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Fiction Editor

Maxine Allison Vande Vaarst

Photography Editor

Katie Morrison

Illustrator

John Gummere

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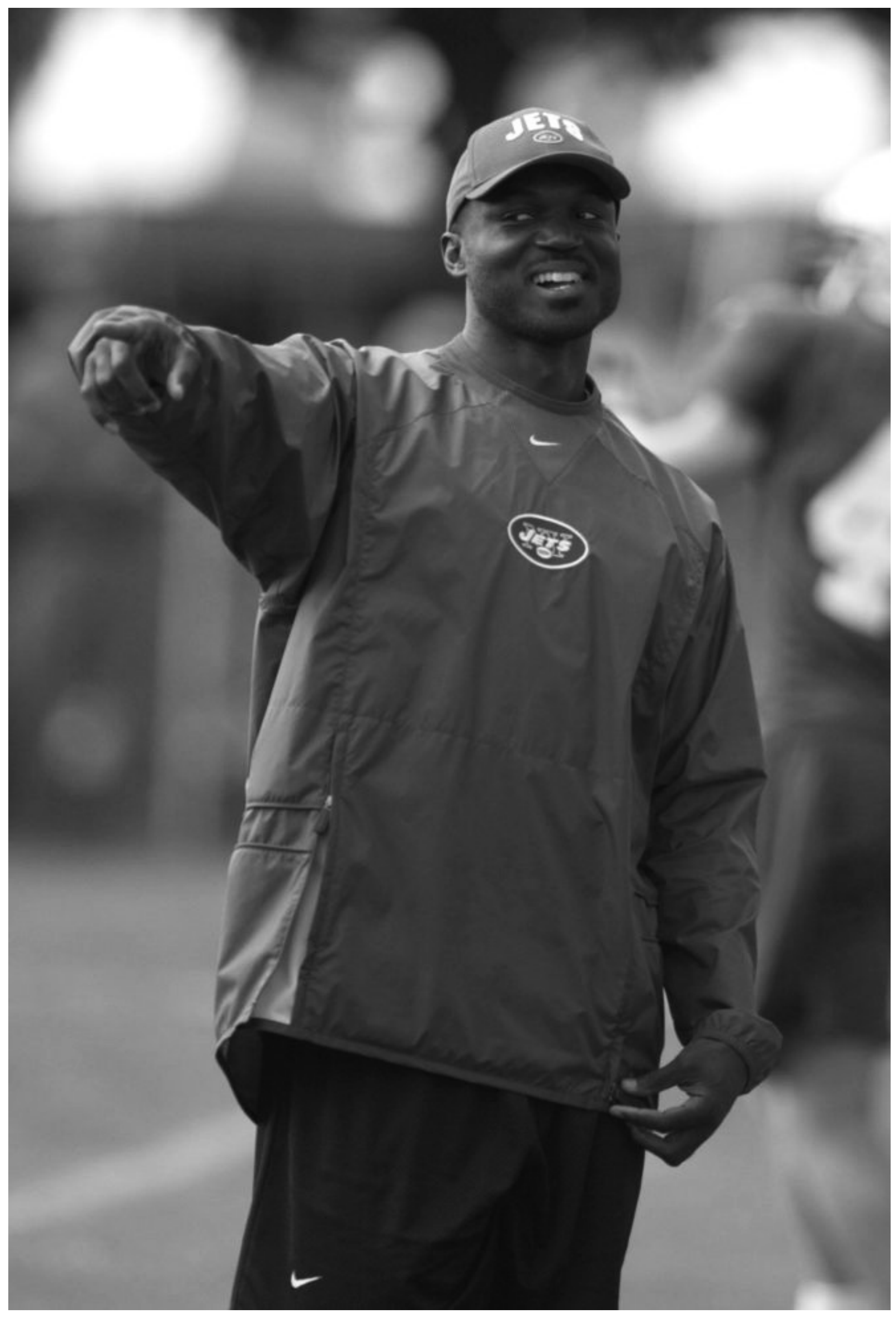

For Todd Bowles,
our glorious leader and superbeast ascendant.
Here's to being better than the last guy.
Please don't get fired.

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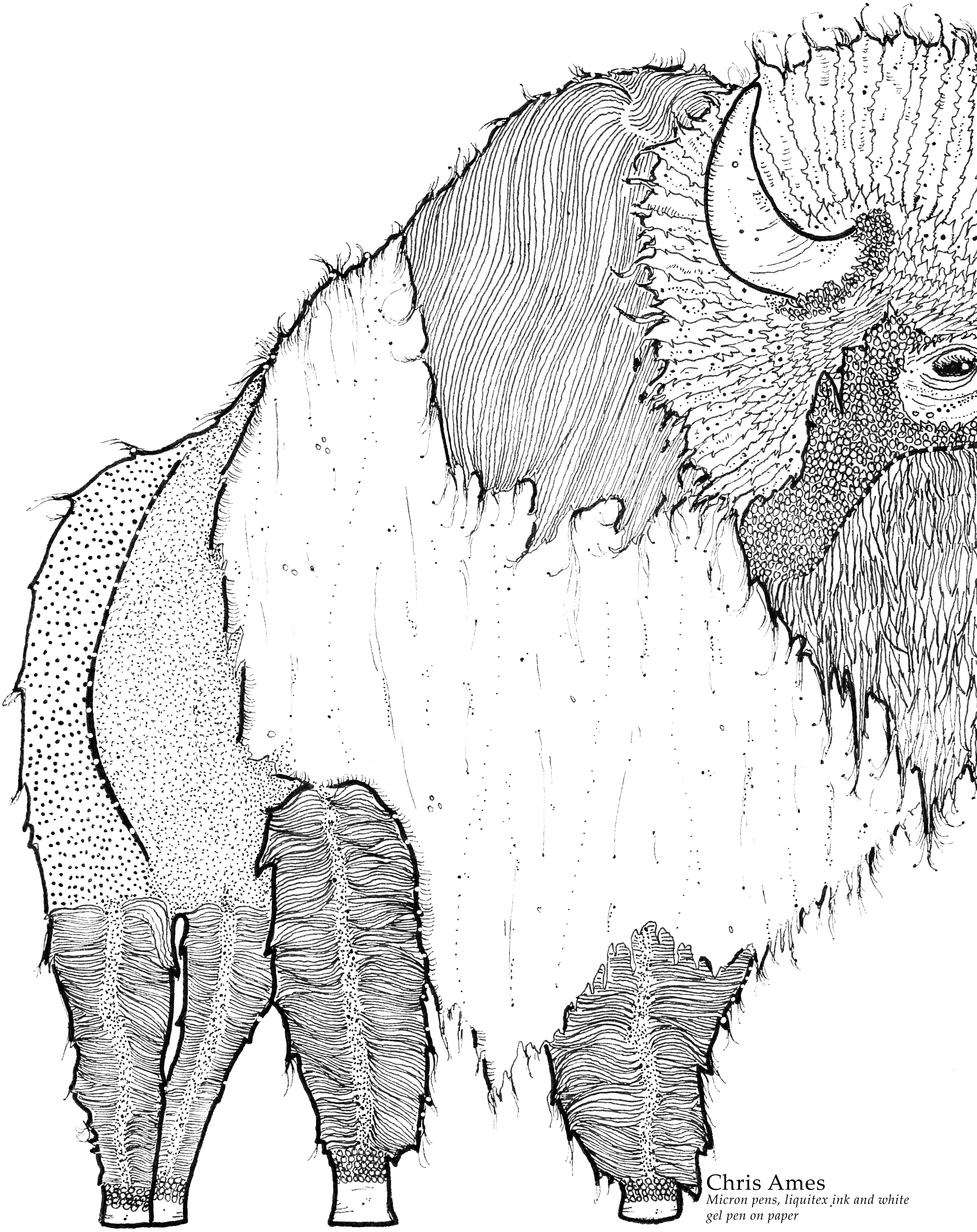

Chris Ames

Micron pens, liquitex ink and white gel pen on paper

"This piece, entitled 'Upright Beast,' is a small homage to killing for sport. A brief song for the nearly extinct. Determination and extermination. One way or another, we all go the way of the buffalo."

Collaboration Horizontale

Erica X Eisen

Inkslinger Award Winner

After the Germans were driven out, the men of Charreau wasted no time in rounding up all the women suspected of harboring treasonous hearts.

Jeanne they came for first, the woman who'd taken over the town bakery after M. Steinberg was deported and who was rumored to have made special night deliveries to the Nazi barracks.

And Yvette as well, whose blonde curls and quick laugh had caught the fancy of a certain sentimental private, his features birdlike and his fingers long and soft like a girl's. He had taken to drawing Yvette, posing her in a hackneyed fashion — flower-bedecked hair, dress with a vaguely Grecian drape about it — that he found suggestive of high romance. This he had done until the first bursts of American shells were heard in the distance, after which he'd deserted at the earliest opportunity. The next day he was found and executed under the gaze of the entire town, his erstwhile Aphrodite included.

Françoise too they took, whose belly was swollen with the four-month weight of her sin. And Sylvie, with eyes like those of a spooked horse, and Desirée, who never left the house without wearing her silver crucifix, and Germaine, whose son had died trying to hold the Maginot Line back in July of 1940. These all they rounded up — some cursing, some weeping — and took to the central square.

And then they took me.

In many ways the men allowed me to finally answer the question that had been torturing me since the German retreat, which was whether or not I had really loved Mathias. Permanently exiled from the gaze of my lover, it was a question I was bound to ask — had my feelings been sincere, or was I, at bottom, just another piece of war trash, a profiteeress ready to perform for a few more grams of sugar added to the month's ration? But when my father called me to the door that day, I didn't resist. I submitted myself to the townsmen and to whatever punishment would come next, and I said to myself, "If this is what it takes to prove my love, I'll do it." The sun that day was as bright as a scoured brass pan; I squinted, but I did not waver. My heart and my head were clear.

My mother buried her shame-hot face in a handkerchief and wept with ugly, gulping sobs. My father followed along, hanging back with the other men and saying not a word as we advanced towards the center of town, regarding me with the same dispassion with which he would observe a swineherd driving sows to the marketplace.

Pierrot, the miller's son, frogmarched me a couple of blocks, but I was compliant, and so he loosened his grip and let me walk on my own. I think he was embarrassed — once, on a spring day under the shade of a linden tree, we had exchanged shy kisses before being caught by the headmistress and beaten for our wayward affections. Now, though he made as though he didn't know me — this boy who I'd taught to whistle and skip stones — he must have understood the ludicrousness of the situation, and so he let up playing prison warden. Or perhaps he thought that I was filthy for what I had done and did not want to touch my skin.

In many ways my fate was the cruelest out of all the girls assembled, for only my soldier had lived. The others had all died, either under the gun of the executioner or at the hands of the Americans. For the ones whose breath rattled on after the fighting had moved away, their girls were each left with a blood-flecked kiss, a tearful exchange of promises. And for those whom death deprived of a reunion, at least their paramours could console themselves with the warmth of certain memories: their last embrace, a summertime promenade in the dappled light of the apple orchards. This the girls could cherish, like a thumb-worn photograph you keep in your pocket, and this would protect them through whatever else they might endure. I did not have this. My last memory of Mathias was of the back of his head, as he and the rest of his squadron retreated east over the river. I watched their backs get smaller and smaller, their forms receding into the distance, and I waited for Mathias to turn back. He never did.

They gathered us all in the center of the square, and there they made us stand and sing "Deutschland über alles" while they burned any Nazi regalia they could find. People were assembled all around, almost all of them men. They spat on us and drowned us out with "La Marseillaise." "Louder, louder!" our captors shouted, brandishing sticks though they didn't use them. Louder, louder we sang, until our throats were raw, until we could push ourselves no further, but it was no use. Seven girls could never drown out the combined power of the entire town, their voices buoyed by the knowledge that already they had won. Though barely past noon, some of the men were already visibly drunk; our humiliation had been a planned event, a spectacle for all to watch. Except for us.

They marched Yvette away from us, over to the corner of the square: it was the spot, I realized, where her soldier had been executed. The body was gone, but a stain remained. For days the wolf-eyed German captain had let the deserter's blood and brains soak into the cobblestones, refusing to have the body removed. It was meant to serve as a reminder to the rest of the battalion, though the message would lose its meaning a few days later, when the entire town was engulfed in fighting and one dead body was as good as another. Several days after that the entire battalion would flee, retracing the path of Yvette's lover over the bridge and into the hilly distance. My Mathias included.

Then the barber came. They made us get down on our knees in the center of the square. Jeanne bucked and fought like a steer against the branding iron, but all she got for her trouble was a bloody nose. Pierrot held up my chin so I wouldn't duck the razor, but I didn't look at him. Instead, I fixed my gaze straight in front of me: my father was standing there, his mouth curled in disgust as though I were not the daughter he had raised for twenty years but some anonymous, fatherless, traitorous whore. I could see him putting it together now: all those evenings when I had offered to run the café in his stead, when I had told him to head home early, not to worry, I would lock up, I was an adult now, I could manage things myself.

The barber nicked my ear. I felt the mingled sensation of warm blood and cold blade. I said nothing. Pierrot pushed my head up towards the sky. I said nothing. People spat on me, glowered at me. I said nothing. I did not weep. I did not repent. My hair fell to the ground; blood dribbled down my neck. I said nothing. I did nothing. I had done nothing. I stared ahead, meeting my father's eyes measure for measure until he dropped his gaze and retreated back into the crowd.

Pierrot's fingers ran rough against my chin. I remembered the feeling of his hands, smaller then, softer then, that day under the linden tree. And I remembered the feeling of the headmistress's martinet as I bent over a desk with my skirt raised up and my knickers pulled down and she beat the love out of me, a lash for every kiss.

They drew swastikas on our heads the way you would mark a sheep to identify its owner. They took special delight in Françoise, covering her bristly scalp with the insignia her dead lover had borne across his armband. The men seemed to hate her above all the rest of us, and yet her sin was not more dreadful — just more apparent. Inevitably, I thought of Mathias. I thought of the pensive look that came upon his face when he smoked. I thought of the way he spoke French — not badly, but very slowly, very carefully, as though words were rationed and he couldn't afford to waste them. I thought of the first time I had seen him in my father's café, of the quiet smile he had given as the other soldiers gave leers, of the look of interest I had returned without embarrassment. Had I known then what it would come to, or had I thought things might turn out differently? I didn't know. The marker against my forehead was cold and wet. I didn't know.

When they had finished marking us they pulled us upright and paraded us through the streets, the crowd jostling close behind. Behind me, Françoise was stumbling; several times she called for rest, clutching her belly, but the men pushed her on. They marched us past M. Steinberg's old bakery, past the bullet-pocked façade of my father's café, past the lamppost where the Germans had strung up two resistance fighters, past the Church of the Magdalen. Its bells were ringing, but no one was in — the people had their Sunday entertainment. From above, the women leaned out of windows and stared down at us; from our sides, the men jeered; from behind, the children threw stones.

Yvette began to snivel, and I noticed that she still clutched a fistful of the golden curls that had won the attentions of her weak-hearted lover. She couldn't have been more than seventeen, I thought. Of all of us, she had been the least careful in concealing her affair. She would link arms with her soldier as they walked down the main street, flaunt his little gifts to her, call to the German HQ in the middle of the afternoon. The rest of us had been more discreet: assignations under the cover of darkness, silent sex in a farmer's hayloft, our bodies wrapped together in animal heat. She had conducted a peacetime love affair; we had known to fit our passions to the circumstances. At the time we had thought her a fool. But we all ended up just the same.

When we got to the river just outside of town, our captors seemed not to know quite what to do with us. Their imaginations were exhausted, but not their anger. The crowd, once raucous and full, had dwindled significantly to maybe fifteen, my father still among them. They halted us, huddling together and speaking amongst themselves in hushed tones. The treads of the retreating Germans were still visible where we stood. Françoise sat down gratefully, unmindful of the muddy ground. The other girls milled around, nervously running their hands over their newly shorn scalps. Looking out across the river, I fitted my boots inside a pair of footprints and waited for the men's verdict.

Then someone shouted, "Strip!" Some laughter, but the call went up again. "Strip!" More voices, more shouts, until the will of one became the will of all. And they had sticks, and one had a rifle, and so I unbuttoned my cardigan and pulled my dress over my head, my arms crabbed, my body turned away from them. And of course I thought of Mathias then, of how at times like this his meticulous French would yield to a heady silence, to the wordless language of sighs. I thought of how one day, about a month before the town was liberated, he had taken me to a secluded spot by the river and told me, eyes bright, that he loved me and that after the war we would buy a farmhouse and live out the rest of our days together. And my only response had been to bury my head in his shoulder and cry, for I knew that the Americans were coming and I felt acutely in that moment that Mathias was slipping away from me, that even though I was holding onto him with all my strength, he was slipping further and further out of my grasp. I thought of all of this as I stood there in nothing more than my slip, arms crossed over my chest to guard against the cold and the leers. I looked at Pierrot; his eyes were burrowing into his boots.

