shadows moving on it. A pair of twenty-foot tiger sharks seemed to be playing volleyball with a loggerhead turtle. They were ripping it to pieces, popping its head back and forth over the net with their snouts, eating huge chunks of its body. Branch floated towards the sharks to get in on the game; the sharks, afraid of his ruthless abandon, scurried to get away and disappeared.

Branch watched as the turtle’s bloody, decapitated head sank down into the depths,

and he remembered Cuba. He felt lousy again as he thought of what some innocent man's head would look like if he did the job waiting for him there.

Then a rumble grabbed him by his ears, and the rumble started to pull him upwards. Back above three hundred the rumble became a roar. At two hundred the roar was a Monday morning alarm clock, screaming at him that he was late for work. At one fifty Branch recognized what the scream really was: the grinding noise from the propellers of a cruise ship, leaving Chinchamos and shredding the quiet of the wild waters as it passed by a mile to the north.

What was the name of that fish? A Maltese Bikinifish? Ain't no such thing. And then he knew no one would have forgotten his name.

After a long deco stop on the way up, Branch joined Bali and the Grouper in the azure shallows. Then the three divers surfaced into the swell left by the passing cruise ship, now a smoking blemish on the horizon. Back on board the Ogygia, they hoisted anchor and sailed towards a string of tiny islands bisecting the channel between Chinchamos and the mainland.

They anchored the boat in a small, deep inlet near the largest of the islands then waded ashore with the ice chest. Bali and Branch lay out on the warm sand while the Grouper free dived from the beach, hunting lobster for their supper.

“What did you see down there?” Bali asked. “You were way past the limits.”

“See?” Branch asked, grinning. “More of a feeling, but what did I see? Neon lights. A bar. A waitress, a big tray of – I think it was – nitrogen martinis? Couple of rough customers out back. Playing volleyball.”

“Getting stoned, as usual. What else did you see?”

“In the Deep Blue Saloon,” Branch told her, “in the back rooms, and in the dingy

booths, down around two fifty and beyond, there's this angel of a waitress down there."

"A saloon. Perfect. But the angel part is interesting. What does this angel waitress do?"

"What angels are supposed to do. Watch over you. And then forgive you for every bad thing you ever done."

"What bad things?" she asked, but when Branch said nothing she moved on. "It's that easy to find forgiveness? I never knew."

"Oh, yeah. Easy to find. Just one problem. The forgiveness fades away with every foot you rise up."

"You could serve a purpose here in the real world," Bali said. "Instead of killing yourself down there. Besides, you might miss out on some good things up here."

"Maybe so," he said, challenged, and now tempted by her.

"These bad things you mention," she said. "Whatever it is you've done. There's bound to be a better way to put it behind you."

"What could be better?"

"Going that deep? Aren't you afraid of dying? Sorry, but if you browned out and started to sink, I would not be coming after you. Not way down there. Not on plain air."

"Plain air's the only way to go. It's a nitrogen thing, Bali. Nitrogen."

"It's a way to go, alright. Out. There wouldn't be any saving you."

"Guess not. You afraid of dying?"

"No," she said. "Not of dying. But wasting my life, yeah. Not reaching my potential."

Not having all the great sex I'm supposed to have. That's why I wouldn't go past one thirty. Unless I was using tri-mix."

She reached across the sand and placed her soft, brown fingers on his hand.

Branch said nothing. He fought off the urge, reminded himself that he couldn't risk blowing his cover. He was so close to having enough; so close to being able to leave the life and make a fresh start.

"But when the moment comes," Bali continued, stroking his hand, "I do wonder."

"The moment?" Branch asked. He tried to distract himself, but her hand was soft and smooth and she was talking about death and he found himself riotously ready to take her.

"That moment. Like that cave-in last week. It was right behind me and I just knew that you and Pam and the Grouper were dead. I felt helpless. Couldn't do anything to help you. Then you rescued the others the way you did, and you don't even know there was a reason for it all."

Branch moved his head to get a better view of her firm physique plastered against the sand, trying to weigh the benefits of any involvement with her. Her nipples poked through her golden bikini top, and her navel piercings glistened in the sun, the golden reflections shimmering on her flat, brown belly.

"Oh," he said. "That moment. You don't need to worry. You're young and smart. You'll have a good life. A strong life. It'll be in a warm bed somewhere a long time from now, and there'll be someone there to hold your hand. No, it's a waste of time for you to worry about it. It will do all the work for you. When that moment comes."

Branch paused, looked out at the Grouper's bubbles on the water. "You're not like me, Bali. I been dancing with it too long. Anyway, that's a long way off for you. "

“You must jack off a lot. You and your imaginary barmaid.”

Branch laughed, admiring how Bali had said it without being mean. “Sometimes it’s for the best.”

“Don’t you want something real? Do you believe in anything real?”

“I believe in the laws of physics,” Branch told her. “And I believe in nitrogen narcosis. I guess that’s it.”

“Narcosis is real,” Bali said. “But what you see down there isn’t. I’m into real stuff. Like love and family. Like protecting the reef and the turtles. And stopping Omar and the pier project. You should find your path. A real one.”

“I had a real path. In the Navy. But I washed out. Then I found something I loved doing. Washed out again. And I just kind of fell into the cracks. Don’t know how to get out.”

Bali laughed as she looked out at the ocean. “You’ve got a strength about you. We could use you. But that’s a mighty deep crack you fell into.”

She was interrupted by an enormous splash as the Grouper shot up from his underwater hunting.

“Got a monster,” he shouted, holding up a bulging catch bag. “Couple more down there, under a coral head, pretty deep for just snorkeling, but I’ll get ‘em. Get the fire started.” Then there was another splash and he disappeared.

Bali put her leg over his and then she slid over on top of him. She looked back over her shoulder towards the water and the Grouper’s bubbles. Then she kissed him, and he didn’t resist. Salty, strange and cautious, warm and delicate.

The kiss might have gone on for hours – or perhaps it was only a few seconds – somewhere in between. The Grouper was still down on his free dive, and Branch

knew his chubby buddy couldn't hold his breath that long. But the kiss felt timeless. Then there was another splash as the Grouper surfaced, announcing that supper had arrived.

Branch gathered driftwood from the beach and tried to shake off his stoned confusion, while Bali helped the Grouper prepare the contents of his catch bag. By the time they started the fire the glow from the west was bouncing off the glassy waters, painting the beach and the jungle of the little island with pink and orange strokes.

Bali grilled the lobster and served it with cold potato salad from the ice chest. They finished the meal with some canned peaches and a piece of chocolate cake the Grouper had brought from the boat. It was barely dark, but the stars were already sizzling in the clear sky. The fire was burning low and Branch admired the shadows from the small flames as they strobed Bali's face. The Grouper poured more rum into Branch's glass, then pulled out a bag of mushrooms.

"Gather 'round, kiddies," he said. "The man with the goodies is here."

"What do you have there, Grouper?" Bali asked.

"All cultures have their sacraments," the Grouper said, a large amount of sacrament already stuffed in his bearded cheek. "And these Rangoonese mushrooms are just for us white boys. We don't know what might happen if a real Indian ate this medicine."

"I'm Asian, dumbass," Bali told him. "Why would mushrooms from Rangoon be for white boys and not for me?"

"It's complicated, Bali. Has to do with U.N. regulations, things like that. But, what the hell, have some of these mo-fos anyway. Mixes real well, as it turns out, with rum and nitrogen."

Bali took the bag from Branch, looked carefully at the mushrooms in the firelight. “Disgusting. You eat these?”

The Grouper laughed. “I was just a kid, up in the Pacific Northwest. It wasn’t so much the high. It was the ceremony we had, me and my friends. We didn’t fit in anywhere. But we found these, and we had something sacred. Then we were a tribe, we were a league of warriors, and these - ,” he said, taking the bag away from Bali and opening it for Branch’s inspection, “these were our shared experiences.”

“You were a league of warriors?” Bali asked. “I thought little boys like you played little league.”

The Grouper grunted. “We were shunned from that league. From that tribe, from all tribes. Anyway, I never had no arm for it.”

“Right,” Bali said, reclining back onto her blanket. “No arm. Don’t mind me. You tribal warriors go ahead with your sacrament. And your rum. And your deep dives. With everything that’s going on I’ve got to stay tapped into reality.”

Branch felt conflicted. What Bali had said rang true to him, and his attraction to her was undeniable. But he couldn’t be taking her side on the pier thing. Omar wouldn’t have it. So he grabbed a big pinch of the dried mushrooms and washed it down with a swig of ice-cold rum.

“That’s right,” the Grouper said, laughing as he watched. “Don’t listen to her. Keep the buzz from the dive going. Don’t ever come up.”

The Grouper got up from the sand and stretched. He waded a few feet out into the water, paused, seemed to scrutinize something on the surface.

“Feelin’ good,” he said. “All the problems of the world, all the damn problems on Chinchamos, they’ll have to do without me tonight. You kids have fun on the beach.

I'm headin' back to the yacht. Hit the hammock, lie about in supreme indolence, enjoy the headphones. Trip out for the rest of the night, what's left of it."

"That's some kind of ceremony you got," Bali said, watching as the Grouper splashed out into the water. He went under, then a moment later there was another splash as he came up. Then he climbed the ladder and pulled himself onto the teak deck of the Ogygia.

Branch reached to cover Bali's body with the blanket, hoping to avoid any entanglement, but it was pointless. She grabbed him, pulled him on top of her, kissed him without any of the caution she'd shown earlier.

Then she was naked and on top of him, and the shooting stars in the sky looked like sparks flying from her black hair. Distorted electric blues music rang out from the Grouper's headphones, but to Branch it was the sirens of the deep calling him again. He was back down in the depths, flying past the French Angels and the tiger sharks. And all the while he flew, Bali rode him. She gasped, and then tiny beads of sweat broke from her brown body. She leaned down to kiss him, but suddenly Branch could only see the turtle's head bouncing between the bloody snouts of those sharks.

Later, she lay contentedly with him, but the remorse had come and he was feeling sorry for that turtle. He was plenty worried about what waited for him in Cuba, but he was more worried about what would happen to Pam if he didn't go. The mushrooms were coming on him strong now and the stars were pulsating wildly above him.

