

Woo



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Editorial

We're back at it folks!

Just in time to save you from those holiday blues. So pour yourself a tall glass of cheap whiskey, put your dog on the coffee table and take off your shirt.

Good luck.

- *Shea*



Excerpt “Chapter 20 Not So Far Anymore” from *The Diamond Kings of Clarence Checkeredfish*

~Brian S. Hart

[Note: at this point in the story, the farmer Charlie Plume’s painting comes alive again, as the two travelers, Stevie Bingo and the Gingerbread Boy (“child spirits” from within the painting) resume their journey northward to Springfield. They had started together in Mobile but became separated after an attack by strangers. Their intent is to tell Springfield a story about Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Springfield is on the verge of a second uprising.

Will the two arrive safely to Springfield? If they do, what will be the true nature of their story, who will be their audience, and how will the story get told? Will their story make any difference to the town?

Meanwhile, the narrator Muscles the Clown remains “trapped” inside a play and young Shorty Gates and her mysterious unnamed little friend continue to play on the spot where the second uprising is due to start.]

Chapter 20 Not So Far Anymore

It’s little Stevie Bingo and the tiny Gingerbread Boy back together again! The two couldn’t have been happier and more pleased! The Gingerbread Boy reached his cold, ungloved hand up to Stevie’s, and they resumed their trip northward. Stevie Bingo couldn’t stop talking about Martin ----- and other topics, and the Gingerbread Boy naturally was bubbling with questions.

They came across a billboard. It read:

“Be Sure To Hold a Bake Sale In Your Neighborhood – Hurry, Hurry, Hurry – Save the Universe!” Transmit, transmute, atoms of the world unite! Any child can change a world, but who can take charge and make shortening bread into a star?”

“What causes the Universe to transform?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

Stevie Bingo thought and thought.

“Perhaps, paintings,” he said, not altogether sure what to say. “Perhaps it is the Escher’s and the Picasso’s of the world who make everything different. Edges that were once shadows become ‘new games to play.’”

“I see!” said the Gingerbread Boy, excitedly, not sure who they were exactly. “Did Picasso or Escher or Martin ----- ever paint ‘backgammon?’”

“I don’t think so,” said Stevie.

“Is someone painting ‘backgammon’ now?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“I don’t know,” said Stevie Bingo. “Why?”

“Every time I look it seems more and more like a backgammon board!” the Gingerbread Boy noted, pleased. He loved backgammon.

Stevie Bingo did some observing, and agreed, saying, “My! It does!”

They came across another billboard. It read:

“Be a ‘Green Sprig’ Member! It’s a Free Association! Strive With Your Imagination! The Universe Is What You Make Of It.’ Coin in the fountain, be my friend. Lie within the water, among rippling dreams of songbirds, weary soldiers, star-crossed lovers, children of the night...”

“Is there a need to have a Universe for ideas to exist?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“I’ve never been around when there was no Universe. So I couldn’t tell you,” said Stevie Bingo, and then he became perplexed at his own convoluted reasoning. He hesitated and then added, “Plato, if he were around then probably would have answered ‘no!’ ‘Descartes, I think might have said ‘yes!’”

The Gingerbread Boy didn’t know who Descartes was or Plato, but... possibly they were great games players. “You don’t need a chessboard for a game of chess,” said the Gingerbread Boy. “But how could a backgammon game ever start without dice?”

Stevie after some thought admitted hesitantly that the Gingerbread Boy was somehow correct in his odd reasoning. The Gingerbread Boy then summarized, “That makes it Plato the chess player, Descartes the backgammon player, and Escher and Picasso and Mr. ---- painters of dreams!”

Stevie added, “Dreams, as Harry once said, based upon the reality of millions of marching feet.”

They walked further and came across a billboard. It read:

“The Stadium Erupts As the All-Star Universe Takes the Field For the First Time... Play Ball!’ Folks, this is it! Popcorn! There’s no tomorrow at Ebbet! Popcorn! Look at Robinson, on third! Ball one! His lead, his lead! What a distraction! Popcorn, over here, please, how much? Strike two! Kill the umpire, you Higgs Field boson! Who said that? Into the wind-up, the pitch... Look! Look! He’s heading home, sir! Wow! In the now...! Safe! He did it! Hooray! Hooray! Fast Man! Fast Man! Hooray for Mr. Robinson!”

“Isn’t the Universe impossible?” the Gingerbread Boy asked Stevie Bingo.

“It sure feels like it sometimes!” said Stevie Bingo, wondering if physics really offered much more to the question. He added, hopefully, “Perhaps some day we’ll meet Einstein or Penrose or Kaku or Randall and we’ll ask them and they can tell us more.”

This pleased the Gingerbread Boy. He didn’t know who they were – though he had heard of Einstein – but he always enjoyed meeting new people, especially ones who came across as being smart. “Are Einstein’s theories like a baseball stadium?” he asked.

“How’s that?” asked Stevie Bingo.

“Where the possible surrounds the impossible!” the Gingerbread Boy said. “Did you know Roberto Clemente once made an impossible catch off Willie Mays?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“No! WOW!” said Stevie Bingo.

“The King and Queen were at the park. The King shouted ‘Say! Hey!’ The Queen shouted ‘Arriba! Arriba!’”

“Really?” said the surprised Stevie Bingo.

“Yes! They sat in the leftfield bleachers,” said the Gingerbread Boy. “Where they were getting ready to have breakfast.”

“Huh?” said Stevie Bingo.

“Yes!” said the Gingerbread Boy. “A mark of royalty.”

Well! For once the sunrise was in the West! It was Stevie Bingo who didn’t understand the Gingerbread Boy’s logic, rather than the other way around!

The subject changed as they soon came across a billboard. It read:

“Who Says Nothing Ever Takes Place In a Vacuum? Take a Good Look At the Universe...’ It’s there for everyone to see and touch! Everything in place to make our destinies! When all is said and done, the Universe is a spectacular place to be.”

“Is the Universe aware of all its parts?” wondered the Gingerbread Boy.

Stevie thought about how Einstein’s light speed limited instant communication. “It takes awhile for messages to reach,” he said.

[Scene 14. Muscles said, “Antoine Éléphant told the story to Charlie Plume. “The boy noticed that Dinosaur Man needed gravy for his potatoes. He picked the gravy bowl up and circled around the dinner table to Dinosaur Man. Everybody laughed! Dinosaur Man laughed too and said, “Traveling in a curve! Thanks!””]

“But if it could jump outside of itself, and look at itself from the outside...” speculated the Gingerbread Boy.

Stevie Bingo tried to grapple with the strange remark. He’d vaguely heard of electrons jumping out of their “cages,” but could the Universe “jump?” Then he thought, who knows what physicists might come up with next? Perhaps given enough time, it might! But where would it leap to?

“I don’t know,” continued the Gingerbread Boy. “But it’s often a good thing to take a look at oneself that way... from the outside. Isn’t that part of Martin -----’s message?”

“Yes!” Stevie Bingo said, considering the thought. “It is!”

Before long they came across a billboard. It read:

“Extra! Extra! News About the Universe! Unsolved Mystery! Clues

Revealed Inside! Read All About It' General Mayhem at the 'Unite the Nations' blows his whistle, and commands attention. 'Everybody line up against the wall!' A petrified silence! The problem? An unsigned love-note! 'Does the guilty party dare to step forward?' Nobody! General Mayhem gives a stern go-over. The glare toughens. 'Okay! All right! If that's the way it is! I didn't do it! You didn't do it! Nobody did it!' General Mayhem blows his whistle again and says: 'Now you're all busted!'"

“Does the Universe know we’re here?” the Gingerbread Boy wondered.

“You’d think it would suspect something,” said Stevie Bingo. “With all the damage and hurt to our planet that we are doing.” He added, “When it comes to ‘knowing,’ minds can be tricky. So much light and darkness! It seems there’s something called ‘the unconscious.’”

“Where is that?” asked the Gingerbread Boy, wondering and fascinated that the mind could have different compartments.

Stevie Bingo gave some thought and said, “Where ice is carved into hope by the ‘**freedom**’ of the cold wind above blue-gray oceans, where the ‘**lookout**’ from the Titanic has his innocence taken away by the beautiful lady of the backgammon board, where dreams manifest edges to become ‘**mountain**’ road signs of Ace of Diamonds chiaroscuro, where royal spirits ‘**let**’ the dice fly from the box that the groom will take the ‘**ring from**’ to place on the hand of his forever love.”

“Oh, there!” said the Gingerbread Boy, but actually wondering where “there” was.

The two continued on and came across another billboard. It read:

“Everybody’s Marvel! A Pie in the Face Of...! The Star of the Show! In the Spotlight! The Universe’s Very Own... Muscles the Clown!” Tell us a story, sir. ‘The circus woman leaves her umbrella behind on the bus. The acrobat while looking at his reflection in the window, clum... “Sil’y o’ me!” trips over the umbrella. The Yale lawyer in the front of the bus is reading a “Justice League of America” and gives the acrobat his card, in case he prefers to sue. The acrobat, confused, says, “Whom do I sue? Accidents are bound to happen, I presume.” The lawyer eloquently retorts, pointing at the bus driver, “He’s the one, open and shut. With all of the witnesses and clues about, you ought to be entitled to a full refund on the fare!”’

“If the Universe goes away some day, who will remember it?” the Gingerbread Boy asked sadly. “With no more storytellers around!”

Stevie Bingo thought and wondered about this for a long time.

“Perhaps no one will,” said Stevie Bingo. “Or perhaps we all will. When the backgammon board becomes infinite, math equations become hard to handle. Physics for the moment has a nervous breakdown. The dice can only go where faith goes, and faith takes us many places.”

“What is there to have faith in?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“It’s different for each of us. The dice tumble and turn, and carry with them wish-making and brash fake-outs. The place they land face-up can be battlegrounds of the human

spirit, infinite planes, Universes of pure thought and mind.

“But sometimes they land on roads, and there is faith that as steps are taken along the road, something does prevail. It seems, despite outside appearances, the battling ghosts inside each of us ultimately want the same thing we do,” said Stevie Bingo.

“What is that?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“What Martin ----- ----, Cesar Chavez, Mahatma Gandhi, Freud, Plato, and thousands of others each in their own way said would prevail!” said Stevie Bingo.

“What prevails?” asked the Gingerbread Boy.

“Love' prevails,” said Stevie Bingo.

The Gingerbread Boy considered this.

After a little while he asked, “Are we still gonna' tell a story when we get to Springfield?”

“Yes!”

“About Martin ----- ----?”

“Yes!”

This made the Gingerbread Boy happy. The two of them recited together, over and over, “We're gonna' tell a little story about Martin ----- ----, about Martin ----- ----, about Martin ----- ----!”

Stevie Bingo continued to spend more time talking about Martin ----- ----, while the Gingerbread Boy listened and asked many questions. <Shorty Gates asked in front of the Springfield library, “Have you heard of Dr. Martin - - , Jr.?” “Oh, yes,” the young girl replied proudly. “The preacher! Only a block away!” “Huh?” said Shorty.> They were pleased. This time there was no one on the road to stop or harm them, and Stevie Bingo observed that they were getting close to Springfield.



Jira

Put your open window
Lightning in your face
A second-tiered share

~ Cheryl Case



The Roman at the Dumpster

~Stephenson Muret

The Praetorian sentry stood behind the Coliseum museum loosening his breastplate. That final gaggle of school kids had waddled by his post and immediately he had skulked around an ornamental swag and out the back door.

