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Editor's Note:

Issue 43 is the runaway American dream. Less chrome-wheeled and fuel-injected, more disillusioned and dejected.

We bookend our June installment with stories about addiction—one with killer drones the other with someone getting shot by a turkey. In between there's war, PTSD, economic recession, and a bread van. Yes, we said a bread van. Also, our first ever poem.

It's a bit of a walk on the dark side, but we think you can handle it. The weather's getting warmer and the writing's always good. You'll be okay if you don't stray too far off the path.

In fact, Issue 43 needs you. Redeem the cynicism, heal the violated.

Hiho silver-o, deliver it from nowhere.

— Mike Sweeney

Drones

Ricardo Angulo

Three months before we got the eviction notice, the president killed an American citizen with a remote-controlled combat jet called a drone. That's what the TV said. Since then my dreams were wrought with blunt-shaped drones blasting *Hellfire* missiles at me, my limbs flailing in the air like a cherry bomb exploding in a Mr. Potato Head.

J.T. and I lived together. After four hits of LSD, I'd grit my teeth to prevent myself from professing my love for him. I was afraid he'd stop selling me his Promethazine if I did. I scribbled my desires in these cheap multicolored spiral notebooks I bought. They littered my bedroom. No one could understand the writing, the manic chicken scratch of a psychonaut.

J.T. and I would get high. Before work, J.T. would shotgun Afghan Kush into my lips, our smoky breath intertwining into lounge singers making love. Chip never noticed me high. I was on the outskirts of the dining area, in my isolated dishwashing station, doing drone work. Spraying sink-hose water on pots and pans and plates. Shoving overcrowded dishes into the spritzing hot water machine. Standing soaking wet in soap water. Repeat. Repeat.

Chip never noticed when J.T. was high, neither. His eyes would look like branding irons. As a server, he got orders wrong all the time. Some lady bitched at him one day for getting her order wrong. She pointed and snapped her fingers, accusing him of sabotaging her food. She spilled her drink on the table, on purpose, he told me, and wagged her finger at him. Ordered him to get his shit together. He snatched the paper tablecloth, the dishes shattering into shards on the ground, and launched the crumpled wad at her face. "Lady," he said, "you wouldn't last a day in Iraq."

Chip fired him on the spot. J.T. shot two middle fingers at him, like dual pistols, and walked out.

He earned money in other ways. His favorite was selling scrap metal. He broke into abandoned houses and tore them apart. He said each house had its own story. Like hieroglyphics depicting the fall of a family.

One day I woke up and shambled into the living room and found a ten-year-old girl on our couch. For a second, I thought I was still dreaming.

"That's my sister," J.T. said. He sauntered over to me and sparked his engraved Jack Daniels Zippo lighter. He was shirtless. I almost blushed. He blew out a puff of smoke. "Watch her for me."

"Watch her for what?"

"Watch her while I'm gone."

"Where you going?" I said. He took a drag and started coughing a tire iron. "Careful," I said. He waved me away and disappeared, hacking and gagging to his room. I plopped down next to his sister and dropped two jolly ranchers into my drink. "Want a jolly rancher?" She didn't notice me. I felt like a grandmother offering hard candy.

"She's deaf," J.T. said. He wrapped a jacket around himself. "She likes to draw."

Then he was gone.

I took a sip and placed a jolly rancher into her hand. She smiled and sucked on it, and I smiled even wider. I was all smiles today. I smoked and drank and she didn't even care. We watched the news together. Everything began to feel numb and sluggish. I wanted life to stay this way forever Eventually the TV said, slowly and choppy, the president killed an American citizen with a drone. Why would he do that? The president looked ugly and boxy. I forgot he looked like that. Video of the drone drooped by the

screen as if it were submerged in water. I forgot what we were watching then I passed out.

I woke up on the brink of vomiting. Nausea tickled at me for the rest of the day. I baked a couple of weed firecrackers and took one. J.T. wasn't back yet. I bought a box of sixty-four crayons, with a little sharpener in the back, and his sister spent the rest of the day coloring in my blank notebooks.

He wasn't back the next day either. It was a little worrying. But I ate another firecracker and my worries were gone. I took another before I left for work, leaving her alone for the day. I barely did shit at my job, I was so high. The machine ran everything. I was just another part of the assembly, another piece of machinery. If we got busy, I could end up racing around the station and scrubbing frying pans. But that never happened. I mostly did nothing. Now that J.T. was gone, no one talked to me. So why not be high? I came home reeking of dead fish.

He was the only number I saved on my phone. The only contact I had. My only drug connect, too. And he wasn't picking up. I downed a lot of acid, the LSD packed into two hits per sugar cube. I re-upped on the notebooks. Bought enough to last me a year, especially with my constant scribbling and Teresa's constant coloring. She took care of herself well. Cooked her own food. Boiled sink water for us to drink. Any time alone, she spent drawing or coloring. Her first drawing was a self-portrait, I could tell. She was lifting dumbbells on a wedding cake. At the bottom she signed *Teresa*. "Teresa?" I pointed to the name. "Your name's Teresa?" She pointed to herself and nodded. I loved her. She was like a miniature Tarzan.

The week came and went and he still wasn't back. I ran out of the firecrackers and hated every second of my job. Every second of washing those stupid fucking dishes. I needed the high. The high got me through this, but without it, I was another slave droning on

at work, forever. God forbid if Chip came along, offering his brand of “positive” body language. Massaging my shoulders. Patting my head. Beaming his phony-ass smile. “Josiah!” he said. “How’s life treating you?” Horrible.

J.T.’s stash was in his room. I found it inside his toolbox. His tools were grimy, dirty, and, I imagined, calloused. Probably from tearing those abandoned houses inside out. But the drugs, the sweet, sweet drugs, were stashed in both paper and plastic bags, and every time I opened the toolbox, I felt like a pirate opening a treasure chest. I brought it over to my room and snorted a line of molly. Molly made me so happy. I wanted to grind my teeth into dust. Then I wanted to snort that dust. I didn’t have a bed (I slept on a pile of clothes) so I hopped up and down on the couch in the living room, calling J.T. over and over and over...

His number was no longer in service. I snorted everything J.T. had. Molly. Coke. Diet Coke. Ketamine. I spent more and more time in my bedroom, snorting lines and avoiding Teresa so she wouldn’t see the dry tears on my face.

Her drawings grew a life of their own. She taped each one to the living room wall, sticking like leeches. And they were all works of art. Dinosaurs and volcanoes and astronauts and aliens. She drew the perfect moon. It was a perfect circle. I tried to draw one but the pencil ended up ripping through the notebook paper. I kept my notebooks to myself, rewriting variations of the word *DRONE!* *DRONE!*

Drones were everywhere. In the skies, shape-shifting into stars. I watched the news. I wanted to know more but then I noticed the blank emotion on the news anchor and the news reporters. They were all drones. And every channel I flipped to were full of drones. Acting like lawyers. Like doctors. Policemen. Racers. Celebrities. Stars. I snorted the rest of the ketamine and drank the last of the Promethazine. The molly was gone but the acid kept going strong. The drugs cleared my mind. When I snorted a line of coke off the

bathroom sink, Teresa came in and showed me the eviction notice posted on the front door. I wasn't surprised. The landlord was a drone. The notice asked for three months of rent payment. I couldn't go to my job and ask for the money. I forgot the last time I went to my job. If I did, Chip would kill me. Chip was a drone. Then the TV wouldn't turn on one day. I got angry and broke the screen with my remote. Then the lights shut off across the apartment, and we were shrouded in darkness because I never opened the blinds. Because the light wasn't safe for Teresa. They'd see her through the slits. She made candles from soap and placed them all over our home. She was like my mother. When my nose wouldn't stop bleeding, she ripped a pillow open and shoved the stuffing up my nostrils. I encouraged her to draw on the walls. They were now colored from floor to ceiling, and watching her draw while high was like watching Michelangelo paint the Sistine Chapel. The walls melted and moved and the colors bled into one another. She drew everything I used to dream about. Things like knights fighting dragons on platforms floating in the sky. Now I just dreamed of my job. My sleep time I spent bored out of my fucking mind, slothing on the ocean floor, scrubbing piles and piles of dead fish off of plates. Then the drones would droop in, like sharks, and blast me. I saw myself die in my dreams, over and over and over...I couldn't let the drones damage her like they've damaged me. My notebooks scribbled with *DRONES! DRoNes! drones!* were kept away from her, in my room. I knew how they stole J.T. from me.