All of us, after varying degrees of hesitation, stripped down to our chemises. All except the pregnant Françoise, still clutching her belly, still whimpering softly, who looked down at the ground and shook her head. The men jeered, but they could not budge her.

Then suddenly several of them were upon her, beating her with their sticks and their fists and telling her to strip, to strip for them, to offer up to the men of France what she had offered up so freely to the occupiers. And who knows how long it before she cried out, before she screamed so sharply that the men sprang away from her? Who knows how long it took before they saw the blood running down her thighs, before they saw that her misbegotten child had dislodged itself from her womb? But when the men saw her miscarriage they dropped their weapons; they huddled up and looked on silently as we whores ministered to our wounded. This was not how they'd wanted it to end, but it's how it ended, and it *had* ended. It was over. Their control over us had vanished and they could do no more. Françoise wept; I wrapped my arm around her. I watched my father as he and the other men retreated back to town: I watched his back get smaller and smaller, his form receding into the distance, and I waited for him to turn back. He never did.

WOOD SHOP TALK

Erica X Eisen is the author of the short story "Collaboration Horizontale" and winner of the Inkslinger Award in fiction for Issue No. 9.
Here we chat with her about her process and her art.
This is Woodshop Talk.

***BUFFALO ALMANACK*: Collaboration Horizontale is of course more than a story title — the community-driven vengeance against women portrayed in your story actually did occur throughout post-Liberation France. How did you come to discover these incidents, and what about them most inspired you to retell their story in the form of historical fiction?**

ERICA X EISEN: I'd read about these kinds of events in history books long before writing "Collaboration Horizontale," but the immediate catalyst for the story was watching Hiroshima mon amour, a film made in 1959 by the French director Alain Resnais with a screenplay by Marguerite Duras. If you haven't seen it, I really cannot recommend it highly enough — it is one of those movies that stays with you. The film is very much about history, memory, and forgetting. The main female character is a French woman who goes to Japan and becomes obsessed with the story of Hiroshima's wartime trauma; the first section of the film is a long interchange between her and her Japanese lover about the atomic bombing, about what she can authentically claim to understand about it. And as the film progresses, her own wartime past is revealed: she had a German lover who died at the end of the war, and after the town was liberated she was publically humiliated and her parents locked her her in their cellar because they were so ashamed of her.

The film —and her story in particular — captivated me. But Resnais and Duras focused on the before and the after of her shaming — the affair, and then her imprisonment following her affair coming to light. In this story, I wanted to fill in what happened in the middle. That's not to say that my narrator is meant to be Emmanuelle Riva's character from the film, per se. But that is where I got the inspiration to look into this topic. And I felt that the most effective (and emotionally affecting) way to recount these events would be to plant my narrator amongst the women who were being accused.

BA: **Was there a research aspect to your writing process? If so, how did you negotiate your responsibility to the reader with a potential responsibility toward historical truth?**

EXE: Most of the research I did actually took the form of examining archival photos from the period. There are a number of surviving photographs that document the treatment of so-called "sentimental collaborators" after the war. You see the women having their heads shaved. You see them being marched through the streets barefoot or being made to stand around in only their underclothes. And then of course you see the massive crowds of people around them. In some of the shots, the men who are restraining these women even mug for the camera. But more than anything else, I think that from studying these images you get a sense of the emotional tenor of these public shamings far better than you would if you just read a list of the events that occurred.

You ask about balancing my responsibility to the reader with a responsibility toward historical truth. I don't see them as separate in this instance. If I thought my story stepped beyond the bounds of what was tenable based on the historical narrative, I wouldn't have told it. Is this a blow-by-blow retelling of one real woman's experiences after the war? No. But I tried to make it cleave closely to the experiences that real women did have. To me, this piece derives its power and interest from precisely the fact that it is so firmly rooted in historical events.

***BA*: These scenes present such a moment of darkness for the women involved, a sexual scapegoating that carries with it shockwaves of masochism, voyeurism and masturbatory punishment; a lashing-out at what should have been a time of tremendous patriotic celebration. It seems evident there is a message here about the gender politics of war. Can you elaborate? And what role did Françoise's violent miscarriage play in the crafting of this message?**

EXE: Looking at the photographs I mentioned above, it's impossible to look past the pleasure that a lot of the onlookers seem to take in punishing these women. In my story, I try to weave in other forms of collaboration that go unpunished by the town, collaboration that some of these onlookers may themselves have taken part in. The narrator's father, for instance, operated a café during the occupation and seemed happy enough serving German soldiers. And then there are a couple of allusions to the "deportation" of the town's Jews, which none of the townspeople are in any way moved by. In fact, another of Alain Resnais's films, the documentary Night and Fog, was censored for a long time because it showed French officials helping the Germans load Jews onto trains bound for the camps.

So one thing I wanted to touch on in my story is a certain level of hypocrisy or selective anger on the part of the townspeople. One reason so much public rage was directed towards these women, I feel, is because of a sense of ownership: the idea that these women in some way belonged to the men. I'm not trying to render my characters blameless—the narrator herself is deeply conflicted about her own motivations, about whether or not she was really just in it for the material benefits that being with a German soldier brought her. But I think there is an aspect of the town's extreme outrage that transcends patriotism

and goes into something else, something misogynistic.
The miscarriage — it is interesting you bring it up, because that is the scene that I have always been the most unsure of. On the one hand, it seems inevitable, like the conclusion that needs to proceed out of the story I've set up. It serves the purpose of breaking the spell, breaking the captors' control, while also evading any sense of resolution. But on the other hand…I wonder if it's not just too much. I'd be interested in hearing what readers think about it.

***BA*: As a university undergraduate, I believe you are one of (if not the) youngest writers we have yet featured. What brought you to the writing world? What's making you stay?**

EXE: Well, I've been interested in writing since I was a little kid. My dad told me that even before I knew how to write I would fill whole spiral-bound notebooks with pages and pages of scribbles, with a sticker here or there for decoration. But I think the second question you ask is more interesting; when you start sending your work out into the world you get rejection, rejection, rejection, so you need something to keep you from just giving up. And in fact, for the first couple of years of college I wasn't doing any writing at all; I thought I wouldn't be able to compete with the other student writers here. It was really only by chance that I got into it again: a little less than a year ago, I was searching on my computer for an old file and I happened to come across one of the stories I'd written in high school. I read it over again on a whim and thought, "Hey, this is pretty good." So I decided it would be a waste to just give up completely, and that's when I started really writing in earnest. Actually, this piece was one of the first stories I produced after getting back into writing again, so it's wonderful to see it being published.

I've also had the good fortune to have friends, family, and mentors who are interested in and encouraging of my work. Last fall I was lucky enough to take a fiction workshop with Jamaica Kincaid, which was an absolutely extraordinary experience—I really cannot thank her enough. And I think there has been a change within myself as well that has allowed me to continue writing: as I've gotten older, I've come to the realization that fearing criticism of my work is both silly and unproductive. Silly because criticism is inevitable and unproductive because any writer needs criticism to grow. Anyhow, criticism doesn't automatically mean your piece is bad; you don't have to just lie down and give up. Criticism should be engaged with critically. And if your work is challenged, it forces you to articulate precisely what it is you were going for, what it is you were trying to do. That's actually an incredible gift, which is something I didn't understand when I was younger.

Colton Adrian
Nikon D-50

Colton Adrian
Nikon D-50

"This photo was taken about a year ago behind an abandoned GoodYear surrounded by decades-old graffiti. I drive past this lamp every night and it hasn't been on as long as I've seen it, but the vintage look and worn colors was something I couldn't help but notice."

A Place of Reversion

Reggie Mills

Paul and I go to the McDonald's to eat. It's evening. The sun's low. The McDonald's is busy, crowded. Compared to the rest of the area it feels abnormal. Its parking lot overflows —cars park along the streets, in next-door parking lots. They expanded this location just a year ago: a bigger floorplan, a second floor, too. The line goes out the door. I'm not sure we'll find a seat. They put in a PlayPlace for the kids. There are five cashiers at the counter, calling *Next* as fast as possible. There used to be land out behind the original McDonald's lot too that they bought out, an alleyway and a long building. They tore it down and turned it into parking spaces.

We wait in line and get our food and go up to the second floor. We find a spot by a window, just vacated. We're waiting for the sun to go down. From our spot I can see all up and down Grand River Ave. Across the street is the Food Centre, its small square windows a murky grey. People are parking in its lot and jaywalking over to the McD.'s. The food line goes out the door and down the Grand River sidewalk.

I bought the house here in Brightmoor soon after being assigned to Detroit. It was cheaper to buy a house than anything else. I figured I would be here a while.

We've become nocturnal these past months, Paul and I. We live in the same house. We wake up late afternoon to the sun slowly descending and pack up our equipment into Paul's Cadillac hearse, then go to eat. We get free food at McD.'s by flashing our employee IDs. We work for McD.'s — corporate employees, in a way. The cashiers here know us by name.

The people in line outside don't see us. The window is a looking-pane, a separating device. I scan the line. I have to make a visor of my hand to block the sun from my eyes. In line they're all facing forwards, eyes level. Some of them talk with who they're with. I see a few families, fathers and mothers and kids. The sun is low and orange and makes their shadows go across the parking lot. There must be a glare on the other side of the window for whoever looks up. People also leaving the McDonald's and jaywalking to the far side of the street with paper bags in their hands or trays of drinks.

The news refers to Paul and I as the "Detroit Banner Bunch" — in spirit, at least. We go around the city hanging McDonald's banners. We hang them at night. The banners say *McDonald's*. No one knows it's Paul and I who hang them; our identities are unknown. They don't even know it's just us two. The hanging locations — the "spots" — are assigned to us. We wear balaclavas to keep ourselves hidden. It's entirely illegal, but Detroit law enforcement doesn't have the resources or the energy to track us down or do anything about it.

McDonald's has kept its ties to us concealed. They publicly deny involvement in the affair regularly, sticking to their guns despite journalistic pressure. It's just the two of us, Paul and I. Small operation. We're the only ones who do this sort of thing anywhere, this large-scale illegal advertising. It's a one-of-a-kind setup. Detroit's the only place it would probably be able to work. We hang the banners at night. We've been going for six months — Detroit's a big city. We do maybe three spots a night, most with multiple banners.

We're drinking coffees, black. We wake up in the afternoon and use the living room at our house to do basic workouts — push-ups and such. Then we come to McDonald's. There's a case of bottled water in the hearse's trunk for if we get thirsty on the job, beside our banners and ropes and drills and harnesses. We wait for the sun to go down and hit three or so spots a night. We drill into concrete, brick, bolt in the ties for our banners. We finish in the early a.m. and come back to McDonald's for a meal. The Grand River location is 24 h. Then Paul takes us home. This is our routine every day.

I bought the house at a bank in Pittsburgh. It was foreclosed, reclaimed by the bank. A representative took me into his office and showed me the photos and I bought it. I signed on a line and they transferred a sum from the account number I gave them. McDonald's paid for the whole thing. He gave me two keys and told me good luck finding the place.

When the Grand River Ave. McDonald's expanded it opened up a side area, a side entrance, separate from the main restaurant. This side place was a prototype. It was a part of the building but you had to enter from a different entrance. It was partitioned.

They didn't have a name for it. You walked in and it wasn't bright and colourful like the rest of the restaurant. It had grey walls. It was two enter/exit doors and a rectangle room, and besides a few windows that was it. You had to leave the doors to go to the restaurant entrance from outside.

You didn't get food on this side. There was a counter with three receptacles. There was a plastic pane wall-to-wall on top of the counter like the kind you see across the cashier at convenience stores to guard the ladies that stood behind it. There were big dips in the counter at the three receptacles so you could slide things under the pane. They also put three circle microphone things in the pane that you talked into to talk past it. There were signs over the receptacles labelled *Receiving* and *Drop-Off* and *Pick-Up*, respectively. Ladies stood behind the counter and pane at each receptacle and talked through the microphones.

I wasn't here by the time they installed this side area. I got here after it was built. I learned how it works through people who were here. Mainly through Paul.

This side area off the McDonald's is open 9 a.m.–5 p.m., not like the 24-h. restaurant area. You come into it and you go to the *Receiving* receptacle and you tell the lady your information. You tell her your information and she puts it into her computer and tells you to stand *x* feet away and she takes your picture. This is what happens if you're new. Then she goes to the back and brings out a bag for you. She prints off a card for you with your identity information and the picture, an ID card. You take the bag she slides under the pane for free and you bring it home and you open it. You *receive* it. You get it for free if you're new.

And you open the bag at home and inside are these pieces of cotton, chemical-smelling, these large squares, nicely manufactured just for you. You only get a few nice big squares if it's your first time. The bag has *McDonald's* written across the front with the golden arches. And you look in the bag and you see there's also a small spool of string and some needles and pins, and a booklet. And you read the booklet. The cotton squares you get if you're new are usually plain, black or white or grey. And you look at the booklet and it has instructions for putting together the pieces of cotton which you realize are marked with chalk outline, the cotton squares, for you to put the pieces together with the string and the needles and it tells you where to cut and how to make it look proper. It tells you to do this and put it in the bag and bring the bag back. And the bag you realize has a place to re-seal it so you can give it back to a lady at the counter.

Or if not a shirt then maybe a sock or a scarf or a sweater, and the bag will have the material necessary for that. And they're in styles you don't need complicated machinery to do, that you don't need advanced collars on or something. They give the more complicated things to the people who aren't new.

You realize there's a bar code on the outside of the bag and you bring the bag back to the McDonald's and slide it under the pane at the receptacle that says

Drop-Off and the lady there takes it. She scans it and tells you *Thank you* and tells you to expect something in the mail in the next few days.

McDonald's is one of the last thriving businesses in Detroit. Most businesses are boarded up or else blocked off with fencing. Unemployment is high. People have been steadily leaving the city. The ones who remain have ties or don't know what else to do but just wait.

The sun outside the McDonald's window is going down slowly. People jaywalking. People sitting on the little concrete curbs in the parking lots rifling through paper bags. People sitting on concrete benches on Grand River's sidewalks.

We hang the banners at night and get home at around 4 a.m. usually, something like that. From there Paul goes out. I stay home and he goes. He has business to do at 4 a.m.

The shops around this neighbourhood are mostly vacated. There's the Food Centre with its pharmacy and USPS inside and the McDonald's and that's it. Everything else is all boarded up. You go down the street and it's all plywood painted grey or else white. You go down a sidestreet and it's more grey with sometimes colourful sprayed graffiti.

Our banners have holes in the corners for rope or cables, with high-quality grommets in them. They're made with industrial-level vinyl, shipped from the McD.'s corporate HQ at Oak Brook, IL. They hold well; as far as I know no banner we've put up has come down unless it was intentionally bothered with.

The shops out the window on Grand River Ave. are shells of their previous forms. The homes around here, too. People leaving homes and the homes being retaken by the Earth — reverting to nature. A more primitive, unconstructed, uncultivated time. Windows broken, barriers undone.

We drive in Paul's Cadillac hearse. It's better for us than my sedan. The bed holds our all our banners and gear.

At 4 a.m. Paul goes out to see his "boys". He calls them his "boys" — nothing else. We don't talk about what he does. He goes out and a few hours later he comes home. He's busy his whole day, from wake to sleep. We both of us fall asleep before noon.

We've had our food and our coffee and we go to the first spot, a highway overpass. It's just after sundown. Paul parks his hearse at the gas station right off the corner nearby, around the back of the station attendant's little building. There's a smallish alley-like area here. He parks it so there's quick and easy getaway if we need it. We probably won't, but still. By now we park for quick getaway without thinking.

The overpass has concrete side-barriers and a chain-link fence on top. It's an easy tie-up. We have two banners, one for each side of the thing, facing the highway both ways. Paul and I get out and go to the trunk and pack my backpack with the banners and rope and we put on our masks.

We walk across the asphalt, me with my bag. We're outfitted in all black. The streetlights are bright enough to make out the cracks in the pavement, the weeds sprouting up, the places where the ground's not level.

With the tall fence on both sides the easiest thing to do is just climb across the outside of the bridge. Paul used to be afraid of heights like this. He's grown accustomed to them by now. This height's not bad anyways. At most, the overpass is 10–12 ft. off the highway. And cars on the highway are few during the day; they're even fewer now.

The bridge has an outcropping steel beam that goes its whole length. We stand on the beam. I go first with my pack and Paul follows. We hold onto the chain-link with our hands and hang off over the highway, working across. The fence and the steel beam are both rusty under the yellow streetlights, the steel's paint chipping in parts. We're wearing gloves.

We get to a spot in the bridge's middle and Paul comes behind me and takes the stuff out of my pack. We tie two corners up to the fence. We lean off the rope with our weight to make sure it's tight.

We repeat on the other side. Tomorrow a representative will drive by to make sure it's visible. We drive off.