He grunted.

One hundred percent Tuscan marble he stood, five feet tall and over two thousand years old. And he still had his nose! But statues, too, once in awhile need a smoke.

The sentry leaned his oak and iron spear against a drain pipe. He unstrapped his brass helmet. Heavily then he sagged against the museum's dumpster and lit up a Marlboro.

The sentry inhaled. He thought, "I swear to God. When I get out of this gig I'm going back to the Riviera."

The sentry puffed. "Half the people...Hell, almost no one notices me here anyway."

The sentry shook his head. He dragged deeply. "They got me situated by that tapestry near the fire extinguisher and everyone just walks by. They're always looking at the mummified finger with the gold ring. And the pike. And the chamber pot. I might as well not even be in this joint at all."

The sentry exhaled. "A couple years," he reflected. And then he tallied up the exact number of months left of his term: Twenty. "Seems like a long time; but it'll go fast."

The late afternoon sun swept through the columns of the arena, across the museum's tile rooftop and onto the creamy gray musculature of the pensive marble statue. He sighed away a plume of smoke. Absently he gazed on the dangling leather straps of his soldier's belt. He mused over the curator's insistence that he wear the straps over his tunic. Then he heard a young woman's voice near the back door:

"See there children? And those are the kinds of things you'll be able to buy when you get older and become accountants and make lots of euros."

The sentry glanced toward the unexpected voice as he sucked in a lungful of smoke. A cluster of school kids ogled him, each peering through the chain link fence pointedly. The signorina still faced away.

"Oh shit," the statue thought. He cinched his helmet for flight and was fumbling with his spear when he heard her gasp. The signorina! She had seen him! And the cigarette still hung from his lips! Children squealed now in alarm. "Look," one kid cried, voicing the principal terror of all. "Look! He's smoking!"

The statue dodged around a corner. The straps of his soldier's belt slapped against his massive marble thighs as he fled. But, "Shit," he remembered suddenly. He halted. He flicked the Marlboro onto the sidewalk and ground it out with his sandal-boot. Then, after looking both ways for witnesses, he kicked the stub into the bushes.

"Caught!" he railed at himself. "They saw me smoking! Shit! What a bitch! That'll be another year for me here! I'm never getting out of this hole!"

“Six Pack” Story

~Nate Butcher

Beer #1

4:44 pm.

Widmer Okto Ale

Jared found himself asking why he'd been this way for so long and hadn't considered if there was a better version. He was a bonafied asshole with a degree in crop dusting. People loved his work. He provided a service that few were willing to do. Sure, there're many people with licenses to fly an airplane but Jared is special. He lived his work. He put his heart and soul into his profession.

For some reason girls tended to avoid Jared. It did not make sense to him. It was a constant source of frustration. Many times he'd get so confused that he's wish for anything that would take this baggage away. He'd try eating right and sleeping, but no. Every once in awhile a girl would come along that seemed oblivious to something that seemingly, everyone else saw. It was nice for him to have her for that time. Inevitably she'd work her way through to some intimate part of him and leave, taking along a little of the other built up shit. This stinks.

Beer #2

4:55 pm.

Widmer Okto Ale

They say California is full of beautiful people. For whatever reason, a lot believe it to be true. Juan left his home in small town Mexico in hopes of finding a better life in the States. Someday he would return to his home and family with many stories of fantastic adventures and many many dollars. Juan held this dream in his heart every step of the way and whenever he'd feel a little low down he'd remember, and feel able to go on. Like when crossing the Rio-Grande he thought, “How ironic is it that I'm personally fulfilling and perpetuating a stereotype?” Pondering on this depressing thought saw him lose focus of swimming and start to sink. Quickly he remembered his goal and purpose, sway up and across. Or when on a weaker hiatus of partying with prostitutes he found himself huffing some spray paint out of one of the girls' 'Instead'.

Throughout Juan's adventures he had many existential crises. Why? Fuck. Screw shit. Fuck my life! (in Spanish). Okay, breathe...remember. Okay. Okay. Okay. O shit ya man pass that shit!

Juan never made it home. He also never forgot his purpose. It just ended up taking the extent of his life to not get back home. Forever and ever he tried.

Smoke break...5:14 pm.

Beer #3

5:24 pm.

Widmer Okto Ale

Proportion is a pretty fantastic thought. Comparing one thing to another in different contexts can give an interesting perspective.

Squirrels have nice nuts. Ants are super strong and pig's wiener's are just weird.

As a young girl Wonda thought of proportion constantly whether it was what she sought in a man or how she'd like to be when she grew up. Super heroes, animals, trees cars, art, music, cityscapes....she was very broad minded.

One day in her midish 20's something clicked and it wasn't the battery cover to her vibrator. It was 2 minutes from total consciousness out of sleep. She wasn't asleep and not yet awake. Everything became connected in a rhizomatic web of delirious clarity. Her mind was able to construct how her dream man looked and his personality for 10 years. She saw herself in the world as she wanted and everything was great.

She tried not to wake up but did.

She tried to commit it to experienced memory but couldn't.

It slipped into her instinctual unconscious and she went through life with a constant feeling of unrestfulness.

Breathe break and pee break...5:39 pm.

Beer #4

5:44 pm.

Widmer Okto Ale

"Your mom's a big fat dirty whore and you eat shit in your sleep."

Clifford was a portly, personally unpleasant, offensive and crass man. He liked hurting people's feelings and cutting them down. Anything and everything that he could do to people, verbally, was fair game.

"You suck."

He loved life.

"Fuck you."

He enjoyed softball and drinking.

"To women: dickless, self-righteous rulers of the world!"

He likes walks through the animal euthanization parking lot.

"Forward this to everyone: you're lame."

He sleeps and drives well.
“Wake the fuck up asshole.”
Cliff is a doosh because he spells it that way.
“I hate you.”

Beer #5

5:59 pm.
Widmer Okto Ale

One day not long ago there lived a pink and black Stallion named Fordude. Everything was perfect about him in everyone's eyes. His mental and physical agility was unmatched by anyone. He lived under his favorite tree and dreamed of fine mares when he slept. He went through most of his life unchallenged and unaware of less than best. Curiously, along came Ryenot, a thing better than said black Stallion. That was it. Fordude would not stand for it and threw many many tantrums for attention.

Alas, Ryenot was better and Fordude slept more. He also cried, but only in dreams.
Wouldn't you know it he also took up drinking!

No one was going to out drink Fordude, and no one did.

He was the best of and for all time remembered by his fateful exit, drinking and cursing off a cliff.

Smoke break and pee break...6:15 pm.

Beer #6

6:26 pm.
Widmer Okto Ale

Making sense of the insensible is a favorite pastime for Barney. He reels and writhes over it. Sometimes it's instant and sometime it's like a plague. Full color spectrum with defining boundaries are only sometimes true.

Loving common sensibility and real time anonymity is given to to the act of amiability.

Barney.

Barney changes color-has nothing to do with the temperature-like a pure chameleon.
Fly on the wall gentle heart.

Oh Barn.

Your roof is stout and your support hardy. Flashes and divisions pepper your salt. Your place is without name.

Happy horny barn. Will you, will you take my arm? Commit submit. Rule a fit?

Lovey dovey proper incorrigible motivation.



Rock 'n' Roll Forever

~ Keith Zimmerman

Fifteen quarters, a handful of nickels and dimes. About eight bucks, give or take, not a bad haul - it was at least enough for a few happy hour rounds at Dorsey's, or maybe a bottle of something from the LQ. In the shuttered darkness of Dani's bedroom, Kincannon replaced the coins he'd taken with a handful of pennies from his shirt pocket and put the mason jar back on her bookshelf. The thing was three-quarters full, she'd never miss the money. A white rayon bra hung wilted on a lampshade next to the change. He fingered the cups and underwires affectionately and held it to his nose. He remembered when he first moved into her house, how he slept in this room every night, the way she surprised him sometimes with a breakfast of sliced oranges and coffee, right there in that bed, sanctum sanctorum. But too many bouts of whiskey-dick and general wet brained behavior had held Dani and her bra beyond his grasp for too long.

Out back the signature whine of her burned-out brakes, followed by the *whumph-whumph* of slamming car doors, alerted Kincannon to the possibilities of detection and apprehension. Heart beating fast, he grabbed her copy of *Chuck Berry Is on Top* as cover, a reason for his being in her space, and barreled through the living room, knocking over fetid beercans and dusty, jerry-rigged ashtrays on the way. He narrowly avoided smashing a darting black cat, and, in doing so, fell flat on his face in a swept up pile of fast food wrappers and hairballs. By the time he made it to the porch his feet were covered with a slurry paste that made them look like a coal miner's. Dizzy and exhausted, he lay on his cot. The weighty coins spilled and splashed out of his pants pockets onto his sheets and he quickly hid them under his pillow, like silver spoils from some unlawful tooth fairy. He turned on the radio, found the fullest 40oz among the empties on the floor, and rested the record on his lap.

He inspected his plaster of slag-coated toes while he drank and waited for the inevitable knock on his door.

'Come in,' he called. He toe-tapped a tattoo on a pile of Zildjians at the foot of his bed.

'Whatcha doin', Jack?' Dani stood next to an unspeakably beautiful young man in the doorway.

'Just sitting around. Beer drinking. You're back from the airport already?'

'What the fuck happened to your feet?'

Kincannon wiggled his toes. 'Just finished some yardwork, is all. Hey, I borrowed this,' he said, indicating the record.

'Yardwork, huh. We saw your little Trail of Tears in the living room.'

'Are you nuts? *My* little Trail of Tears? Your cats are disgusting, Dani, you know that. I saw the mess they made too, and believe me - I'm done mopping up after those little bastards. But you of course have to blame everything on me. Right?' Satisfied, Kincannon grabbed a half-smoked butt from the ashtray on the windowsill and lit it with a maroon barbecue lighter he found on the floor. 'Anyway, who's your friend?'

'This is Andre Dardano. I told you about him.'

Andre nodded.

The kid was tall. His dark lashes framed pale blue bedroom eyes set beneath long brown hair that was somehow both feathered and dirty, weightless but styled. An untroubled, natural tan, and a long, delicate jawline, underlined by full, feminine lips, lent his face a vaguely equine grace. He wore skinny blue jeans, ripped and faded with discrimination, rolled up like Huck Finn's, and a pink- and grey-striped tank top. A white and red feather earring hung from beneath his generous locks. *His* bare feet were prettier than most girls' faces. Kincannon coughed and scratched his balls.

'What up?' he said to the stranger.

'Jack Kincannon,' Andre said. 'I've heard all about you.'

'Oh yeah?' Kincannon splashed a cymbal.

'Yes. It's no surprise you're drunk before noon. Dani expected as much.'

'Summer break, buddy. It means rock and fucking roll. Ever hear of that?'

'I'm sorry. I didn't realize that you're a student, because--'

'What are you, a cop?'

'—because I heard that you're a forty-year-old bum who would have to live with his mother if not for the generosity of a certain someone very close to my heart.' His eyes glanced off Dani and back. She elbowed him and giggled. 'That concerns me.'

'Yeah? You should be concerned. I mean, did you also hear that I eat pissants like you for fucking breakfast? Because that certain someone shoulda told you. She shoulda told you to keep your fucking mouth shut.' This sudden surge of anger disturbed Kincannon. 'By the way, I'm thirty-four, not forty. And you know what *I* heard? *I* heard *you're* from Kentucky, which makes you a fucking hillbilly.'