I drank the Jack Daniels bottle I was saving for the love of my life and the world whirled around me. I grabbed his ball-peen hammer. This was my sword. I drove to the fish food restaurant, leaving Teresa at home (better she did not see this) and the drones came after me! Red and blue lights beaming! Roaring their high-pitched battle cry! I swerved and swerved and saw the restaurant. All I needed to do was pop Chip's teeth out with the ball-peen hammer. Then I'd sell them to the tooth fairy. Me and Teresa

would live off the money, traveling like hermits and keeping under the radar. The drones would not get to her. I wasn't going to let the drones hollow out her soul and turn her like us. Like drones. Like all that mattered in the world was killing yourself to make a living. We'd be invisible. The last thing I remember before passing out was driving into the front window of my job, the glass shattering around me like glittering shards of broken dreams.

No one picked me up when I got out. The jail was a Wal-mart-sized dorm room, bunk beds as far as the eyes could see, with failed lives sleeping in each one. Whole armies of hollow men lying in stasis. All of us drones. There was nothing to do but not do drugs. I talked to nobody. I just wanted to be higher than God. Rocket past the atmosphere and escape. I sweated so much my paper shoes were soggy.

The drones found Teresa and took her to a foster home. She was gone, forever.

Nothing for me to do now.

They said they never found J.T. But I did! I did! The drones never got to him. When I'm holed up in an abandoned home, huffing bag after bag of nitrous until my insides hurt and my head feeling light, I crack my head against the dry wall from cackling too hard.

Those abandoned boarded-up row-houses.

I pried open the boarded-up doors and boarded-up windows of each house and found the walls destroyed, the wires sticking out like tendons. The insides of each house look war-torn and scorched, as if a suicide bomber exploded in each one. I grabbed mementos. Old toys and coil springs. And J.T., love of my life, hung dead in one of the kitchens, his ankles draped awkwardly to the floor. On a wall, he wrote his last words. *YOU WOULDNT LAST A DAY.*

Beside it was a shitty picture of a stick family in a perfect house by a perfect meadow under a perfect sun surrounded by a perfect rainbow, and I laughed and laughed and laughed.

RICARDO ANGULO was born in New York, lived in New Jersey, and still claims to be Dominican. He currently resides in Tampa, where he studies at the University of South Florida as an undergraduate. He has written numerous short stories and published none until now.

Arrhythmia

Nate Depke

Every preventive measure he took failed. He aerated the soil, fertilized, went from plastic pots to clay, then back to plastic again. He read up on grow lights, even asked the gardening folks at The Home Depot for advice. *Did he have trouble following through?* No. In fact, the opposite was true. Sam was a dedicated man, a decorated war vet who served in Afghanistan. He did everything by the book. *So, what was up?* He watered the plants in accordance with instructions given, sat them near sunlight, went so far as to read aloud handbooks on indoor perennials hoping the audible noise—the puffs of air from his mouth—would spur plant growth. *Nothing worked.* The pink chrysanthemums died as before. *Sam blasted the people closest to him. It's how he dealt with frustration. He implemented time restrictions on conversations he had with friends and family; he whistled TAPS while in the company of despondent women; he spoke softly on the telephone and dodged make-believe bullets from would-be assassins.*

NATE DEPKE is a groundskeeper in Maine. His work has appeared in *Crack the Spine*.

What The Hell Is A Bread Van?

Ric Carter

Claude awoke, thought for a moment and then got out of bed and dressed himself, selecting items from a puddle of discarded clothes on the floor and not from his wardrobe, which now turned into a rocking horse at sunrise every day and rocked away on wooden adventures until sunset when it would return home and become a wardrobe once more. It was well past sunrise. The wardrobe-rocking horse was already off, had left the morning eating dust. Claude turned on the television and watched the opening of parliament. First, all the members held hands and reiterated their love for one another and then the leader stood up and announced that: "We are failing in our mandate to deliver constant, glorious, infinite happiness to everyone all the time." Claude turned off the television. He thought about all the things in the world, all the things that existed minus all the things that had disappeared, and it made him feel limp and lifeless.

He wondered what could make him happy in the way that his wardrobe-that-turned-into-a-rocking-horse was supposed to but didn't, then he ventured outside for a while and gazed at serious old buildings made of grey stone. Watched the sea which looked big and drab and ugly and tired, the boring sexlessness of the waves crashing over and over like recurring days and nightmares.

Claude went home and found his flatmate climbing down a ladder backwards, like an astronaut descending onto the surface of the moon. There was a new shelf high on the wall. Claude could not be sure but he did not think that this shelf would be the thing to bring them both infinite happiness. At least, not straight away.

In the interests of fulfilling the mandate of infinite happiness, their local pub had been transformed into an underwater-themed

bar. Claude and his flatmate went there now, ordered drinks and sat in a booth with a small aquarium between them. The aquarium had hollows in the glass so that patrons could put their heads in and feel like they were in the sea, the rush and flash of silvery fishes all around them. The hollows were fitted with microphones and speakers to aid conversation, and a bubblespeak sound effect was applied to complete the experience. A straw was incorporated to aid the act of drinking.

"I put up a new shelf," his flatmate said, sounding as if he were speaking underwater.

"I noticed. What do you want to put on it?"

"I don't know."

"It's quite high up."

"Maybe it was a bad idea then."

"Maybe."

Claude wondered how the two of them would look to the fish. "I don't think the shelf will make us happy."

They must have appeared as two giant heads, human and ordinary. "That's okay. Didn't you see the news? That's normal."

Patchwork skin and a random array of hair. "I'm serious." Claude said this and then took several long strawfuls of drink.

His flatmate did the same, then made faces at the fish flying past his eyes.

"What are we going to do then?" Claude demanded, suddenly unhappier.

"I don't know. We could start a bread van."

"What the hell is a bread van?"

"You drive around in it, and you sell bread to other people."

Claude stared at his flatmate in incomprehension, scowled. One of the fish had set long and languid defecation adrift in the water in front of him. Other fish darted around in front of Claude's eyes, made him want to swipe them away with his hand like they were flies.

His flatmate laughed. “They used to have bread vans, back when everyone was happy. All the time.”

They walked home, Claude thinking about the fact that his wardrobe would be waiting for him when they got back to the flat. He felt a strong urge to change his clothes, change the day for the better.

“I don’t think it was that simple,” he told his flatmate as he unlocked the front door. “Bread vans,” he added.

In the flat, the new shelf was still proudly attached, high on the wall. It did look good. Claude’s wardrobe had returned itself faithfully to the corner of his room. Claude conceded that maybe there were things that could make them happy. Maybe it was shelves, maybe it was wardrobes or maybe a bread van could be the answer. Maybe if they had a bread van everything would be right with the world.

RIC CARTER is a short story writer/biscuit inventor/office monkey who lives in Guernsey with his girlfriend and cat (just to clarify—that’s one girlfriend and one cat, not one being who is both girlfriend and cat). If you have a spare afternoon he has five-years worth of work available to read at <http://digestivepress.wordpress.com>.

Middle-Class Man

Jon Wesick

No one knew what the meeting was about, not the employees sitting on folding chairs ten columns wide by twelve deep, nor Donna from HR who'd set the chairs out. Despite her colorful scarf, the scene in the warehouse was drab—concrete floor, cinderblock walls, and a lonely podium made of the same gray metal as the doors.

Punctual as always, CEO Derek “Chainsaw” McIntyre started the meeting precisely at 8:30. He had red hair, pockmarked skin that always seemed sunburned, and a neatly groomed mustache. His body was trim and fit as only those of people who spend hours at the gym are although anyone who knew him would doubt he enjoyed the exercise.

“I won’t beat around the bush.” The microphone squealed with feedback and McIntyre turned it slightly. “Is that better? As you know, business hasn’t been good for several years. Back at corporate we’ve examined the numbers and we just can’t keep going this way. We’ve decided to close the plant.”

The audience erupted with murmurs.

“Hold on.” McIntyre held up a hand for silence. “In recognition of your loyalty the board is going to provide each of you one week’s pay for every year you’ve worked as severance.”

A crash came from overhead and broken glass clattered on the floor. Heads rose to see a man with a chin the size of a bulldozer rappel from the broken skylight. Despite his flashy entrance he dressed in business casual, khakis and a polo shirt monogrammed with an M. Seconds after touchdown, he released the nylon climbing rope, dashed to the microphone, and grabbed the CEO in a headlock.