I met Paul my first day in Detroit. I followed a map and drove to the house I'd bought from the bank. I arrived in the morning, just before noon. When I unlocked the front door there were people in the living room: a woman and a little baby boy. They asked who I was and I said I'd bought the house. The woman called her husband.

What the banks don't tell you is that these foreclosed homes haven't been evicted.

They were the previous owners, still living there. It was Paul and his wife and his little boy. They had nowhere else to go. They were one of many in the neighbourhood who lost their homes. They had neighbours whose homes were bought also; they knew their turn was coming sooner or later.

Paul said his wife's name was Bianca, his son's Paul Junior. He said they called the kid "P.J." for short.

He told Bianca to pack up so they didn't have to inconvenience me longer than necessary.

Bianca asked if they could just eat before they left. I didn't know what else to say.

The lady at *Drop-Off* takes your bag and they ship it off and look at the completed product and make an analysis of its quality, and that's how they determine what you'll get back from that. And if you do an okay job you get something. You get a letter in the mail and it tells you your analysis and if you should go back to the counter at the McDonald's with its *Receiving* and *Drop-Off* and *Pick-Up*. If you do an okay job you get something at the receptacle where it says *Pick-Up*.

And with your photo ID card now you have the option to go back to the original *Receiving* receptacle and give the lady there your ID under the pane and tell her how many bags or what size of bag you want. They have these catalogues you can ask for where it has all the types of things they give you in a bag. And you choose the bag you want but this time because you're not new it's not a free sample or anything like that anymore. You make a deposit to get the bag this time. And the lady tells you that if you do an okay job when they look and analyze the quality of the product you'll get your deposit back. And depending on the quality of what you drop off you'll get your deposit and then some. But if you do a bad job you lose the deposit. This is the risk.

If you do good when they analyze then within a few days you go and bring your ID to the *Pick-Up* receptacle at the counter and give your lady your ID and you can get a cheque with the amount they determined your product has earned. But here's the thing: if you want, instead of taking a cheque which has money on it, McDonald's has the option that you can get four times the amount you'd receive on a cheque as McDonald's store credit. They put the credit on your McDonald's spending account, which is linked to your ID card. So if you choose, you can get that store credit amount put on your ID and then go out and just walk around the building to the regular restaurant entrance and buy food for yourself or whoever else, with what they just put on your account.

I got to the house in Brightmoor, Detroit just before noon and the wife Bianca made us all lunch.

Paul lost his job about a year before I got here, and it was uphill ever since. He used to work at the funeral home downtown, but business was poor. People were leaving the city; they were dying abroad. Those who did die here didn't have families that could afford the service. The state would sometimes pick up their slack. But sometimes you'd see a body wash up on the river shore.

Paul would go in to work in a suit. He still had the thing, up in his closet. He didn't have occasion to wear it anymore, really.

He had a "friends and family" discount at the home. He'd buried lots of his friends there.

The owner finally decided to pack up and leave like everyone else. Those last months before packing up were a deficit. But Paul stayed with him until the end. He said to Paul he was sorry, but what else is there to do. As consolation he gave Paul the Cadillac hearse.

Paul and I have become friends these past six months. It was natural, unavoidable. We talk while we work, about things — anything. We flow.

We hit abandoned buildings, mainly. Hang the banners off the sides.

Sometimes we hang them on billboards, sometimes on bridges. The spots are assigned by McD.'s. Once a week a McD.'s representative comes to town and drives through to make sure we hit all the scheduled spots okay.

Twice a month we go to the separate side-area of the McDonald's with its grey paint and its counter and we go to the *Pick-Up* window. This is where we get paid for being the "Banner Bunch".

Paul and I play CDs when we drive. We have a whole collection of CDs in a rack in the hearse's trunk, beside our equipment. There must be a hundred. The collection is Paul's — another giveaway from an abandoning store owner, a local music shop. We have a ritual where we don't choose what we play. We go to the trunk and lean in and grab one from the rack at random.

And now tonight's our last two scheduled spots. We must've hit 500 spots in our six months. 1,000 banners easily. We do it nightly. You can't now drive more than five minutes without seeing *McDonald's* hanging somewhere. The running joke between Paul and I is that soon people will start calling this city "McDonald's, MI". Tomorrow I go back to Pittsburgh.

We're at the top of the Marriott downtown. We drove over from the overpass. We just bolted up the two mammoth banners they gave us for the place, drilled holes into the building's concrete. One facing west, one east. If you act like you know what you're doing you can go through the lobby downstairs to the elevator real quick. The banners wrap around almost the whole sides of the curved tower. They flap back and forth against the building's glass in the wind.

"That's it," I tell Paul.

"That's it man," he says. "The Banner Bunch."

"Yup."

Paul told me earlier that he was taking the night off tonight, that he wouldn't be spending it with the boys. He told them he was taking a break, just for one night.

We hop up onto the Marriott's ledge and swing our legs over, facing west towards Brightmoor, the two of us. It's still dark out.

"It was a good thing," I say. "These months."

"Sure was."

We take off our masks.

When you come by the Grand River McD.'s during the day there are two lines out the door, not just one; one for the restaurant and one for the side area. People lining up to return their finished products at the *Drop-Off* receptacle. They come with bags, totes, knapsacks, wheely carts. Carloads of completed product. The people flock to receive, to produce, turn in, get their McDonald's store credit. The trans- and saturated fats, the savouriness. They do it unconsciously.

Before the Grand River expansion they'd do nothing — sit on sidewalk benches on streets or else sit in living rooms watching TV with whatever reception their CRTs picked up.

After the deposit return they get paid pennies per article. To make anything reasonable you need to produce hundreds, thousands of articles a week. Tens of thousands. You line up with truckloads of the stuff, to turn it in. These people collect their children, nieces, nephews, set them up in living rooms. Whole organizations, collaborations of them. They pound out hundreds of articles a day, pile them up by the couch and out in the garage. Shirts and socks and scarves, sweaters and jeans and underwear. Rooms that smell of chemicals; aldehydes and ketones. The smell of freshly machined cotton. It keeps them occupied and it keeps them fed.

Twice a week McDonald's has their semi come by to exchange all the product. They back the truck right up to the building and it all happens without being seen from outside, behind the shield of the truck and the restaurant walls. They take away the finished product and drop off more uncompleted. The exchange goes unseen.

They've already made expansions to other McDonald's locations in Detroit, implemented it elsewhere. Perhaps they'll have the setup go abroad, like everything else from Detroit — the cars of the past, the people of the present. It'll be natural, unavoidable.

About a week ago Paul told me Bianca was pregnant again.

"B. was pushin' me for another," Paul said. "I was worried about the money we got. I got nothin' else lined up after this banner thing. She was tryin' a get me to cave, pushin' for one more."

"Then I guess you caved," I said.

"Yeah," Paul said. "I stopped worryin' 'n' caved."

"Congratulations, buddy. That's great."

We're now sitting up on the edge of the hotel building, looking out westward over the city. Even with the nighttime darkness I can see some of our banners in the Detroit streetlights, across the city.

"How many you think we put up?" Paul asks.

"A thousand, easy," I say.

"Shit, man."

". . ."

". . ."

"It was a good thing alright," I tell Paul.

The banner underneath us flaps against our feet.

"I have something for you," I say. I take two cigars out of my breast pocket and give one to Paul.

"What's this for?" Paul says.

"You know," I say. "The baby and all."

"You don't gotta do that."

"I can take it back if you don't want it," I joke.

"Hell no man. I ain't gonna say no."

We unwrap the cigars and I give Paul my lighter. It glows orange-red in the dark and casts upward shadows on his face. I light mine.

We sit and inhale and let the smoke rest on our tongues. The flavour is sweet and musky and on the smoke it's just right.

We sit there and wait, both of us unthinking.

The original plan set up by McD.'s was to just have me do the jobs alone, putting up the banners all over. They sent me alone. I had my sedan and I was to use that to drive over Detroit. But I called HQ up after Bianca's lunch and they said that if that's what I needed, then sure, they'd have another contracted employee.

So I said to HQ to put Paul on the payroll. They had me give the phone to Paul and he told them his information.

The sun starts to come up behind us. The city below is fading into grey.

"What'll you do after this," Paul says.

"I don't know," I say. "Whatever they have for me. . . . Something corporate."

I look over at Paul. The sun is grey-yellow on his back.

"Come with me," I say to Paul. "We'll get you a job in Pittsburgh or somewhere. Anywhere."

"I dunno man," Paul says.

He looks at me and the light from behind us shadows his face, its ruts and divets and crags. His weathered face.

"McDonald's isn't any way to raise a kid — two kids," I say. "It's no diet."

"P.J.'ll be right fine," Paul says. "McD.'s is what my momma raised me on. B., too. We turned out right fine."

"We'll put you in school. I'll find a school for you. You'll go back to school. Or I'll get you a job with McDonald's. I can get you something."

We'd finished our cigars and put the little nubbins on the ledge in the space between us.

"We'll get you back into classes. College classes," I say.

Paul used to go to a school in the area, after high school. He'd told me it was called something something Ford.

"I'm too old for that now, man," Paul says.

"Bullshit," I say.

I feel the sun's warmth on the back of my neck.

"When I go back I'll take you with me," I say.

Paul laughs. "Okay man."

"Serious," I say. "What'll you do after this? Wait for the next guy to come buy your house?"

But the homework interfered with the time Paul spent with his boys. There was one day when Paul let himself be pressured into a night with the boys. He skipped class.

"We can find something for you to do," I say. "There must be something you've always wanted to do."

And when Paul got the bill in the mail halfway through first term, the money was tight. Those days his only income was from the funeral home. Bianca was pregnant with P.J. already then, too. He realized money was something he'd have to think about. He didn't want to have to constantly worry. Soon, one skipped class became two. The rest is history.

We'd watched the boxes of banners grow small each month. We'd get our monthly shipment FedEx'd to us from Oak Brook, IL and piled on the driveway, and we'd spend the evening packing the boxes into the garage. They ate up the whole space, with only thin passageways in-between.

On Sundays we'd go to church, Paul and Bianca and P.J. and I. All of us and everyone else all sitting and standing and kneeling, all facing forwards as one. I was never very religious, but it's something you do here — hold onto your faith devoutly.

"McDonald's, MI," Paul says beside me on the ledge.

The sun's higher now, the city brighter. Less grey. This high up you can see the whole city. Canada, even.

"Promise me you'll get out of here someday," I tell Paul.

But even still, this high, the city is different. It looks normal, healthy. We're too high to see the boarded windows, to realize that the abandoned buildings out there are just shells.

We sit up on the ledge and look out.

Inkslinger Award Winner

Tamar Hammer
Watercolor and pencil on paper

Tamar Hammer
Watercolor and pencil on paper

"After moving to Portland I searched for a way to get to know my neighborhood — which luckily appeared to have some nice coffee shops, and one tea house built in a caboose.
I started visiting these places at least once a week, with my painting papers, paint and colored pencils, finding myself flowing with the intimate atmosphere for sessions of three to four hours."

Tamar Hammer
Watercolor and pencil on paper

"While painting the places and people, I heard part of their conversations, kept translating it to Hebrew in my mind. During this process, I found that translation can be a very tricky game to play. I try to make it accurate, passing the meaning in its full form, and yet translating leads me in unexpected trails.

Looking at reality of time and place, through these trails of double bilingual meanings, often makes the excellent coffee taste even better."

Tamar Hammer is an Israeli-American illustrator and winner of the Inkslinger Award in visual arts for Issue No. 9. Here we chat with her about her process and her art. This is Woodshop Talk.

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***BUFFALO ALMANACK*: Your illustrations depict the language of an American coffee house being reinterpreted through the lens of your native Hebrew. Yet it could just as easily represent the opposite: an Israeli café seen through the eyes of an American expatriate. What does it mean to see the world in two languages?**

TAMAR HAMMER: Oh… it is very noisy. I'm busy translating all the time. My brain is like an airport of words lending and departing from one language to the other with me stuck in the gate trying to remember my next destination and where my luggage is while pretending to the world that I am in the control tower.

***BA*: Do you often paint or illustrate public scenes as they unfold? What value do you see in keeping an artist's journal, or else taking your art to town with you?**

TH: Yes, there are a few places that I visit often, for painting reasons and I'm always looking for new ones. For me, creating an art journal is like having a meaningful conversation. After a session of three to four hours of painting in a coffee shop, for example, I feel that I learned a lot from the place and the people around me but also had a fair chance to express my perspective.

In my journal I draw coffee shops and other neighborhood scenes but also natural sites like parks and gardens, and this conversation happens while painting people reading a book in a coffee shop, as well as well as while painting a goose hopping in the park.

***BA*: Everywhere in these artworks we see language and material blend together, until we are no longer certain what is objective and what is perspective. Why do you employ such a technique?**

TH: Text is an inanimate object therefore it jumps out of other inanimate objects, as well as from the people around. During the process of painting, the words just leap out, no planning ahead. Sometimes words stand before me out of 'nowhere' while at other times they emerge out of physical texts, such as a sign or a logo. The words come out and start a dialogue that soon becomes a long distance flight from America to Israel and back. On the way between Tel-Aviv and Portland I make a few connections and spend many hours above the ocean.

***BA*: How has life in America treated you so far? What do you miss about Israel?**

TH: Sometime in the 1980s when I first visited Oregon's wild forests, the ones touching the Pacific, I fell in love with the high ferns that cover the soil between the evergreen trees. It was so different from what is known as 'forest' in Israel. Such a rich, lively and wild green - it has amazed me. Maybe it sounds like an exaggeration – to fall for a fern – but it was real and since then, it was my dream to come back. This is why I feel at home living by these forests, and I visit them and the coast every season.

In Israel, other than my family and friends, what I miss is the landscape: Palm trees on the Dead Sea, the Bet-She'an ruins on a warm summer night, ancient olive trees in Beit-Hakerem Valley.

Speaking of olives, there is nothing like an Israeli breakfast (which is typically salty - fresh bread and vegetables, herbs, all kind of cheese and, of course, olives). I still can't handle the sweetness of Honey Nut Cheerios.

***BA*: What does your public creative process look like?**

TH: When I go on a painting trip, I always take with me my little carry-on in which I pack watercolor-paper journal, watercolor paints and a few colored pencils. After take-off I draw with the pencils, then I check out the color atmosphere with the watercolor paints, and finally I use the pencils again, to write the text.

Later, at home, after recovering from the jet-lag, if I feel that some spots came out 'too weak', or if there is a need to bold a word, I use touches of acrylic paint.

Tamar Hammer's traveling box of paints

My Dakota

by Rebecca Norris Webb

In 2005, I set out to photograph
my home state of South Dakota,
a sparsely populated frontier state on the Great Plains with more buffalo, pronghorn, coyotes, mule deer, ring-necked pheasants and prairie dogs than people.

It`s a landscape dominated by
space and silence and solitude,
by brutal wind and extreme weather.
I was trying to capture a more intimate and personal view of the West.
I was trying to capture what all that space feels like to someone who grew up there.

A year into the project, however, everything changed.
One of my brothers died unexpectedly.
For months, one of the few things that eased my unsettled heart was the landscape of South Dakota. It seemed all I could do was drive through the badlands and prairies and photograph. I began to wonder:
Does loss have its own geography?

"Blackbirds"

"Cottonwoods"

"Abandoned Farmhouse"

"Homestead Blizzard"

"The Sky Below"

"Ghost Mountain"

They say your first death is like your first love, and you`re never quite the same afterwards.

After my brother died, my photographs started to change. They were more muted, often autumnal. I remember saying to the writer, Linda Hasselstrom at her ranch house near Hermosa, South Dakota, where I did much of the writing for the book,

"I see summer, fall, and winter, in the photographs, but not spring."

"When you`re grieving, there isn`t any spring," Hasselstrom replied.