'Virginia.'

'Whatever.' Kincannon pulled from his bottle. 'Hope you brought your banjo, Virginia.'

'C'mon, guys. We're all going to be friends,' Dani said. 'Close friends, you'll see.'

Andre shrugged, Kincannon grunted, Dani snickered. She led Andre out through the living room down into the basement where she had set up his makeshift living quarters. Kincannon lowered Chuck Berry onto the turntable, dropped the needle, and lit a smoke. Seconds later a giggle rose through the vent and punctuated the opening notes of 'Maybellene,' followed by a series of sweet, slow moans that tightened and quickened, keeping time with the tune. Kincannon trolled his trousers, looking to find any lasting warmth for Dani, and slowly locked step to the rhythm section thumping from the basement bed below his.

Kincannon awoke to the snap-crackle-pop of the stylus scratching alien transmissions on the rotating paper label. The sky had changed from bright August sunshine to deep midnight blue while he slept, and for a moment he was lost in the new darkness. He could have been anywhere or nowhere at all, but his heart fluttered in grateful recognition as the old Chuck Berry sleeve slid from his stomach to the floor. He lay on his cot staring at black treetops floating in the wind outside the wall-to-wall windows of the screened porch – Dani called it the mudroom – and listening to crickets and the soft rush of passing cars. A dim amber glow shone from the stereo monitor, just bright enough, the right color even, to make the warren of bottles on his bedroom floor look full in reflection. But the house lights were dead; Dani and her little muppet were somewhere laughing over drinks, smiling and sneering and feeling a little bit sorry for all the fools too foolish to be in love, too dumb to be truly *alive*,

like they were. He just knew it. He knew it because that's how things were when he first met Dani. Special like that, and just as stupid. He took a swig from his beer: Empty.

Groggy and punch drunk, Kincannon lifted himself from the cot and stumbled like a spent prizefighter, sending domino rows of empties crashing from both feet. He stretched each elbow behind his head, held the position a moment, then bent at the waist, attempting to reach his toes, and almost fell down. The air in the small room was stifling. He opened two windows and stuck his head out into the nighttime air, leaning there on his forearms. This dizziness was bad. He knew he had anemia or diabetes or *something* – normal people didn't sleep so long without physical exertion, they didn't sweat constantly without exercise, and their hearts didn't do the cartwheels and jumping jacks his was doing right now, not without cause. Maybe, he thought, I could use a bite to eat.

A man walked down the sidewalk in the darkness. When Kincannon raised his hand to wave, the man said 'Faggot,' and kept on walking.

'Well then,' Kincannon whispered, 'just keep on walking.'

He groped the light switch next to the door and was once again newly yet predictably crestfallen by his meager surroundings; an army cot, a tape deck, and a thrift store record player; a broken down drum kit, a banged up guitar, and a suitcase used as a dresser; scattered books, peeling paint, a lot of glass; cobwebs, rat shit, who knew what else. Some change. One of these days he would have a place of his own but it would not look like this. His place would be in the foothills, somewhere just outside some midsize city. Portland, say, or maybe St. Louis. Hell, why not? He imagined rolling green hills and pickup trucks carrying large barking dogs down crisp wet streets after the rain. The house itself could be a Victorian or a ranch-style or whatever, he didn't care, just nothing too modern, but it would have a lawn for mowing and a basketball hoop out front. An extra room, maybe the whole basement, would be dedicated to playing and recording music. There would be beds and cots in every bedroom and the garage, for when visiting bands or friends came to town. Maybe there would be an outbuilding, like a carriage house, for shows. Most importantly, it would be clean. Very, very clean.

One of these days, but when?

Kincannon grabbed his barbecue lighter and Dani's change and stuffed them in his jeans. He stepped into his flip-flops, briefly considered taking a shower, or at least cleaning his feet in the tub, but decided against it. Fuck it, no one would notice, not where he was going.

He went down the porch steps to the sidewalk and headed west to the Maverik station without thinking. As he passed the piles of the Mayflower St. bridge a wet river breeze riffled his hair, causing him to lament his failure to bring along a sweater or jacket, some item of protection; he had a feeling he would be out late tonight. He eyed the river. A certain icy lightness of stomach blossomed and began fingering its way upward toward his chest. Cold storage, he thought. Keep your wits. He knew it was necessary to forestall all thoughts of Dani in order to operate with any sort of self-control. This was what his old probation officer called 'an irrational sense of impending doom,' and Kincannon knew from experience that it was something he needed to soften – all he needed was a drink. If you can't hang, he told himself, the river is right here. He stood at center deck on the bridge and looked down over the water, where streetlight marbled blue and silver on the swells and eddies of the Cascade. He caught a chill. Kincannon turned back to the street and quickened his pace.

The orange glow of the gas station flood lamps radiated for blocks, causing Kincannon to squint and shudder. Maverik looked like a giant, self-contained astrodome glittering insects and chimera in the night. It was Atlantis under the ocean, a snow globe with no snow. Noises of voices and cars trickled and hummed, growing louder, like the turning-up of a volume knob on some unseen radio. He crossed the street to the parking lot, watching his shadow grow longer and more distinct with every step toward the light.

Kincannon stood beneath the flickering store sign and waited for a lull in traffic. When business slowed, he approached a brown plastic ashcan that stood next to the glass door entrance. The thing was shaped like a bell at its base, a sort of covered bucket that held trash and supported a slender cylindrical shaft that stood a few feet high, with an opening at the top, where customers dropped their smokes. A malignant odor wafted forth when he removed the shaft from the tub. Discarded lollipops and bubblegum stuck to wadded up Kleenex, cellophane wrappers were filled with dirty butts and sand. He quickly sifted through the refuse in search of smokeable cigarettes, and in the harried excavation his hands took on an ashy complexion matching his feet. His heart was set to pounding for fear he might be caught or seen; even in his bitter state of disrepair, Kincannon found this humiliating.

When he had enough high-grade halfies he stood up and replaced the lid. He stowed the stolen smokes in his shirt pocket and brushed hands on knees. The glass door swished open from the inside and he jumped. It was Alan, the night attendant.

‘Hey Jack, you fucking mutt,’ he laughed, ‘get a fucking job.’

‘Jesus, dude, you nearly gave me a heart attack! Fuck!’

‘Sorry, sorry. Hey, what’s going on tonight?’

‘You think I know? I’m out here digging through the trash.’

‘You going to Dorsey’s maybe?’

‘Yeah, maybe. I’m broke, though. You got a smoke?’

‘Yeah. Tellya what, buddy boy. There’s some kids in the alley, they’ve been playing Hey Mister all night, they can’t get no one to buy ‘em no booze.’

‘Yeah? Nice. Thanks, man.’

‘Sure, sure. Whatever I can do, you mutt.’

Kincannon walked around the corner into the alley, where a group of teenagers stood huddled under a streetlamp smoking and giggling. The smell of marijuana hung thick in the air.

‘Hey, what’s up?’ he said. ‘You guys got a smoke I could bum?’

‘Here.’ The tallest, oldest boy nodded and gave him a menthol. The kid was wearing some off-brand Walmart shit, baggy shorts with a backward baseball cap. He was mad-dogging Kincannon with dope-cashed slits.

‘Thanks, bro. What up?’

‘Hey, mister...’

‘Hey mister will I buy you some booze?’ Kincannon said, and the kids all laughed. ‘Sure. I need some too. If you guys buy me a bottle of wine and a pack of smokes I’ll get you whatever you want.’

The group of boys gratefully agreed to Kincannon’s request. They settled on Budweiser for themselves, and the oldest boy collected close to twenty dollars from the others. ‘Make sure you come back, now,’ he said, handing over the money.

‘Shit. I’m sure you can run faster than I can.’

Kincannon struggled to see clearly in the blinding light inside Maverik. He stood still and loosened his belt, opening and closing his eyes until he no longer needed to support himself on the dayglow rows of candy and detergent. He gathered a case of Bud, a bottle of bottom-shelf wine, and asked Alan for pack of Pall Malls.

‘Even got some smokes, huh? For free? You are one of a kind, Jackie boy. Why work when all ya gotta do is beg? Me, I must be a sucker. Here, you’ll want to keep this. Don’t spend it all in one place.’ Alan handed him the change, grinning. ‘Receipt?’

‘Fuck you,’ he said, shoving the money into his pocket. He carried the beer back to the kids.

As he placed the Budweiser on the asphalt next to the boys, Kincannon could feel pink clouds forming and dancing in the pit of his stomach. Little waves of relief licked his insides, unclenching the old fists of despair and disgrace. He closed his eyes and savored this familiar feeling – he got it every time he figured out a way to cop some booze – this languid benediction that seemed to roll over him and erase the days. It was never the drunk itself, but more the calm that preceded it; there was nothing he liked more than the beginning. It was the prospect of a reprieve from loneliness, of communion and fellowship within and without himself. Kincannon was giddy. He straightened the church key he kept chained to his belt loop and uncorked his bottle.

He looked at the oldest guy in the group. ‘Thanks,’ he said, ‘you don’t know how much this helps.’

‘Are you Jack?’ the kid asked. ‘Jack from No Soap?’

‘Yeah. Used to be.’

‘No way.’ The kid turned to his friends, talking excitedly. ‘Man, this guy used to play guitar in the dopest fucking band, man, this guy was a fucking rock star.’

‘This guy?’ his friend said laughing. ‘This guy’s a bum. Aren’t you like a Vietnam vet or something?’

‘What? No. I’m only thirty-six.’ Kincannon was laughing too, but felt a little stung. He took a swig from his bottle.

‘No, wait – you remember Rachel Emhoff?’ the first kid said. ‘She’s my sister. Remember “Ghettoblaster?” She *loved* that song! She used to take me to all those crazy house shows you guys used to play. She was in love with you, man.’

‘Ha. Rachel, yeah, I remember her. I haven’t seen her in forever. How’s she doing?’ Kincannon lit a smoke, but forgot he was carrying a barbecue lighter until it was too late. He decided to just hold it in his hand like he didn’t care.

‘Old people shit, y’know? She married a Mormon and they have a bunch of kids and shit, nice house out in the suburbs. She seems happy, though.’

‘Wow. That’s pretty cool.’

‘What about you? You married?’

‘Nope. Not me.’

‘But you still playing music though, right? Shit, why get married?’

‘Right? Yeah, no. I mean I play at home sometimes. Man, I can’t believe you were around back then. You must’ve been a baby.’

‘So what’s up? What you up to?’

‘This, just this. You’re looking at it.’

‘Oh. Huh.’ The kid stared at Kincannon’s toes, sucking his teeth.

He smiled at the kid, but a pall had been cast. 'Listen, tell your sister hi, okay? And don't get in any trouble tonight.' Kincannon picked up his bottle and started to walk away.

'Hey Jack,' the kid called.

'Yeah?'

'What the fuck happened to your feet?'

Neptune Park was dark and quiet. A scrub of trees – Ponderosas, Blackjacks and Cottonwoods – flanked the outer edge of the park. Nothing more than black on blue shadows against the sky, they stood sheltering him from the lights of passersby, insulating him from Clayton St. noise. Kincannon lay on a grassy slope overlooking an empty playground where black plastic swings swung on their own, felt the alcohol affording him that same easy sway. He kicked off his flip-flops and made a pile of the evening's take: ten bucks, twenty stubs, a pack of smokes and a bottle of wine – he hadn't been this flush for a while. Kincannon glugged some wine. He rested in the stillness, alone and content.