"I'm Middle-Class Man here to single-handedly battle the systemic problems contributing the economic decline of the American middle class. You'd better hire all these workers back or you're going to get it."

"Going to get what?" McIntyre asked.

"I'm going to give you noogies so severe that you'll need a bigger hat size." Middle-Class Man moved his giant fist toward McIntyre's scalp.

"It's..." McIntyre struggled in Middle-Class Man's grip. "It's all the federal regulations that are killing us. I can't hire them back unless you get OSHA and the EPA off my back."

"EPA huh?" Middle-Class Man let McIntyre go. "Very well, I'll take care of it."

Flanked by aids lugging briefcases and laptop computers, EPA Administrator Katie Barstaff exited the House Rayburn Office Building onto Independence Avenue to wait for her limo. After a frustrating meeting with the congressman from West Virginia, all she wanted was to return to her office, take off her heels, and pour herself a big glass of the Kentucky bourbon she kept in the bottom drawer of her desk.

A lavender SUV cut across two lanes of traffic and screeched to a halt in front of her. Shocked by the driver's recklessness Administrator Barstaff didn't realize the danger until it was too late. Before she knew it, a man in a polo shirt got out, knocked down her aids, and grabbed her in a headlock. Within seconds she was prisoner in the backseat of the SUV as it sped away. Stranger still a gorilla was driving.

"Who are you?"

"I'm Middle-Class Man here to single-handedly battle the systemic problems contributing the economic decline of the American middle class."

"All right, who's the monkey?"

“That’s Numb Chumsky. I liberated him from the Yerkes Primate Research Center after some psychologists taught him to speak using American Sign Language.”

As if on cue Chumsky grunted and gestured.

“What’s he saying?”

“He says the I-95 is backed up and that he wants a banana but I didn’t bring you here to talk about language acquisition in primates.” Middle-Class Man held up his fist. “If you don’t eliminate your job-killing regulations, I’m going to give you such a powerful set of noogies that you’ll regret it!”

Derek “Chainsaw” McIntyre was late. Middle-Class Man stood outside the corporate headquarters looking at a parking lot that was empty except for a BMW and a green-skinned man digging holes in the asphalt with a jackhammer. Middle-Class Man checked his watch. It was 6:30. With nothing better to do he watched the man work. After completing each hole, the green man planted a sapling, added potting soil, and sprinkled it with water. Then he began digging another hole in a seemingly random spot.

Around 7:00 McIntyre emerged from the office.

“Mr. McIntyre, sir!” Middle-Class Man took a deep breath. “Just smell that sulfur dioxide! As you can tell, I took care of the EPA. Now how about reopening the factory and hiring back those laid-off workers?”

“Wish I could help but I can’t compete with all that cheap labor in China.” McIntyre took out his keys and walked to his BMW.

“China, huh? I’ll take care of it.” As he was leaving, Middle-Class Man asked the green man, “Who are you?”

“I’m Global-Warming Man here to single-handedly put an end to climate change.”

* * *

Security at the Chinese Communist Party's compound at Zhongnanhai was among the best in the world. Guards chosen from the People's Liberation Army's elite October First Division patrolled the perimeter and no expense was spared equipping the facility with advanced electronic surveillance. However, all this manpower and technology was no match for a man armed with American know-how and a pair of Craftsman wire cutters from Sears.

After his kidnapping, Chinese leader Hu Jintao woke to find his wrists secured to the metal chair he sat in. He screamed for help.

"Yell all you want to, Hu Jintao." Middle-Class Man stepped out of the shadows. "No one can hear you."

"Who are you?" Hu Jintao rotated his head and rolled his shoulders to loosen the muscles in his sore neck.

"I'm Middle-Class Man here to single-handedly battle the systemic problems contributing the economic decline of the American middle class."

"What do you want from me?"

"What do I want?" Middle-Class Man stepped behind the Chinese leader, wrapped a forearm around his neck, and vigorously rubbed his scalp with the knuckles of his free hand. "Don't play games with me, Hu Jintao! Stop keeping your currency artificially low, raise your wages and environmental standards to U.S. levels, and start enforcing copyright protections or else you'll be sorry!"

"You're... you're asking me to commit economic suicide. If I did that all our jobs would go to Vietnam or Burma."

"Burma, huh? I'll take care of it."

For anyone who's penetrated security at Zhongnanhai, breaking into a Russian missile silo is a snap as two officers of the Strategic Rocket Forces found on returning to the control room after their morning vodka and caviar break. Both were quickly subdued with

powerful headlocks and then handcuffed by a man in a polo shirt and a silverback gorilla.

“Let’s see.” Middle-Class Man examined the control panel and began turning dials. “Here we go. Sixteen degrees forty-eight minutes north, ninety degrees nine minutes east.”

“Who’s the monkey?” a Russian asked.

“That’s Numb Chumsky. He speaks sign language.”

The gorilla grunted and gestured.

“What’s he saying?”

“He’s asking whether it’s pronounced Rangoon or Yangon and he wants a banana.”

Chumsky made more gestures.

“Now he says ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, liftoff!” Middle-Class Man punched a red button and the control room shook as the ICBM went on its way.

On his second visit to Zhongnanhai, Middle-Class Man found Hu Jintao peeking out of the turret hatch of a T-99 battle tank. Instead of the usual suit and tie the Chinese leader was wearing a leather helmet and olive-drab fatigues.

“Hey, Hu Jintao, I took care of Burma. Now how about raising those Chinese wages?”

“Screw you Yankee Middle-Class Man! We like our economy the way it is!”

Motors whirled as the turret turned and the tank’s 125mm cannon lowered to point directly at Middle-Class Man.

“Fire!” yelled Hu Jintao.

Fortunately for Middle-Class Man his Eddie Bauer Kevlar polo shirt protected him from the blast. After the debacle at

Zhongnanhai he retreated to his secret lair in Muncie, Indiana to plan a new economic strategy.

"We need to find something we can sell to the Chinese."

Middle-Class Man set a bowl of microwave popcorn on the table in front of Numb Chumski.

Chumski stood up, pointed at the world map, and gestured.

"What's that, Chumski? Sell them opium. That's a splendid idea! I wonder why no one has ever thought of that before."

In a greenhouse, the size of a football field, workers in polo shirts scurried about examining poppies for signs of insects and disease, checking mineral levels in hydroponic fluid, and repairing electronic equipment.

"Quite an impressive operation you have here," Global-Warming Man said.

"And we're well on our way to becoming carbon neutral."

Middle-Class Man pointed to the roof. "During the day solar cells power the pumps and charge the batteries they run off at night."

"What are you growing, anyway?"

"We're growing opium to sell to China." Middle-Class Man crossed his arms over his chest in satisfaction.

"But that's illegal!"

"It can't be illegal! It's all natural!"

"If the DEA catches me again, they'll put me away for thirty years." Global-Warming Man dashed toward the exit.

"Damn government bureaucrats!" Middle-Class Man raised his arms over his head and waved. "Attention everyone. Gather round." The workers formed a circle. "I'm sorry I'm going to have to lay you off."

The workers dropped their tools and started toward the door.

"And I'm going to need your polo shirts back," Middle-Class Man added.

Chumsky the gorilla stood from the computer control station and rested a hand on his mentor's shoulder.

"I'm afraid that means you too, Chumsky."

The gorilla hung his head.

"Try to think of the bright side," Middle-Class Man said. "It's the creative destruction that's the engine of American competitiveness."

Chumsky gestured.

"Of course you can use me as a reference."

The gorilla began removing his shirt.

"Aw, what the hell. You can keep the shirt."

With nothing better to do Middle-Class Man went to the park and watched a pickup basketball game. As always his sympathy was with the underdog, so instead of concentrating on the dribbles, dunks, and fast breaks, he paid attention to a man in a yellow jersey sitting on the sidelines.

"Why aren't you playing?" Middle-Class Man asked.

"Bad knee. Doctor says I need surgery but I don't have health insurance."

"Knee surgery, huh?" Middle-Class Man grabbed the injured man in a headlock and using the pressure of his forearm against the carotid artery quickly rendered him unconscious.

Seeing the scuffle, the basketball players surrounded them.

"What are you waiting for? Can't you see he needs knee surgery? You!" Middle-Class Man pointed at a bald man wearing a headband. "Bring me some rubbing alcohol and a kitchen knife."