"There's another thing planned for day after tomorrow," she said. "We're going to march to the jail to protest Pam's incarceration. And the pier project, too. Something real. If you want to get out of that crack you fell in, come with us. Day after

tomorrow.”

Branch knew that protesting would do no good. Only going to Cuba for Omar the day after tomorrow and doing the terrible job would get Pam sprung from jail. That would get him one step closer to his own goal, but it would also lead to more danger, more darkness.

“You’ve got to believe me. I wouldn’t be any help to you.”

“Have some faith. Find where you’re supposed to be with your life.”

“I know where I want to be, Bali. But to get there I’m gonna have to walk a damn crooked path.”

“Come with us,” she said. “A few people standing up can change the world.”

“Yeah. That looks good on the refrigerator magnet. But whenever I tried it, it only made things worse. From my experience, staying home is almost always safer, and it yields better results. I advise you to just stay home.”

“I won’t live like that. I want to do great things. When people Google me, I want them to see wonderful accomplishments. What do you want them to see - about you?”

Branch took a deep breath, ran his hands over Bali’s smooth shoulders, closed his eyes and explored his way down her back. “When they Google me? Nothing. Absolutely nothing.”

“What are you running from?”

Branch thought about how easy his enemies’ job would be if they could just type the words Branch Curry into Google and find him.

“There’s a lot you don’t know about me,” he said. “You know what the Grouper said

about belonging to a tribe? It's true for most people. They want to look good on Google. They never dare to explore life beyond that. But that's where I have to live. Outside the tribe."

"So lonely," she said. "Billions in the tribe, all of them afraid. All of them except you. What happened to you?"

"It builds up layer by layer. I don't know. I grew up on my grandpa's farm. I guess some things happened there that maybe sidetracked me from a normal life."

"Farm boy. Thought so. What was that like?"

"Learned to hunt. Got good with a rifle when I was just a kid. Mostly it was hot, in the fields. Busted knuckles and bad suntans. Didn't know how much I didn't like it until he took me to the stock show up in Ft. Worth."

"Stock show? That's what, Wall Street?"

"Pretty close. Giant exhibition halls, full of prized bulls and fat hogs and sheep, things like that, farm girls and blue ribbons. All of it reeked of shit. I snuck out of there when he wasn't looking. There were roller coasters out on the midway, really scary and rickety ones. I liked those roller coasters. After a few rides they weren't fast enough or high enough. When we got back to the farm I tried to invent my own roller coasters. Grandpa sent me back to my father in Houston pretty soon after that. I grew up alone."

Branch rolled onto his back and looked up at the stars, dimming now that the red glow of morning was beginning to swell. A shooting star burned across the sky. Suddenly all the stars seemed to be shooting, and as he looked back at Bali, he felt the beach rocking around him.

"And here I am," he said, watching a meteorite burn across the sky towards the glow

in the east, towards Chinchamos. “Always one more job to do, to keep me busy.”

“You’ve got to know when to quit, Branch. It’s like that last shooting star before dawn. You look for one more. You don’t want to admit that the beautiful night is over. And then it’s getting light and the safety of the darkness is gone. And you’ve stayed out too late.”

It was true; he’d stayed out too late. But he knew he wouldn’t be able to make the protest, wouldn’t be able to walk a new path with Bali, not just yet. He had a job to do in Cuba. A horrible job, to be sure, and he was dreading it, but it was a job. And it wasn’t just for Pam. It was for him. To get him one step closer to where he wanted to be. To hell with everyone else. And if nothing worked out, he’d always have the Deep Blue Saloon.

The rain in Spain, Branch thought, trying to prepare himself for the question he knew was coming. Suspenders? No. Sheep? Maybe. Ski goggles? Come on, man, you can do better. Barbecue? Yeah, that’s it, he decided. Barbecue.

“What are you thinking about, Branch?” Bali asked.

Branch looked at her and smiled. “Barbecue.”

MICHAEL MURPHY

A FAIR PAY OF HURT

On the morning of December 1, 2014, Jody Lee Hunt, a tow truck driver and convicted felon with a history of abusing women, killed four people and himself in Morgantown, West Virginia as an all-day manhunt paralyzed the town. This is the author's imagining of events that day, based on actual quotes from witnesses, 911 transcripts, social media, and news reports.

Vengeance came to a rough country when Jody Lee Hunt picked up his gun and shot down four people, making them “receive their fair pay of hurt”. His heart and mind were broke down just like those cars he would drag out of ditches with his tow truck, cars wrapped around trees alongside the highway. Just like she used to wrap him. Five years at Huttonsville Correctional had taught him how to serve his kind of justice.

The killer's first stop was out near the lake where his blonde-haired ex had taken up with a taunting younger man in a house on Sunset Beach Road. He had never been shy about using his fists on women before—his father had seen to that. The unfinished Protective Order was tacked up next to a grocery list in the bloody kitchen—milk, white bread, Cool Whip. Shot the man dead first. She made it out to the driveway before the second bullet finally caught her. A neighbor saw her body on the ground and, at first, thought it was a late Halloween prank—the scattered teeth fooled him—but the exit wound and the blood on the hoodie told him it was no prank. He had seen bodies before in Vietnam and he knew she was dead.

Then, back to Doug's Towing shop next door as the killer settled up with Doug the

owner. The town wasn't big enough for both of them, even with all the easy cash to be made from scamming clueless college kids, their trucks circling the town like vultures eyeing baby rabbits. Arlene Burnett, drinking her morning coffee in her home nearby when she heard the shots, went about her business "seeing as it was deer season" 'round those parts.

Finally, back across the river to the trailer on muddy Sweet Pea Lane to kill his own cousin—a cousin named after him, a former business partner who had gone behind his back, stolen money, fooled around with his ex. Shot him point blank among the cinderblocks and junked cars, the killer's Aunt standing in the doorway watching. Gave him a couple more after he hit the ground...just for good measure.



"A gentleman," said the County Commissioner of the killer, shaking his head. "Always returned my calls."

"He was...hurt, depressed all the time...and happy occasionally," said the killer's stepson.

"A body can only take so much, I guess," said an employee, fixing a set of snow chains on a Ford F-150.

Someone on Facebook posted that the killer had a soft spot for animals. "One time, he saved my little three-legged dog when it gone tearing through the woods and up the road after a rotting carcass..." from a man who lived on River Road.

Seems the dogs never left him, never hurt him. Not like his mother. Not like the women.

The killer would leave this world as the others did.

He had spread his hurt well beyond himself. Spread it down the lanes and through

the valleys and across the town. Spread it far and wide until the hurt was as thick as the caked Appalachian mud on his steel-toed boots, as black as the coal under the pockmarked hills, as black as his soul. He'd given everyone their fair pay of hurt.

The Sheriff found him later that night in a power line right-of-way down near the county line, a bullet in his head. The killer's final act had been to call 911 dispatch to ask that someone please take care of his three dogs, Chihuahua Terriers, named Tid Bit, Scooter, and Lexie. "Lexie's the fat one."

Jody Lee Hunt had left the back door unlocked. He knew they would never leave.

EMILY KIERNAN

AT THE MANZANAR WAR RELOCATION CENTER, 1945

Every evening when the boys came into the barracks, they tracked the red dirt with them. It covered them like the fine hairs, like the silky down of animals. It accumulated slowly on their skin from morning to noon as they stomped across the dry expanse from the barracks to the school building and as they wrestled and pushed one another into the dust that was always swirling where they played. When Barbara saw their shadows flickering past the window above her cot, she would run to the door to meet them and say “stop” to them, making them strip off their outer clothes before she let them inside the barrack’s walls. Then she would gather up the pants and jackets they had shed and hang them on the line, beating them with a stick that had fallen from the oak tree over the wall, and from which she’d stripped the leaves and branches, until a red cloud no longer rose up from each stroke. Often she did not see the boys in time, and they would come streaking in like comet tails, leaving marks on the things they touched and upsetting Mrs. Kimura, the old woman who stayed in bed, always, in the cot just beyond the cloth dividing wall.

The boys liked Barbara’s apartment because she was too young to yell at them and make it stick. When she told them what to do, they would turn their faces away and grimace at the ground, but when she turned her back they would slip away with their feet and hands squirming in the air like fish who have slipped the hook. They would not go into the apartments where their mothers and their fathers were, or their grandparents. Sometimes Barbara thought that her little brother, Aki, had told them they could come in so that he could make friends. It was not always easy for him. But Aki was better than the rest of them, and sometimes when she had

chased the others outside with their filthy boots squeaking against the floor, she would find him still standing on the path with his clothes folded on the ground beside him, quiet and shifting from foot to foot on the dry grass. He was afraid of Mrs. Kimura and had nightmares of her standing up in the night and coming to stand over him while he slept, big green lights where her eyes were meant to be. Barbara had told him that Mrs. Kimura would do this if he tracked dirt inside like the other boys, that she would do this and worse. When Barbara found Aki on the path, she would kiss him right on the top of his head, and while the other boys stripped, she would walk him to the water pump and scrub at his face with a soft cloth. She scrubbed him every day, but still at dinner she would watch him across the table and see how the dirt stuck in the corners of his eyes and at the edges of his lips. Sometimes she would dab at the same speck of dirt again and again until his skin had grown too red to see the spot at all, and then he would push the cloth away with his little hands, but sometimes she still tried.

Other days the boys would not come (in the winter when it rained there would be lizards crawling in and out of the sandy soil by the fence. The boys were mesmerized, burrowing their fingers into the holes, which were just the size of child-fingers, made for them), and then she would not see Aki until dinner, but still there was the dust, as if their feet had dragged it. All the women did was sweep. Sometimes they awoke with the dust all over them, falling in between the cracks in their eyelashes. They awoke rubbing their eyes and wiping their mouths. Aki said it was Mrs. Kimura, said she saw her trickling the dirt from her hands at night.