Funny, he thought, seeing that kid at the gas station, Rachel's brother. She was a nice girl, very pretty. How long had it been since he'd seen Rachel, or anyone from those days? They all had kids now, he supposed. Kids, jobs. His old friends were off doing their own thing, the grown up thing, like he was supposed to do. They'd graduated. It was always disconcerting when a friend from way back would pull up to a gas station Kincannon was loitering at. They'd talk about music or old times, the friend would invariably say he was 'out of touch,' feigning embarrassment, while standing in front of a shiny SUV. The dinner invitations were always to houses newly purchased, 'way out in the boonies, ha, we're such *homebodies* now.' When they asked Kincannon what he was up to, he'd say 'Oh, y'know. Not much.'

But getting a real job had never occurred to Kincannon, except as a way to eat; he'd always figured he'd be in a band, playing shows, doing *his* thing, for...well, forever. He'd never thought of *not* doing it. He knew that meant he'd be poor, and that had always been okay with him, up until the past few years, when he began to realize that girls his age didn't want to be with a guy without money. The younger girls didn't want to be with an older guy. Not as old as him, anyway.

When he was a kid Kincannon had valued the older guys on the scene, and often sought their advice. This new group made him feel old and in the way - it was like another crop of musicians, drinkers and shitbags, a generation of Andres, had taken his place, claimed his title, usurped his throne. Maybe two generations, he wasn't really sure anymore. He'd never prepared for the Andres of the world, all these newly minted know-it-alls who sat in bars acting like King Shit of Fuck Mountain, professional smirks painted on their faces like makeup. It didn't matter to Kincannon that he'd only met Andre today - he knew the type.

He'd always figured his life would be the same at fifty as it was at fifteen, more or less. He never realized that all the girls he'd been with had expected him to change *for real*, to actually *grow up*, like everyone else. He thought their arguments were just arguments; he'd maybe slow down on the hooch for a while (he'd given up drugs completely, years ago, and how was that for a sacrifice?), but shit, get a job? Please. He'd thought that the band, the music, and all the things he was really doing, every day, were worthwhile. That he himself was what people appreciated. How could he give *that* up? It was the only thing he knew.

But after all, he told himself, you don't play anymore. You don't do much of anything.

These days Dani let him sleep in the mudroom for free. She took him into her bed one

night after the bar, and he didn't leave. They stayed and drank in that dank little room for days. He played her records while she worked, smoked her cigarettes. When she was home, they lay on a beat-looking mattress amongst piles of clothes on a corner of her bedroom floor. They'd drink wine and talk about bands. There were nonstop music marathons; sometimes they played nothing but *Horses* for weeks. Dani sold some records to get his guitar out of hock, took him to Connie's house to retrieve his drums. Although she was ten years his junior, she'd seen No Soap in their heyday, and she encouraged Kincannon to further pursue his music.

'Look at yourself, Jack.' Dani said. 'Look at your white t-shirt, your Levis. You don't even see it. You're Johnny from all those girl group songs. You're the bad kid with the switchblade, even as a grown-ass man. Not a cliché, *for real*. Like, that's just sort of who you are, it's your way about you. But if you sit in a room all day drinking whiskey no one will know that. And why would they care?'

After the gauntlet had been thrown to no response, things soured. Dani went to bars after work without him, she laughed a little longer with the guys she found there. If the house was a mess or smokes were missing from her purse, she got pissed. Sleeveless singles presented problems and his drunkenness depressed her. Finally, Dani bought Kincannon a cot at the Good Samaritan, and Kincannon spent his nights under her sleeping bag, alone on the porch.

Kincannon quailed skyward, open-mouthed, at gulfs between clouds. A faint current rustled leaves and flurried the stars. Grass tickled his feet and neck. He finished the last of the wine, threw the bottle toward the playground, and headed for the bar.

Dorsey's was dead. A few grey-haired drunks sat belly-up, sipping slowly, watching George and Weezy Jefferson have a closed-captioned conversation on Nick at Night while Kristofferson sang 'Blame It on the Stones.' The dim interior was lit with small candles encompassed in red pebbled glass, and old fashioned beer displays; a Hamm's clock with galloping stallions, a neon Beefeater sign, others. Blinking red Christmas lights hung from cinder block walls painted with black enamel. The overall effect suggested some kind of gothic fallout shelter repurposed as a geriatric ward.

Kincannon dropped two dollars, six quarters and ten dimes on the bar, half of the coins spilling behind the bar. He grabbed his glass of Miller. On the TV above him, Sherman Hemsley shouted then danced across the screen. The subtitle read 'ZEBRA!' He downed his shot, hitched his jeans, and turned to survey the room.

'Look, it's the March of Dimes. Dani always said you were a charity case.' Andre Dardano approached him, giving him the horns, sticking his tongue between the fingers. He sat on the stool next to Kincannon.

'Always, Virginia? What is always, like a week?'

'Where'd you get all that change, Jack? Were you out playing Hey Mister in front of the 7-11 again? Here, let me buy you a shot.' He winked at Kincannon. 'What would you like?'

'Whiskey neat. Well's fine.'

The bartender, Dicky, a slack-jawed fifty-something Dorsey's lifer, emptied the errant coins from two beer glasses and gave Kincannon a look. Andre laughed. Dicky racked their cash, built their drinks, and waddled back.

'If you ain't got no paper ya proolly shouldn't be here, Jack.'

‘There were those two I just gave you. I know you got me for another round anyway, right buddy?’ He patted his jeans. Finding nothing, he pulled a butt from his shirt pocket. ‘Must’ve left ‘em at the park. We need a pitcher, too.’

‘Let the kid pay.’ Rick glanced at Andre.

You mean Andre? His name is Andy, but he goes by Andre because it matches his haircut.’ To Andre, ‘Can I call you Dre? Are we close enough yet?’

‘What?’

They took their drinks to a corner table near the door and settled into the black scoop-back chairs. Kincannon palsied a splash of pilsner over his lips and chin. ‘Oops.’ He smiled, wiping his mouth, and hid his hands under the table. ‘Man, I need to wash my face. I’ve been drinking for too many days in a row. My skin feels so sticky, like a glazed donut that hasn’t dried yet. Or a cinnamon bun you put in the microwave.’

‘That’s disgusting.’

‘Pfft, tell me about it. Jesus, I am so fucking hungry!’ He drank his whiskey and wretched, forcing a single string of saliva from his mouth. ‘So where’s Dani? Your girlfriend.’

‘At home, I guess.’

‘Home, Andre? You know what? I live there, this place you refer to as home. Dani also lives there. You, however, are only a guest.’

‘She’s at the house.’

Kincannon took a butt from his pocket and beamed Andre between the eyes. He waited eagerly for a response, but, failing that, he downed his beer and grabbed Andre’s. As the dim light of the bar paled and darkened in waves, Kincannon watched Andre’s eyes turn from two to four to eight to two.

‘Do you know how long I played? I been playing my whole goddamned life and it don’t mean a shitting thing! Y’know Andy? We were sort of almost great. My band. So how can you sit there and call me a loser? How can Dani?’ Kincannon was yelling, but quieted now. ‘Almost fucking great is better than any of you will ever be. I guess it hurts that nobody really cares. That that “almost” was so long ago. That it’s changed to “never again.”’

‘Jack.’ Andre sat staring at the floor.

‘Gotta bunch a cigs today.’ Kincannon fished a handful of half-smoked cigarettes from his shirt pocket and placed them on the table. He selected three good ones, put them in his mouth, began to chew. He spit them out slowly, one by one, aiming for Andre, but managed only a flaccid gurgle of ashy black sludge which clung to his jaw, threatening to drip. Emptying the pitcher of beer over his crotch, Kincannon vomited a matching, twin stream of foamy grey bile onto his lap. ‘Ha! All gone.’

‘Seeya, Jack.’ Andre stood up. He fingered Dani’s keys.

‘Hey, look, you like poetry, right? No, you seem like a sensitive soul! Here: “I paint the cot. As truth will paint it, as bards will not.” How’s that, Virginia, you feather earring motherfucker!’ Following Andre now, he flailed his arms about, air-painting the emptiness. *‘I paint the fucking cot!’*

He caught Andre’s shoulder as he reached the door.

‘Hey, whoa, sorry. Sorry sorry sorry. *Sorry*. I’m not feeling so hot. Gimme a lift home.’

‘Dani doesn’t want to see you like this. Jesus, Jack. I don’t know how she stands it.’

Andre shook his head. ‘Find somewhere else to sleep tonight.’

Kincannon followed him to the parking lot, stumbling and barely able to see. When he

found the passenger door, Andre slammed down the lock. Kincannon kicked the car and fell straight backwards. He chucked a stone at the window as the car backed away and straightened itself. Once righted, Andre revved the engine, floored it. The car shot forward, and Kincannon, thinking to impede its exit, scrabbled to his feet and pitched himself before it. Dani's car bucked him with a force that popped his legs from beneath him and sent him buckling wildly on the hood. His face met the windshield, a bloodied cord of wiper in his mouth, and his eyes met Andre's. And then he was off. He lay on the asphalt watching the taillights recede. 'I paint the cot,' he laughed.

Newly vigilant, Kincannon staggered inside and dumped a handful of change on the bar. 'Gimme a 40. I'm going home.'

Kincannon slipped his state ID between the door and the jamb, jiggled it, twisted the knob with his other hand, pulling the weight of the door with up with the handle, and waited impatiently for the lock to pop. His card snapped in half and he stifled a sob. Sighing, he stepped back, released the handle. On the sidewalk where he'd left his 40, Skeevy, Dani's black cat, sat blinking at him. She meowed. 'Oh baby,' he said, but as he crossed the lawn she skittered away. He sat on the curb and poured some High Gravity down his throat, put his head in his hands. Calm down, he told himself. Keep your wits.

But it angered Kincannon to think he was being pushed around by this snot-nosed know-nothing. Where had Andre been? What had he done? What did he know about Kincannon, the way he lived, how he coped, his relationship with Dani – what did he know about any of it? These kids and their philosophy texts, their poetry books, the same formula of accepted wisdom, just common knowledge, really, installed over and over like chain stores by professors paid only to do a job – who were they kidding? What did they think they knew about real life? Kincannon was living the very life these shitheels studied in their books, the life of a seeker, one of monasticism, the single-minded pursuit of a solitary transfiguration, some kind of enduring autonomy. And it was ugly. The kind of life that is beautiful only in books. He wasn't hurting anyone, not really. But a guy like Andre, nonplussed by everything, couldn't be bothered to see what was actually there in front of him. He couldn't be bothered by the inconvenience of it all. And now he was going to try to take it all away, take Kincannon's home, his girlfriend, his livelihood? Fat fucking chance. 'Whoever locked the goddamn door,' Kincannon said, 'is getting shot.'

He needed a way inside. The weather was fine despite the late hour and Kincannon figured he would be just as comfortable on the lawn as in his bed. The problem was that when he was drunk and angry like this he needed music to send him to sleep, to drown out the static. There were no stand-ins for the agents of lassitude; he just wanted to go away. Besides, this was his house, and he needed to talk to Dani.