Host of the Gelato Poetry Series, instigator of the San Diego Poetry Un-Slam, and an editor of the *San Diego Poetry Annual*, **JON WESICK** has published more than sixty short stories in journals such as *The Berkeley Fiction Review*, *Space and Time*, *Zahir*, *Tales of the Talisman*, *Blazing Adventures*, and *Metal Scratches*. He has also published over two hundred fifty poems. Jon has a Ph.D. in physics and is a longtime student of Buddhism and the martial arts. One of his poems won second place in the 2007 African American Writers and Artists contest.

Sleeping Saints Lie

Robert Buswell

In the alcove we spoke in whispers, as if afraid to wake some long-departed saint. But the saints, rotten and stinking in their crypts, were so unlikely to awaken that our whispers could only be attributed to superstition, a superstition which galled Courtney.

"We're way too old to believe such stupid shit," she whispered. She gesticulated angrily with graceful hands, hands which I longed to touch, to hold.

"Then stop whispering," I replied quietly, but loudly enough to anger her further.

"Fine," she said. She glanced through latticed window at the graveyard, perhaps expecting some saint, roused to anger at her presumptiveness, to rise, loose meat scraping off on headstone edges, and cast a withering curse on her.

"Okay, back to the war." I shifted against the stack of useless books. "How are we going to start this?"

Courtney and I had been planning this war for a while. We had chosen sides and shuffled troops; she placed most of hers in Europe and the Americas, while mine occupied mainly Indonesia, Africa, and the Middle East. I continued to question my strategy even though it was far too late to shift tactics.

"I want nuclear early," she said.

I hesitated. "I know we haven't talked about it much, but I'd rather not go nuclear until we get some good ground action."

Courtney laughed, a laugh flush with derision only a fifteen year old can muster. "Ground action? Even the most backward civilization has armed drones now. There's no hand-to-hand anymore."

"You know what I mean. Ground action. Like disabling the satellites and letting them go at it."

She stared at me, a look of concern surprising in its sincerity. "Drew, are you sure that's wise? I have half a billion more than you do. That's a pretty big advantage without technological weapons."

"Maybe you're right, but I'd still rather not go nuclear until we have to."

She frowned. "Two nukes early and then no more until the end."

I paused. It was a fair offer, considering how big the war would be. "Fine, but no more than 100 kilotons each."

"Okay," she said. "And I want chemical."

"You already have radiological. That only leaves me with biological."

"But you're a year older than me," she said, nudging my boot with her toes. "You agreed to a handicap."

"I already have the smaller side."

"And?"

We fell silent. I looked away first, out to the graves. The saints still slept, as unaware of their complicity, indeed their responsibility, in our endeavor as kittens on sunlit flagstones.

"You ready?" Courtney touched my arm as she spoke, a loaded touch with no discernable intention.

I turned back to her. "But what about us?"

"Us?"

"Yeah, us. What about afterwards?"

I could not interpret her expression. "We part."

"I know, but what about later? Will I ever see you again?"

"You know the answer to that." She selected a book and flipped through, stopping at pictures. The saints glared out in all their impotent glory from the dust-edged pages.

"But you could change your mind, you know." I hated the sound of my voice. "We don't have to stay apart forever. It's just a little war."

"No, it's a world war," she said. She tilted her head, hair falling off one bare shoulder like some saint herself, watching me. "Tell you what. If you win, I'll change my mind."

"No. What we have isn't real if it depends on the outcome of a war." My voice was rising. Were the saints shifting at the sound?

She dropped the book and stood up, her barrettes brushing the alcove roof. "You know why I can't!" she shouted.

"But you know why you can," I said softly, staring at the ancient stone floor. I could almost feel her indecisiveness, hated baggage which haloed her in pale colors.

"Let's go," she said, walking down the stairs into the sanctuary. I followed, my longing an obscenely dripping stigmata.

In the sanctuary, stained glass saints watching in consternation, we pitted our forces in silence. Courtney had two billion Christians to my 1.5 billion Muslims, but I fought with the determination only wounded pride can proffer and it was a very close battle indeed. Millions died, many hers, leaving us somewhat evenly matched after two hours. She called for full nuclear then but I resisted, saying that we had not yet exhausted conventional arms.

Another hour's passage left me with few options. When she again demanded nuclear, I conceded. Of course it was over then. We sat back on thick wooden pews and watched the world end for hundreds of millions more. I glanced out into the graveyard through the open doors and saw earth cracking.

"Courtney, look!"

She turned. The saints, angry features all, were rising. Headstones splintered, disintegrating from violent upheavals beneath them. There was no loose meat to scrape off, only raw power and indignation. "Run!" she shouted. We ran.

By the time we reached the strip mall where we'd parked she had decided the rising was only a trick of light, the light of faraway mushrooms casting their eerie afterglows down into the graveyard.

"The dead don't rise," she said. "Not even saints."

"Yeah." I couldn't think of a wittier response. Staring blankly at a storefront displaying Saints merchandise, I tried to conjure words to keep us together.

"We have to go," she said suddenly, a warning edge to her voice.

I saw silver streak the sky in my peripheral vision and reached for her hand. As a malignant sun blossomed nearly overhead I looked down to see that even at the end she pulled away.

We flickered ahead.

The saints, pacified, lay down to sleep once more.

ROBERT BUSWELL is a fictional construction worker who lives in a mobile home in the American South with his common-law wife and eight children. He enjoys chewing tobacco, riding all-terrain vehicles, wearing overalls, transporting loaded handguns, attending religious services, consuming alcoholic beverages, and voting. He is currently working with two fingers at a Smith Corona on an autobiographical novel, which documents his rise from poverty to slightly less poverty.

It Scares Me When It Gets Like This

Helena Ainsworth

It scares me when it gets like this
and of course the scars frighten alien touch,
but at least they are tangible,
at least they are real.

When it gets like this,
it gets carnal, sounds erupt,
sounds like this that which
I could never again create.

And even the screams
I cannot hear,
eyes tightly shut
knuckles white between gripped hair,
lips stretched wide,
trying to articulate despair.

They are merely raw,
ear-shattering bombs
attacking my unexpected conscious,
rendering me nearly comatose,
even though it is I
who throws the missiles.

When it gets like this:
my hands form a triangle,
my breathing forms a rhythm,
“I am calm,” I think,
and yet I know, I am exploding.

And that is why
the skunk smoke swirls,
the ink of life drips,
the body hungers.
That is when I get scared,
When it gets like this,
When I remember how it was
And how it still could be.

HELENA AINSWORTH is a seventeen-year-old current resident of the United States who has moved over twenty-one times, lived on two different continents, in four different states. At the moment, she lives in Newburyport, Massachusetts. She finds much of her inspiration in the State Park she often explores with her dog and beloved companion, Copper. She has won the Smith College Annual High School Poetry Prize for 2013 as well as being a Topical Winner of the Live Poets Society of New Jersey High School Poetry Prize for the Summer of 2013.

The Last Time I Saw Her, She Was Doing Fine

Isaac Boone Davis

Even before the turkey shot Mama Cooper, the party was a disaster.

I didn't want to be there. I'm not sure anyone did. Their house smelled like soup and everyone's temper seemed to bleed in razor rivers out on the paper plates. The giant picture of Ben wearing a Knicks hat and a bunny rabbit smile loomed at everyone from the kitchen. He could have been a first round draft pick in that photo. Ear-to-ear cheesing, hugging Maya in a club somewhere. The R.I.P. in the left hand corner and the We Miss You banner just above his name: Ben Cooper July 7th 1984- October 23rd 2009, "Sugarman." Next to the picture there's an enormous sheet of paper where all the guests can leave Ben a birthday wish. Or maybe just tell him how much he meant to them. Since I didn't know Ben, I was having some trouble deciding what to write. I got him a present. You'd think that would be enough.

On the back porch I help myself to a beer. Cody, the yellow Labrador retriever, noses a green tennis ball. It's my third Budweiser, but no buzz is forthcoming. Ben's little brother Rusty blabs into a cell phone on the opposite end of the porch. His voice is high and shredding like an incoming missile: "Yeah, I told him we can do it that way too. I said 'buddy, there's the three f's.'" He ticks them off on his short red fingers. "Fighting, fucking, and framing, and I do them all quite well. Nah...He changed his tune real quick." Inside, the women are cooking. Even Maya, who makes eggs that taste like spare change. "Yeah man," Rusty's tone lowers like he's trying to sound wiser. "She's here too." Ben's name is

tattooed on Rusty's forearm. Those same dates on the banner running from his elbow to his wrist below a ghostly cross.