"Stained Glass"

"Stormlight"

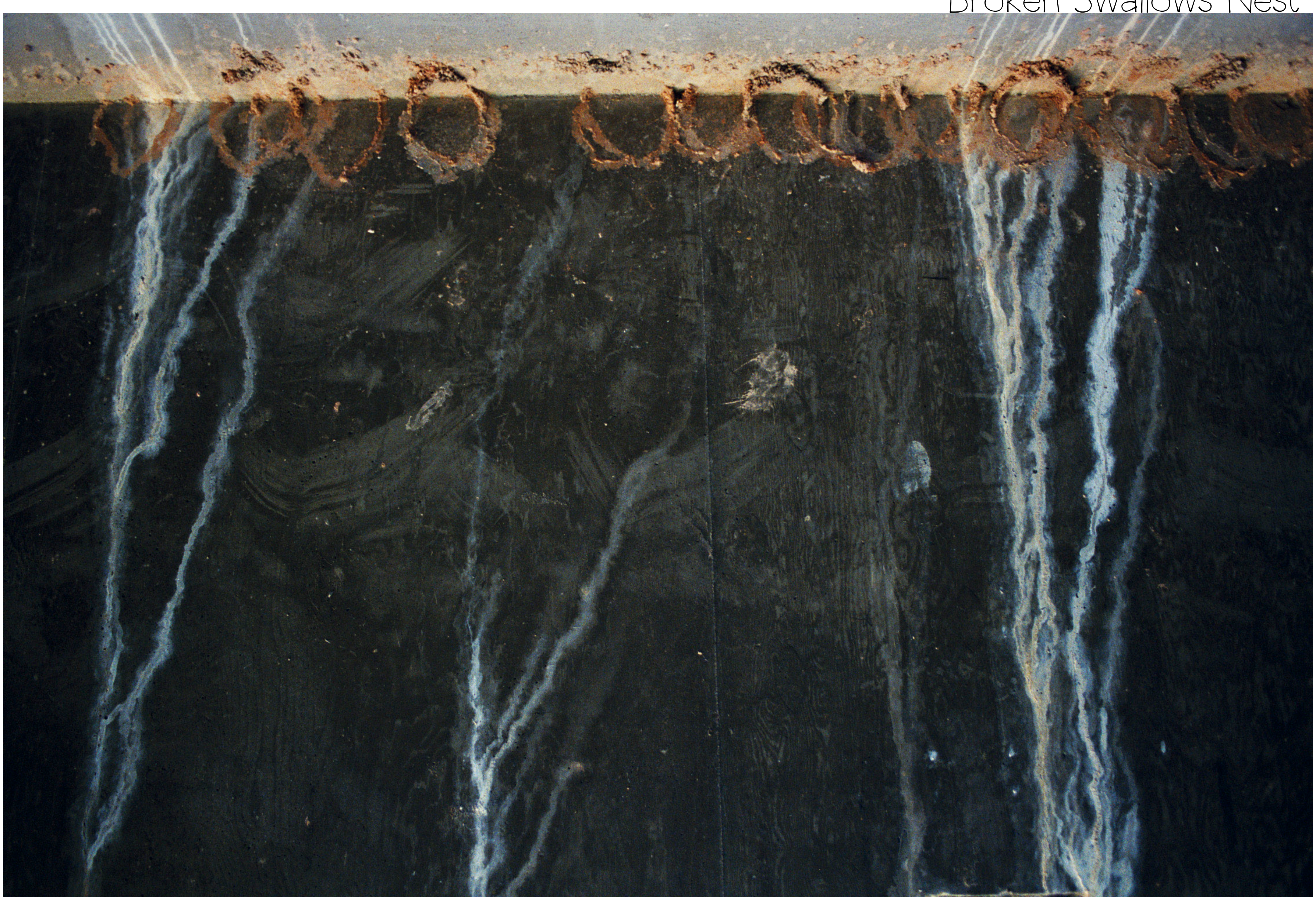
"Hot Springs"

"Highwinds"

"Fallen Apples"

"Weather Bitten Motel"

"Broken Swallows Nest"




"Pronghorn"

"Rearview Mirror"

Milking Dimitry

Mikhail Revlock

Josh used to brew coffee at a small café and play sax in a jazz quartet. He still worked at the café, but he pawned his horn when the organist offed himself. He accepted the paltry sum the shopkeeper offered him, knowing he could have gotten more on eBay, because he wished to suffer. He blew the money in his dealer's apartment. Swerving home, his brain toked, popped, and snorted into oblivion, he feared that his vacant saxophone stand would make his heart explode.

However, when Josh faced the void in his basement apartment, he felt only relief. The sax was a burden on his self-esteem, a daily reminder of his oversized and undernourished ambitions. It was liberating to expect nothing of one's self. He had always admired William Blake's proverb, "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom," and now he could finally embrace it.

Nevertheless he gave scant thought to his destination. He journeyed first to Mexico, where he collected peyote with the Huichol people and conversed with the spirits of iguanas and armadillos. He moved on to Peru, where he ate, puked, and shat Ayahuasca with a bogus shaman who absconded with part of his life force. Finally, in Canada, he dropped acid in his friend's condo and witnessed God's creation in the dust bunnies beneath the sofa.

His travels brought him back to Portland, but he never stopped tripping. 5-MeO-DMT was his latest passion. His dealer extracted the psychedelic tryptamine from the parotoid glands of her Colorado River Toad. His favorite forums were inundated with fellow druggies attesting their allegiance to the Church of the Toad of Light. The high felt like "a speedboat chase down the River Styx" to Blunted4Eva. SAMMYDOSHA compared it to "a freight train full of hobos fighting over a single can of sardines." "It defies description, opposes reason, and scrambles minds with the instantaneity of a flash of celestial light," wrote Josh (TrippinBalzac1).

Though he smoked 5-MeO-DMT every two weeks, his trip on Wednesday had no parallel in his memory. He followed the standard procedure, first tapping a point into his hollow light bulb then applying a butane torch to the base and sucking the bitter smoke into his lungs. As usual, in thirty seconds, he dropped the bulb on the carpet and collapsed atop his recliner.

The chair transformed into a shallow dish of water. He discerned a resinous rock cave to his right, a silk ficus to his left. His feet were webbed, his hands four-fingered. Surrounded by glass walls, he hopped onto the moist substrate and bumped his head on the edge of the tank. He saw his dealer scrubbing her hands in the kitchen.

Michaela dropped a live cricket in the tank, and he snapped it up without a second thought. Though he enjoyed the crunchy snack, he felt anxious. The cricket carried a sinister implication, walking hand-in-hand with an unknown trauma. A shadow fell over his body. He darted for the cave. It rose to the sky as he dove for the entrance. He made for the ficus. This too Michaela spirited away. He dug a hole in the substrate. She plucked him out by his hind leg and wrapped him in her damp fist. He watched his home recede into the distance, supplanted by a music stand. A pane of glass was propped on the desk.

She said, "Thank you, Dmitry."

Her fingers moved up and down his body. The gentle massage exacerbated his panic. He tried to squirm out of her aproned lap, but she held him tight between her thighs. He felt her fingers settle on the glands behind his ears. Terror flooded his veins. The gaping maw of a rabid bobcat loomed over him. His milk hit the glass with a sickening splat. He lost consciousness.

He woke up in his tank, a slain baby mouse at his feet. He could not bring himself to eat it. With a shiver, he recalled the faded images of his youth: purple flowered cacti dwarfed by craggy mountains, shimmering rivers lined with verdant shrubbery, red cliffs jutting into the gathering clouds of an imminent storm. Though his body remained in bondage, his heart roamed free in the Sonoran Desert.

When Josh reassumed his human form, he was possessed with a keen desire to return Dmitry to his natural habitat. He had caught a glimpse of the palace of wisdom, and he was eager to see inside.

Michaela used to serve ceviche in at an upscale Peruvian restaurant and write for a fashion blog. She still blogged on occasion, but she stopped waitressing after a drunk teen opened a car door in front of her bicycle. She flew over her handlebars and landed hard on her helmetless head. A CT scan revealed mild traumatic brain injury, and a team of interns assured her that the symptoms would pass in a few days. Two weeks later, she remained incapable of memorizing the most basic of orders. Though she tried her hand at a numerous jobs, she found that selling drugs accommodated the digressions of her impaired mind.

She owed her longevity in the game to her prudence. She dressed inconspicuously, her wardrobe composed of flannels, skinnies, and Toms. She demanded that clients stay in her apartment for a minimum of thirty minutes. She refused to sell any less than an eighth of weed, a gram of blow, or two points of 5-MeO-DMT. Loitering outside her home was a punishable offense, describing drugs over the phone grounds for dismissal.

Every day she shifted an area rug, unscrewed a floorboard, desensitized an electrified briefcase, and distributed her wares between sundry baggies. The product of an academic household, she never ceased to find this activity bemusing. She felt no kinship with the dealers of film and television. Her life was neither silly nor debauched. She knew only the monotonous thrum of paranoia. She distrusted the homeless hipsters who gathered on the front yard of the holistic medicine shop across the street. Every time she peeked through her blinds, she saw them lying in the grass, smoking cigarettes and hocking spittle. They demonstrated such commitment to their leisure, they had to be narcs. This theory, first conceived as a joke, had acquired a grim authority over the passage of time. She could not meet their eyes when she passed them, and she fell into a trot when they asked for change.

Michaela had only to gaze into Dmitry's golden eyes to feel her anxiety abate. The toad's stolid presence was a stronger mood enhancer than all the intoxicants in her catalogue. It was unfortunate that his support was more emotional than financial. 5-MeO-DMT lacked the cultural cachet of her other products, and it induced a face-melting shitstorm few clients were compelled to repeat. Though the cost of his upkeep easily outpaced the value of his milk, she retained him because she could not imagine living without him.

He was kidnapped on a Thursday afternoon. She was crouching in her bathtub, extracting stringy clumps of hair from the drain, when her cell phone beeped. She pulled off her gloves and read the text. "You want to hang?" wrote Josh, her oldest customer. She invited him to her apartment, and the buzzer sounded a moment later. The immediacy of his response gave her pause, but she shook off her apprehension and answered the door.

Josh was a portly man with a shaved head, a chin curtain, and a calf tattoo in the shape of a supple-lipped pine tree. She often considered asking him about it and invariably decided she did not want to know.

His eyes dull and filmy, he mumbled, “Howdy.”

She said, “Come on in,” and started up the stairs.

He lagged behind her, his boots thudding on the narrow steps. By the third flight, he was wheezing. She held open the door for him, and he stumbled past her and fell onto the sectional couch. The springs whimpered beneath his weight. Beads of sweat streamed down his cheeks and accumulated on his hirsute chin.

Pity and guilt dueled in her mind as she gazed at his perspiring body. “You don’t look so good, champ,” she said. “You want some water?”

He seemed to nod. She set the oven timer for thirty minutes, filled a pint glass from the tap, and set it on the coffee table. With some effort, he raised the glass to his lips. Most of the contents made it into his mouth.

“You want the usual?” she said.

“Please,” he managed to reply.

In her bedroom, she measured a half-ounce of weed and four points of 5-MeO-DMT on the triple beam balance. When she returned to the living room, she found Josh standing by Dmitry’s tank, one hand flattened against the glass, both eyes firmly shut.

Though Michaela was unnerved, she feigned blitheness. “Am I interrupting something?” she said. “Are you guys having a moment?”

He gave her a sullen look and returned to the couch.

She tossed the bud on the cushion. She would retain the 5-MeO-DMT until the timer went off. Josh ran his thumb up and down the crease of the baggie. As she waited for him to come to his senses, her pity-guilt flourished. She had never seen him this low. She knew it was wrong to continue enabling his downward plight, but she had come to depend on his steady business. Still he looked like he could keel over any second—did she really want his blood on her hands?

He finally drew three hundreds out of his jacket and slapped them into her open palm.

She pocketed the bills and, gesturing at the coffee table, said, "Make yourself at home."

On the surface of the table rested remotes, controllers, and issues of High Times; in the drawers nestled glass pipes, hand mirrors, and razor blades.

"Will do."

"I'll be cleaning the bathroom if you need anything," she said.

Josh continued modeling apathy. When she turned away, he watched her leave. She had a nice eyes and cute rump, and she was a good person to boot. Fussy and neurotic but essentially decent. He regretted that saving Dmitry entailed hurting Michaela, but he knew the toad's happiness took precedence over hers.

Knowing she expected him to spend the next half-hour smoking bowls and playing videogames, he filled his piece and loaded a disc into her decrepit PlayStation. An overall-clad kangaroo bounced up a pebbled beach and threw a right hook at the camera. Hooking his thumbs in his denim pouch, Kangy Walkabout sounded an off-key whistle. Josh blew Raspberry Kush in his face.

After ten minutes, he rose to his feet and tiptoed across the floor. Pausing by the bathroom door, he listened to Michaela's scrubbing. Her cleanliness struck him as excessive and vain. Surely she had more enriching ways to occupy her time. He proceeded to the tank. Dmitry's dark brown dorsum protruded from the substrate. Josh gently removed the lid. He had experience in the art of toadcatching, and he snatched up Dmitry with a quick movement and stuffed him inside a Ziploc, which he subsequently placed in the inner pocket of his jacket. The toad writhed against his heart as he made for the exit. A murmur of self-doubt pierced his conscience. Though his hallucinations often contained vital truths, he recognized that some of his epiphanies were misguided. He had consulted the internet, but his cohorts were divided on the psychological and physiological consequences of the milking process; he found more creative ideas than concrete answers.

A rattle in the bathroom squelched his indecision. He hurried out the door and bounded down the steps. As he settled inside his corroding Civic, he wiped off his forehead with a handkerchief. He took a moment to collect himself before he fumbled Dmitry into a perforated shoebox. He wrapped the box in rubber bands and set it on the passenger seat.

When he swung onto Powell, a woman shrieked in fright. The sound came from his phone. It was Michaela's ringtone, thusly assigned to ensure he never missed her calls. A giddy feeling usually came over him when he heard the scream. Now his heart flung itself against his breast. As the scream went on, he realized he would rather speak with her than listen to her voice message. He pushed the speaker button. Michaela's breath filled the car.

"Josh," she said. "Are you there, Josh?"

With a soft exhale, he said, "I'm here."

"What do you think you're doing, Josh?"

He cleared his throat. "Not much."

"What are you doing with my fucking toad?"

His stomach stirred. "I'm taking him home."

She sighed. "I know where you live, you asshole."

“Not my home,” he said. “His home.”

She was silent. “His home,” she finally said.

“According to my GPS, I’ll arrive in Tucson in seventeen hours.”

“You can’t be serious.”

“If you care about Dmitry’s well-being, you won’t follow me.”

He could hear the spit flying from her mouth. “If you give the tiniest morsel of shit, you’ll turn the car around. Letting him free will not solve shit. He will die, horribly. He’s never been outside, he doesn’t know how to hunt, he’s too old to pick it up. A bird will eat him, a fucking coyote will rip him apart. It’s not a good idea, Josh!”

When the line went dead, Michaela’s first impulse was to go after Josh. To hop in her car, fire down I-5, and run his car off the road. As soon as she saw her harried expression in the window of her Camry, she perceived the absurdity of her plan. She leaned against the door and covered her face with her hands. Dmitry was gone, stripped from her life without warning, and she had no way to counterbalance the violation. Knowing she could hinder his ability to buy drugs consoled her none.

“Excuse me, ma’am. Are you okay?”

She peeked at the man through her fingers, and slowly lowered her hands to her sides. He had a scraggly beard and bore a coterie of tattoos and piercings. She recognized him as the de facto leader of the gang of vagabonds/undercovers. His eyes evinced sympathy and amusement.

She said, “I’m fine.”

He nodded. “Kind bud?”

She shook her head. “No thanks.”

He squinted at her. "You live around here, right? You look familiar."

She said, "I'm just visiting."

On the lawn, his crew sat watching, taking mental note of her distress. In their unwavering gaze, she sensed the desperate hunger of junkies.

With a sallow grin, the man said, "I guess you just have one of those faces, huh?"

"I've heard that before, yes." She voiced a staccato laugh and braced the door handle.

He made a flurry of gesticulations at his crew. Two of the men shambled to their feet, wiping the grass stains from their pants. They lingered inside the boundaries of the lawn.

"I have to leave," she said.

"Sure." He shook his head. "Places to go, people to see, I got it. You're a busy lady. No time for these street kids. You walk by every day, and you can't even look at us, let alone say hello or some shit. Then I try to comfort you, and you act like you never seen me before. How unique."

The man's words opened a circuit in her mind—fear became anger. "You're right," she said quietly. "I don't have time for trash." She raised her voice, so the others could hear. "I look at you guys, and I see garbage gone to rot, and I just can't fuck with that."

The man looked away, his face red. When he spun around and bared his middle finger, she acted on impulse, pulling the Mace from her purse, thumbing off the safety, and releasing a cloud of cayenne pepper concentrate in the man's face. He promptly recoiled, descending with a spasmodic twitch to his knees. He gave voice to an unending array of coughs as he drooled onto the pavement. His friends cried out and started to approach, but a quick wave of the Mace halted their movement. As she looked down at him, a wave of nausea passed through her body. She got into her car. Backing out of the spot, she maneuvered around the man's crumpled, fetal form. A can of PBR bounced off her hood.

She drove with no destination in mind, her only motivation a desire to escape. In time she set a course for Josh's apartment. It soothed her racing heart to imagine Josh holding Dmitry in a spacious terrarium, feeding him insects, humidifying his air.

Though Josh planned to drive until his windshield showed nothing but Sonoran desert, his energy flagged after four hours on the road, and he checked into a Best Western in Medford. His room overlooked a stagnant pool, the TV carried seventy-three channels, and a damp spot by the bathroom gave no indication of drying. Though he felt comfortable here, he had never longed to smoke 5-MeO-DMT with such urgency. He yearned to reassume Dmitry's perspective, to confirm the import of his mission.

He turned his duffel bag upside-down before he remembered leaving his order at Michaela's. He paced to and fro, smoking three consecutive bowls with diminishing returns. A glance at the shoebox incited a new line of thinking. He eyed the mirror hanging behind it. He could easily squirt the surface if he calibrated the glands correctly. He caught a glimpse of himself as he formulated the plan, and the worn, brittle texture of his skin made him pause.