The back door. Obviously. Kincannon shook his head and drank some beer. Alcohol and force of habit had rendered in him a near-helpless lack of imagination. He crossed the grass to the side of the house and was startled to see, at the bottom of the window well, Andre Dardano sleeping on a recliner in the basement. His head was askew, his mouth agape, and he was holding a bong. 'Snoring,' Kincannon quietly imitated Andre's voice, 'is so *distasteful*.' Kincannon drained his beer and burped. He poured out the suds. Moving slowly, with a sudden disquiet, he knelt down, set his bottle aside and, with one hand holding the corrugated side panel of the well, supported himself against the foundation with the other, stepping

gingerly onto the crushed rock floor of the cavity. He squatted down, knees against the window, and lit a cigarette. He was one foot away from the back of Andre's head. Firecrackers erupted in his chest once more.

Still dizzy from the booze and sweating from the strain, Kincannon drew the window open. He waited to see if Andre stirred. Looking at the moonlit stillness of yard, the empty sidewalk, and the open gate to the back, Kincannon felt time, circumstance and intent coalesce deliciously, regrettably. He steeled himself on the heavy metal window frame, grabbed his bottle by its neck, fitted it through the window, reared it back, as close to the wall as possible, like the wind-up before a pitch, and brought it down on Andre's head with all his spite. The glass shattered and Andre fell to the floor. Kincannon crouched there, his face against the window, waiting for Andre to move, but no dice. The body slumped motionless on the carpet. Kincannon jumped out of the hole and ran to the backyard.

The backdoor was locked as he'd known it would be. He shook it a little, gave it a shove. When he walked past Dani's car he noticed a spiderweb crack branching out across the windshield where he'd hit his head. He rubbed 'FORGOT ABOUT DRE' in the dust with his pinkie. The gravel of the alley knifed his feet and he realized he'd somehow lost his thongs. No beer worried him, Maverick called. He hoped to find a place to sleep, somewhere without bother, because he could barely see.

But his wandering brought him back to Mayflower St., to the bridge, where he sat with his naked feet dangling over the Cascade. He imagined what it would be like to sit here, young again, unencumbered by the weight of failure and humiliation, the heat of embarrassment that rose to his temples every time he thought about his past or future, the cheap way he'd lived his life - the dwindling possibilities of salvage, the pointlessness of it. Where were the people from before, all the long-ago friends and lovers, all those smiling eyes? Kincannon realized his life was of no value to anyone, least of all himself. He knew then what he had avoided for years: it was too late. It was too late.

He rounded the bridge abutment, rode a clumsy trot down the bank, his toes sinking footprints into the damp of the grassy watershed. He stood at the bottom grinning, resigned for the moment, at his old chum the river. But Cascade River roared unaware down there, close to the shore, mindless of him and his anchorless calamity, every whispering ripple a threat. He could hear clearly every drop, every splash, the endless blue doo-wop of the old, cold water as it ebbed and flowed in harmony with the hot throb of his body. Riverbed reeds waved so long under the waning moon. Much as he tried to stop it, his mind kept turning toward impending departure; all he wanted was some rest. To erase his lowercase life.

A thought began to form in his mind: this river, the Cascade, was a river connected to other rivers. Streams and creeks, tributaries and byways; they all flowed from the same place, somewhere up in the mountains, maybe the sky. He turned toward the bridge where cars blurred past in a rush of new traffic, and in each window he saw faces of the past, over and over, in a stuttering procession, some come to call, others waving. He looked at his hands, his feet, which were now very clean, and at the river and sky. He wanted to be near them, the visitors, and so headed for the road.

Finding the alley empty and the doors both locked, Kincannon huddled in front of the dog door, scooted in. He grabbed a dirty fifth from the kitchen counter and walked past Dani's bed to the mudroom, took off his shirt. Not knowing exactly what to do but knowing he must do something, he surveyed the room for clues. In the corner, sticking out from under his cot,

lay *Chuck Berry Is on Top*, the sleeve, and it shone like a beacon.

With trembling hands, he moved the arm to track three. Chuck Berry wrung out a limber opening plea, an ornery invitation. As he lay there listening, prone and open on his cot, some new sensitivity buzzed Kincannon and prickled his heart. When the band joined in, earthy umber chunks of guitar thumped a call-and-response, a rubbery push-pull of joy and pain like calls to arm, cries for help. *As I was motivatin over the hill / I saw Maybellene in a Coup Deville / A Cadillac a rollin on the open road / Nothin outrun my V8 Ford*. Kincannon heard the song with new ears and eyes, like a child would, and the song seemed different, too; it was somehow elemental, all-important, coming from somewhere inside himself. Drums hopscotched jittering train tracks on their way uphill, gaining momentum and losing distance, chugging forward and dropping back. *Pink in mirror on the top a the hill / Just like swallowin up a medicine pill / Offhill curve, a downhill stretch / Me and that Cadillac neck and neck*. Berry's voice blustered a lighthearted dismissal of the burden of gravity, showcased his bravado before the storm. Kincannon was part of it, feeling it, living it – he was there for real, on the road, up the hill, in the Ford, crying and laughing, down by the river. *It then got cloudy and it started rain / I tooted my horn for a passin lane / The rain water blowin all under my hood / I knew it was doin my motor good*. Living water trickled from pianos. Crystal bells rung in May. *The motor cooled down, the heat went down / And that's when I heard that highway sound / The Cadillac a sittin like a ton a lead / A hundred and ten a half a mile ahead / The Cadillac lookin like it's sittin still / And I caught Maybellene at the top a the hill*.

The breath in Kincannon's lungs sweetened. This gift, this beacon, this strange grace – it was the never-ending now and required no thought. Pillories were loosened. Woodsheds and soapboxes were no longer needed, mudrooms didn't exist. He removed the needle from the record. For the first time in years he reached for his guitar.

Outside, the morning sun rose and shimmered. The summer warmth slowly straightened sagging stalks and thawed night's frost-beset petals. Somewhere in the distance, on the river, blue bottles began to sing.

The idea is to reach the unknown through the derangement of the senses
Everything takes on a mystical, atrophy-induced light, like fasting or Siddhartha
empty alley, tire tracks
stain of blood (maybe don't revisit this)
John the baptist
Wrest/rest, wring, twist

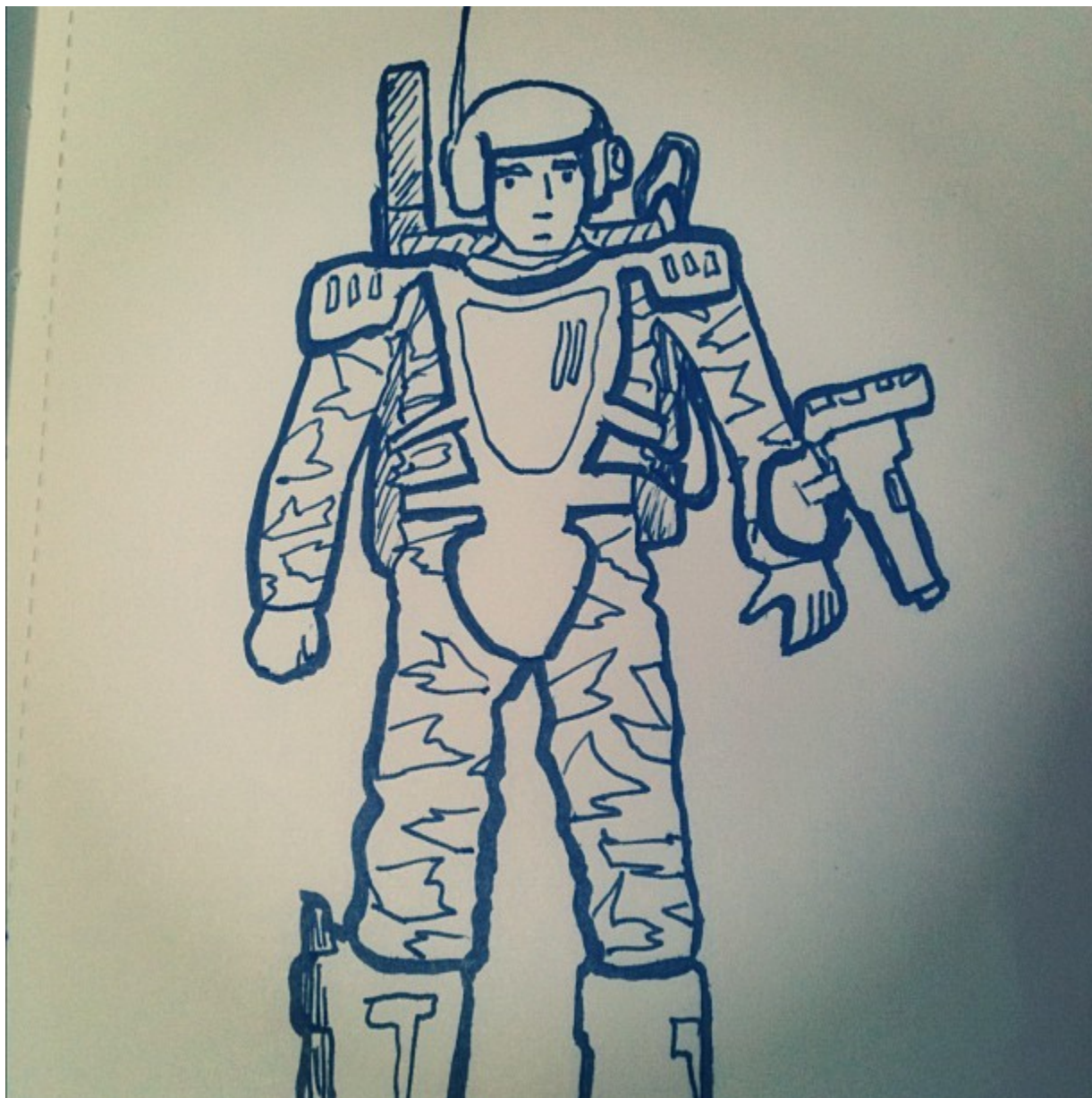
A cheap thief/hood
an angry tooth.

Kincannon remembered three things:

- 1) Locked door.
- 2) Andre. ('Motherfuckers act like they forgot about Dre' comes after head bash.)
- 3) Dani.

Soapboxes and woodsheds (no longer needed)

When the song was over, he removed the needle from the record. Jack Kincannon picked up his guitar and began to play.



Waterbaby

~Amy Cain

In the summers he would go to the lake with his family: oldest sister, older sister, mother, father. His sisters teased him because he didn't like to make sandcastles or play Marco Polo, and his mother scolded them between cigarette drags without looking up from her fashion magazine. He tuned them out, preferring to sit on the warm rocks and watch the glistening water, all the while working up a desire to swim. When the desire was big enough, he would sink into the lake and make generous strokes with the arms that his sisters said were long and weird like octopus tentacles. Later he would take the canoe and paddle around the dock or out to the giant rock in the middle of the water. There was a peace out there that he fit smoothly into. He thought that he was like the lake: calm, quiet, hiding things away.

During the school year he read a lot of books and kept a journal that he filled with stories in which he gave life to inanimate objects: rocks, tables, ladders, books. He made good grades and his parents didn't bother him, though his sisters subjected him to various methods of torture. They forced him to hold his bladder while feeding him glass after glass of water until he finally wet his pants. They played barber and cut his hair in the bathroom, sending him to school the next day with Mohawks and odd patterns shaved into his scalp. Sometimes they ripped stories from his journal and read them aloud using the living room coffee table as a stage; usually they were laughing so hard that they couldn't get to the end.