I open the backyard gate and step into the driveway. I've never met the Coopers before today. They don't seem to want me here. I'm Ryan, Maya's new boyfriend. And I really don't like beer.

"The love of my life." That's how Maya described Ben. The same choice of words over and over again, his title. Not that her life has exactly given her much love to choose from. She had one of those childhoods that make you wonder if social workers aren't just frustrated serial killers. Fourteen foster families that all kept the receipt and eventually gave her back to the state. The first eighteen years were a rain slick of juvenile centers, county jails, women's shelters, and, maybe, a mental institution if she was lucky. After that she hit the road. Dancing from Detroit, to Miami, to Dallas, and finally, here, Port Trampa, the lip gloss graveyard.

Ben seemed to have had a better go of things. The Coopers live in a clean, two-story house with eucalyptus trees in the yard. Maybe he was a wayward son. A middle-class kid who decided to sell dope and eventually fell in love with a stripper. They were together for four years. They lasted through a nine-month jail term (his), a fuck you affair with a Buccaneer linebacker (hers), monumental drug habits (both), and a bullet in the neck from seventeen-year-old ecstasy dealer named Goods (also his). There was also the loss of his truck detailing business; a car crash where she broke her back in two places; and the suicide-by-cop of her best friend in a CVS parking lot. There's no aphrodisiac like scar tissue. They got engaged on Christmas Eve.

Ten months later he was dead. His heart had seized up in the back bedroom of his father's house in West Virginia. He was living with his dad at the time and that's who found him. Naked with his dick in his hand, blood still dribbling out his nose, an amateur porn on the TV playing an endless, taunting loop.

"He O.D.'ed on coke?" I asked Maya when she told me the story. "No one O.D.'s on coke."

"He had a heart condition, asshole." She spent the next two years in a blue coma. Twenty four months of oxy's, heroin, men, tears; finally she got herself Baker-Acted after she jumped off her second-story balcony. She stayed in the hospital for a week. After that, she started going to N.A. meetings. That's where she met me. And that's how I got invited to Ben's birthday. You know, closure.

Of course, when she said "love of my life" I heard "dick like a rolled up Sunday newspaper." I wasn't any kind of failed kingpin like Ben had been. Just your average recovering crackhead with torn Adidas and a suspended license. And she's starting to notice. Whatever dipped-in-shit run of luck that had brought Maya into my life seemed to be on its way out. When I walk through the kitchen and stroke her shoulder she hisses like a popped tire.

"What Ryan?" The ladle smacks the red sauce.

"I just wanted to see what you guys were up to." This seems reasonable, if entirely false.

"Just making food, babe. Why don't you go back outside?" The celery she chopped are little green snowflakes, no two even vaguely resembling each other.

"Oh, he's just checking on his girl. Don't be so hard on him." Mama Cooper, or Marcie as she may prefer, wheels an army surplus-sized pan of some indistinguishable potato product into the oven above the still frosty turkey. There doesn't really seem to be any theme to the food today. Pasta, turkey, potatoes, some kind of casserole that resembles gravel, a big red wiggling platypus that we've all agreed to call Jell-o.

"Okay. Well he's done checking. Me and Mama was having a conversation. Ryan, go back outside. Go talk to Rusty. You'd like Rusty." I would not like Rusty.

"Oh, he would like Rusty," Mama agrees. Maya, not creatively, refers to her as "my white mama." She's only forty-five with skin

tight enough to trap a wolverine. She's a good looking woman even if the purple bandana and the crystals dangling off her neck make her look more like Janis Joplin's personal trainer than anyone you would call "Mama." In the dining room Alexis, Ben's sister, smiles at me while she rearranges the plates.

"Ryan come here, I want you to meet my boyfriend." She waves me over and I'm shaking hands with a willowy green-eyed black guy named Kenyatta.

"Pleasure, man," he says in a voice deeper than the Hillsborough river. Alexis Cooper is the only member of the family I've ever met before today. She and Maya strip at the same club on Dale Mabry.

"Yatta's a basketball player," Alexis beams.

"Oh, no shit?" I say. "Me too, in high school."

"Yeah, I'm heading up to Illinois. Got a tryout with Quad City."

"No shit," I repeat. That poet laureate medal will be arriving any day now.

"Sad occasion, you know?" Kenyatta gestures with his chin, which is about as straight as an Olympic javelin.

"Huh?"

"Ben. He was a cool dude, man. Real people. Maya's a great girl, man. It's like she's not just beautiful on the outside," he gives me a diagonal eyebrow. "She's beautiful on the inside too."

"No doubt."

"You two been together long?"

"Bout three months. How about you and Alexis?" He laughs into his shoulder which I interpret as "Dude, you got better things to worry about." My eyes follow his compass of a chin to the poster.

I miss you every day baby not a day goes by I don't wish I was with you—Maya

and

Stir it up buddy!!!!!! Lol

and

**You are my angel, my life, my son, my memory and my hope.
I will never give you up — Mama.**

There are a few more scrawlings and a valentine with an arrow through the aorta. The air conditioner makes the poster flutter like a trembling hand. The light from outside slices through the paper. We wince and we drink. This is Tampa, Florida, where the sunshine hurts your eyes.

By December I was measuring myself by how little suicide I had committed the night before. Twenty bucks was nothing. If that was all I spent it was like I hadn't gotten high. Didn't count. Forty was a fuck up. A hundred and the next morning I was massaging my heart with a handgun.

"I'm not this kind of person," I'd tell the gun.

Every day I'd forget to pay a bill; lose a friend or blow somebody's trust. I slept on strangers' couches or rented a room for a month or two before ultimately getting hucked on my ass for smoking the rent.

"Hey buddy! This ain't working out." The landlord jabbing his fat fingers into my chest.

"Man, I'm just having a rough time. Trust me, I'll have it."

"Oh, you've got to be fucking kidding me!"

On the second to last day of the year I tried to rob the Winslow convenience store on 32nd and Nebraska. I was sparked out of my mind and needed a rock more than I needed oxygen. I wandered up and down the pork rind aisle rubbing the .38's butt like a rosary. The Sikh lady behind the register with the teddy bear eyes stared at me when I put the gun on the counter.

"I need what's in there."

"You what—what do you? No!" My eyes cut to the door. I held my breath.

"Whatever cash you got. I just need the cash." She grabbed for the piece and only found my sleeve. I snapped my wrist back and we both go flying. The Five-Hour Energy shots on the counter-stand toppled to the floor.

"No!" She screamed. "Help!"

"Please," I said and I aimed the gun at her throat. "Please."

A week later, I was in a N.A. meeting. Everybody hugged and drank coffee. At the end of every session they'd hand out these key tags with different colors for how much clean time you had. If you had a year or so they'd let you say a little something.

"Who are you and how did you do it?" they'd ask. The answer was always the same.

"So what did you get him?" Over the last seven minutes I've learned about Rusty's preference for Puerto Rican women, his fantasy football team (he has many hopes for Maurice Jones-Drew), the time he and his buddy Jon Loc stole an ATM from a county fair, and why he won't drink coffee. I haven't spoke. Instead I've been picking sunflower seeds out of my teeth.

"Get who?"

"For Ben. I saw y'all came in with a box."

"Yeah. We got him a Bigfoot doll. Maya said he used to—"

"Ben used to fucking love those Bigfoot shows."

"Yeah, that's what she told me." This had revealed a surprisingly nerdy side of Ben. Apparently somewhere in between ripping off a Piru set and trying to start his own clothing line, Ben had found great solace in the hunt for Sasquatch.

"I'd tell him over and over again, there ain't no Bigfoot. Cause if there were," he plunges a red brick hand into the bowl of

sunflower seeds, "somebody would have him on tape by now. All the cell phone cameras and whatnot."

"Don't they have a video?" I debate another beer. The beer wins.

"That shit was so fake. Some guy in a Halloween suit. You got him a doll?"

"Yeah. Cost like twenty bucks."

"That's retarded. You ever see his 'Bu?"

"Heard about it." The first night Maya and I slept together I lasted about as long as it takes to flip a coin. We talked over each other, me apologizing and her explaining how Ben had loved his 1965 Chevy Malibu hardtop more than he'd loved her. It didn't really make me feel better, but since I can't drive at least it was one way I couldn't disappoint her.