Still the addict in the mirror did not weaken his resolve. He pulled off the rubber bands and cracked open the box. He discerned Dmitry staring back at him, his eyes wide and inscrutable. Josh raised the lid higher, and Dmitry immediately sprang out. He landed on the carpet and hopped madly for the bathroom. Josh chased him into the shower stall and flung a towel over him. He rolled Dmitry inside it and held it to his chest.

"Don't worry, little buddy," he said. "It'll all be over soon."

Exposing the toad's glands, he was possessed with an outlandish whim. He ran his tongue down Dmitry's back, connecting the glands with a parallelogram of saliva. His flesh tasted like sewage and lilacs. He could only wallow in disgust for so long before the milk took effect. He dropped the towel at his feet and fell forward. From a distance, he felt his head collide with the porcelain tiles.

The floor was softer than anticipated, earthy in texture. With a sinking feeling, he realized that he was back in Dmitry's tank. His hands and feet were his own, but a laptop had assumed the place of the artificial plant, the cave had transformed into a mason jar of marijuana, and a flat screen TV was mounted on the glass wall. Dmitry stood in the kitchen, holding his limbs under a running faucet. He slapped off the water with his tongue.

Bouncing up to the tank, Dmitry said, "It's time, Josh."

The resonant timbre of the toad's voice sedated Josh, who lay supine on the substrate as Dmitry unscrewed the jar and crumbled a nug into a bong. The sound of bubbling water recalled a spring, and Josh dozed off as the aromatic smoke wafted through the terrarium. The blare of an air horn snapped him awake. The now-bitter smoke bore the unmistakable calling card of 5-MeO-DMT. His throat felt like it had been blasted with a blow torch. He buried his head in the substrate, but relief did not follow.

"Can you feel it now?" Dmitry said. "Can you feel your pain?"

Josh tried speaking to no avail. He expressed himself through writhing.

Dmitry laughed. "Freedom is for the dead."

Sleeping behind the wheel, parked in front of Josh's building, Michaela saw Dmitry reclining by a river, his dorsum shimmering. She watched in horror as a green bottle fly laid her eggs on his head. When the maggots hatched, they crawled up his nostrils and feasted on his soft tissue until his face caved in. He dwelled within arm's reach, and yet she was powerless to stop it.

She woke to rapping knuckles on the window. Josh's haggard face loomed over her. In his trembling hands, he held a shoebox. She showed him her Mace before she unrolled the window. He passed her the box, and she pressed her ear to the lid.

"I don't hear anything," she said.

"There's nothing to hear." He placed his hand over the box. "Please don't open it."

It felt heavier as a coffin. "I don't understand."

His face betrayed his lack of forethought. "I thought you'd want to bury him."

"Tell me what happened."

"I squashed him." He lowered his head. "I licked his back, I dropped him to the ground, and I fell on top of him."

Her mind illustrated his words. She rested her head on the steering wheel.

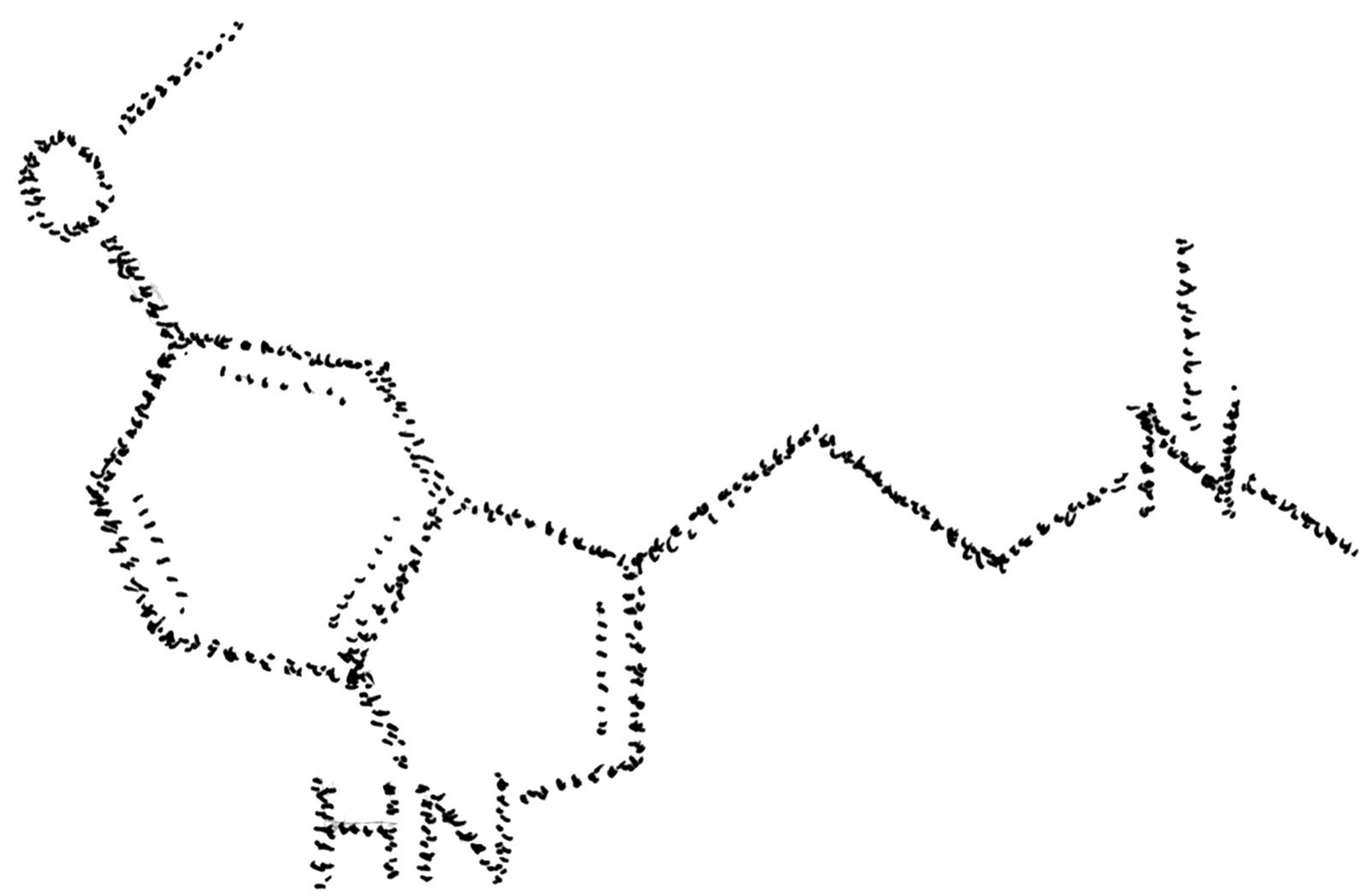
"I have to go," she said.

"I thought I was doing the right thing. I'm so sorry."

She found his meekness revolting. "Step away from the vehicle."

"If there's anything I can do…"

She said, “You'll never get high in this town again,” rolled up her window, and drove home. She immediately cleaned out the tank and set it on the sidewalk. It was gone by evening. She knew she had to bury Dmitry, but she was not prepared to say good-bye. She placed the shoebox on her nightstand and resisted the urge to look inside. She paid no mind to her chiming phone. Her clients could wait. Alone she mourned her toad and faced his void. She sensed no liberation in the loss of her friend.



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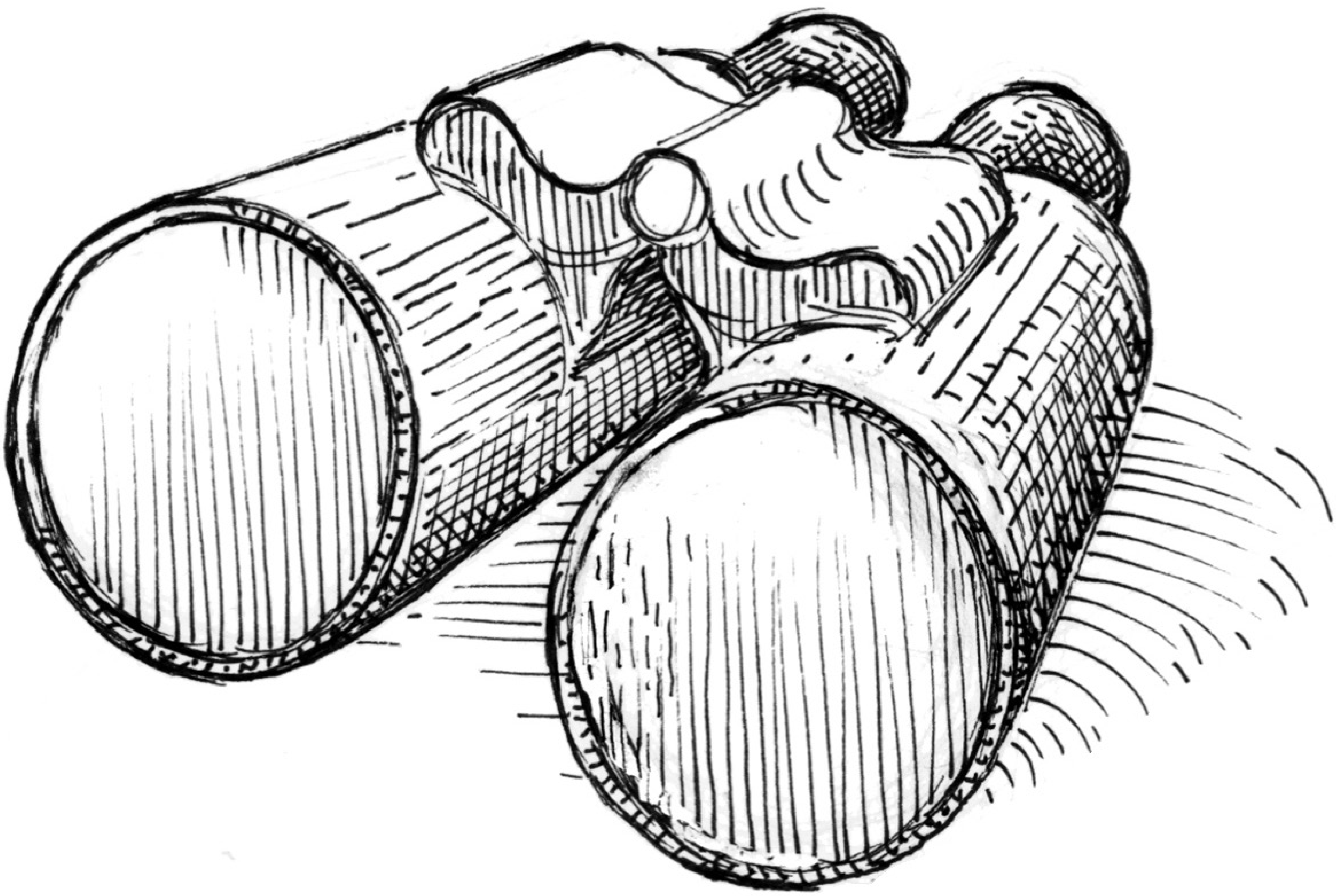


The Big Sleep Together

Dan Moore

July 15, 12:45 PM: Suspect's Place of Employment

The second day of the stakeouts is in Donna's car, something cute and new-ish —it was short notice and the back of Rick's is filled with debris that is a little embarrassing in its particulars, McDonald's receipts with identical orders and Walgreens bags and yellowing ad inserts with McDonald's coupons in them.

Her car has an air-freshener with a picture of another car on the label. It smells just like tires. "*Right*?" she had said, spinning the rack around at the Quik Trip.

Apollion Purcell had come out of the Taco Gringo twice for smoke breaks on the first day, when Rick was alone, carrying one of those ridiculous Indian pipes you can get off any interstate exit in Missouri, his curly hair bouncing over his neckbeard to the rhythm of his schlubby gait.

"Missour-*uhh*," Donna'd told Rick, when he was talking about the pipe. The sticks. She had gone to college in Missour-*ee*, one of the St. Louis suburbs he can't keep straight, and when she was a little drunk and Rick was not drunk she would claim to have left an impressive but vague reputation behind her there.

Rick is hoping for more this time, because Donna could make it, and the Apollion mystery is the kind of just-kidding-but-seriously thing that holds her interest. This time Apollion comes outside for his lunch break, like Rick expects, exactly like he'd hoped. He pushes open the door with his flabby shoulder and then, looking right over the cute greenhouse of Donna's new-ish car into a perfectly, briefly mild sun, swings his bag of tacos back and forth in an expansive, private gesture.

Donna cracks up and when he sits down she ducks gratuitously behind her center console. From near the CD changer she speaks in the direction of Rick's lap: "He — did he see me?"

"He maybe heard you," Rick says, looking down, but over her eyes.

Rick considers eating at the Taco Gringo a secularly depressing thing to do, but slouched over in his rumpled uniform polo Apollion looks especially sad — he wants him to pull the pipe out, again, and give that pipe-smoking smirk, at least.

Rick watches him for clues while he eats his tacos, while he rifles around in the bag, while he sucks not especially pruriently at his bendy-straw. Donna spins the seek dial for stakeout songs. Their being together in this moment, partners, is why Rick cares about his pervert neighbor.

June 30: 11:15 PM: Rick's Parents' Deck

Before Apollion had come up Rick had been spending a lot of downtime with his mom, picking out appliances for her new house. He'd learned things, if nothing else: that he preferred white to stainless steel, that convection microwaves added resale value, that he liked ramen well enough if he cracked an egg over it. His mother told him that trendsetters were buying white again because everybody else had replaced their refrigerators with stainless steel.

At the old house, as it was poured out into the new one and his dad's spartan bachelor condo, he puttered around in quiet rooms. Then Donna boomeranged back into the subdivision and they met again on accident.

That May she had packed up her student apartment in wherever it was. Her boyfriend Joe, their friend from high school, was in Taiwan, teaching English and ingratiating himself with certain tycoons and sending the both of them Facebook messages with in-apartment thermometer readouts that had to be Google-converted before they could be gawked at. And before Apollion the whole summer had been sitting in a car with no air conditioning, or drying up in someone's backyard, or going to Family Video and lingering in the Nearly New Releases section even though they'd already picked out one of those movies where Harrison Ford is yelling about getting away from his family, because they keep it about sixty-five degrees in the Family Video by what is still Rick's parents' house. It had been talking about finding jobs, maybe, and what they'd do if they got one, and why they hadn't.

Then, finally, Donna sees Apollion. And they're caught up in something weird and they dramatize it. Like, Rick puts Donna in a red dress, smoking from a cigarette holder. He gives himself a nice hat, not a weird one, not a neckbeard one. He moves them from his parents' back deck in Springfield to a millionaire's steamy greenhouse. They're in the movies Family Video rents five nights for a dollar, on the Timeless Classics shelf.

He and Donna have been talking for a while, in the greenhouse, around things. As mysterious damsels in distress go he thinks she's a type B — mysterious not because she has any really obvious hidden past but because she appears to have no past at all. She's completely — not shallow, but surface-oriented. Everything she thinks — and he's had a lot of time to formulate this, but this is as far as he's gotten — is in the process of being turned into something she can say or enact.

"Apollion's a sex offender," she'd said. Apollion is their neighbor's son. They hadn't noticed him before leaving for school — not once their entire childhoods — and now that they're both back he has appeared, all of a sudden, around the neighborhood, doing creepy things. Acting creepily.

They'd walked around the greenhouse, then.

"Literally a sex offender?" Rick had said, doing something with his nice hat.

"Literally," she'd said, smoking from her cigarette holder.

And the day after that they meet again on his parents' deck, and Donna tells Rick everything she knows about him.

"His name is Apollion Purcell," she says.

"Good work," Rick says, and she punches him on the arm.

"He's twenty-three, so probably the year ahead of us. He went to UIS but didn't graduate, so you guys have something in common!"

"In case I go undercover."

"That's a good idea," Donna says. Rick's parents' deck, low and long, with a hot tub on one end that he and Donna don't make eye contact with, looks across a particularly narrow part of the 14th fairway at the back of Apollion's mother's house as it rises sheepishly over a spite fence. "We can't figure it out just by asking him, or else he'll know we know."

The Purcells aren't members of the country club and they aren't even in the Bear Run subdivision at all, but his mother has always been at the edges of the neighborhood, so when Donna points out the fungal outline of Apollion's hair in the window Rick begins to wonder how he's never seen the guy. When Rick was learning to ride his bike, or running out through the sprinklers on the sidewalk — when he went up to Mrs. Purcell's house in a homemade saber-toothed tiger costume and got fun-sized candy bars — Apollion must have been there at the margins, being creepy.