In high school he met a girl named Kyla who didn't tease him. She seemed to think he was funny and that his skinny arms were charming. She even said his stories were creative. When he first invited her to accompany his family to the lake during the summer before junior year, he was surprised and pleased when she said yes. After that, she accompanied them almost every time. His sisters were taken aback by the arrangement and shied away from their little brother and his girlfriend, but after a while they began to treat him, for the first time in his life, like an adult.

When Kyla left to study in Italy after graduation, he waited hungrily in his dorm room for her letters, mailing out a lengthy response on the very same day he received them. As her letters began to dwindle, though, he was haunted by dreams in which the sea that separated them grew and grew, swallowing up all the letters she sent. In truth, the sea did not swallow her letters—she stopped writing them.

After his freshman year of college he met a girl who took his mind off Kyla. Her name was Cindy. She was a business major and wanted to start her own wedding planning company when she graduated. They began to date seriously during their sophomore year. Over the summer she came along with his family to the lake, but when prompted, she wouldn't go near the water. She sat on the dock for most of the time and complained incessantly about the bugs. After they returned home later that night, she confessed that she hated the lake. The bottom was mucky, and what about all the ticks in the bushes that carried Lyme disease? She suggested they try the swimming pool.

He and Cindy graduated college at the same time, and from the podium he saw his life stretching out ahead of him as two rivers. One was wide and deep, free of white water, heading

ever dependably in one direction. The other river was unpredictable; sometimes it was rocky, sometimes smooth. There were deep spots and shallow spots and trees that hung precariously over the water in some places. This river forked off endlessly into smaller tributaries until the entire thing looked like a confusing family tree. The vision was overwhelming and he asked Cindy to marry him while drunk later that evening, spilling his beer on her lap when she said yes. The liquid ran down her dress in a long, straight current until it dumped out onto the floor.

They were married in the fall at a church in Belton, Missouri where Cindy grew up. She was going to start her business in nearby Kansas City and he was going to write for the Star. His sisters and one cousin came out from the east coast to see them married.

In the weeks leading up to the wedding, though, Kyla continually breached his thoughts. He remembered her earthy brown hair, the way it frizzed out after she had been swimming in the lake. He vaguely considered finding her. Maybe she was still in Italy. He could fly over as a surprise, take her out for some pizza e vino. He knew this was illogical, though, and instead he wrote a short story about a man who goes to Italy for a girl and finds that the entire country has gone underwater. The story was published the day before the wedding in a small journal out of Ohio. A complimentary copy should have been sent to him, but it never showed up.

They went to southern Mexico for their honeymoon. Cindy sunbathed on the beach while he melted into the blue water, swimming back and forth under the sun. He hadn't been swimming for a long time, and for the duration of the honeymoon he felt like he had come home.

After the honeymoon they moved into their new four-bedroom house in Kansas City, not far from Cindy's family. He let Cindy handle the decorating and the first thing she did was purchase a water bed for the master bedroom. He helped her cover it with deep blue sheets and then they made love on it. They rolled and undulated together and he felt like he was caught in a giant womb.

The bed became unsettling, though. At night he dreamt he was swimming. The lake that had been relegated to childhood memories was suddenly all around him. In his dreams he made generous strokes and found he could swim endlessly. His arms never tired. The lake kept changing shape, too. Some nights it was a circle, other nights it was a jagged star, and other nights it was a dinosaur. He would glide along the wave of its tail, then using the dinosaur's teeth he hoisted himself out of the water. Kyla swam by periodically. Her torso was normal but below that she had the tail of a mermaid; barnacles stuck to the scales of the tail and her hair floated around her head like a halo.

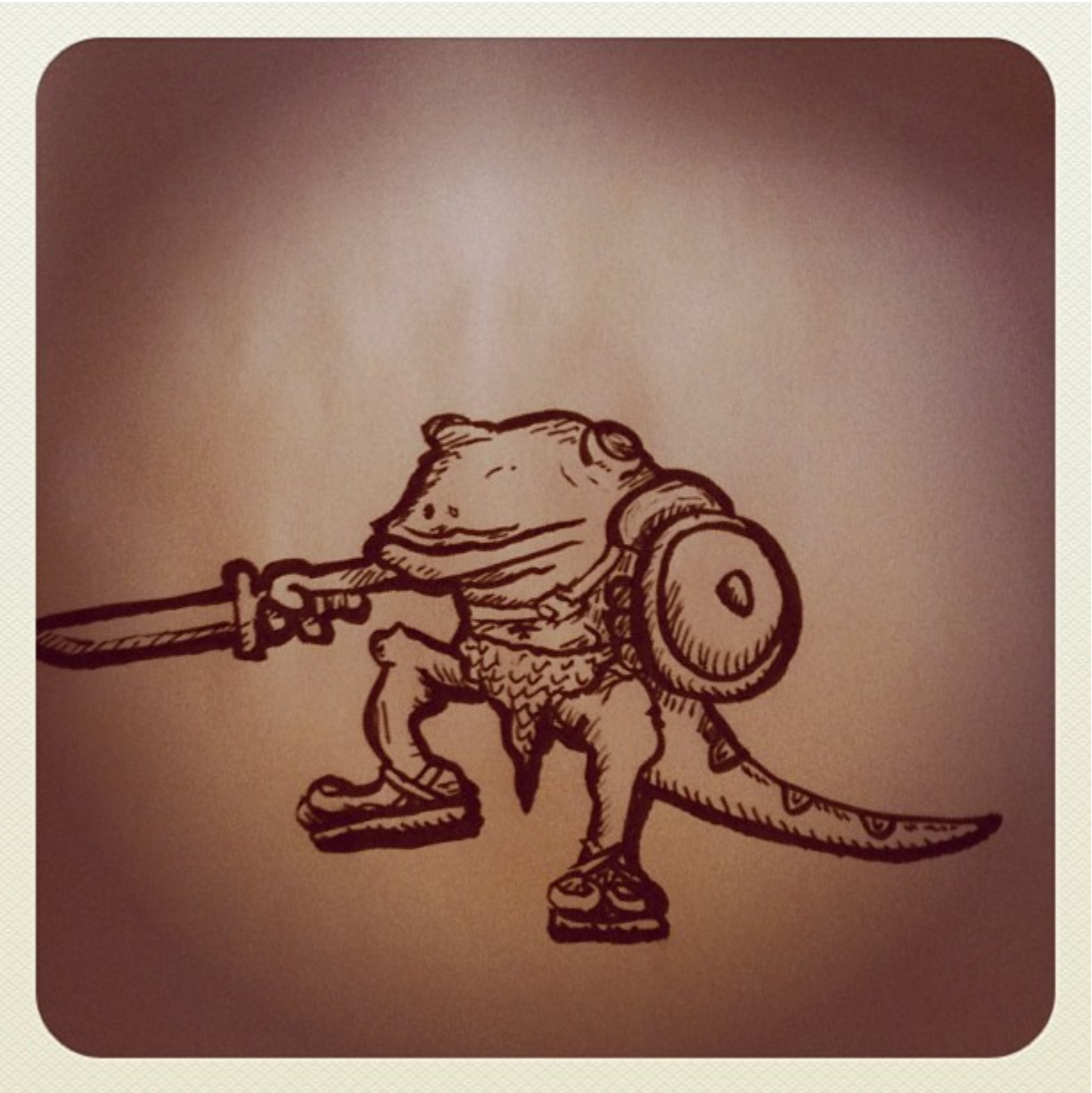
In the mornings after these dreams he felt heavy. His arms were like fat eels hanging limply from his shoulder sockets and his body was dense like the rock in the middle of the lake. He sat heavily at his writing desk all day while Cindy swirled around him. She was a constant current flowing out the door and then back in, always talking at him and her words ran together into a steady stream that spilled over him and back into the lake.

One day Cindy announced she was pregnant. The baby was due in the summer. He swallowed the news and went upstairs to his desk. It overlooked the neighborhood where children teemed on the sidewalks and in front yards. He watched them and imagined the thing coming into the world, slimy and naked, looking like him. Would it have his cheekbones, his long, skinny arms? He sat at his desk, looking out at the children, and wrote a story about

a baby born with gills and long arms like octopus tentacles. It was never published.

In his dreams he saw the baby as a slippery little fish nibbling at his ankles. Eventually it grew into a shark that came after him with teeth and giant fins. He was now in the ocean. Kyla the mermaid laughed and kept swimming away from him while the baby bit off his toes. He wished she would wait for him, but she kept gliding away. Up above he saw the shimmer of the water's surface and spotted a cruise ship steaming by. Cindy was stretched out beside the pool aboard the ship and he yelled her name but she just smiled and lay there with her eyes half-closed in the sun.

After eight and a half months he awoke to flooding in the bed. My water, my water, said Cindy, holding her massive belly. Sitting up, he turned on the lamp and saw the broken water everywhere. It smelled like salt and he felt himself gagging, going down fast, sinking into the bed. He craned his neck and saw the water's surface, a reflective blue-green sheet. Somewhere Kyla giggled. The baby started to cry. And there was Cindy, sunbathing by the pool.



dust in the window sill

~Catrina White

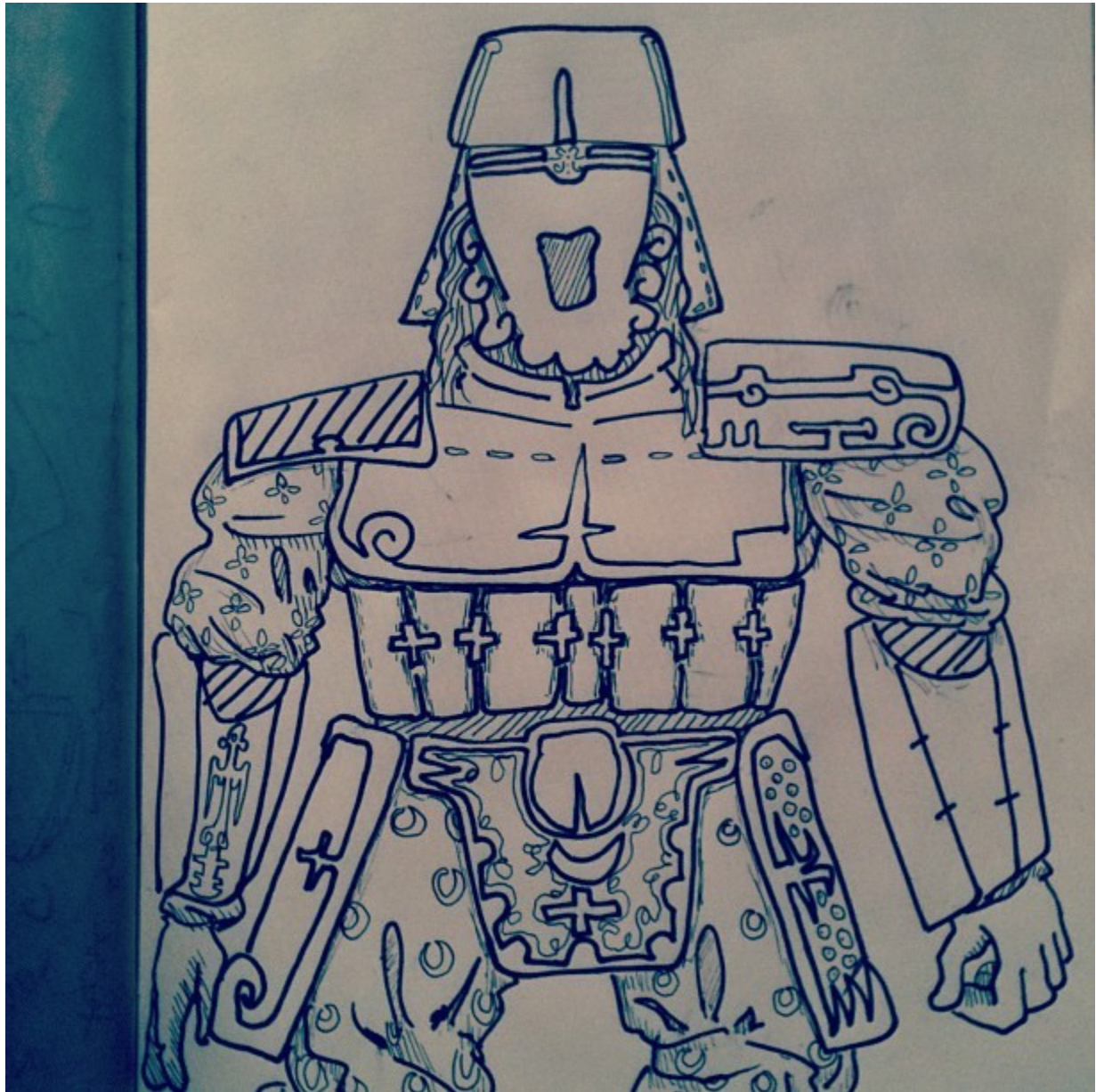
a word to me.