"Had that bitch on '28's, looked like wagon wheels. People told him you can't put no 'Bu on 28's. Won't work. Ben said 'fuck what you heard.' Stunt lights...damn, it was like, don't hurt 'em." He gives a little gospel hand splay.

"Where's it at now?"

"Got seized." Tony, the homicide detective, Mama Cooper's second husband, flips an orange frisbee to Cody. He nods to us and points at the dog.

"He moves slower than you, Rusty."

"Let that dog spend sixty hours hanging drywall next week. See how fast he moves."

"Sixty hours, huh?" Tony's voice is wet soft. If he hadn't become a badge he could have been a soul singer. He gives the frisbee a last fling and glides up to join us on the porch. He's wearing a golf shirt one size too small. His dark muscles swim underneath the denim.

"Sixty hours? Rusty a working man, huh?" Tony smiles at me. It's like an uppercut with toothpaste.

"You want to call my boss?"

"I don't want to call nobody. I make phone calls all week. I'm off today." Tony pops the imaginary lapels on his shirt as if he were wearing suspenders. Rusty takes a breath. When Tony breaks eye contact it makes a snapping sound. My own step-father is an HVAC repairman named Dave. He has a Sprite with dinner every night and goes to sleep by nine. He's the most inoffensive human being on earth and I'm still not ready to forgive my mom. I like Mama Cooper, but I can't think of anything worse you could do to your son than marrying a cop when he's in the tenth grade.

"So, Ryan, how you doing?"

"Fine. Thank you for having us here."

"So how long you and Maya been seeing each other?" There's something deceptively idle in his tone. Like the magician about to guess your card.

"About three months."

"Well she's a great girl. It's good to see her moving on." Rusty picks up the frisbee and considers it before dropping it back to the ground.

"Y'all met in N.A. right?" Rusty chimes in.

"Yeah...yeah, we did." I begin to itch. The beer tastes like grease in my gut.

"Well that's good. That's real good. She's a real nice girl, Maya. Ben was very fond of her."

"I think Maya got that fever," Rusty cackles over Cody's barking. "She like her some white boys." Well, I suppose someone had to say it sooner or later. It is a little hard to miss, the skin braiding going on at the Cooper home today. Me and Maya; Tony and Mama Cooper; Kenyatta and Alexis; Rusty and his imaginary Puerto Rican women; all of us playing on the melanin see-saw. Tony double clutches his drink and stomps his foot with laughter.

"I'd say so, Rusty. I'd say she does." I laugh too.

"I thought it was only the fever when the white girl got with the black man." Apparently, Rusty is an authority on this sort of thing.

"Yeah, that's true," Tony reflects.

"What do they call it when it's the other way around?" Rusty asks.

"They don't call that nothing. So Maya's getting high again?" Inside the house I hear classic rock and oil in a skillet. Tony's face is mild marble. I read "Are you going to bother lying, son?" in his eyes.

"She's not getting high anymore. Maya? You...you mean, Maya?"

"I do mean Maya. Who did you think I meant?"

"Um, no, no she's good now."

"Oh?" says Tony wiping away some imaginary sweat from his forehead. "Well, maybe I'm wrong." I want to apologize to him. Apologize for my name, my face. Tell the air I'm sorry for breathing it.

"Yeah, I'm wrong a lot," he continues. "Wrong so much I'm starting to get good at it." He goes back to his staring contest with the sun. "You know, she just threw up in there. You do know that, right?"

"What?"

"Maya, your girlfriend. She just threw up in the garbage can—well most of it got in the garbage can. See, I'd'a thought she was dopesick. But maybe that's just this crazy line of work I'm in starting to cynical-ize my point of view. Is that a word? Cynical-ize?"

"When was this?"

"Oh, a few minutes ago. You might want to check on her. I'm sure she's fine and all, but you may want to go and make sure."

In recovery they talk about the pink cloud. The big, soft, cotton candy colored wave of emotion that overcomes you with good vibes after your first few weeks off the dope. I think it's mostly bullshit. Unless you got health insurance, getting clean hurts. But

then I met Maya. And I realized I don't know anything. In the middle of the sad-eyed tragic concrete, she was human graffiti. All that merciless beauty; the black girl with the blonde hair and the giant, store-bought titties. A sharper than life image broken in all the right places. During the meetings she'd clap when people would share; she'd cry when they would pray. She was an oncoming train with the cost of shattered things in her eyes. I was healed. I was fucked.

"I'm really scared to be here," she told me the first night I met her.

"You've got nothing to be afraid of," I lied.

In the hallway behind us a woman with a treble clef tattoo on her neck and one painted eyebrow gnawed into her phone. "Bullshit," she said. "I told them 'Hell no, I'm not ready.' They said thirty days and I was like 'Hell, no.' The shit I was doing? Give me ninety days and I'll piss for them. Hell, I'll piss all over the judge and it'll be clean piss too."

"See," I said. "Everybody got troubles."

In the kitchen Maya's plopped out on a stool shivering and sweating like a spent fighter. Mama Cooper fans her with a spatula inadvertently roiling the meat fumes with the air conditioning.

"Maya's not feeling good," Mama explains.

"I'm fine." She knee knocks, one eye rolling sideways. "I don't need to lay down."

"Nobody said anything about laying down. Let's get you a little water." Mama's voice slides through my skin while she applies a washcloth to the back of Maya's neck.

"Baby, you're sick." I try to wipe away the bilious crust off her mouth but she flashes her hands at me, knuckles first.

"Get away please. Can you do that Ryan? Can you please leave me alone for a second?" Kenyatta nudges past. He unravels a paper towel next to the sink and begins to clean the sides of the garbage

can.

"Maya, go on up to Ben's room and lay down for a minute." Marcie takes the butter from the fridge. She was a nurse for years in a hospital in St. Pete. There's a scalpel just underneath all of her hippie costume jewelry.

"Yes, Mama," says Maya. "I'm gonna lay down now."

"The last time I saw her, she was doing fine." Marcie sprays air freshener above my head. I reline the garbage can. "But that was about a year ago. I guess a lot can change in a year." Her calves are steel drums. If I bit them right now, would they break my jaw?

"Do you need me to take out the recycling?" I ask. There is nothing to recycle. I am not a good person.

"Did Maya even grate the cheese?" Alexis' voice honks in reproach.

"No, honey. No, she didn't." Marcie considers the air freshener for a minute. She doesn't seem to like it very much. "The turkey is going to take a while. I'm going to drink now, Ryan." She takes a long clear bottle off the shelf. She looks into the liquor like she's about to bless it.

"I guess this can't be easy for you," she says.

"It's fine. Easy enough."

"You must think we're crazy, having a birthday party for Ben."

"He doesn't think that, Mama." Alexis rushes to my theoretical defense.

"Oh, it's alright. I'd think we were crazy too. You have any kids Ryan?"

"Yeah. My daughter's name is Lisa. She lives up in Pennsylvania with her grandparents."

"Not your parents though, right?" Ice rainfall jangles in her glass.

"Nope."

"Then you wouldn't understand."

Alexis positions herself by the sink. She slips her hand over my wrist. She smells like the last good day of Winter. "I think Maya's getting high again."

"Oh, Christ honey," Marcie tilts her glass and shivers. "I think he knows that."

I want to take the beer bottle and smash it against my windpipe. I want to take my dick and drive it into Alexis's spine. I want to carry Maya out of here on my back like a soldier in an earthquake firefight. I would like to go home now, please.

"Yeah, um...I don't think she is. She's really committed to the program. I think she's even gonna get a sponsor."

"Well, she needs one."

"Oh fuck, Alexis! Do you have something to say or not?" Marcie cannonballs the question at her daughter. Alexis looks like a little girl about to perform in her first school play.

"We got high last night, Maya and me." She delivers the line with a soap opera tremelo.

"Well, that's just fucking great. On your brother's birthday you decide to go out and do this. Then you bring, you bring *that*, you bring her back here." She slams the spatula against the lip of the sink and it does a wooden cartwheel to the floor.

"Mama, please. It's not that simple. You don't know."

"I don't know?" Marcie's face is under her daughter's chin. She's cutting off the ring. "Here's what I don't know. I don't know why you allowed that dopesick piece of the sewer into our home. I don't know what happened to the fifty dollars that was laying on the coffee table last month. I don't know what your brother ever saw—oh I am so fucking over this. Somebody else stir the noodles."

"I didn't take the fifty dollars." But Marcie's already marching outside. The door slam is pretty much an afterthought. Alexis wilts in front of me heaving sexy, wet tears into the red sauce.