Aki said he did not remember the farm but did remember their mother, so Barbara knew he was lying about one or the other. They coexisted; they were not separable. At the farm the dust had only come in the autumn, when the carnations were picked from the closest fields and they let the ground go dry and drifting. Barbara

and her mother each had a broom that was the right size for them, though Barbara was taller now than either of them had been then. When they had to leave, Barbara had swept the last dirt all hunched over and had not been able to wear any of her mother's clothes and so left them. Her father had packed a few, but he took them with him when he was sent to Tule Lake, so now she had none to even look at, to turn over in her hands and be amazed by the smallness. Barbara thought that Aki did remember the farm, after all, because when they walked together in the mornings, or after dinner in the summer, he could point to the flowers way out beyond the fence that her older eyes could hardly see, and he knew the names of each of them. And she knew it also because when their mother had been so sick before she died she would get up in the night and pull her wasted body around the house, eyes vacant and strange, and they'd all woken up to her above them one time or another, when they had slept too deeply to hear her feet dragging.

When Aki would not sleep and would crawl into her cot beside her (so much littler than a boy his age should be, she did not think he was growing anymore at all), she liked to tell him stories about the farm. She would tell them how funny their father had looked, every springtime, his big scowl and dirty face growing dirtier above armful after armful of daffodils. She would tell him about the Santa Anas, the howling autumn winds, and how the whole house would shake from top to bottom when they came. She would tell him that they could live in the big old house again soon, that he would have a new puppy and a new set of clothes to wear to the school just down the road, and that if the first harvest was good they would buy the land outright – they'd paid for most of it already – so that someday it would be his. She asked him if he wanted that, to go back, and he always said yes, but she never, ever believed him. When they'd first learned that the order was rescinded and the camp was closing, Sgt. James had asked her where she wanted their bus tickets to take them, to the farm or to her father, but she said neither, or that she didn't know, and

she had asked if she could wait, and he'd said she could, but only for a while.

That was in January, when they'd learned that they were free. The word had gone through the camp like a joyous wave breaking, and they all said the war would be over soon. People jostled at the gates, trunks and bags and babies in their arms. Busses came and took them away, waving happy at the windows. The crowding grew better and they didn't have to wait so long for meals or for the laundry. Aki's friends began to leave and he cried and cried, had nightmares, said he was afraid to leave, to live somewhere all alone with no guards or fences to keep him safe. No word had come from their father.

There was a man named John Tashima she walked with in the evenings. He was two years older than she was and had a skinny face that seemed to get smaller and smaller near his chin. She liked to watch it while they walked, trying to find the spot where it became so sharp that it stopped. He said he did not want her to worry, but some of the men at Tule Lake had been sent back. Her father had never told her what city his parents had come from. She wondered what he would do, with all those words he could not pronounce in those places he had not seen. She remembered a day when she was younger, when he'd come back from the post office with an odd-looking letter – the paper brown and thin and covered with writing she could not have read in any language because she was so young. Folded into the letter were photographs. Her father left the letter on the kitchen table for an hour, but then carried it outside and burned it along with the dry leaves and weeds he'd cleared from the fields. Barbara never learned what was in the letter or what the pictures were of.

Barbara thought that perhaps John Tashima was just trying to work up his courage and did, after all, want her to worry. She thought that maybe he wanted her fear to make him brave. John Tashima came from Stockton, where Barbara had never

been, and his father had owned a dry good store, but had sold it just before they came to the camp. They had not known, when they left, if they would ever get to go back. They thought it would be better to have the money than the store. His family had gone back already, in the spring, and they'd bought a new store down the road from the one they had sold. John Tashima had not gone back with them and Barbara was afraid to ask him why he'd stayed behind. She expected that he would ask her to marry him, but the days and weeks wore on and he did not. They continued their walks out along the fences in the evenings. They talked and talked.

"Aki has so many dreams every night," Barbara said to John Tashima as they walked. "He has a lot of bad dreams, but a lot of nice ones too. He told me that he dreamed about you once, that you and me and he were in a great big house together, and that every room in the house was painted bright blue like a robin's egg. Except for one room that was orange like a robin's breast. He said that in the dream you told him that room would be his room, and so he closed his eyes and fell asleep in his dream and woke up here in his cot."

"Aki is a sweet boy," John Tashima told Barbara. "You are as lucky to have him as he is to have you." Barbara thought that John Tashima did not know this was not a dream of Aki's, but of her own. She had dreamed it many years ago, and dreamed it again often, though sometimes the people changed, and so did house they went to. Aki had more bad dreams than good ones, and the good ones were silly and boyish. She thought John Tashima would understand better if she told him this one of her own.

"He is very dear," Barbara said. "He takes after our mother. His face is so much like her face that sometimes when I wake up in the night and see him sleeping it surprises me and I think she's back again."

She was surprised when she felt a stiff pulling at her side. John had pushed away the

sleeve of her coat and taken her hand. He had never done this before; it was both enough and not enough. His skin was as dry and as warm as everything else in that place, and she thought that when their skin pressed together it must have made a little noise she couldn't hear, a rustling like mouse feet on wooden floors.

Though he did not say anything right then, Barbara felt almost certain that John would ask her to marry him. She thought that she would feel very happy when he did, because he was a good and handsome man and she thought she could like being his wife. She thought of how she would pull Aki up onto her lap and tell him that she'd made a new home for them with a new father for him, and knew she would worry even then as she did every time she held his little body with its little, thin bones. She wondered if they would all go to Sgt. James together and ask for three bus tickets to Stockton, where he would take her to live with his family above the dry goods store. She knew there would be dust there too, and flowers growing in fields by the roadside, and that things would be very different as well. She thought her father would try to find them and would find them if he could. She thought she might feel better in the future than she did now, happier, and that in the new home Aki would have to find some new fright to dream about. She thought of all of this as they walked with their hands clasped together, before he spoke, and above them the guards in their towers tapped their feet and checked their watches.

ERIK WENNERMARK

DRINKING SCHOOL

Rule #1 of Drinking School: **YOU MUST BE SOBER!!!** If you come to class under the influence you are subject to arrest!!!

Rule #2 of Drinking School: **YOU MUST BE SOBER!!!** This may seem like a contradictory rule for Drinking School, but don't ask questions. If you were meant to question, God would have given you a tail.

Rule #3 of Drinking School: Use of cell phones is only permitted during approved breaks.

Non-compliance with any of the rules of Drinking School will result in your dismissal from Drinking School and a warrant will be issued for your arrest!!!

NON-COMPLIANCE

Non-compliance means failure to comply.

WELCOME

Most people are not excited about starting this class. You may be angry or embarrassed you have to be here. You may feel like you do not belong here at all. You may say to yourself, "Fuck this shit. This shit is gay, yo." Try to relax. This program has been created to help you. Though it may suit you to reflect on your use of the word

“gay.” Or not. To each his/her own.

Look around. You will notice you are in jail. This may or may not be a familiar place for you to be. If you see a man carrying a large model boat with three long wooden masts, you will refer to it as a schooner. It is not. Disregard and continue. If you are interested, there are books available in the library that will help you better identify maritime vessels.

Look around. Are these your peers? Would you hang out with any of these people? Go out for beers and shots on a Saturday night, sharing jovial, spirited chatter? If you answered yes, move on. If you answered no, move on with ice in your heart.

Reminder: We do this for you. This is for your benefit.

Please Be Honest in Response to the Following Questions:

Why are you here? What exactly did you do to get here? Did you pass out behind the wheel, crash into a parked car? Sideswipe a forlorn bicyclist? Did you puke out of the car window in the Taco Bell drive-thru? Did you piss on a cop’s shoes? Also, what is your spirit animal? To which Hogwarts’ House do you most feel most kindred? Who is your favorite Muppet? (Do not answer Ernie, Bert or Elmo—these are not Muppets. Do not answer Beaker either—we know you are just trying to be clever.) These are important questions for you to answer.

You will receive a workbook on the first day of class. **This** is your workbook. You must bring it to each class. If you do not bring your workbook to class there will be big trouble. Big.

Imagine this scenario: You are at the opera. During intermission you meet a beautiful/dashing woman/man. You sense this is the real deal, you sense this is the one. You ask her/him out for a drink after the show. Knowing your limitations you order a tomato juice. Well done. The evening is a marvelous success. It is a whirlwind

romance. You are married. For your honeymoon you visit Niagara Falls, the bed in your suite is heart-shaped. There are chocolates on your pillow every morning. One evening you let your guard down and order a scotch, neat/vodka martini. This is followed by several more. Your new wife/husband is embarrassed by your subsequent behavior. This will not be the first time. Lower your expectations, she/he certainly will.

Some months from now you will be at the bar. Drinking. You will be at the bar, getting drunk. You will see one of your current classmates in the bar, perhaps the fellow sitting in the next row over and three seats down currently drooling on his arm. He too will be drinking, getting drunk. Please choose the proper course of action for this occasion you will no doubt find yourself in one day soon:

- Avoid making eye contact and quickly find a new bar to drink away the remainder of the night.
- Chide him gently for his inability to stick to the “program.”
- Buy him a shot and laugh at the inconsequence of the previous hours you spent together, hours that now only serve to bind you in Jägermeister and a small, fleeting shame.

This is not your story? Wait a minute. Like the weather in San Francisco. Dallas. Denver. Peoria. Tell me about it.

Reminder: YOU WILL BE CHARGED AN ADDITONAL \$15.00 WORKBOOK FEE IF YOU DO NOT BRING THE ORIGINAL WORKBOOK ISSUED ORIGINALLY, TO CLASS AND NEW WORKBOOK WILL BE ISSUED.

Reminder: The Court Referral Program is not here to punish you. It is an opportunity for you. We are here to help you and, hopefully, to reduce the number of alcohol and drug-related crimes in the state.

BLOOD ALCOHOL CONTENT (BAC)

JUDGEMENT .02 BAC This is the first to go. When the blood alcohol levels rise, the brain becomes increasingly sedated or drugged. Reason and caution are the first functions to be affected. But you know this already.

VISION .05 BAC 30% of a driver's side vision is lost. Accurate vision is necessary for safe driving, among other things—the term “beer goggles” comes to mind. Almost 90% of the information we use in driving comes through our eyes. Alcohol impairs vision, which affects judgment, reaction time, and engenders regret.

RESPONSES .05 BAC Reactions are delayed 2/5 of a second. Safe driving requires split-second decision-making. Watch that girl/guy at the end of the bar. The one slouched forward, barely able to raise his/her glass to his/her mouth. Watch him/her slip off the barstool and onto the floor. Don't judge, it happens.