birth control was saying no. his father's hero fell in love with a girl first of all because of an art piece that simply read 'yes' in square lettering, fear not. she told me she was pregnant and something automatic changed in my heart like without thinking i aligned myself with a continuation, a happiness connected me to the future. she must've talked with her mom. she wanted to be a professional artist, they aborted the pregnancy without saying a word to me. i remember the night that caused these events. we were in my best friends bed, i don't remember where he was, and she lay beneath me for a long time, did she fake those orgasms? i don't understand why she thought she should dig her fingernails into my back...any way it distracted me. we didn't use birth control except i would pull it out before exhaling my balls. didn't matter, that night. that night we fucked forever and some little person started to get made, gone now. but still i remember the feeling of excitement for the future i had. she has three kids, their father is a breathtaking man. one time she said to me that she couldn't imagine finding a sweeter lover. my uncle steve says maybe each squirrel squashed in the road is keeping the world from veering off it's destined path, like that time travel scenario..."don't touch nothing or you might not be there when you get back." i was a second pregnancy, my mom aborted the first one, and my aunt doesn't brake for squirrels cause they eat her tulips. crazy mother fucking tulips.

providence

~Randall Avilez

dire excuses and bottomless
hopes and shuffling
thoughts
meandering around the town square
at night with
a really cool girl, who
i think really likes me, but i can't
seem to find out for sure
maybe i'll just ask her, and
she calls me over, "paul."
and i go yeah?
but she turns
away and i look over
at a big factory building, wondering
what to say.
after seconds, she
comes around and asks
if i want coffee,
and i totally say, "yes", like
a goof, i admit, but,
honestly- she looks good tonight
i love her, uh, dress, yeah, her dress
and i wonder
where her friends
are, they've been gone awhile.
as we leave, twins ride by
on a tandem bike
and a
shooting star crashes into
a clock tower, sprinkling
cookie dough onto
the beggars next to us



The Chronicles of Tim Part VI: Into the Woods

~Mike Wiley

Tim followed James through the dark, twisted trails of the forest. Though it was early in the afternoon, the canopy overhead allowed little light to trespass the billowing leaves and reaching branches. The path, though clear and well-worn, consistently made sharp turns in this direction and that, leaving no distinct impression of either how far they'd come or how far they had left to go. Occasionally, a fork presented itself and the path diverged in two directions. At these times James would reach into his side bag and produce a neatly folded sheet of paper. On it were a series of hand-written numbers and formulas. Each time he consulted the scrawling on it he closed his eyes, mumbled as if performing calculations, then decided on a direction. Tim had to trust that the man knew what he was doing. They marched along in silence to the occasional tune of singing birds and rustling woodland critters.

Reaching into his pocket, Tim pulled out the last bloobort. He held the strange and delicious fruit in his hands, turning it over and over, examining the blue peel. It was all he had left. Breakfast had not stayed with him long, as it often didn't. He had already eaten the other fruits and was attempting to save this one until hunger had completely overtaken him. Conversation, or a drink he thought, might take his mind off food.

"Say, James. What is that piece of paper you keep looking at to decide which way to go on the trail?"

James patted his side bag and laughed. He looked strange wearing that dirty satchel in a tuxedo in the middle of the forest. To top it off, his thinning hair had risen straight up on one side from repeatedly wiping the sweat off his forehead and back over one ear.

"Oh you mean this?" said James. "This sheet of paper is something you will need soon enough. But these calculations - as I'm sure you've noticed on here - these in particular are mine. You will have to create your own to navigate these woods. Each man comes through this forest on their own terms. This sheet of paper right here wouldn't do you any good under any circumstance. But especially not here since the trails are always changing anyway. I've never been through here the same way twice."

"Well, how many times have you been through here, James?"

"I don't know. Hundreds? Maybe a thousand times. Hard to say much about time in this place." James looked around at the foliage overhead as if reminiscing about an old house he had built with his own hands.

"And why do the trails keep changing? Who is changing them?"

James smiled and threw a side glance to the speaker of these questions. Tim could see that he knew a great deal more than he was inclined to share and for a moment he thought that the conversation had ended. Tim began to turn and squeeze the piece of fruit in his palm.

Then, suddenly, James stopped in his tracks. Tim kept walking a few more paces before he realized his partner was not beside him. He stopped and swung around to face James, who was still smiling.

"What?" he said. "Are you tired of my questions? Do you know things that I'm not supposed to know? Because I don't know anything about this place, James. I don't know what I'm

doing here. I'm a long fucking way from my home and I've been a pretty good sport about all of it. So, what? Am I here to replace you? Am I supposed to kill you or kill Geryon and rescue his daughters? And why are we walking through this forest? To gather some mystical root? I come from a place that has a name, okay? It has a, uh... a history. And there are other people and stores and roads. They drive cars and live in trailer parks. And people don't just manifest multiple selves, okay? Paths through dark forests don't just change overnight for no fucking reason."

James didn't relax his smile. He stood calm while Tim let it out. Tim spun on his heel and threw the remaining bloobort far into the woods. His back was to James and he did not turn around. He drew long, heavy gasps of air and brought a hand up to his forehead.

"Perhaps you are you hungry, Tim?" asked James.

"You're goddamn right I'm hungry," he said without turning around. "And that was my last piece of fruit."

"Look. You're just hangry. It's okay. Let's get some food in you, then we can talk about some of these things you're having issues with. Maybe not all of them, but perhaps I can ease your concerns for the time being."

"Look, I don't know what 'hangry' means and you don't have anything edible with you anyway. I've already told you; I tried those root things you pulled off the tree and they're awful. I can't eat them."

"I'm not talking about those, Tim," he said. There was a shuffling sound behind Tim's back; the work of more than just two feet. "Here. How about this?"

When Tim turned back around, he was greeted by more than one James. There were three of him; a number Tim had grown accustomed to. One squatted over, building a fire right on the trail while another was skinning a small animal. It appeared to be a squirrel.

"I caught this for you," James said.

"But, what is it? Is it... edible?" Tim asked.

"Well I have no idea, Tim. But there sure isn't a lot to eat out here. So you'll just have to make do. Look. It's almost done."

In a matter of moments, the James', working in unison, had prepared the small creature and roasted it over the open flame. Whatever it was, it smelled wonderful to Tim. His mouth salivated and he eagerly reached out to accept the charred morsel when it was offered to him.

He bit straight away into the searing hot meat. It was mostly fat and tendon but more than satisfactory. The two copies and their master stood and watched Tim as he ate his meal. They said nothing until he was nearly through picking tidbits off the bones.

"Feel better?" James asked.

Tim discarded the slop of carcass into the foliage and wiped his mouth in the folds of his robe.

"Yes," he said.

All of a sudden a fourth James came running up the path from the direction they had come. He was sweating profusely and carried a small, brown bag under his arm. He reached the two men, stopped and bent over his knees breathing heavily. The primary James put his hand out to the exhausted one. Without looking up, the man handed over the paper bag, then collapsed on the ground. James reached into the bag and produced an unmarked glass bottle of brown liquid.

“Salud,” he said.

Tim took the bottle, pulled the cork with his teeth and spit it out.

“Don’t plan on needing that again?” James asked.

Tim raised the bottle to his lips and took a long pull. The whiskey traveled over his lips, past the throat and reached deep down into the pit of his stomach. The effect was immediate. Goosebumps appeared on his arms and he gave a little gyration all over, like a dog shaking rainwater off. He could think clearly again.

Tim and the original James began to move again along the trail leaving behind the three copies to extinguish the fire and clean up the mess. James allowed some time to pass for Tim to cool down before he addressed him once more. Tim carried the uncorked bottle in his hand as they walked.

“You have questions,” James began. “That is most natural. You have been unwittingly plucked from your home, wherever that may be. I really don’t know much about you, Tim, other than that the master sees something in you. But something you must come to understand about *that* place, where you came from, is that your home may not even exist anymore. The time of your former people is not consistent. It never was. Sure, you perceived time in a linear fashion, as you think you do here, but that likely will not always be the case. That is why I cannot say that I have been here for one hundred years or one thousand. It doesn’t mean anything.” They walked on and Tim didn’t speak. He was waiting to hear the attempt to explicate this sub-universe that he had entered. “Tim, do you have any idea how long you were in the think box?”

Tim drew from the bottle.

“Well, I was going to say three days, but something tells me you have a different idea about that.”

“It was probably something more like three months. Being deprived of any kind of stimulation is one sure way to disorient you against your perception of the passing of time. But again, that is all relative, and for the purposes of this conversation - irrelevant. You thought you were there for three nights. That is what matters to you. Now, let’s suppose you *were* in that box for three months. How do you suppose you survived down there with only the bread that I gave you?”

“Gee. I don’t know, James. How?”

James ignored the haughtiness of the reply.

“Because in this place none of that matters. Not time or hunger or money or lust. Condoms and bank cards won’t serve you any purpose. Some people here choose to engage in these matters. That’s fine. It breaks the monotony. But they are not essential to survival. Not in the sense that you once knew anyway. Before, you needed sleep, food, water, shelter, etc. The whole Maslow’s hierarchy pyramid. That kind of crap is true only if you believe it is. But your mind is still in transition, so you think you need these things to live; to become your actual self. In this place there is only one thing that is...”

“Is what?” Tim interrupted. “Essential to survival?”

“Yes.”

“And what is that?”

“Theodine.”

“Theodine? What the hell is theodine?”

“It’s the glue that holds every one of us together at Castle X____,” James said. “It’s why I’m here. It’s why Geryon is essentially immortal and it’s why we’re hiking through this forest right now.”