"He's creepy," Donna says. "It's creepy that we didn't notice him, even. But here's what it says on the website—" and Rick hasn't seen the sex offender registry before and it startles him when Apollion stares back at him out of Donna's phone, looking ill-at-ease and uncovered. It says he's two hundred and ten pounds, which seems about twenty pounds off in the sad direction. It reveals only that he was convicted of something bad enough to be listed in the registry.

"We could watch him at work," Rick says.

"At the Gringo, yeah." New ideas seem to hit Donna all at once and her hand rattles the arm of her lounge chair, like she's trying to buzz into a game show that won't have her, and she says, "We could have stakeouts. We could — how do you bug a phone? You know, right? With the computers and all —"

"No — I mean—"

"And we could *tail* him. We could figure out where he's going to sex-offend and we could tail him." She slaps Rick on his shoulder. "We could put him in *citizen's arrest*."

If the watch-list website just said what Apollion had done the two of them would go back inside and laugh about *Rizzoli & Isles* or something in the emptying living room, but it didn't say anything, and so they sit out in the humidity and watch Apollion move around his little cell. Finally he stands up and for a moment Donna balls one of Rick's shirt-sleeves in an anticipatory fist. Apollion stares out over the golf course, and he unzips his pants, and closes the broken blinds, and he sits down at his ancient computer, and "Oh—" Donna says, "oh, no— I mean, I know you guys do it, but—" and suddenly it's a little weird for them to be so close after dark, Rick thinks, and he walks her out through his parents' emptying kitchen and she promises to sound the klaxons if Apollion appears on her side of the sub-division.

"Didn't you guys have a refrigerator?" she says.

"They're moving," Rick says. "We're moving." He imagines a conversation, floating outside the places they usually talk, where he explains the split. Where he says, "It's not that it's not *your* business, it's that it's not really *my* business."

Anyway, she looks at the hole where the refrigerator went and Rick wants badly for the kitchen to have doors.

July 4, 8:00 PM: Father's Condo

There's a week or two where Rick doesn't do much besides talk to Donna on the phone about things he's said on the internet somewhere, clarifying vague, frustrated comments directed at a general audience. Explaining subtweets.

Rick's dad's HOA has fireworks, though, and he and his brothers go out there around 8:15 for the show. Rick can't get around his dad's new place — the TV has a strange new remote, and when Rick can't find the HD channels his dad grabs it and punches in nine-zero-zero like that is a thing they all know. He points Rick to the bathroom and mentions these great elliptical machines they have in the gym. The fireworks are great, those super-active neighborhood association fireworks, and they watch them from Rick's dad's new deck and he offers all of them some champagne, nice champagne for once.

When they get back to the house his brothers get ready to go out and do whatever illicit high school things they do, but Rick can't stop thinking about how at home his dad is already, how much he's figured out since he left. Rick has felt, all summer, like everyone around him was receiving very specific orders from some benevolent third party; back at the neighborhood he realizes he's only got Apollion, and the eye contact he and Donna make when it's late and very hot and they're tired, a little, punch-drunk.

One of Rick's brothers is lifting a cooler into the bed of his truck when Rick mentions their dad and his apartment and how organic it all felt. "Well, he *lives* there," he says. While Rick was away at school his brother has somehow developed a southern accent.

July 15, 1:00 PM: Suspect's Place of Employment

Stakeout talk: "I don't think you should worry about any really terrible thing that might happen to you," Donna says.

"No?"

"I figure that if anything really tragic happens some rogue time traveler in some possible future will take care of it, consequences be damned."

"How will he know to do it?"

"They'll know everything eventually. Anyway, it just takes one guy who doesn't take time travel paradoxes for an answer."

"So nothing we do now has to matter?" Rick doesn't know if he's taking it too seriously.

"It's comforting, right?" she says.

The idea of all-seeing time travelers unsettles him, but Rick is mollified because he knows when their conversations are just-about-over, and he loves that, and he always has.

"Make sure to die in a situation of incredible global import. So they'll know to come back for you."

When he and Donna are both quiet, and Apollion has finished eating, the suspect reaches sloppily into his pocket and pulls out a cheap little phone, a rough lump of flaked plastic and dull silver paint.

"A *burner*," Donna says. "Of course."

They watch him talk and then they watch him lean his phone and his chin into his chest and away from the door. Donna starts rolling down her window and then, with a graceful turn of her head from Rick to Apollion, her ponytail tracing the opposite arc, she opens the door and lopes through the parking lot, taking the long way around the patio seating to the front door.

Her path rounds very casually around the umbrella over Apollion's table. Then she stops, and Rick panics, and Apollion's phone stirs against his shoulder. And when Rick thinks Apollion's about to flip his phone shut she reaches smoothly into her purse and slides the keyboard out of her own.

Rick watches her fake-text, a little more rapidly than she real-texts. He sees her look up as though contemplating a turn of phrase, then angle her screen under the awning. Then without a glance back at her car she walks into the Taco Gringo. The whole routine buys her a solid minute-and-a-half.

"Private eyes (clap) they're watching you (clap clap) they see your ev-ery move," Rick's phone says. At some point Donna must have set it up. He checks his texts and she's written:

"Ogh ggod! He's tlaking abt lttile kids! Rrck this guy is the creepiest! Adcpoqwdojddmkld i'm tpying now so he wont look up, it jas to sound really fast and cnotinuous ore lse he will. Okk Ill let yuo know."

He looks at her through the glass of the storefront but under his gaze he feels Apollion staring at him through the windshield of Donna's car.

They don't talk about it the entire way back — "Holy shit," Donna says — "*Jesus*," Rick says — and when they get to Rick's house Donna gets out of the car and walks around to the passenger's side just to push Rick with both hands and say, "Holy *shit*." He's never seen Donna look so excited about anything, and her cheeks go red and glow beneath a shimmering layer of sweat.

It's just two o'clock and the sun and the humidity will be around another seven hours, but it feels to Rick like it should be four in the morning, like their day should be officially over and their skin should be flushed under hooded sweatshirts in the dark, like they should feel bad about staying up so late. Now, only now, is Donna pulling the detective stories close to herself, wearing her femme-fetale dress, looking at him like he's something he's not. And as uncomfortable as Apollion makes him — uncomfortable as it is to look through his private things — Rick wants to wear the fedora, he wants to swim out from his parents' wake and into some untraceable Manhattan office.

She sends him an offline message later, from down the street. There's something about her and Joe, something sad and alienated-sounding, and then, "He was talking to somebody about some weird shit. Like, he hadn't lately, is what he was saying, but it's hard not to. That's ominous, right? With kids? Like, maybe there's a *ring*. Like, a kiddy ring? That's what it's called, right?"

Rick's face gets hot and even though he wants to be consoling about it and *good* about it he scrolls quickly through the paragraph about Joe. But he writes back, "A *ring*. *Jesus*," he writes. He passes afternoons thinking about what could happen on their excursions, the common ground it might give them.

July 27, 12:30 PM: Rick's Front Door

On or about July 18 Joe's father pulls some local strings in such a way as to get Donna a temp job as an administrative assistant downtown, somewhere in the back of the Willard Ice Building.

The investigation goes dark on Donna's end, save for a string of shaky photo messages: a blob of pixels framed by a rough Korean car, or the trees at the edge of Bear Run, and all of them with captions at the bottom like, “Creeper Watch: Day 5.” The stakeouts at the Taco Gringo end, but on July 27, on Rick’s suggestion, she stops there and observes Apollion for a few minutes before getting takeout at the other register.

She shows up at Rick’s front door with a bag of burritos and two Cokes. “I had to make it look on the level,” she says.

She looks on the level: She’s wearing a Department of Revenue badge over the nicest suit in the Petites section at Kohl’s. A week ago it might have looked like a costume.`

Rick has to prompt her to give a debriefing. “Oh,” she says. “He couldn’t talk on his phone or anything because he was behind the counter. But he *stinks*, did we know that? Like, he just smells really bad. I — that’s all I noticed. Sales tax has me preoccupied.”

There’s a lull where Donna looks like she wants to be invited in, only there are men with thick weight-lifting belts disassembling the sectional couch where they’d sit. But Rick remembers to ask about her job and Donna has a story ready about her crazy boss and the crazy people she’s seated next to. Rick wants to follow her through these coworkers and among those desks, but they’re sealed off from him somehow.

She’s lost in it for ten minutes or so, and Rick has to remind her that her lunch period is over. She snaps out of it and says, “Take some,” and holds her side of the Taco Gringo bag in two fingers.

Rick says, “No way — I don’t want you sitting there in the break room with a smug look on your face knowing I’m eating the Bandito in my parents’ living room.”

"Joe's dad could probably get you a job if you wanted. He's got weird government powers."

Rick has been telling her about a résumé he's been working on.

"Maybe," Rick says. He's Joe's friend independently; he and Joe hung around in grade school, too, were assigned to the same chaperones on class trips. He'd sat, a kid, in Joe's dad's Lexus and watched the spacey lights on the dashboard swirl in complex patterns. But arranging something like that through Donna would be wrong somehow. But he just says, "Maybe, yeah."

"Talk to him, I mean. Anyway I'll be eating the Petito-Bandito. Oh — oh, you're right, I'm late." And he watches her car disappear toward the business parks a few exits down.

The first and last time Rick was ever kind of pissed off at Donna for things, and not just himself, it was graduation day. She and Joe had just finished a ridiculous synchronized cap-throwing dance for video cameras from each set of parents, and then she'd run past her dad and nearly over Joe's mom to meet Rick. He was looking at her for a second and she was looking at him.

She looked him up and down, finally, and pulled him into a somber graduation-day hug, and she said, "Rick?"

And he said yes, because what else could he say.

"Promise me," she said. And she held him close, buried her face in his shoulder, and he held her back, his hand on dress and strap and skin, and she said, "Rick. Rick."

Uh-huh. They both sounded husky and stupid, and he wanted to spin them a few quiet steps away from her parents and their classmates, or else just to keep sounding husky and stupid in that quiet way.

"Promise me," she said. "That no matter what—" He could feel her blinking against his robe, and then her mouth opened again, and she said: *"You will* never *reveal the Wu-Tang secret."* And she started to giggle against his chest.

There was another way the conversation should have gone that he'd let her close off — that he hadn't even let himself look down. And he'd had to laugh, because it was funny.

When Rick can't see Donna's car anymore he thinks about that, and he sets the food down, there on the porch. When she's not there it becomes too clear to him that he's chased Apollion around their quiet neighborhood on false pretenses, that what he's doing could just as well be grossing out some other set of neighborhood detectives. And out on the porch he's trying to crack the case on his own — to at least have an ending on his own terms, and not Donna's.

But his mom hangs up the kitchen phone in her new theatrical way and walks through the front door and says, "Do you know Mrs. Purcell's son? With the weird name?"

And Rick says no, of course not.

"He's a *sex* offender," she says. Rick laughs, a little, but it's bright out and hot and she doesn't notice. "That was the family with the little daughters, on the phone. No longer interested in Bear Run. Internet, no doubt."

Before Donna and Apollion this had been Rick's summer, a running tally of the ways in which their house could be atomized and stripped bare but not sold. And Rick's mom, in the middle of the afternoon, tells him exactly what Apollion did.

August 3, 6:36 PM: The Callahan Irish Pub and Restaurant

The Callahan is where the girls at the Willard Ice Building go on Fridays, and Rick is sitting there at a long empty table with Donna. They're eating hamburger horseshoes and Donna is talking about work and about how she spends most of her time on GChat with Joe — because the time zones work out just well enough if he stays up too late or gets up really early, because government work. Her coworkers have vanished around them. They're in the bathroom and getting refills and at the bar.

There's wood and wood grain everywhere and something loud on the radio and families coming in for horseshoes and ponyshoes, and they're at the end of this long, empty table, and there's a bubble around them, Rick knows, where they could have some hushed important conversation that would leave them shivering in the air conditioning. But her job has eaten into their Family Video time and they don't have much in common to talk about except Joe, with whom they both have distended Facebook conversations late at night.

When Donna has finished her last story about the Willard Ice Building — the one about how birds keep getting into the building through wide and expanding gaps in the beautiful glass roof and then dying over the airy cubicles — she asks Rick the Joe question again. "I just don't know how long I can," is how it ends this time.

Rick knows both of them, and is friends with both of them, and in these long Facebook conversations he's somehow become the one they chase down for reassurance, the rock. He knows everything about their relationship, more than either one of them. So Rick says, "Yeah. The hard part," and he's making this up as he talks and surprising himself unpleasantly with how plausible it sounds, "is what you already did — you guys let each other go and figured out this new thing. And it's only going to be, what, two years?"

"Maybe just a year if I can't handle it," Donna says. "You're right. Thanks," she says, and she smiles at him. "Thanks again."

Rick is the first to see Mrs. Purcell walking in, holding her big purse in front of her like a deployed airbag, digging around in it for her wallet while the hostess asks her how many she'll be tonight. The purse is a color that was purple and when she rakes her hand through whatever's inside there's a plastic clicking noise that Rick can hear once he's turned toward her. Behind her's Apollion, pushing the door open like his shoulder was caught accidentally between the glass and his pigeon-toed body.

Mrs. Purcell has an excited look on her face, and Rick can read the trilled word "horseshoes!" on her lips when she turns and waves Apollion through the doorway. Rick is picking at his own by now —there's just part of the toast, covered in cheese sauce, and a few burnt fries on the edges. The hostess has the same excited look as she leads Mrs. Purcell and Apollion, hulking over both of them, to a little booth.

Donna still hasn't seen them when Rick turns back around, and Rick doesn't say anything about it. They talk about something stupid in the news that's funny, and the part of *Con Air* where the undercover agent was killed and Donna started crying when she was a little girl. Then Rick goes up for another beer and sits at the bar and waits for something. There are long moments in detective stories where the people who are thrown together by the stupid things that throw them together aren't doing anything at all, until they're visited by something new.

Apollion is talking to his mother about church — about Megachurch, Donna would say, capitalizing the M, hammering the G like it's towering thing that is about to fight Godzilla and not the three-story auditorium attached to the elementary school where they went. There's a pastor there he's talking to, a nice guy, Apollion says, and his mother is looking at him while they wait for their food to arrive with a smile like Rick has never seen, a perfectly sad satisfaction, when Apollion says: "I really feel close to God now. That's what Pastor Mark says I should be looking for, is feeling a closeness."

There's something Rick can't place in Apollion's voice, something that makes him sound like an old movie — a Jimmy Stewart one, not his and Donna's films noir — until he realizes finally that it's sincerity, or forthrightness, or one of those words. Apollion is hopping from pronoun to pronoun around what he actually did, but he's not avoiding it, and when Pastor Mark's name comes up relief shows on his face, in the pale space between his clogged pores, genuine relief.

For a moment Rick wants to leave Apollion there eating horseshoes and pleasing his mother. But one of the Willard Ice Building girls is back already and she and Donna are talking about work things. Nobody else Rick knows is working and everybody else is still living in their parents' houses among their old things. And he wants to be where Donna is, hunting Craigslist for empty places, talking about it.

"I don't really like the north side," Donna is saying, "but I also don't like driving Veterans every day. I don't know, right?"

Rick knows what Apollion is doing, what's hard not to do and who he's not doing it with, but he wants to not know it with Donna, to be front-lit in *The Big Sleep* together. To share secrets. He listens to Apollion talk a little while longer about the young-adults group until he trails off and Mrs. Purcell starts talking about her job with the city. Then he sends Donna a text message and walks out the door and to his car.

August 5, 9:15 AM: West-Side Christian Church

Donna in church clothes is bored-looking and weirdly solicitous — her hair looks smooth and different and her thin straight legs stick gangled together under a dark, formal skirt. On Saturday afternoon she'd replied to his text message with, "i dont know its prob not worth it," and on Saturday night she'd said "I guess" after Rick said he'd owe her lunch for it. (Saturday around midnight Joe asks on Facebook if Rick has ever considered going abroad, that lots of people in his program went abroad while nothing much was going on in the states, that all he'd have to do was get however many credits he didn't have.)

Now while people shuffle in in front of them Donna gives Rick a joking, plaintive look and then a legitimately frustrated look and then, her green eyes suddenly softening and drawing wide, a sad, wondering look. "You'd tell me if things weren't all right, right?"

Rick lets her cycle through the looks again until the lights go up over the big stage in front of the glowing baptismal font.

Apollion is in the front with his mother. They're in the aisle, and one of his untamed legs hangs around the pew's low wooden arm, his knee bouncing against the hymnal. And that must be how most of the people there know

Apollion, just a leg sticking out too far and a hoarse low excuse-me, and behind Rick someone asks him to please lean back just a little because she can't see the pastor.

The pastor has casual-Friday clothes on, dark pants and a dark purple shirt and a tie that goes iridescent in the colored spotlights. Donna is looking around and breathing forcefully until Rick says, "Look at it. His tie."

Donna looks at it and her eyes sharpen and her mouth turns up. "He probably calls that his Fun Tie, to his kids. Right?"

"Probably," Rick says. He's a little taken by the idea, by a fun tie that is just a fun tie, but he laughs.