QUIZ!

True or False: You do something under the influence of alcohol that you would normally not do. Because of this, you are not responsible for your actions.

True or False: People have come to expect your shitty behavior. A series of wrenching, pitiful emails the next day should cover most any misdeed.

True or False: .05 is a “pussy” BAC. ___ / 3

A suggestion: Count your drinks. A further suggestion: Try counting your drinks. If you lose count, well, what are you going to do, go ahead and start over... If you

lose count again, which you probably will, well, fuck it.

A suggestion: Take a blunt (large marijuana cigarette). Dip it in cough syrup (Robitussin is best, if money is an issue for you, which it probably is, Tussin will do). Sprinkle with Special K (Ketamine). Smoke it. You will be straight fucked up.

A suggestion: In preparation for your court-mandated urine inspection, or, more colloquially, “piss test,” buy a whizzinator. The Original Whizzinator© preferably. The prosthetic penis comes in many different skin tones. You will find one to match. Young ladies, simply dip the cup in the toilet water as you pee. It is an admittedly slapdash tactic, but it has worked before and it will work again.

EMPATHY PHASE

Imagine this scenario: It is an August day, hot and humid. A day for sweet tea on the front porch. The whirr of a fan. Perhaps, knowing you, reading the New Yorker drinking sweet tea on the front porch, flattening the pages against the heavy air stirred up by the whirr of the fan. You look up from an article on the false evaluation of Chinese currency to watch the activity on the street. A young girl rides by on her bicycle. Two young men toss a football to and fro, making their way, slowly, casually, to the park. You carry on your reading. Switch from sweet tea to beer. Are you sure that is a wise move? It’s only noon. You know what happens when you get started.

Glenda Richardson was a 3rd grade teacher. Her husband, Paul Ray, a day laborer. They had two children, two boys, Doug and Dave (Glenda was what you might call alliterative). Doug was 12 and enjoyed fishing. Dave was 7 and not yet old enough to know what he enjoyed other than being a child, free in the western world. They

are all dead because of men/women like you.

D___ C_____ was recently returned from Vietnam. He was born in Alabama and a devoted fan of the Auburn University football team. He was fortunate to return from Vietnam just weeks before the annual Iron Bowl, the famed match-up pitting the Auburn Tigers against their hated rivals, the University of Alabama Crimson Tide. In anticipation of the game, D___ C_____ drank for two days straight. Auburn won. After celebrating their victory for several hours in the company of many old friends, he got in his car to drive home. Making a left turn, he struck a car carrying Glenda, Paul Ray, Doug and David Robinson, also returning home after watching the football game with some friends from church. All four were killed, though not instantly; young David hung on for some several hours. As in Vietnam, D___ C_____ received not a scratch.

IMPORTANT CONTACTS!

Instructor Name: J___ C_____

Program Phone Number: (2xx)7xx-9xxx

Court Referral Officer (CRO) Name: N_____ M_____

CRO Phone Number: (2xx)2xx-5xxx

Self-help Contact Number: (2xx)7xx-2xxx

Self-help Website: <http://www.axxxxxxx-axxxxxxx.org>

You will receive a letter in the mail in the coming weeks. This is not a letter, it is your workbook; the letter will come later. The letter begins: I am writing to ask your help

in evaluating the performance of Judge D____ A_____ as part of an ongoing effort by the State Commission of Judicial Performance to improve the quality of our judicial system. We are contacting individuals who have been in Judge D____ A_____’s courtroom or have been affected by Judge A_____ and asking them how well or poorly they think he carried out his judicial duties. Please try to be objective. It’s important.

Did you forget that woman (Glenda? No, no, someone else) who lost her dad and her daughter to drunk drivers? Remember her. Hold her and her dead child in your mind’s eye. Raise a glass to their memory. Drink deeply.

AT THE WORKPLACE

Does drinking help you write? If yes, please elaborate. Does a hangover enhance your lucidity? Do you feel the words that tumble out of the fog and onto the page have strength and solidity, as if they were honed by your disgrace? Can you write in bed while puking in a trashcan? Do a couple pulls get those creative juices flowing? Do a couple pulls send you away from the computer and flying to the bar in search of fleeting human connection and more booze?

Here is a prompt:

THE BOTTLE

A Novel by Don Birnum

To Helen with All My Love

Begin.

Are you a personable drunk? Has drinking widened your publishing network? Have you ever pissed on a table/pissed on the floor in a bar with your coworkers? Have you ever been headbutted/rudely grasped by the bouncer and thrown down a flight of stairs? Did you go into work the next day? Did you pack your duffel and board the train, moving on to the next failure, the next misery? Have you ever written about it (before now)?

THE HIGH COST OF YOUR ARREST

Your arrest may have been more costly than you realize. Fill out the form below as accurately as possible.

Medical Expenses_____.

Legal Expenses_____.

Insurance/Damage to your car_____.

How many bones have you broken as a result of an accident that occurred while drinking? If the number is 3 or below, you have that many fascinating stories to tell. If the number is above 3, do not bore your drinking companions with tales of your misadventure.

Describe a situation when alcohol or other drugs led you to do something you would not do sober. _____ . Attach additional pages as necessary.

Do you remember last night? How many nights of the week are totally blank? Is this blankness complete or sporadic? Do you have flashes, faces bursting into presence? Words, phrases? Or is it simply nothing—you are tabula rasa, this morning, every morning. Which do you think is the better condition? It is important to remember... the grass is always greener.

Did you count? Counting can be helpful. For a while. Did you lose count? It is understandable.

ENRICHMENT PHASE

Imagine this scenario: The ringing of the telephone sounds like Beethoven's Pastoral. It is your sweetheart on the line. He/She is excited to talk to you, excited to see you soon. Your heart skips. You have found someone that makes you feel like you've always wanted to feel. He/She is the one. Worry not, alcohol will eventually take this, too, one way or another.

Here is another prompt: Her eyes smell like the lilacs in Ohio. Begin.

Imagine this scenario: The time has come to meet his/her parents. Oh, didn't make it that far? Blew it long ago? Too bad. Well, you've saved yourself some embarrassment anyway. Enjoy drinking alone for the rest of your life. Or even worse, not drinking alone, but destined for the perpetual public embarrassment of which you've no doubt had the first bitter taste. Supposing he/she is blind to your glaring inadequacy/dependence (he/she's a real trooper!), the time has come to meet the parents. You will be nervous, that is okay. Expect it. It would be inadvisable to go to the bar beforehand to cool your nerves. You will never make it to dinner and he/she will be very disappointed. If you do make it to dinner, even more so.

Imagine this scenario: Bats swoop throughout the shadowy room. You are in bed clutching the sheets to your chest. The bats leap and flip, one brushes your face, drenched in cold sweat. You spin in bed, pull the sheets over your head. You scream. You tear the sheets. The bats have not stopped. You see a mouse hole on the floor opposite you; you see a small mouse face peek out. You are afraid. The bats spy the mouse too, or whatever it is bats do, not spy though. Senses the mouse. The mouse is oblivious and ventures further out the hole. You want to tell the mouse to stop, you want to warn the mouse but are frozen. When the bat takes the mouse into his bat mouth, his bat hands, you scream the most blood-curdling scream. Even awake, your life is a nightmare.

CONTEMPLATION PHASE

This course can help you make positive changes to the behavior that brought you here. The question you need to ask yourself is: "Am I interested in change?" This question may initially be taken on a purely conceptual level, but at some point

should address the concept as it relates directly to you and your life decisions.

Have you ever heard of the Indian poet and artist Rabindranath Tagore? No, of course not. What about Rumi? Not him either? Well, the jail is equipped with a library though the copy of the Divan has been somewhat... defaced. Perhaps you could have a friend pick it up.

A suggestion: *Whoever brought me here will have to take me home.*

Cin Cin

HENRY MARGENAU

IT'S THE NOISE YOU MISS MOST IN THIS GIANT NEW WORLD

As soon as Ray's wife walked out, all the appliances stopped working, like she took all the electricity along with her. The refrigerator stopped humming and a few light bulbs blew out. The television wouldn't turn on because the batteries in the remote had died. The angry voices were silent. Everything stopped but the heartbeat of the mantle clock, which ticked away sheepishly as if not to disturb the quiet.

It had been a long while since Ray was alone. He didn't know what to do with himself. He made a turkey sandwich without the crust and ate it and then decided to go out. He put his hat, coat, and gloves on and called up the stairs, "I'm going," before he realized what he was doing. When he left, he still closed the door behind him softly.

That was days ago. Since then, he spent most of the time walking. Walking in the park. Walking around town. Walking along the train tracks that hadn't seen commuter transit in decades and whose ties were half hidden in the embrace of overgrown ryegrass. He passed evenings at the Rail House, drinking and reading, and slept in a rented room across the street.

"Lookie here now," the man at the end of the bar said.

The paper was spread out in front of him on the bar. The edges had started to curl and there was a wet ring on the right page from his glass.

"The planets are moving away from the sun and each other at an alarming speed. The entire galaxy is spiraling forward and away."

“Where’d you get that?” Ray said.

“The paper,” the man said.

“I don’t feel any different. Should I feel different? Shouldn’t I feel the speed like on a roller coaster or something?”

The man looked from Ray to the bartender who only responded with a shrug.

“And besides,” Ray said, “the paper’s not the gospel truth.”

“This is not just some scandal sheet. This is the New York Times.”

“My point,” Ray said.

“What the hell do you know about it?” the man said.

The man went back to his drink and Ray went back to his. It really didn’t seem so implausible when you thought about it. He felt it now in his own house, in his own life. Everything seemed like it was getting bigger and farther away. The negative space repelled him so powerfully that it drove him right out the front door.

When his wife left, Ray tried staying home in all that quiet, but now even the thought of it was unbearable. Everything in the house was made for two. Two chairs at the kitchen table, two sides of the bed. Now, the furniture seemed an odd fit for each room. Everything was too spread out. Ray felt too small for the house, or perhaps the house felt too big for him. The house was not just big but vacant, empty. He would have to replace the furniture, no doubt. Get rid of the loveseat and replace it with a few odd chairs here or there.