As he said this last part, the path began to make a sharp right bend. Nothing initially unusual considering the meandering twists and turns they had made thus far. But as they rounded this corner and kept walking, the path did not straighten out or turn left again. At a certain point Tim was certain they would have come full circle back to the original path, but it just kept veering right with no sign of the path they had just come on. It was as if they were spiraling without any descent or rise in elevation. This continued for some time while James went on.

“Some might call it a drug. But that would be like calling water a drug where you came from. Everybody needed water to survive, right? Well, it’s the same with theodine here. Everybody does it. Everybody uses it. Everyday. Granted some use it more than others and some use it for different purposes. It produces a unique effect on everyone.”

“Let me guess,” Tim said. “Your unique ability is that you can manifest these multiple selves?”

James smiled. “Something like that. We are nearing the end of a cycle and supplies are at a minimum.”

“That would explain the bumbling pile of you on my bedroom floor when we left?”

James nodded. Tim lifted the bottle.

A strange sensation began to accompany Tim as they continued on the trail. For one, he was fairly certain that the path had become a full-fledged circle but there were no distinctive markers from which to judge this revelation. In addition to this, he had just received a great deal of information from James that he was not necessarily prepared for. The whisky helped mellow everything out. That was the other thing, the important thing: he was experiencing a different kind of high from the liquor than he ever had before. It was possible that it was because he hadn’t had a drink in days (months? he wondered) and that was simply unprecedented. Tim had had a bottle or a can within arms reach at all times since before he graduated high school. A man’s tolerance diminished significantly with every day he stayed away from drink.

Still, this felt different. He was light on his feet. He felt rejuvenated, powerful even. As opposed to becoming more and more dull, his senses seemed to heighten with every sip. The passing images of the forest became more focused, sharper. The trees began to buzz and breathed in unison with Tim’s own breathing.

James reached into his satchel and brought out the map of numbers. He looked it over and became sombre at once. “We’ve nearly reached the first checkpoint,” he said.

“How are we about to reach anything,” Tim asked. “You do realize we’ve literally been going in circles for the last hour, right?”

“You can’t be serious, Tim. After everything I’ve just told you, you think any of your reason applies here?”

“Well, fuck, James.”

Sure enough, around the bend appeared what James had just referred to as a checkpoint.

An enormous man, wide as a bank vault, sat on a stone armchair blocking the path. He had foreign black symbols, tattoos, all over his bare chest and face. He reminded Tim of the

African tribesmen he had seen in the National Geographic growing up, though he had never seen any human of these proportions.

Behind the man stood a concrete wall, three stories tall, with a single knotted rope dangling from the peak to the ground. The wall extended as far as the eye could see in both directions. There would be no getting around it.

“Oh, come on,” said Tim. “Where did that wall come from?”

James shot a sidelong glare that told him to shut it.

The man, upon seeing them approach, slowly rose from his seat. The ground shook beneath their feet as the human dumpster shifted to his feet. Tim took a long, hard pull from the bottle. It was nearly empty.

“I am Korbai, guardian of this wall,” the man said. “If you wish to pass you must go through me. Is that your wish?”

James spoke first. “This is Tim Cutlass, of Arizona, and he wishes to cross your wall,” he said.

“Wait,” Tim spoke under his breath to James. “I thought we both wanted to cross this wall.”

“Well, we do. But this is your trial; not mine. And I’ve never seen this guy before. I don’t know what he wants from us in order to pass. He may very well end you but this won’t be *my* last day on this rock.”

Tim was feeling whisky-strong enough to fight somebody, but the difference in stature between the two was that between a full grown man and a toddler. He didn’t stand a chance so he decided to speak for himself and see what it was going to take to keep moving forward.

“I am Timothy Cutlass and I have traveled from Castle X_____ in search of the caves that lie at the other end of these woods. We seek a special root or something...”

Korbai let out a great bellow of laughter. The trees shook.

“Ha! So you must be one of Geryon’s creatures. You seek the ghost root of the Never-caves: a near-impossible task.”

“Oh, it’s not so bad,” James said to Tim.

“Shut up, James. You’re not mortal, remember?”

James shrugged. Tim addressed the giant once more.

“Look, Korbai, what do I have to do to get over this wall?”

The lumbering man stepped aside and dragged his stone chair to one side of the trail, leaving a clear path between Tim and the rope. “Climb,” he said.

“What?” The question fell without grace from Tim’s mouth. “That’s it?”

“Sure,” said Korbai. “Go for it.”

Tim walked up to the wall and stood face to face with the rope. The apex seemed to rise another two stories as Tim looked up; straight up beyond the trees and into the sky.

“Can you climb?” James asked.

“Shit, I don’t know,” came the reply.

At first, the task didn’t seem so impossible. Then he remembered back to elementary school gym class and that ominous rope that always hung from the center of the gym. Once a week it seemed the coach made a point of embarrassing Tim by requiring the class to climb up and ring the bell at the top. One by one the boys flew effortlessly up the ladder and smacked the little bell. Some showed off and swung around from the rafter like monkeys. Once a boy hooked his legs up over a beam and hung upside down. He swung and chattered like a chim-

panzee until the coach ordered him down. Then it would be Tim's turn, and everyone knew he couldn't do it. He had tried many times.

It wasn't that he was afraid of heights; he simply didn't have the upper body strength to make the ascent. Nobody ever taught him how to wrap his feet into the rope under him and push himself up. The boys laughed. The coach laughed. Tim would become red with anger and embarrassment each time he struggled just feet off the ground, but he was told it was a requirement that he try - or he would fail.

All these memories came flooding back to him as he stood looking up at the wall. Tim took one last drink off the bottle, killed it, and threw the empty container into the trees. He reached up and took hold of the rope. He would have to try.

James and Korbai stood by and watched as Tim began to lift himself from the ground - one inch at a time. He suddenly felt light as air as he began to glide up the rope. He practically floated up, reach after reach. Amazement overcame him at the ease with which he rose half-way up the wall and, despite trying to hide his joy, he let out a little giggle.

Far below, still on the ground, Korbai began to laugh a mighty laugh. Tim stopped climbing for a moment and looked down.

"What?" he yelled from up in the air.

"I was just wondering what you were gonna do when you get to the top. How will you get down the other side without killing yourself?"

Tim hung there and thought about whether this was some kind of trick. He looked back up to the top.

"I'll just pull the rope up after me and let it down the other side," he said, pleased with himself. He began to climb again before Korbai interrupted him.

"And how do you know it's the same distance to the ground on that side as it is over here?" Korbai said. Tim stopped climbing. Was he going about this the wrong way? He remembered that nothing was spatially consistent in this place. This reminder angered him and he felt the rope begin to slip in his hands. He sank back down several yards and he could hear Korbai laughing below. James remained silent.

It occurred to him that this could be some sort of mind game. He stopped his descent and pressed his heels hard against the concrete wall. He would just have to climb to the top and see for himself. After all; he'd already come this far.

Tim braced himself and began to climb again. Korbai continued to laugh. The breeze grew more intense as Tim went higher and higher. Soon he had cleared the trees and the wind picked up, rocking him from side to side. He kept climbing and did not look back down until he was nearly to the top. When he did look back below, he could barely make out the shapes of the two men on the ground. The world began to spin so he decided not to look down any longer. He was so close to the top.

At last, with one final, confident extension of his right arm, Tim reached up and placed a hand over the edge of the wall. He pulled himself up to the ledge and sat at the top - one leg on either side of the great wall.

Before he looked down the other side and risked complete vertigo, he looked out over the tree tops in the direction they were supposedly headed. There was a sea of green in every direction. He looked back in the direction he thought they had traveled from and spotted the castle he now called home, many miles away. It was easy enough to spot though, as it was situated on a hill and it stood higher still than he did on that wall.

Tim sat there a moment, taking in the view. There came to his attention a small rocky area in the direction opposite the castle. This must be where the caves they were, he thought. He let his stomach settle before he was ready to look down the other side the the wall. When at last he was able to brave the vertigo, he was shocked to discover that the ground was a mere hop away. The whole of this challenge had been a joke. The wall stood only a few feet from the earth! The physics of this universe were clearly distorted.

Tim swung his feet down and, placing his stomach against the wall's ledge, dropped to the ground. When he stood and turned away from the wall he found James and the behemoth, Korbal, laughing hysterically. They were laughing together at Tim.

"Real funny, guys," said Tim. "Can we keep moving now?"

James and Tim set off on the trail together, leaving Korbal still bellowing at the foot of the wall.

"So, that was the whole challenge?" Tim asked.

"Oh, haven't got a sense of humor, have you, Tim?"

"I just want to find this theodine source and get back to the castle, alright?"

They continued walking along the meandering trails for a few more hours, climbing here, descending there, until at last they arrived at what appeared be the Nevercaves, as Korbal had referred to them.

Contributor Bios

Cat Baldwin is an artist and illustrator whom resides in a Brooklyn apartment that looks like it was decorated by a 10-year old. Her husband and two cats put up with her love of bright colors because she's also a pretty good cook and can make them laugh. Yes, even the cats. Her artworks include but are not limited to; illustration, watercolor painting, digital graphics and accessory design and can be seen at <http://catbee.com>. With a day job that affords her plenty of free time, she pretty much takes on whatever sounds exciting. She is currently designing a holiday window display for a local liquor store. Because it sounded fun.

Jesse Destasio was formerly an ice cream cake maker at Carvel. He was in charge of writing birthday (and funeral) messages with colored sugar gel in cursive (a skill he learned in grade school). Part of his charge was also to make said ice cream cakes (one layer of chocolate, layer of cookie crumbs, one layer vanilla, frost throughout) and place them in the freezer to set for sales the next morning. Also under his charge was the task of mopping floors and cleaning out the ice cream machines with hot water. Jesse diligently performed these tasks every shift with no fanfare. He was later fired. If you are looking for someone to make ice cream cakes for you please email me. <http://jessedestasio.com>

Brian S. Hart is a first time author with a background in physics. He has a Master's Degree in Education from Westfield State College and is a teacher in multi-cultural education. He is interested in mathematical structures and puzzle forms within experimental writing.

This is **Cheryl Case's** first published poem.

Stephenson Muret lives and writes on the Gulf of Mexico. He has more than twenty publications in venues as various as *Slow Trains Literary Journal*, *Alienskin Magazine*, *Unlikely Stories*, *Bent Pin Quarterly*, *The Medulla Review* and *Ducts*.

Nate Butcher currently enjoys looking at pictures of pretty things. Design is fun. He wishes the best for everyone that is a real ass motherfucker. Hi.

Keith Zimmerman has a cold. He can be reached at kfzimmerman@yahoo.com.

Amy Cain hails from Portland, Maine, though she ended up in Kansas as the result of a road trip gone wrong, and is now pursuing an English degree at Kansas State University. For amusement she reads obsessively, plays drums and keys in a band full of people who do not exist, and romps around with her Doberman puppy, Santiago.

A long time entertainer of shared regret, **Catrina White** writes global topics in a sizable font acceptable by those whose troubled minds walk the memories to silent features. She's been published in countless articles boasting not for goodness sake but for the beginner's mind to make out sessions. She lives in down state New York under wraps.

Randall Avilez is a student at Fullerton Community College. He plays guitar in a gypsy-surf, blues-punk, rock n' roll, band called The Moonshiners. When he's not writing or playing music he's writing poetry on bathroom stalls or leaving them for people to find in on picnic benches, written on torn pieces of paper.

Mike Wiley lives, works and plays in Brooklyn, NY.