The microphone comes on and they're both quiet as nothing happens. Donna turns to him halfway through the message, about the school they're building in Benin, and Rick says, "I thought maybe —" that it would be a message about shame, or guilt, or secrecy, maybe, and that Apollion's true self would bubble up and show red on his face and through his matted hair.

But when the message ends and people stand up to go home or to McDonalds or to meet again in smaller groups, Apollion and his mother rise with everyone else and he hugs her and she leaves to meet some other faces Rick has seen on the Purcells' street.

Donna gets up, too, and Rick looks up at her from the pew and he says, "We didn't ever tail him."

"Yeah, no, we didn't."

"Do you want to? He's alone now."

Donna says he's only going to Taco Gringo but she gives him a shaky nod, too, and they walk out to Rick's mom's car, which is still cleaner than his, and he waves her into the passenger's seat. Apollion's out at the other edge of the parking lot by then, crawling toward the exit with a line of other cars in a rusting-out little Mitsubishi.

“Are you mad at me?” Rick says. He’s staring out the window still at Apollion’s car as it idles through the line, and before Donna says anything he pulls his own car through a half-open spot and cuts ahead.

“No, I mean — are we mad at each other, or something?”

“No,” Rick says. “I don’t think I’ve ever been mad at you, really. I was just wondering.”

“I’ve been busy, is all.”

“Yeah,” Rick says. They’re on Koke Mill, now, following Apollion at a safe distance over streets that wind indiscriminately through neighborhoods and weedy fields. “He’s not going to Taco Gringo, at least. Not even the back way.”

After a mile or two of nothing Apollion’s right turn signal flashes through red masking tape. “Should I —” Rick says.

Donna looks nervous, but finally things flicker back into place and she says, “Take the next street down, up there, and then we can kind of —” and she makes a sharp right turn with her left hand, hooked into an awkward sickle. When she sets it back down it’s right against Rick’s on the armrest.

“Right,” Rick says. And they’re tailing him, the two of them. It’s theirs.

They drive through a leafy neighborhood Rick has never seen before, one with old-growth trees and new-looking houses with big, blind-covered windows. Rick remembers being very young in a neighborhood like this and playing outside in it, moving across the lawns and being vulnerable and getting yelled at when some kid’s Camaro flew through too fast. But there aren’t any kids in this neighborhood at all, he thinks, nobody older, either, nobody at all, and he’s thinking that when he runs a two-way stop sign and Donna stifles the beginning of a scream and Rick's mom's car collapses the left front quarter panel of Apollion's Mirage.

There are sounds he's only heard on TV, weird and familiar metal sounds, and the car seems to brake like it would have if he'd stopped on time, but the airbag doesn't deploy and when he blinks he opens his eyes and it's the same moment. Rick's chest hurts from not hitting the steering wheel, and Donna is rotating her ankles gingerly in the passenger's footwell and holding her bare knees, and for what doesn't seem like a long time to Rick he's thinking about what he can do next to not look like he feels.

Then Apollion's pulling at Donna's door, which is a little distorted from the impact, until it opens, and the first thing Rick hears is that hoarse, bubbling, awkward voice: "Are you okay? Either of you hurt?" And the first thing he sees is Apollion, his cell phone balanced on his shoulder, helping Donna out of the car and motioning at Rick to turn off the engine, just in case. Apollion's trunk is open and there are reflectors in it, and flares, and an air compressor. He's in command, somehow, standing up as straight as he gets, helping Donna test both her bruised legs.

There's a part of himself Rick would have to give to get to really know another person, and Apollion has it now somehow and Donna doesn't and he doesn't want either of them to know what they know about him now—about his half-concealed desires bringing them all together. He sits in the car, staring down into the footwell, until Apollion grabs his hand. Donna says, "Jesus! God — are you — *Jesus!*"

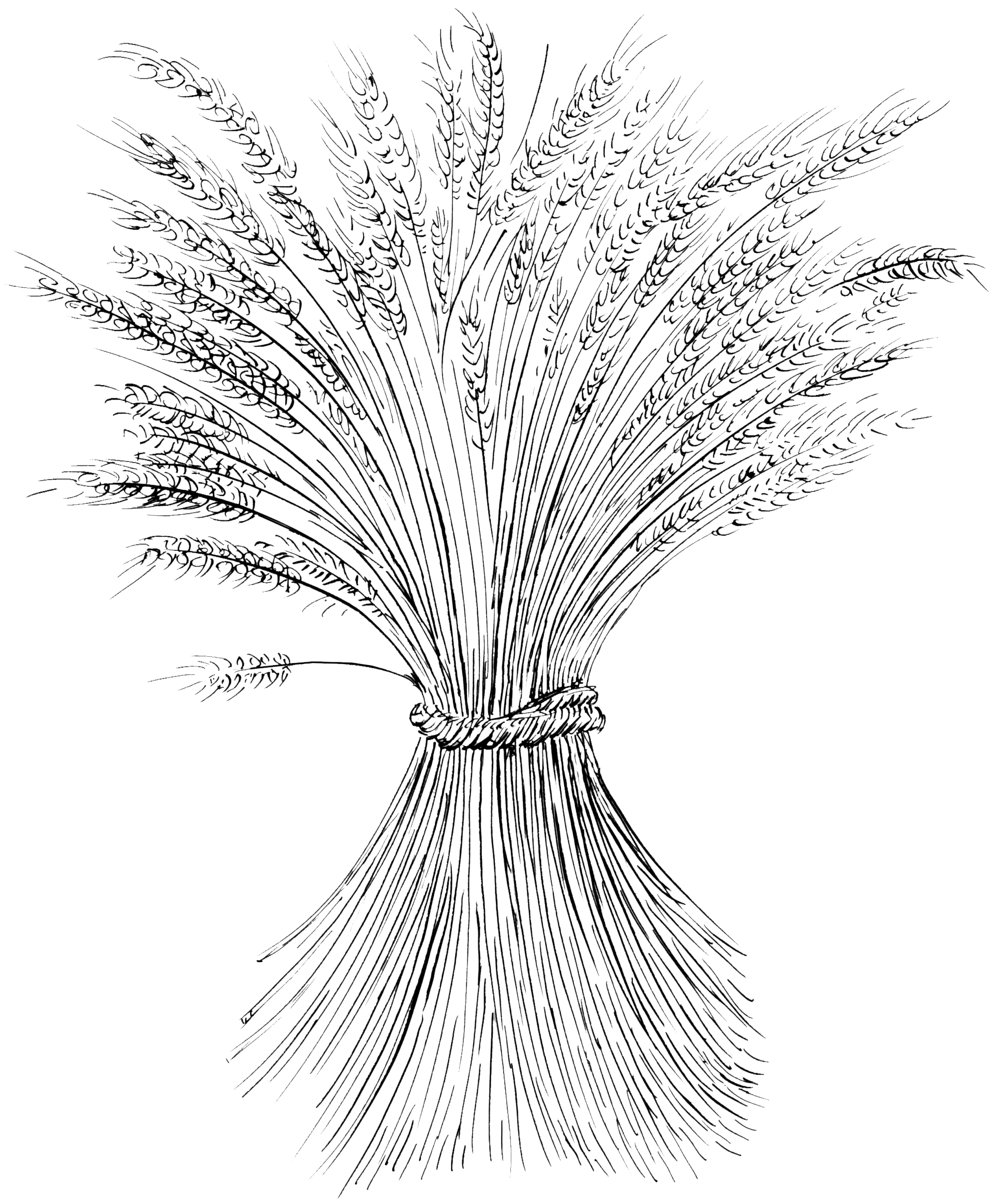
Then they're all out of their cars except Rick, and Apollion has placed his shabby reflectors and waved down a police car, and everything's finished. Apollion looks at him now, into him, and the look isn't anger like Rick assumes it will be, it’s just knowing, like they’re charter members of a secret society, and that’s when Rick throws up. Apollion waits until he’s finished and still doubled over and then he looks at Rick and he turns himself in, is the final twist, cops to everything. Rick can’t look.

Donna is over talking to the police officers when Apollion takes Rick by the elbow and admits all the things Rick knows.

“You guys,” he says. “I’d have told you if you asked. I have to.”

And Rick doesn’t want to know any of it, anymore, but Apollion tells him a story about having something called lolicon on his computer — pictures of girls from anime, twelve or eleven years old, he says, drawn having sex with each other. Rick had typed it into an incognito window after his mother told him about it and the pictures seemed so innocent, was the stomach-churning part, soft hands on pale skin, one set of big anime eyes transmitting love to another. “Somebody in the dorms,” he says, the UIS dorms where Rick thought secret and terrible things about Donna, “saw me looking at one of those, and she — well, she was right, I mean, to be so mad about it — and it got reported and I’m online now, and everybody knows it.”

Apollion helps him up out of the car, and over where he was sick, and he tells Rick about seeing Pastor Mike about it, about having an accountability partner, about being honest with himself, most of all, and Apollion is crying by the end of it, crying like he’s not talking to someone who wrecked his stupid car. It’s beautiful how he’s crying, how he can cry in front of them. And Rick runs, he runs away until nobody can see the secrets he’s uncovered.

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Nathan Susnik
Canon Eos 55D w/ 18-135mm lens

"Berlin is a city of extremes, caught somewhere between the East and the West, communism and capitalism, rich and poor, politics and art, misery and ecstasy, yet these conflicts coexist (mostly) in peace. I found this street art, set upon the backdrop of the old East Berlin television tower, to be a perfect representation of the city's internal strife. The art is already gone and the artist is, unfortunately, unknown."

Nathan Susnik
Canon Eos 55D w/ 18-135mm lens

Issue No. 9 - 2015

The Tail End

Dispatches from the artistic frontier

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Crits by Kristin: *The Vactioners*
Novel by Emma Straub
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PAST PERFECT Review: *Revolutionary Road*
Novel by Richard Yates
Review by Alexa Dooseman

Interview:

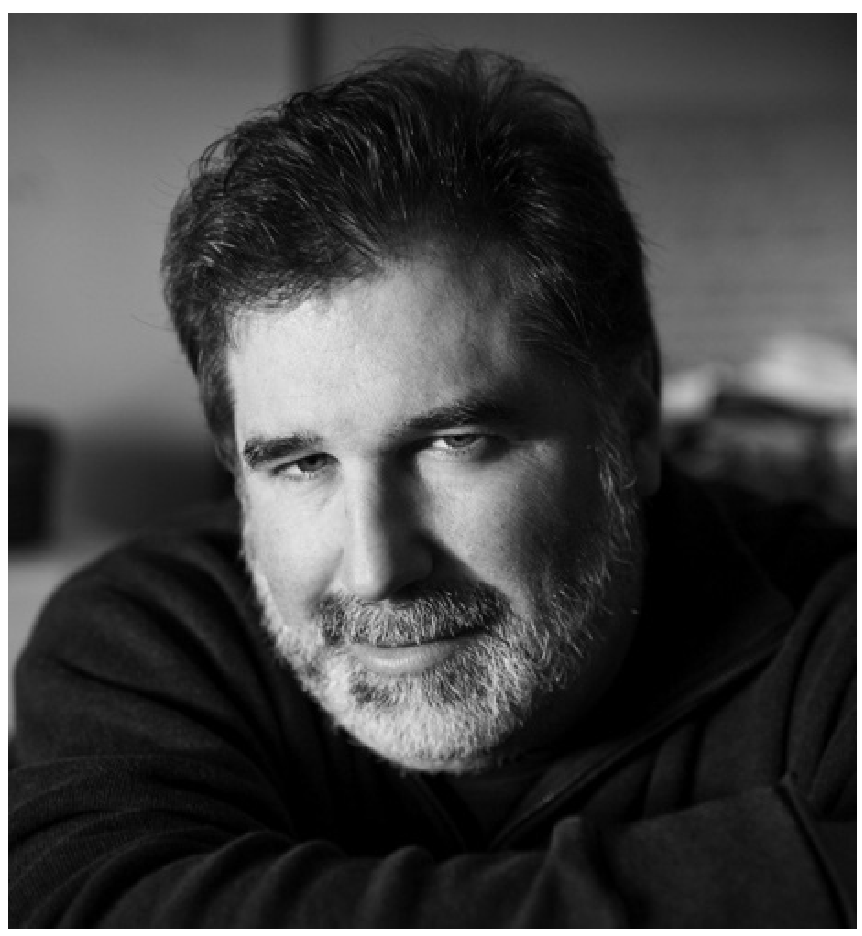
Kenneth Jarecke
Photographer
Just Another War

An Interview With Kenneth Jarecke

Kenneth Jarecke's uncanny ability to find unseen angles and delicate shadows at major news events has made him one of America's most distinguished photojournalists. Time after time - during presidential campaigns, the student demonstrations in Tiananmen Square, the Persian Gulf War and ten Olympic Games – Jarecke has captured moments and situations unnoticed by the media pack.

Throughout his career, Jarecke has traveled extensively. Having worked in over fifty countries, he's reporting on everything from tumultuous elections in Haiti, to the fall of the Iron Curtain. He's put a sympathetic face on the plight of child soldiers in Mozambique to the suffering refugees trying to escape a drowning, post-Katrina New Orleans.

During the winter of 1991, TIME sent Jarecke on a three-month assignment to Saudi Arabia, where he covered the allied war effort in the Persian Gulf. He would eventually spend time on patrol and cover combat duty with the U.S. Army's 18th Airborne Artillery Corps. His photograph of an incinerated Iraqi soldier, made on Highway 8 north of Kuwait City, stirred a storm of controversy. It remains one of the photographic icons of the Gulf War.



BUFFALO ALMANACK: **We're at the 10th anniversary of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. Can you share some words about your experience documenting the aftermath? And after 10 years, what do these images mean to you now?**

KENNETH JARECKE: Looking back, experiencing an event like Hurricane Katrina creates a mixed combination of feelings between rewarding, humbling, and frustrating. It's rewarding to see that my skills, honed over an entire career, allowed me to tell the story of the people affected by the storm to the best of my abilities. It's humbling to know that regardless of these skills I wouldn't be able to tell these stories as well as they should be told. It's frustrating to know, regardless of anything else, that nothing much changed and instead of working towards solutions politicians used the event to point fingers at one another for the past ten years.

Looking at the images now, to me as the photographer, is frustrating as well. I wonder if I could have worked harder, smarter or a combination of the two to have done a better job.

***BA*: Do you take photos every day, even when you aren't traveling, or are photography sessions something you plan and consciously arrange? If so, is there a different feeling between an 'at-home' shoot and travel documentary?**

KJ: Making pictures for me is never a casual thing. I wish this wasn't true. I don't have the ability to make snapshots anymore. I'm always thinking about an end-use beyond FB or Twitter. When I was working as a journalist it was no different. The end-use for me wasn't a double-truck in *Time Magazine*, it was for creating a lasting image that would eventually find it's way into museum collections. Having that mindset is a bit of a burden, but the only way I know how to operate. It would be like asking a chef to make a grilled cheese sandwich. A good chef isn't going to be happy throwing a slice of processed american cheese food between two slices of Wonder Bread. It doesn't matter if he's serving a four year old or a food critic. So using an iPhone and a faux polaroid filer and throwing that up on Facebook is hard for me. I know the difference between a sharp cheddar and the plastic stuff that comes wrapped in cellophane.

The other problem is I haven't really had the proper tool to use since I switched to digital ten or twelve years ago. To pickup a Leica, loaded with Tri_X or Kodachrome immediately creates the opportunity for creating great work regardless of the subject matter. There's a great tradition of photographers making lasting images in 'at-home' situations. So when you combine the two, the proper tool and the proper mindset, then it doesn't matter whether you're in your backyard or standing on the Great Wall of China, the potential for creating a lasting image is there.

I'm still waiting for the proper tool. The digital version of a Leica loaded with Kodachrome 64, that can be beaten up, hung on the back of a car seat, carried around without looking too serious. I think we may be close to that solution now. The takeaway being I haven't had the proper tool for at least ten years. I see pictures that aren't made, which I would have liked to make.

Now, this isn't a bad thing. The popular mindset is the best camera is the camera you have with you. This is utterly foolish and has robbed many of us of the ability to enjoy an experience, whether that's a concert, a child's birthday party, a sunset, whatever. Many people live their lives looking at the back of their phones and any decent photographer can tell you that's an excellent way of removing yourself from your own life.

So, to answer your question… when I'm shooting I'm shooting and it's quite serious, but when I'm not shooting I'm soaking up that real life experience as much as I possible can.

***BA:* Lester Bangs once wrote, "If you accept for even a moment the idea that each human life is as precious and delicate as a snowflake...you've got to hurt until you feel like a sponge for all those other assholes' problems, until you feel like an asshole yourself, so you draw all the appropriate lines. You stop feeling." I think about this passage often when looking at war photography. Can you reflect on how relevant (or not) this idea was during your time documenting the Gulf Wars? How did you deal with the traumatic scenes you witnessed?**

KJ: Okay, this is good. I think it was Rene Burri who said to be a photographer you need a comfortable pair of shoes. I think you need a healthy supply of empathy as well.