He knew when she was there, washing dishes and whistling under her breath, doing crosswords in the blue armchair with that constant papery scratch of her mechanical pencil (she was never bold enough to work in pen). He knew it even if he didn’t advertise it. The small sounds you barely hear until they stop making waves,

he thought. Now he could feel the difference.

“You want another?” the bartender asked.

Ray looked at his empty glass. Then he looked at his surroundings. The loudmouth at the end of the bar was smoking the stub of a little cigarillo and sipping bourbon in between puffs and staring into space. There were usually a lot of sad characters at the Rail House, down and out middle-aged men, like the loudmouth, who should be home with their families if they had families, older women who sat in twos and threes, cackling and knocking over glasses, and people like Ray somewhere in between. Out the window it had begun to snow and Ray could see his little motel through the gray flakes.

“Not for me, thanks,” Ray said. “I should be getting home.”

He paid his tab and left a few singles for the bartender. It was colder than he thought outside so he wrapped his scarf over his mouth and pulled his wool hat down over his eyes. The thick veil of snow masked most of the foot traffic on the sidewalk. It made the air quiet the way snow usually does and Ray wondered if perhaps he was the only one out walking. He had just finished that thought when he bumped into someone right in front of him.

“Keep your distance, fella,” the voice said.

“Sorry,” Ray said.

He continued on and, after walking for what seemed like a few blocks, Ray realized that he hadn't seen a traffic light or an intersection. He looked back but, even squinting, could just barely see the lights of the Rail House sign, a few hundred yards back. That's strange, he thought, and looked at his watch. I've been walking for half an hour. He continued up the street for another ten minutes or so until he came to a light. There was a group of people waiting to cross. Ray tapped the guy in

front of him on the shoulder.

“What block is this?” Ray said.

“Clarkson,” the man said.

“Clarkson?”

“Yeah, Clarkson. The sign’s right there,” the man said and pointed.

“That’s the first light after the Crown Motel,” Ray said.

“Yeah.”

“The first light?” Ray said.

“Yeah, the first light. Are you lost?”

Ray thought for a minute. Am I? No. Drunk, maybe. That was it. Drunk as a skunk.

“No, I’m ok. Thanks,” Ray said.

When the light turned green, Ray went to step off the curb and was stopped short by the man who pulled him back by the arm.

“Hey, what are you doing?” the man said. “You’re going to get yourself killed.”

“Huh?” Ray said.

The man let Ray go, then sat down on the curb and lowered himself backwards off the edge.

“Take it easy,” the man said right before his head disappeared beneath the curb.

Ray looked to his right and saw other people headed down the curb. Some made their way down on their bellies like the man he spoke to and others went forward, reaching their hands down to be helped by someone at the bottom. Ray walked to the curb and looked down. The street was a good five feet down from the sidewalk.

He sat reluctantly on the curb, with his feet dangling over the side. Far on the opposite side of the street he saw people climbing up the curb to the next block, some making it on their own, finding little footholds from the cracks in the pavement, and others being hoisted up on the hands of strangers. Suddenly he felt a foot nudge his back.

“Come on, buddy. Today,” a voice said.

With that, Ray slid forward and pushed himself off the curb. He stood up to dust off his coat and was startled by the sight before him. It was the main drag that he had been down hundreds of times before only on a much larger scale. There were cars and buses as usual, but the street was as wide as a tarmac. People scampered up and down the five-foot curbs on each side, trying to make it up to the sidewalk before the light turned green. Rather than scale the curb again, he walked on the shoulder of the road. The streetlights projected onto the street the tall shadows of the people walking above. A cab pulled over alongside him.

“Need a ride?” the driver said. “You should probably let those socks dry off.”

Ray looked down and saw that he was ankle deep in slush.

“I’m all right,” Ray said.

“Ok, then,” said the driver.

The cab pulled away and merged back into the four or five lanes of traffic. Ray kept walking until he could no longer ignore the people honking their horns and yelling at him to get out of the road. He found an unoccupied piece of curb and made his way up the concrete wall to the sidewalk.

He sat down on a bench next to a forty-foot tall streetlight and let the snow land gently on him. The main street looked the same as it did that afternoon, same news-

stands, same bars, but the buildings looked as if their proprietors had added an extra story or two to the top of each. They were set far back from the street as well. The walkway from the sidewalk to the entrance of the post office, for instance, was at least twice as long as when Ray mailed a letter the other day. It was a little after rush hour and people went about their business, helping each other up and down the enormous wall of a curb, walking the hundred feet or so to the front door of a restaurant, like nothing had changed.

Maybe nothing had changed. Maybe it was just that he was only now feeling it, the space he put between himself and everybody else. If he felt it earlier or just more deeply, the distance, maybe she would have delayed her exit, Ray thought. He didn't know why his life had always carried on so inwardly but, watching the snowflakes and the little life going on around him in every direction, he regretted that it had.

Across the street, directly facing his bench, was the Abstand Building, the tallest building in town even amidst the towering masses in this strange new world. It rose away from everything else around it, alone up there, profiled by the bright lights below, no one to talk to at that height. Ray stared up into the Abstand until the wind became too much and he lost feeling in his brow. The people on the street went about their business, which was something unmistakably separate from his. There was a couple coming down the street, arm in arm, looking for a place to take in the sights, looking much a part of the expanding world around them, and so Ray gave up his seat.



Eventually, the center of town began to fade behind him as he walked on. It didn't seem to matter which way. The night air was so unforgiving that he couldn't feel his fingers or toes, like parts of his own body were separating off and floating away in contradictory directions.

It was a poignant exit; he had to give that to her. One final clash of voices, hers more than his, and then the purest silence. It was the same silence that Ray had kept until she was gone. It wasn't malicious. He simply failed to realize that other people aren't as content in the company of their own thoughts, that other people depend on conversation to reaffirm their own sense of being.

At some point, what felt like hours later, Ray found himself in his neighborhood. Though it was still early enough, the neighborhood was nearly pitch dark except for the streetlights. The houses on the block were set too far into the blackness to be seen from the street and so Ray was alone between the giant furry skeletons of sycamore trees that leaned tiredly in his direction. It was so quiet, he felt like he was the last man on earth. How strange, he thought, that the drink had still not worn off.

When he got to his street there were more ghostly sycamores and as he walked along the block, the streetlights burned out one by one. He could see his house in the distance. Really, it was too dark to see the actual house but he recognized the mailbox and the way the curb broke there.

The driveway had to be at least a mile long now. If it weren't for the moonlight, the house would have been impossible to see in the distance. As it was, the only thing discernable within the jagged silhouette was the porch light, nearing extinction now, glowing a downcast honey orange. Ray must have left it on when he went out. He couldn't help but feel like the house was trying to keep him at arm's length.

Ray surveyed the landscape. On all sides was darkness and, sitting on his porch swing, he felt like he was on an island or his own planet. He stopped the bench to see if it was the swinging he felt or the planet hurtling away through space. Entranced with the night sky, Ray was surprised to hear a barely audible voice in the distance.

“Hi, Ray!”

“Is that you, Wilt?” Ray said.

Wilt’s house was so far away that Ray couldn’t really see it, but if he squinted he could just make out a few small lights dotting the dark horizon like the last embers of a firecracker that had wept back to earth. It wasn’t until he was alone in the midst of the blackness that he realized how sensitive he was to the sound of other people. There was only Ray now, his house, and the moon, bright and big as a serving plate, painting the landscape with porcelain light.

“The universe is expanding!” Wilt shouted.

“What?”

“The universe is expanding!”

“So I’ve been told,” Ray said.

“Isn’t it beautiful?”

REBECCA ORCHARD

ALPIRSBACH

The sunlight had in it the quality of bees. It hummed against Brother Albrecht's closed eyes as he stood at the window enjoying the warmth, which still felt like a newly bestowed gift so close on the heels of winter, the views of the mountains unsmudged by mists. He was fortunate to have a room that overlooked the valley, to be able to see the shadow of the clouds passing over the tapestry knit by the pines. He had not requested this view, but the Father Abbot was wise in what he saw in men: Albrecht treasured this sight as he treasured no earthly possession.

He was both remembering and anticipating time spent with Brother Fabian tending the hives in the meadow behind the Abbey. It was the hour, in the summer, when most of the Abbey rested, and a hush lay over the grounds while Albrecht and Fabian smoked the hives. Over the murmur of the slumbering bees they cut slabs of honeycomb, paper-thin but miraculously strong. Fabian would hold a piece up to the clear, open sky and watch the light glow through the comb.

"The works of God," he would say.

It was hard for men like Brother Fabian to restrict their speech only to the strictly necessary. Some felt that to stifle comments about the glory of God was to do a disservice to God, but the silence had been the easiest part, for Albrecht. When he had lived outside these walls he had been reserved, shy of his voice even when it was most needed, and had welcomed the chance to let his throat rust from disuse. He had asked Father Eustacius some years ago if he might take a vow of silence, reveling in the idea that he may never be required to speak another word.

The Abbot had studied the brother standing before him, quiet. Father Eustacius had grown quite old but was not bitter, in the way that only men who find joy in their occupation are not bitter. This had been a new sight for Albrecht when he had first come to Alpirsbach, every bone longing for a place to lay his burdens down.

The Abbot said: What comfort we most want we must learn to live without, and what we find most difficult we must conquer.

So Albrecht still spoke, though sparingly and with great care, as if rising each time through layers of earth.

The bells tolled now for Terce, a great bronze wave over the valley, and Albrecht lingered for one more moment in the window before stepping into the cool shadow of his room.

He set down the quill he had been holding, noting the new stain of ink on his finger next to the one, fading, from yesterday. He would pray for forgiveness for his preoccupation and for greater control over his wandering mind, which of late had been difficult to master.

He opened his door to find the great old hound sleeping against it. It looked up at him with rheumy eyes and he leaned down to scratch its back where its hair was thinning, as if years with the monks had given it its own tonsure. The brothers did not keep pets but the animals in the Abbey did not know that, and all had favorites; Brother Fabian was orbited eternally by a ring of multi-hued cats. The dog wheezed onto its cracking joints and walked past Albrecht to lie down in the square of light cast through the window onto the floor.