"Maya's upstairs?" I ask her.

"It's like I'm just nothing." Her left nipple is slicing through the

fabric of her shirt. You could hang a coat on it.

“Okay.” I answer myself. “So I’m just going to go upstairs.”

On the hallway leading to Ben’s room there are pictures of him, Rusty and Alexis in Halloween costumes. At Christmas opening up what looks like a fishing rod. And at his First Communion looking as graceful as the early evening. Even then you could see the dark, handsome features that were growing in his face. Maya had always wanted to be taken in by an Italian family. She’d lie in bed and tell me how “none of this would have happened if just one foster family had been Italian. They take care of each other. Plus, the men are fucking gorgeous.” Cooper doesn’t sound like an Italian name to me, but there’s a portrait of a saint on the hallway wall. And above Ben’s bedroom there’s a crucifix covered in paint chips. I’m about to knock when Rusty pours himself through the door.

“Oh, hey buddy. I was just in there checking on her.” He scratches a tar stain from his wrist. His gold chain plops against his heart.

“She doing okay?”

“Sick, bro.” He says knowingly. “Man, she ain’t feeling well. I think dinner might be a little later than it was gonna be.”

“How long were you in there for?”

“You know Maya’s like a sister to me. I just hope you can take care of all that.” He claps my clavicle and bulls past. I can smell beer and cement grit. Every passing minute feels like it doesn’t belong to me. Even when I enter Ben’s room it seems like I’m stealing something. My own shadow doesn’t think I could pay for it.

“Baby.” Maya’s face is puddled with eye bags and runaway mascara. All that pretty nightskin looking flat and crushed under the withdrawal. Ben’s room isn’t a shrine. The Derek Brooks jersey and the Ed Hardy T-shirts are unfolded violently near the bed.

There's a book titled *Mysteries of The Pacific Northwest* and a dreamcatcher on the desk. The walls have pictures and punctures. Someone has been slamming their fist through the plaster.

"He loved that car." Maya's trying to point at a photo of Ben standing next to his 2005 Navigator. The rims are the size of my legs.

"It get seized too?"

"That one. That one." I try to wipe her mouth with the side of my sleeve.

"Baby, we're gonna get you some help."

"Oh shut the fuck up." Well, it was worth a shot. "He made me feel something. I never had—"

"I don't make you feel anything?"

"Oh baby, don't do that to yourself." Her voice is low and raw. She's singing me a lullaby. "I like you. Sometimes I love you, but you don't make me...you don't validate me."

"I'm here aren't I? I came to your dead ex-boyfriend's birthday party because I'm—"

"He's not my ex."

"Oh for Christ's sake Maya. You know those people downstairs? Those people you think are your family? You want to hear what they are saying about you behind your back?"

"I don't care. I had fourteen families growing up. Fourteen different sets of people who talked shit. Think I can't take one more?"

"You're making excuses Maya. That's what addicts do."

"I don't care. Do you know what it's like never thinking anyone will ever really understand you, and then finally finding the one person who does?"

"Yes," I say evenly. "I know exactly what that's like."

We go on like that for a few minutes. Me trying to bully her into loving me and her looking for another blanket to stop the shivers. I suppose if life was more like an independent student film, this would have all ended with me fucking the shit out of Maya

underneath Ben's 2002 Tampa Bay Buccaneer Super Bowl poster. But life's not like the movies. Even the good ones.

"They know, huh?" She points her eyes downstairs.

"Of course. Why'd you do it? Why baby?"

"Oh fuck off, Ryan. Please. Why? I'm a dope fiend. I got high last night and Alexis was supposed to cop before we got here. But her lazy ass missed the phone call. So, I fucked up and got sick. I've been getting high. I just haven't been telling you."

"I thought we were in this thing together."

"We are baby. You know how it is. It's not the end of the world. I didn't kill anybody. I got high last night. That's all."

"Yeah," I say. "I know. I got high too." Downstairs I can hear the plates slapping against the dishwasher rack. Feet getting stomped. Other people's lives are like a pulse.

"I know you did, baby. I can always tell when you've been getting high," she says. "It's easy to tell. You're so fucking mean to me the next day. Plus, you never shave. I like you better when you shave." She kicks herself up on the bed and hands me a goofy look. We both shake our heads at the same time.

"Ryan, you know I love you, but you understand I can't have you in my life, right? Not if you're getting high again. I can't have that."

"I'll stop. You're getting—I'll stop. I can stop, just don't."

"Nobody stops, baby. Nobody can stop this shit. I love you, but nobody stops."

"I understand, baby." I've always heard about people who can never bring themselves to say "love." Bullshit. Seems pretty easy to me.

"You know one time we went to Spain together?" She's looking at the picture again.

"I think you told me."

"I tell you about getting stuck in that elevator? I've never been anywhere before and we're in this crazy place where nobody

speaks English. And I'm just holding on to him everywhere we go. And we get on this raggedy-ass elevator. And there's an American family on it too. Just us and them and it gets stuck. I was freaking out. I think I have closet-phobia or whatever you call it. But he's so out there, so calm. Like it was nothing. He just talks to them. Waiting for the repair guy. I'm pissing myself and he's just chatting with this fat family from Arkansas."

"What did he talk about?" I put my hand on her thigh and she flushes it away. Just another rain drop falling to the ground.

"Wal-Mart." Maya giggles. "They talked about Wal-Mart for like three hours."

I was in the bathroom thinking about how I hadn't bought a CD in years. About how much I used to love music and how it used to be so fucking important to me. About how in high school I wanted to start a music criticism club and actually got a teacher to sponsor it. But nobody ever came to our meetings. I was thinking about that, when I heard the shot.

Turkeys are no longer harvested by blunderbuss. Farmer Brown doesn't wander around his acreage with a shotgun firing at the fattest fowl he can find. Instead, the process is more antiseptic. It involves the laser removal of beaks and claws. The birds are thrown in a grinder like chipped wood. Which is why, all things considered, the occasion of a deceased hen opening fire on Mama Cooper seems a little unlikely. Yet, when the paramedics arrived they didn't seem too surprised. After all, this is Tampa, where we need six policemen in every public library. So birds, even dead ones, may very well pack a clip.

"A stray bullet from an earlier harvest," Jared the sandy-haired paramedic explained as they were loading Mama Cooper into the ambulance. Kenya and I must have had the same perplexed city-

boy scowls on our faces, because he bothered to keep talking.

"Sometimes these big companies like Butterball or Hormel contract out to smaller family farms. Guess somebody was shooting around the house and one of the turkeys took one. Or more likely, he ate a bullet that was lying around. Thought it was feed. They'll gobble up anything." Jared's voice had just the right amount of blood and drawl to make me think he may have grown up slaughtering and milking his way through adolescence.

"What are the odds on that shit?" Kenyatta asked.

"Not good." Jared said as he latched the back of the ambulance. The idea that somewhere on a rural stretch of Indiana farmland there had been a gangsta turkey with a teardrop tattoo and a felony warrant wandering around carrying a burning slug in his wing was both stupid and appropriate. Just like it had for Ben, the harvest had come early. In the end, it's always the end.

As I had run down the stairs after hearing the shot, my first thought was that Rusty or Tony finally decided it was time for a little step-father to step-son hollow point heart-to-heart. Or, maybe one of Ben's old gangland enemies had heard about the party and needed some drive-by closure of his own. What I hadn't expected was the human arena that had formed in the Cooper's kitchen. A semi-circle of ten or so gaping, gasping, very confused mourners. In the middle was Mama Marcie Cooper riding the floor like a bucking mule. Glass and blood and turkey meat were spraying from every corner. Marcie had a hand on her hip in what resembled a side-plank pose. If it hadn't been for all the gore I would have thought she was getting a little work in on her obliques before the meal. She was screaming a steady stream of consonants that almost sounded like the glass itself spitting against the oven's walls.

"Holy shit, fuck man. Mama are you—"

"Stay back, Rusty." Marcie—even from the floor with a shard of steel in her high, stair-mill crafted ass—commanded the kitchen as mama's always have and always will. Later, we would learn that it was not the actual slug but just the casing that had exploded into Mama's body. She had gone to plunge her meat thermometer into the eagle at precisely the wrong time. The bullet, a .45, would never have been able to pass the oven's steel. In fact the propulsion from a turkey isn't anything like a handgun. If Marcie had kept the oven door closed the slug would never have seen the light of day. Perhaps it was that God-given divinity of all southern women to flood their kitchen with no less than fifty smells at once. Possibly, it was just bad luck. But all that was later. For the time being, Mama had been shot by the turkey.