The toll ceased as Albrecht waited at the top of the stairs for an old monk to descend, painstakingly, before him. That old hunting dog had found its way to this valley scabbed and scarred, and the part of Albrecht that still remembered the mid-

wives of his village wondered if the hound sensed their kinship, knew that Brother Albrecht too had seen what it had seen.

The stairs let out onto the slate flagstones of the cloister and Albrecht joined the line of monks making their way into the sanctuary; he returned Brother Thadeus's greeting with a nod.

They had taken their vows together, although Thadeus was a much younger man. He had been given to the Abbey as a nameless infant, and had been raised by the monks in the shadow of the Schwarzwald.

It was hard for some of the oblates to truly value their life. Those given to the monastery as children were often resentful of their seclusion and their many obligations and their own fear. They had failed to respond truthfully when the Father Abbott asked them on their thirteenth birthday if they wanted to leave, failed to be brave enough to forsake this shadowy peace and enter the world of men, although choosing the life of monkhood took a certain bravery too.

His own time in the novitiate under Brother Martin had been easy to bear, once he learned to silence what he now thought of as his "elsewhere" mind. He had needed to sink beneath the rituals and orders like a stone in a deep pool.

The brothers had at first been reluctant to admit him due to his advanced age and lack of learning, but saw the love he had for the shape of the words of Scripture and found his reflective nature promising. Father Eustacius had appointed a special teacher for him and he had learned to read and write in German and in Latin. He hoped as he neared old age and his body gradually crabbed itself into uselessness he would be allowed to copy manuscripts like Brother Ulrich, whom Albrecht could watch for hours, each precise scratch of ink bleeding finely into the vellum, joined slowly over time into letters and then into words. Last week as a private

meditation Albrecht had practiced his own pathetic copying with Psalm 51: *Cor mundum crea in me, Deus: et spiritum rectum innova in visceribus meis*, watching meaning come from nothingness, his pen a tool of great and mysterious power.

But until the day his joints ground to powder or his talent matched Brother Ulrich's, he would enjoy the tasks assigned to him for the support of the monastery. He was eager—as eager as he allowed himself to be these days—for warmer weather and the chance to work outside. He would, as he had been taught, take the day's Scripture and turn it over in his head as he plowed or sowed or scythed, so first its words and then its meaning and then its implications would work into his coursing muscles. In this way, he thought, he may finally become willing to shed the last shameful vestment of his former life.

He entered the church. He had seen grander facades, with gilt and painted clouds, but this sanctuary he loved for its simple, clean strength, its brightness and the smoothness of its sandy stones, the fact that it both soared and stayed rooted to the earth. This was a place where a man like him could find the peace of God. He closed his eyes and listened to the brothers singing,

Dextera patris, lapis angularis, via salutis, janua caelestis, ablue nostri, maracielas delicate, a breath, Attende Domine... Voices journeying together, a crowd over a hill. Albrecht's lips moved with them, their words his in spirit, but his singing fled from him. Many things had left him at the death of the last member of his young family, so long ago it seemed now like a passage from the book of Daniel, something he had studied at his desk by the window.

To worship the Lord is to be joyful, the Abbot had told him. You must ask Him to lead you out of this valley of sorrow.

In this one thing only, he disobeyed.

For many years Albrecht had lived only to preserve the memory of those he loved. He was their only living vessel; he cared for the health of his body and mind only to lend them the use of it. Unlike his brothers in the Abbey that had so blessed him, Albrecht had known the terrible unsettled world, the plagues and the scourge of men, the floods and the famine. Here only did peace surround him and here only did it begin to rule him. He had learned to take simple, selfish pleasure in the Psalms and the sound of his brothers singing. In the swing of the thurible and its arc of smoke. In the sun beating warm on the shoulders of his black habit.

His guilt over this quiet life he had banished through many prayers, but the sin of his sorrow remained in his breast, beating alongside his heart, and he fed it as dry wood feeds fire, against the will of God.

LORI MICHELLE HAWKS

HOPING IN COLOR

I knew why they were there. The youngish looking couple, looking lost in the parking lot. They stared up at the building. This way, I waved to them. Follow me.

I pressed the elevator button, feeling a mixture of pity and camaraderie. Fourth Floor. Center for Reproduction and Infertility. I'm sorry you're here, but please, join me.

I took a moment to look them over. They fit the profile: neatly dressed, manicured nails, pressed khaki pants, fresh haircuts. They tightly held their yellow medical folder, and they wondered why this was happening to them. They longed to be parents. I could feel it.

Looking down at my own nails and sweater dress, I nodded. I never wanted to come to this place looking disheveled either. I had used a lint roller in the car. I needed to look matronly, put together, prepared. It was silly. There were no interviews. There were no judgments on which couples would get to fulfill their dreams. There were just the doctors and their science, working to help stack the odds in our favor.

In the exam room the ultrasound wand showed my uterus on the small screen. There were shades of grey with lima bean shaped black spots and smaller sweet pea shaped white ones. There were areas that looked like little rivers and lakes on a map. There were vast deserts of barren wastelands. There was emptiness.

I stared into the greys, briefly imagining a baby's face and a tiny heart; it was like making shapes out of the clouds in the sky. I had never seen an actual baby in there

before. I'd only gotten to see a tiny empty sack, not much bigger than the black lima beans. That's where it ended the first time. The second and third were positive pregnancy tests that eventually faded from two deep fuchsia lines to one pale pink line to stark white.

You aren't pregnant anymore, they said. These were considered biochemical; these didn't count.

Today, of course, there wouldn't be a heartbeat so there was really no reason for the tears that I silently wiped away while looking at the ceiling. Except that there was no heartbeat. That was actually the reason.

Today they were checking on my uterus to prepare me for IVF, three letters all of us in the infertility world know and recount often. They are absently recited like a social security number or date of birth. Translation, In – Vitro – Fertilization. Translation, I – Very Much Need – Fixing.

In less than one month I'd be back for my Beta, the test that would tell us whether or not our scientific experiment had been a success. Any number greater than zero would be good news. Then our number would need to double after 48 hours. It would need to keep doubling and it would need to keep growing exponentially. The number and the baby. If we were lucky, they would become One.

In the meantime, there would be a Thanksgiving meal. There would be a wish-bone. There would be prayers and more medicine. Pills. Vitamins. Injections. Ultrasounds. Samples. Measurements.

In the meantime, we were wiping our slate clean, creating a blank canvas. There would be a move to our new home with new views. There would be unblemished spaces. There would be an attempt to start over.

In the weeks before Christmas we would tip-toe around for precisely fourteen days

after we watched the eggs being placed into my uterus and before our test. We would wait, optimistic, cautious, quiet. We would speak in Ifs and Maybes. We would dream of painting the room at the end of our new hallway festive shades of cotton candy pink and blue. We would hope in color while we still lived among the greys.

OLIVIA WOLFGANG-SMITH

THE SPIRIT OF ADVENTURE

In 1769, under funding by the Royal Society of London, Captain James Cook and a crew of scientists sailed from England to Tahiti to measure the movement of Venus across the sky. It was the last time the planet would make the observable transit for over a century. Cook's crew spent nearly a year battling sea and sun and then waiting, their clothes and skin rimed in salt. They were across the world from home, cataloging and trampling somebody else's. They hacked trees along a virginal beach and built Fort Venus to house their astronomical instruments. They fought and loved and grappled with the natives, negotiating desperately for the return of stolen equipment just before the transit. On the day of the event, interference from Earth's turbulent atmosphere blurred the image of Venus. The scientists' measurements and diagrams did not agree. No usable data was collected, and their head astronomer died on the return voyage.

In 1966 the Soviet probe Venera 3 crash-landed on Venus through dense clouds of sulfuric acid and died for science and the Cold War. It was across the void from home, cataloging and crushed against a slab of alien rock as it measured atmospheric pressure nearly 100 times that of Earth's and temperatures close to 900 degrees Fahrenheit. The probe's communications systems had failed before it reached orbit. It choked on the untransmittable numbers, melting, acid-eaten and sputtering data that would have shocked Earth's scientists if they had been able to hear.

In 1909 T. E. Lawrence was young and thirsty, walking through Ottoman Syria researching Crusader castles. He was alone. He trudged 1,000 miles in three months. For as long as possible he didn't sleep, didn't eat, didn't drink. He did all of this to prove he could, with the same torturous spirit that had made him lie awake in a coffin every night as a child, staring up at the image of a worm-eaten corpse. Only so many days and every sunrise one fewer, and he born a given number of days behind due to illegitimacy and short stature. He calculated his disadvantage. He worked every moment to make it up. He stayed awake, red-eyed and rock-tense, and rewrote himself in worn shoe-leather and self-denial, saying with every step, to no one watching, look how little I need to work my wonders.

In 1995 Sarah McCormick's mother went into the backyard to bag a pile of maple leaves before the wind picked up and Sarah assumed she had been abandoned. She triple-checked the house's six rooms. The tears passed quickly. Sarah had been a severe child since birth, and worse than ever since her parents' divorce the year before. She adapted quickly to her new circumstances. Her spirit rallied. Abandonment felt, suddenly, like a kind of freedom. She decided she would live with the Brown family. Marjorie Brown was the closest thing Sarah had to a friend in kindergarten. Sarah held onto the doorknob with both hands to steady herself and pushed her feet into her light-up sneakers. She was fairly sure she knew the way. She took an apple from the kitchen and said goodbye to the house. From the backyard, Mrs. McCormick heard the screen door squeak-bang shut. She jogged around the house and found Sarah halfway down the block, eyes red but dry, heading in the right direction. Similar misunderstandings would happen twice more that year and then again, with more finality, in 2020.

In 1880 the Arctic whaler SS Hope anchored fast to an ice floe to wait out an impassable fog. The ship's surgeon was Arthur Conan Doyle, newly twenty-one years old, hungover and soaked through, missing his mother and the excitement he had been promised. He was a novice in both medicine and adventure. When the crew – flinty eyes; rough beards – spread over the icepack to hunt seals, they left him black-tempered on board, kicking his feet over the bulwarks like a child, until the hateful ship heaved on a swell and threw him into the sea between two groaning ice blocks. He had fallen in four times now, limbs stiffening, lungs seizing, clothes freezing solid. The men laughed and called him “the great northern diver.” He was not allowed to be afraid. He was not allowed to be angry. When he felt himself coil too tightly, he shot at rats. Now, at once buffeted and suffocated by the fog, he stalked over the ice away from the anchored ship. The dog Sampson came with him, snuffling. They lost sight of the ship. Arthur consulted his compass; he oriented himself toward the Pole. They were within reach. It would be something to say he had seen. A shape resolved itself out of the fogscape: a snow house, twelve feet high, like a beehive with a door. Arthur crawled inside. Empty. Sampson whined at the entrance. Arthur looked around the icehouse and waited for the spirit of adventure to crack above his head and spill over him, baptismal. He crawled out again. He returned to the ship. He wrote in his diary. “Traveled a considerable distance, and would have gone to the Pole, but my matches ran short and I couldn't get a smoke. ...Gin and tobacco at night.”

In 1880 Natar Tookoome walked and walked and walked over the ice away from home. He sucked frigid mist in through his nose and huffed in out again. He tried to fill himself with new air and start again, but the fog blurred boundaries and he only stoked the embers of his anger with fresh breath. He clutched a shard of

bone in his mittened hand, a marker to leave when the anger left him and his calm returned. A way to measure the extent of this bout of fury against his others. How many steps? He passed dark shapes in the fog, relics of his past fits of anger. Every one looked for a shifting moment like Kenojuk, coming back to him across the ice. But then they all resolved into nothing. He passed the furthest marker. His legs burned, his breath shortened. He could not go further. He was not ready. He screamed; he flung the bone shard away and let the thick air swallow it. For the first time, he brought his anger home with him. He accepted that he would never walk it off. There were tracks about his home and the scattered sticks of spent matches inside, as if he'd been stalked by ghosts on the ice.

In 1897 Joshua Slocum became the first man to sail alone around the world. It took him three years in a thirty-seven-foot sloop. The hull, oak cut from New England pasture shade trees, split tropical coral outcroppings in two. Slocum befriended a dolphin he recognized by its scars and shot any sharks that menaced it, until it left him. Gales rolled the ship over and righted it, sloshing seawater. Slocum raved at hallucinations brought on by solitude. Hail fell in chunks big enough to lacerate his face and hands. He could not swim. Caught in the doldrums, he ate a supper of strawberries and tea. The moon rose, at once, violently, like a man springing over the bow. Slocum wept and greeted it. He sang to it. He was afraid he would lose his voice to disuse. In the shallows around an undiscovered tropical island, he anchored the Spray but stayed aboard, lying on the deck, listening to the wind rattle dead and dying palm fronds. In the morning he saw a shark making slow circles beneath him, but found himself in no mood to make one life less.

In 2010 Sarah McCormick rode the Lakeshore Limited five hundred miles from her college to her boyfriend's. The train chugged through the night like it was going back in time. Amtrak coaches had changed so little. Sarah felt like she was in North by Northwest. She fixed her hair and stared mock-moodily out the window, distracted by her own reflection. She tried to look like a person barely evading trouble, a person whose fate was balanced on the edge of a knife. The train passed through Pennsylvania and filled slowly with Amish passengers, muffled in simple fabric. Sarah felt like she was in Witness. She tried to look like a person on the side of justice, not the law, a rascal who secretly knew how to fix things. The train reached her stop at 4:40 am. Dead-legged and smelling of day-old deodorant, she stumbled down the stairs to the station platform ringed by cornfields. There was no one there to pick her up. She waited until snapping twigs began to spook her, and then until she was too close to sleep to care. Then she called a cab. The driver knew the train schedule. He spun his wrist, checking his watch for show. Sarah tried to look like a person who had important places to be in the pre-dawn half light, a person who was in control of what happened to her. She did not know the name of her boyfriend's dorm. The campus library was open twenty-four hours. She texted him to find her there when he woke up.

In 1814 British Major General Robert Ross burned Washington, D.C. and the White House with little resistance. He insisted that only public property be destroyed. Honor. But he stole one of John Adams's shirts and ate at his table before they lit the flames. When Ross set off for the next battle, he announced, "I'll eat in Baltimore tonight – or in hell." Courage. On the march he was shot through the arm and chest by an American sniper. He fell to the side of the road – his blood in the dust, the dust in his wound – and begged to be covered with a blanket. His

troops marched by, pretending not to see him. Respect. Ross's body was preserved in a barrel of Jamaican rum. One hundred twenty-nine gallons of alcohol and him, pickled for the journey home. He absorbed it until he could have been invincible, an oracle, drunk to his very bones and every strand of hair crackling with inebriation. Power. Before leaving America, the ship carrying him was diverted to New Orleans for the war. Duty. His barrel was sent instead to Nova Scotia, and he was buried in Halifax. Canada.

In 1919 Jack Alcock and Teddy Brown flew a surplus Vickers Vimy bomber from Canada to Ireland, ahead of Lindberg and Earhart and public interest. They had replaced the plane's weapons with extra fuel. Both had been prisoners of war in WWI when their last bombers had failed under them in enemy territory – Turkey; Germany. They were not well acquainted before they squeezed together into the cockpit and crossed the Atlantic. Their instruments froze; they relied on dead reckoning. They wavered between skimming the waves and rising to 12,000 feet. For a time they accidentally flew sideways, ears to the ocean, Alcock's scarf dangling to tickle Brown's cheek. Brown navigated. Again and again he crawled out onto the wing to clear ice from the viewscreen. Fire from a split exhaust pipe licked at him and at the plane's cloth covering. He wiped Alcock's goggles free of fog with the pads of his fingers, since the other man could not release the controls. They traveled in at least one accidental lazy circle, flying back towards Canada again. They righted themselves. In Ireland, the landing field looked smooth and green from the air and resolved itself into a sucking mire seconds before they crash-landed into it. They climbed from the wreckage into the bog unharmed and unheralded, ready for resolution, closure. A double-barreled prison break. Alcock died in a plane crash later that year. Brown never flew again.

In 1741 Captain Commander Vitus Jonassen Bering set out from Russia on an expedition to North America. The St. Peter carried a crew of explorers and naturalists and Bering's personal staff of servants including two trumpeters and a drummer to announce his embarking and disembarking from the ship. He was newly distinguished in Russia, in fashion at last after his most recent expedition, and enchanted with courtly custom. He paced the deck and dreamed of landing on that other continent, mapping its coast, finding routes to Japan and South America. And he would be lauded at Imperial galas, his wife unembarrassed on his arm. One of Bering's ships beached itself on a sandbank and tumbled their provisions into the sea. The trumpets sounded. They set sail for North America. Bering ground his teeth. The expedition landed in Alaska for less than a day before it had to turn back for lack of provisions. The naturalists scrambled over the rocks, making rushed and clumsy sketches of new species, pleading for more time. But the objective had been achieved. The trumpets sounded. There was no more time. The water they brought aboard in America was brackish and limey. The crew began to suffer from scurvy. Bering's teeth shifted in his gums, every movement of his tongue like a breeze rattling them. Old wounds reopened, a lifetime of scrapes and gashes and twisted joints. He curled himself into his bunk until he heard the sound of trumpets and thought he was home. It was an uninhabited island, where the foxes did not know to fear him and stole his food and clothing. He lost blood and teeth and crewmen. He could not see. He ordered the trumpet fanfare to sound and carry him to St. Petersburg. In 1991 scientists would return to the island to exhume Bering's body and find that the scurvy did not kill him; his heart gave out.

In 1957 a dog named Laika became the first living being to travel into space. Her

ship, the Sputnik 2, was designed in four weeks in the name of poetic justice, to meet the anniversary of the Revolution. She was a stray, pulled from the streets of Moscow because she already knew cold, hunger, the void of solitude. She was trained as a cosmonaut – kept in progressively smaller cages, spun in a centrifuge. “Laika was quiet and charming,” wrote the program director. He sent her to spend an evening playing with one of the scientists’ children. On liftoff, Sputnik 2 didn’t separate correctly. A piece of thermal insulation tore loose, leaving the rising temperature inside unregulated. The ship reached low earth orbit and began circling the planet. Laika was alive for four orbits before she overheated. She continued circling for five months, crossing over the Soviet Union and the United States and the spaces that were neither 2570 times, before the Earth finally tugged her home. Returning, she burned to nothing before she hit the ground.

In 1999 Sarah McCormick upended a refrigerator box and climbed inside it. She was too old for this, but there had been no new refrigerators in her childhood, so. She sat in the darkness, breathing cardboard fibers. She wondered briefly if she should find her sister, who was only three and would legitimize the venture. She decided against it. Sarah stabbed the wall of the box with a time-blunted steak knife and sawed a rough circle, a porthole. Halfway through she slipped and cut herself, just a little, the halfhearted knife tearing the fleshy pad of her thumb where it met her palm. Sarah sat for a while, watching her blood congeal on her skin, smelling its tang fill the spaceship box. She finished the porthole left-handed. She stared through it at the living room, vignette-framed and empty. She could hear her mother and stepfather’s footsteps circling on the second floor. Sarah pulled the porthole closed and wedged herself so she could lie curled on the smooth floor of the spaceship. She touched the slick of blood on her hand. It was solid and dry. She

chipped at it. She fell asleep and dreamed of flying. When she awoke it was to the shock of light and cool, oxygenated air, the rush of static electricity to her hair, the exasperated cry of “there you are!” as her mother yanked the box from the floor and broke it down for recycling.

KEVIN O'ROURKE

FUCK YOU, EVERYBODY

"You can turn the lights out. The paintings will carry their own fire."

—Clyfford Still

There's nothing like telling someone off. Particularly when the telling off is done explosively, at great volume, and when you're very, very angry; the telling off can act like a release valve, letting all of the anger out of one's body like the popping of a water balloon. Indeed, that most cathartic of telling-off imperative phrases, fuck you, is a little bundle of satisfaction: the word fuck comes to a close about as conclusively as any word in the English language, with its hard

-ck, and you unequivocally directs fuck's action. Though logically problematic—the phrase could be interpreted positively, as fuck is slang for sexual intercourse, and telling someone to go sex themselves or be sexed is generally something that that someone might enjoy—fuck you has become the go-to expletive phrase in the English language. The gold standard of cusses, if you will.