"Holy shit, fuck man," Rusty repeated. Apparently, this was his new favorite superhero.

"Get back!" Tony swept into the room flailing at the small fire that had begun on the stove with a suit jacket. It wasn't clear who he was talking to. No one was getting very close.

"Mama, Mama, Mama." Alexis sobbed into the floor. Her voice muffled inside Kenya's arms as he wrapped her up on the ground. I was stunned by how protective he was. And immediately, I had the rather racist thought that this may not have been the first party Kenya attended that ended in gunfire.

"I called them, baby. They are on their way. Just hang on."

"Oh Christ, Tony! Just call them."

"I did call them." And he had. Because a few minutes later the Coopers' home was swarmed with personnel from TPD, the fire department, and Jared, the knowledgeable paramedic. I have heard that if you call 9-11 and hang up, they will send a representative from each sector. Maybe that was what happened or maybe they were just extending Tony a professional courtesy. Regardless, it was hard to miss the message. This is what emergencies look like. Emergencies go bang.

Dear Ben,
Keep your dick up.
Ryan Di Mateo

I set the highlighter back on the coffee table. The sulfur smell of bullet and bird has dimmed a little by now. The family: Rusty, Angela, Tony, and Maya followed the ambulance to the Town and Country hospital just off Hillsborough Avenue. Six months ago I had met Maya in that same hospital. Her beautiful Baker-Acted ass crumbled in the metal folding chair. Somehow, the image of her pressing doctors for information and holding hands with the Coopers comforts me. Dope fiends are no different than little kids that way: we love playing grown-up.

Kenyatta and I and a few of the other guests stay to clean. I keep rubbing the table with a wet rag well after I should have been done. We find out the hard way that you can't vacuum glass. On my knees filling my hands with gizzard and patches from Marcie's Juicy Couture sweatpants I hear the trilling tones from my pocket.

"Baby," I say into the phone.

"She gonna be okay. They already talking to the lawyer." Maya clips her words when she gets excited. I had forgotten that.

"We're cleaning up here. Me and Kenyatta are straightening everything up—"

"Oh good, baby. You do that. Kenyatta's a good guy. You need people like that to be around. He's focused."

"He's a basketball player."

"They are gonna get so *paid*. A bullet in the turkey. She could have been killed." It's impossible to tell, but she sounds like she's jumping when she speaks.

"Baby," I say dumping another round of paper plates. "I don't want to lose you. I can't lose you yet. Can you —"

"You're not going to lose me Ryan. I'll only be just a phone call away. You call me any time you need to call me and —"

"That's not what I mean."

"Baby, I got to go. The doctor is coming back. Try the potato salad, it's in the red container. She made it with barbecue sauce. You'll like it."

The potato salad isn't bad. Even though it was made in that Tampa style where the butter is trying to prove that Florida really is the south. Kenyatta has found a bottle of Johnny Walker Black which we sip while sitting on the back of the Coopers' porch.

"Don't worry," he tells me. "Tony ain't gonna miss this shit. And if he says a word about it, fuck him. They let you drink in that N.A. thing?"

"Nope. But I'm over that. My habit wasn't all that bad anyway." Kenyatta looks around for a place to kick his feet up, settling on a pine cone.

"Fuck man. I'm gonna be up in Quad City tomorrow, so this here," he waddles the brown liquor in the glass, "this gonna be my last hurray. You talk to Maya?"

"She called from the hospital. Seemed excited about suing them."

"Hell, she should be. We all should be. How else she sound?"

"Not sick anymore. Like she already copped."

"Alexis get that way too. Like she'll be sick as hell, but if she knows she's gonna get good, then the sickness goes away. I tell her that about herself, too. That just proves all that shit is in your head, you know?"

"Yeah," I sip and decide that I can definitely afford to part with thirty bucks tonight. Maybe forty.

"So is Maya your first?" Kenyatta scratches his neck and leans

in to his glass.

"First?"

"First dancer."

"Oh." I pause to try and convey a sense of Maya just being one in a series of countless other women whose lives have been shamed and wrecked on the shores of my dick. "Who knows?" is the lie I finally settle on.

"Yeah well then you probably know. With them girls every day is Halloween."

"Yeah."

"I mean even with Ben. I don't want to talk bad about the—" He stands up. He starts to move to the end of the porch, his eyes beginning to laser their way around the yard. "Shit, man." He turns without spilling a drip. "Where's Cody?" The gate on the back fence is open. Nudged just enough so that it could fit a retriever. Possibly he was terrified at the sirens or the shot. Maybe he was just seeking adventure. Either way Cody's gone.

"Fucking Rusty," Kenyatta groans. "I know he would leave the back gate open. They couldn't fit more stupid in that boy if they hollowed out his leg." But it wasn't Rusty. It was me. I can remember it now: the memory of my forgetting. My walking out into the Coopers' driveway with my beer in hand, wondering how long before I could run and hide and smoke. I had left the gate ajar because paying attention was just too much trouble. So busy planning my own escape I hadn't noticed I had created someone else's.

"Yes," I agree. "Rusty is a total fucking dumbass."

Kenyatta and I arch our way into the street. He takes Webb road heading to Hillsborough, while I make a tender gallop down Jackson Springs behind the apartments. Both of us sharing the silent understanding that while it may be acceptable to drink a

man's liquor, you just can't lose his dog. No matter how much settlement money may be coming his way.

"Cody, Cody, here Cody!" I yell out. The houses are slouched and slanted. A hobo's mouth every bit as cracked and gritty as the sidewalks. The rooftops are uneven and the windowsills are marked by the tar droppings. In Town and Country, the places where people live are like the short man at the bar—hunched, angry, ready to fight.

"Honey, are you looking for Cody?" A thick woman in a purple sweatshirt is loading plywood on to the back of her truck. Her face is red and joyful.

"Yes... yes I am. Have you seen him?"

"Of course I've seen him," she says. "Cody is my son."

"Oh," I'm embarrassed how much I'm panting. When was the last time I ran? "No, I'm looking for a dog. Have you seen a dog?"

"A dog named Cody?"

"Yes, ma'am."

"Like my son?" I notice her truck's bumper sticker: My Child is an Honor Student at Webb Elementary.

"I suppose so. Have you seen him, the dog?"

"Well," her round cheeks crease with the memory. "There was a dog. I didn't know what his name was, though. Yellow dog—"

"That's him," I almost collapse from joy. "A retriever."

"He was heading up to Waters. That was a while ago. You better hurry. That's a busy road."

"Thank you, Ma'am."

"You know Cody is also my son's name."

The first time Maya saw where I was living she laughed at the black sheets I had pinned over the windows. "Oh baby, that's some straight dope fiend shit. You're in recovery now. Those need to come down." So maybe it's justice that today she's left me and I can't find any darkness to run towards. It's seven o'clock and the

sunshine isn't even thinking about retreat. "I own this town, bitch," it says. "I'm everywhere." It's reflecting from the bodegas and the ice cream joints; it's in my mouth when I call Cody's name. I can even feel it in my cavities and my hairline.

"Cody, Cody!" There's no sign of a mangled puppy on Waters. But, what would that even look like? Who would stop?

"Cody!" I turn back and try to remember if I took Woodbridge or Murray Hill. I run but the air in my lungs moves like a fat man trying to get off a bus. I taste blood and beer in my throat. Maya told me once that the sunshine just expected a little too much out of you. Seemed to think you were better than you are.

"Cody, Cody!" I yell at the gang tags on the fences.

"Cody, where are you, buddy?" I holler at the pink houses with the gray people inside. Cody, you can't outrun the sunshine. I'm going to find you. No matter how far you get, it's really not that far. Nobody gets that far.

"Cody, Cody, Cody!" Did you hide in that place where I used to care about music? Are you hurt, Cody? Did you make it all the way back home? You're a retriever motherfucker, so retrieve. Where did you go, stupid?

"Cody, Cody. Here, Cody."

I'll find you. You're here. You didn't go anywhere. It just seems like you've run to the end of the world, but you know what? Like they say in the meetings, you're right where you left yourself. Well so am I, Cody. So be a good boy and just come your little doggy-ass back here to me.

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On the cover:



"THE NEXT SCREEN YOU SEE MAY BE YOUR OWN"

Samuel Snoek-Brown

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