But fuck you is hardly the only phrase in current modern English to use the word fuck. Fuck is a truly versatile obscenity able to be used, per above, to discuss sexual congress, or in a whole array of aggressive expressions. Just a few of the many, many examples: go fuck yourself; get fucked; fuck used adjectivally, as in fucking; fuck as a present participle; the present participle form of fuck used adjectivally, such as that is fucking bullshit bro; the word as jack-of-all-trades, fuck you you fucking fuck; and finally, used in caustic self-reflection, fuck me I'm such a stupid fuck. Of

course, using any form of the word, especially saying fuck you to someone, regardless of whether or not you feel they deserve to be cussed out, isn't always a great idea, because fuck, in addition to being occasionally offensive (it is a curse word after all), can cut off conversation as suddenly as a slammed door, and one should take care when deciding which persons should and should not be told go fuck themselves. Fuck is a giant heavy gold standard that can be dropped on others' heads, or one's own feet.



Clyfford Still, abstract expressionist painter, asshole, genius, megalomaniacal egotist, and man who, in many ways, embodied the phrase fuck you, was born in 1904 in Grand Fork, North Dakota. Some 75.5 years later he expired, in New Windsor, Maryland, maybe because he smoked one too many cigarettes while working on his large, often oversized, abstract paintings of colors shearing their way up and down canvases like great serrated knives. That Still was born and died¹ in two relatively small towns — according to the 2010 Census, New Windsor's population is just shy of 1400—is somehow appropriate, given the degree to which Still is said to have disliked his fellow man. His prickly, dismissive nature—of selling out, and the New York art world in particular—is legendary. For example, in a 2007 New York Times article the former director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, Henry T. Hopkins, noted that when one visited Still:

“You weren't allowed to take a tape recorder or a notebook. You were just supposed to listen. He served you one cup of coffee, no seconds. He was like an avenging Protestant minister coming out of the barren lands of the Dakotas to the wicked city.”

Not that Still avoided society entirely, as during his life he lived in both the Bay Area as well as New York, among other large cities, but he certainly did return to

something approximating his roots when he and his wife moved to New Windsor in 1961. I like to imagine that he spent the darkening days of his last years stewing in his rage's juices, occasionally shaking his thin fists furiously at mirrors. Fuck you, everybody.

I can't remember when I first became infatuated with Clyfford Still's work, but I do remember the first time I saw a significant number of his paintings in one place. Because Still went to extreme lengths to control who could show his art, the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, D.C. was, until very recently, one of the few U.S. museums to permanently house several Still paintings. Why? Because in his will Still specified that much of his work would only, and could only, be shown in a museum entirely devoted to his work. To wit:

“I give and bequeath all the remaining works of art executed by me in my collection to an American city that will agree to build or assign and maintain permanent quarters exclusively for these works of art and assure their physical survival with the explicit requirement that none of these works of art will be sold, given, or exchanged but are to be retained in the place described above exclusively assigned to them in perpetuity for exhibition and study.”

Hence why, until the 2011 opening of the Clyfford Still Museum in craggy, low-oxygen Denver, Colorado, Still's work was largely spread out or shown in special shows. The Hirshhorn's Still paintings, much like those at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, are displayed together in their own room; I have always felt that walking into a Still room was akin to entering a cathedral. For the paintings are large. For example, 1948-C (nearly all of Still's paintings lack “proper titles” and many sport year-appropriate labels in lieu of “untitled”) is 80 7/8 x 68 3/4 inches, or about 6 3/4 feet high by 5 3/4 feet wide. As much a painting as a piece of furniture.



What do I like so much about Still's work? Well, I could say the movement; I could say the way that his paint is applied like plaster; I could say the way his bright colors seem to literally pop out of his backgrounds. Or I could point to the fact that when I look at a Still painting my eyes tend to dart crazily around their surfaces, for the colors' tearing vertical movements tend to thwart one's eyes ability to see the paintings as wholes; maybe I could note how there is more going on texture and visual-interest wise, in small sections of Still's work than there is in the entirety of many other painters' paintings' wholes. And arguments regarding technique and expertise could be made; I could talk about his use of a palette knife instead of a brush; I could talk about hue and saturation; I could say the sheer size, for the experience of walking into a room of these giants is similar to being cursed out volubly and violently, similar to being hit in the face by an object flying through the air at great speed.



For much of my late childhood and adolescence, I was afraid of expressing my opinion to others, fearing that if I did they might disagree with and so dislike me. Instead, I developed a reflexive habit of nearly always agreeing with others so that I would come across as agreeable and someone to like. I had a particularly nasty habit of not being able to admit when I was unaware of some reference being made (i.e., a cool band, they're so great, man) and would find myself trapped in involved conversations about things about which I knew nothing, nodding my head furiously in agreement with the person with whom I was speaking.

Later, as a reaction against this tendency—which, after much navel gazing in my teen years, I began to see as a warning that I had an indistinct, weak personality—I took the opposite approach, by forcefully expressing my opinions and thoughts to others, regardless of whether or not an aggressive expression of one's opinion was

really appropriate. In contrast to my formerly sheep-like self, I strove to become the sort of person whom others avoid disagreeing with. I wanted my stances known. I wanted to seem confident. Nobody was going to push me around and force their opinions on me. I was going to be an asshole.

As part of this project, I grew to admire assholes the world over, seeing in their force of personality a guide for my own behavior. It should come as little surprise that during this same period of time—the second half of high school and my first few years as an undergraduate—I was listening to a great deal of punk rock, the gist of much of which was giving the world the middle finger. In particular, when I was seventeen or so, I discovered Fugazi. Specifically, Fugazi’s 1989 record *13 Songs*. And more specifically, that record’s first song, the anthemic post-hardcore, noise rock, smart punk, art punk classic, “Waiting Room.”

Nearly twenty years later, “Waiting Room,” still kills me; if there was ever a song written to incite its listeners to throw clenched, fuck-yeah-that’s-great fists in the air, then “Waiting Room” is that song. Aside from the music—which rocks, with its heavy opening bassline and stuttered stops and starts and chorally yelled lines—the song’s lyrics were precisely what I needed to hear at seventeen: in the second verse, Fugazi’s Ian MacKaye sings-screams I won’t sit idly by / I’m planning a big surprise / I’m gonna fight / for what I wanna be. When I heard this that afternoon after school in my high school’s auditorium where I was working on the set of some upcoming play as a member of stage crew (something I’d gotten into several years earlier, mainly as an excuse to use dangerous tools with little to no adult supervision), I felt like I’d had a revelation. Even played tinnily through the beaten, dented little boombox that lived backstage for our use, hearing, “Waiting Room,” that day changed my life. Thereafter, I had two selves: Kevin before, “Waiting Room,” and Kevin after. The latter version was a bit of a dick, I’m afraid to report.



And though such a sea change may sound cheesy and like a bit of revisionist personal history, I really did change. I fought with my parents more. I cursed a lot. I drove faster. I dumped my nice, straightedge ska-loving girlfriend for a girl who drank and who had a somewhat more, well, fun-loving reputation. And as an undergraduate—an undergraduate fine arts major focused on installation and video, the very worst sort—I cultivated an interest in obscure art and music and the personality of the sort of person who enjoys obscure art and music at the expense of other more popular, broadly entertaining media: I worked on becoming a haughty dick who looked down his nose at people with more plebian interests, and took an especial interest in badmouthing the hippie “fraternity” on campus, who I felt were all a bunch of obnoxious trust fund brats driving their parents secondhand Mercedes to and from the patchouli store.

It was roughly around this time that I began to admire Clyfford Still, and not just because I discovered his work in the midst of my interest-in-strange-art (which has stuck, I’m sorry/happy to report) period. When I learned that Still was an asshole, the sort of “pure” artist who disdained public relations and commercial success in lieu of a fanatical devotion to his own work (and ego), I became so interested in him and his work that that interest bordered on obsession. Here was an artist I could emulate I thought, as I edited dissonant feedbacked audio over grainy looped distortions of home movies in the pursuit of some sort of domestic commentary and meaning via video art. Here was a guy I could model myself after. After all, famous dead artists are by nature mythical creatures. And famous dead artists who painted enormous inaccessible abstract paintings and seemingly hated the company of their fellow man are even more mythical and mysterious. Fuck everybody else, I want to be like Still, I thought.



However, age happens, and with age the inevitable rounding of one's youth's sharp corners. Being an asshole unnecessarily, and going nearly everywhere in the world with a scowl on one's face, does not, I learned much to my surprise, get one far in the world. And being a dick is simply exhausting; often it's easier and nicer to be polite. Which is not to say I've reverted to my adolescent ways of agreeing with people about everything and pretending that I know about more cool shit than I really do (that still happens), but like many things in life a little moderation is what's called for.

In addition, I've come to realize what it is that really attracts me to Still's work. His paintings, despite their size and immense presence in a room, are works of sublime subtlety. Unlike some of his contemporaries—Pollock comes to mind, or Kandinsky—Still's work does not hit its viewers over the head with movement. And his color palette is even basic, lots of primary colors and slightly dirtied primary colors. Moreover, Still's work does not resort to technical trickery and more radical, fourth-wall breaking techniques, like painting on strangely shaped canvases, or pulling a Rauschenberg and incorporating objects that sometimes hang from and so break up the borders of his works' frames. Rather, Still's work has a quiet, almost unassuming presence, and it is this presence that one should really use as a model for one's behavior, far more than the model of one prickly cactus of an artist's dealings with other people. Though I've long disagreed with the New Critics, who would have us ignore artists' biographies in favor of an objective, context-free appraisal of their work, the New Critics did have a point. If an artist or writer is more famous for their poor behavior than their work, what does that say about their work? Luckily for Still, and for my love of his art, Still's work lives on not because he came across as “an avenging Protestant minister coming out of the barren lands

of the Dakotas,” but because, as Still himself said, his paintings carry their own fire. I suppose I’ll mind my manners.

Notes:

1. Still actually died in Baltimore, but close enough. One imagines that the time he spent in Baltimore at the end of his life, likely hooked up to some sort of medical equipment, was not significant. Terminally ill patients in hospice do not so much as live in the place in which they are dying as exist therein.