A photograph speaks about three things, the subject, the viewer and the creator. Most photographers are narcissistic and only want to talk about themselves so this is naturally reflected in their work. Unfortunately this is also the quickest path to success, so embracing the inner narcissus is rewarded. Regardless of who he was photographing, Richard Avedon spent his life doing self-portraits (It's no accident that we're drowning in a sea of selfies). Avedon was also a great artist. At some point I want to see what he has to say. Which is all fine and good, but the problem becomes evident when the subject of the photograph is lacking their own voice. I don't need Avedon to look down his New York City nose at my neighbors out here in the West. Save that attitude for Henry Kissinger, not the single mother of three working to make ends meet. To put this another way, the famine, war, or earthquake didn't happen for the photographer to improve their portfolio. It's not about them. Now, I'm also not interested in the photographer as photo-robot. I don't want to see detached images of record. The building was here and now it's gone. That's what Google is for. What I need to see, and what the every viewer needs to see, is something that makes them say, "if not for the Grace of God this could be me, this could be my child, this could be my home". That's the definition of empathy and that's what great photography accomplishes.

The photographer, brings their photographic, diplomatic, and survival skills to the image, but without empathy for the subject these are all meaningless. The viewer, well they bring all their baggage and personal experience to the photograph when they're viewing it and there's no controlling that. That's why one person is incredibly moved by a certain image and the next person isn't. The subject… the subject is the person that allowed the photographer to be there (maybe the only reason is because nobody has ever paid attention to them before), and to abuse that trust is, well abusive, but also doesn't normally make good pictures.

The photograph is always going to be about the photographer there's no way around that, but a great photographer manages to keep the focus on the people they photograph.

For me, the "appropriate lines" is crucial as well. Somehow, one must create a buffer around themselves while still remaining connected to the person they're photographing. The camera does this automatically, but that's more of


ONE WAY

a problem than a solution. The bottomline is this, I've got no reason to be there, to take up space and be in the way, unless I'm working to create a lasting image that captures the situation (the subject) in a way the will put the viewer into the shoes of the subject (however briefly). I can't do that unless I'm concentrating on all the technical and ascetic elements that give the photograph a chance to be successful. To say it another way… to be concerned about your exposure when someone is dying in front of you is arguably asshole-ish, but to miss the exposure, or have a tree in the background growing out of that person's head because you aren't concentrating on your composure is unforgivable.

BA: **How can photojournalists best take responsibility for their subjects? Put differently, how can photojournalists be ethical in their practice?**

KJ: I've touched on this a bit already. Sadly, plenty of photojournalist aren't ethical and they eventually pay a dear cost for this behavior.

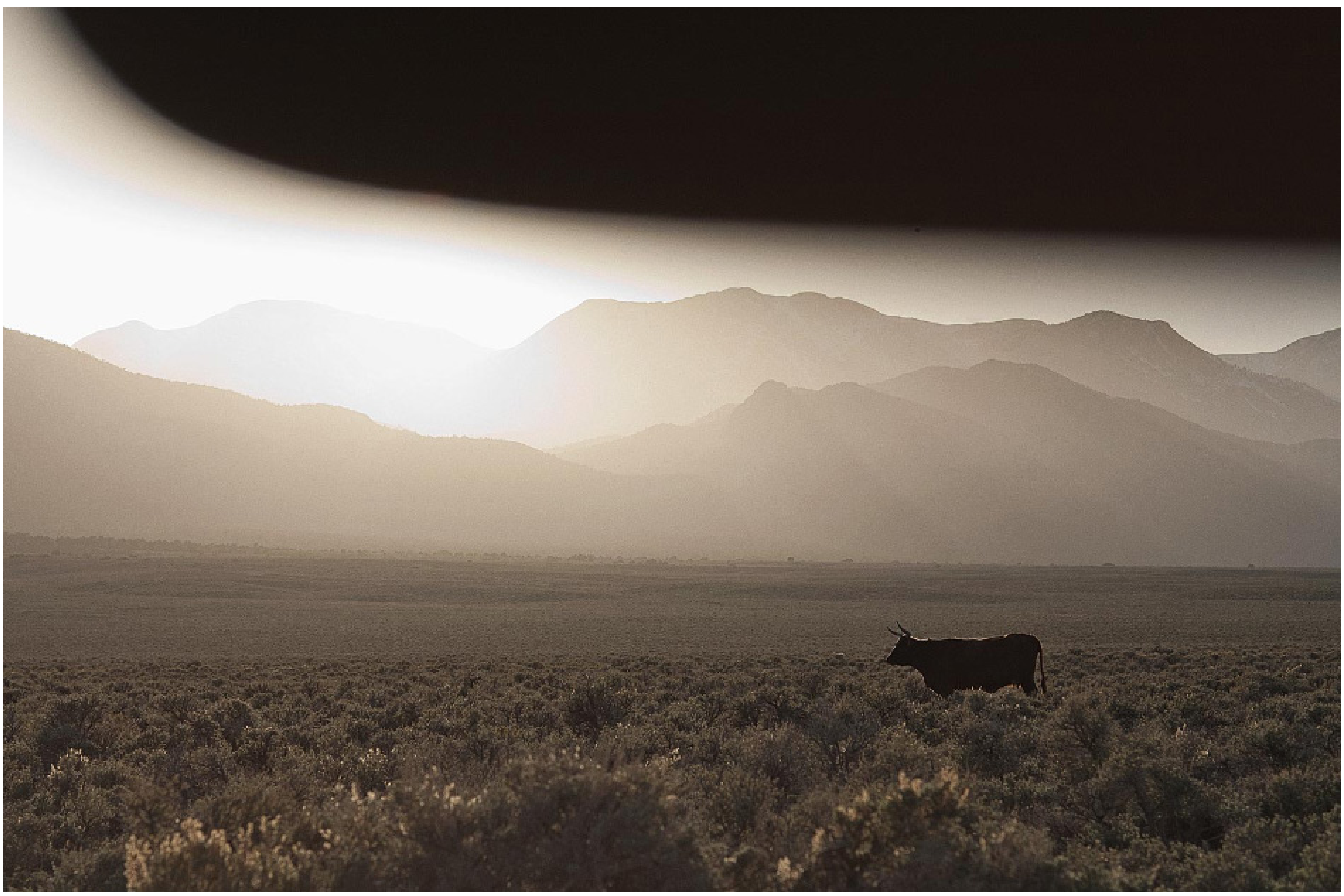
If you ask a young photojournalist what they hope to accomplish they'll usually give you a grandiose, Quixote-ian response along the lines of "I want to change the world". What they don't realize is they're correct. Every photojournalist changes the world, even if the only part they change is themselves. If they've gone into a war zone (for example) for the wrong reason, like to win an award, they've tarnished themselves in a deep way, and made the world a worse place. If they've gone into the war zone for the right reason, say, to simply show the plight of those affected by the war, there's a good chance they've made themselves a better person, if for no other reason they now realize or appreciate their own circumstances. Of course, even if they've gone in for the right reason, they still could be a jerk if they didn't manage to make any decent pictures.

BA: **On a related subject, how can editors be ethical in their practice?**

KJ: I think it's hard for an editor to be ethical. It's a different skill set. Maybe it's impossible for a photojournalist to be ethical as well. We live in a world where self promotion is king. Honesty and hard, intelligent work, making the perfect grilled cheese, is no longer as important as getting the 5000 likes and getting Kraft to sponsor your Instagram feed.

BA: **What non-photographic-based art do you find yourself drawn towards?**

KJ: I like Jazz. I don't really know what it is about the music. I don't understand the music, the structure, how it's done or why it works. I think it has to do with a couple of people reaching into their bag, pulling out a musical instrument and creating something that is lasting, that moves the listener as well as the creator(s). I think its similar to the idea of having this tool, a camera, and being able to capture an enduring image that speaks to the viewer, does right by the subject but can later find a life on a wall someplace that transcends the moment or circumstances of when it was made.



BA: **Which photographer's work are you most excited about right now?**

KJ: That's hard to say. I'm a little cynical (in case you haven't noticed). It's not just about the photograph. If it's not done in the right way I can't appreciate it. For example, I can't appreciate music that is too perfect, because I know it's been scrubbed and polished in the studio, but hearing that same artist live might make me a fan.

BA: **And last, what kind of projects are you working on these days? Are you still keeping your focus on American spaces and the West, or do you see yourself branching back into global optics?**

KJ: Currently I'm the Creative Director for *Hail Varsity*. I've just completed a short film as the Director of Photography. I do various art projects in Billings, Montana. I think if I get my hands on this new camera system, the digital Leica I mentioned above, I would start making the pictures I've been seeing for the last ten years. I've got a documentary film to shoot. I sell a lot of prints to collectors which keeps me busy. I've got a few students to mentor. I've got two different books to finish writing. But really my main focus is being a great husband and father, which is a full-time job.

Thoughts on the fantasy genre

A guest essay by Samuel Sattin

I grew up reading what some consider the wrong kind of books. Literacy wasn't championed in my household to begin with, and life circumstances were such that I found myself attracted to anything that distracted from the gravel pit of my backyard. Kids with hard fists and harder tempers populated my Elementary school across the street. After I first had a knife pulled on me by a fourth grader who threatened to cut the fat off my stomach, I like to believe I had no choice but to chase away my fears in Manichean novels where the fair-minded and honorable took up arms against evil hordes. The fusty used bookstore in the corner of my neighborhood strip mall, tucked away beside a busy Albertson's, offered an entire host of tattered, J.R.R. Tolkien fantasy-inspired paperbacks on a budget. For a dollar and some cents I could bury myself in worlds where violence abounded in gory detail, but where justice, as I could understand it at the time, was served, and order maintained. These books weren't always morally simplistic, but neither did they necessarily seek to heap commentary on readers about the state of the modern world. In retrospect, they seemed mostly concerned with the genre itself, trying to refine and reinvigorate beloved tropes with varying degrees of success.

Dragons, the caliphs of the fantasy canon, became an acute obsession. I acquired imaginative encyclopedias on them, filled with lustrous illustrations and diagrams that treated its fictitious subjects with incredible gravitas. I watched *Flight of Dragons* on what may as well be considered near-constant repeat, and read and reread the Peter Dickenson book it was based on until its pages went worn. Eventually I walled myself inside such a fortress of belief I thought with genuine conviction that a colony of winged wyrms still survived to this day, hiding in the forests of Eastern Europe.

Though I would come to understand fantasy literature through a more allegorical lens as I grew older, and pioneering authors — some of whom had been around for a long while without me knowing — began to chisel away at the keystone of the genre itself, I internalized it as a child without a trace of irony. I didn't view fantasy books as a wellspring of post-modern commentary, a way for 'serious' authors to someday trade in intellectual currency and earn accolades for elevating what many still consider the basal, brutish realm of sci-fi/fantasy. I created maps of places that wouldn't ever exist, emulating what I loved. To provide a direct example, my first "novel," if you could call it that, was titled *The Ring of Shanalacas*, and was a shameless chapter-by-chapter replication of both the plot and characters of *The Sword of Shanara* by Terry Brooks. I obviously wasn't interested, or even capable, of viewing the fantasy genre objectively. I inhabited it. I needed it to feel okay with who I was. I and others like me were pushed to the social sidelines, associated with the same kind of closeted nerd rankness as the frequenters of D&D groups that local gaming shops hosted, who customized figurines with Citadel paints and collected Chessex dice sets.

Today, however, the binaries I took for immutable in my youth have undergone an amazing feat of mitosis. It goes almost without saying that all over the board, from literature to television, we're witnessing the breakdown of boundaries between the genres. Popular literary authors are winning elite accolades for work whose subject matter just ten years ago would have been summarily overlooked. With the fantasy genre in particular, *Game of Thrones* has obviously led the charge towards knights and dragons being subject to introspection in the New Yorker, partially because of the genius savvy of its creator, and partly because of the legitimacy lent it by a cerebral television network that specializes in complex character drama. The floodgates have now been nudged open. Just this year, Kazuo Ishiguro, whose evolution as a novelist has carried him from his roots in stark realism to this year's *The Buried Giant*, a novel of Arthurian fantasy, has been scoring interest from a wide array of critically important surveyors. In the realm of science fiction, countless post-apocalyptic novels have been welcomed by authors whose previous affiliations are more in line with the PEN American Center than the Hugo Nebula, and some genre authors have crossed over the other way, migrating out of their own niche communities into statutory importance. Such inroads have led to a cultural awakening of sorts, in which the tools and mechanisms of genre fiction have been accessed by the literary establishment, and (though less often) vice a versa.

Critical acclaim, however, is a strange and often bewildered notion in itself. The literary canon has, for years, managed to edify a system for separating what it perceives as culturally worthy from what is not. Just by reading the transcript of Stephen King's acceptance speech after receiving a medal from the National Book Foundation in 2003, one can understand how the wound has festered over the years. Though historically important authors like George Orwell, Kurt Vonnegut, Italo Calvino, Franz Kafka, Mary Shelley and many others have had their usages of speculative elements brushed aside by the literary community in favor of exalting their unique visions, authors like Ursula K. LeGuin, whose work has plumbed the socio-political, psychological, and lyrical depths but included a few more wizards and spaceships in the meanwhile, has not been afforded quite the same luxury.

While such injustices are annoying to consider, I also believe they serve a noble function. Much like comic books in the United States, which have thrived for years in cultural exile, science fiction and especially fantasy have blossomed in insular environments populated by people for whom genre is an un-ironic construct. It almost goes without saying that robust counter-cultures are developed in reaction to being cast aside by the mainstream. In other words, radically interesting work is created when no one else is looking. Sure, conflicts run still rampant within these in-groups, but they are almost always enriching to its acolytes in the long run. In fantasy, for instance, there has been an ongoing, sometimes acerbic opposition to Tolkien structure among writers and readers alike. Although he holds immense respect for Middle Earth's progenitor, authors like Gene Wolfe, for instance, have spent a great deal of time and energy breaking down the tropes Tolkien built up. In one of Wolfe's most lauded works, *The Book of the New Sun,* the main character, as opposed to coming from a quaint, kelly green hamlet reminiscent of the English countryside, is instead a torturer from a blood-built guild that specializes in immolation. China Mieville's sometimes desultory opposition to Tolkien is also well known, as it reaches the point of becoming revanchist. But most of these battles are internal and fly beneath the radar of literary concern, for whom books that aren't consciously interested in exploring the human condition, or the intellectual implications of genre retrofitted to explore the human condition, aren't of much concern.

I have personally enjoyed what many literary authors have created in their forays into genre. Although some of it is not successful, what is successful soars. In 2014, *Station Eleven* by Emily St. John Mandel comes to mind, as does Edan Lapucki's *California*, both of which exceed in plotting, concept, and world-building (three genre mainstays), while paying close attention to literary conventions like heightened prose, complex characters, and pointed social commentary. Overall, one only need read *The Road, Oryx and Crake,* or *The Devil in Silver* to understand that cross-genre relationships are mutually beneficent. But I also understand how some genre authors (and fans) might bristle at what may be considered an invasion of their terrain. And not entirely without merit.

In the way in which our society is structured, appealing innovation can be commoditized. The Sex Pistols, Stooges, Dead Kennedys, the Clash and other bands were instrumental in the development of Punk subculture, espousing authenticity with a sneering rejection of the status quo. But over time, like many subcultures in the American landscape, Punk culture became subject to commodity. I got into Punk music around the same time I got into fantasy books, as if they'd decided to arrive hand in hand. Although I never studded my own leather jacket, in the music itself I discovered a culture that could be characterize as smart, unpretentious, and staunchly anti-authoritarian. But now you are made to think that you can buy such rebellion at the shopping mall. Body modifications and clothing tailored to appear DIY, things that were used historically to intimidate polite society, to project apathy and misanthropy, are now marketed to conventional society. This isn't because of evil intentions on behalf of the culturally elite. Inclusion comes from a place of appreciation. But when the mainstream decides to open its doors to elements of subculture for its own use, what it often ends up absorbing is not core philosophy, but elements of style. Style, to me, can mean clothing. It can mean images and slogans. When it comes to fantasy and science fiction, style can mean dragons, wizards, space ships, zombie invasions or warp travel. Things that might seem fairly uncomplicated on the surface, but in effect, and especially in composition, require a great deal of understanding.

I'd like to think you can't buy culture at the shopping mall. And consequently, I'd like to think that you can't produce quality fantasy and science fiction without having firm respect for its tools and conventions. Putting categories on books is, in essence, absurd. Nothing exists in a vacuum, and the least successful work is arguably the most limiting. If a literary novel sticks to convention, it an come off as solipsistic, uninventive and boring. If a fantasy book sticks strictly to convention, it can come off as unoriginal, over-plotted, and devoid of character. This is why the best work tends to borrow, beg, and steal from various elements of fiction, and the best readers among us know of the unsung geniuses who fostered brilliance by defying their own kind.

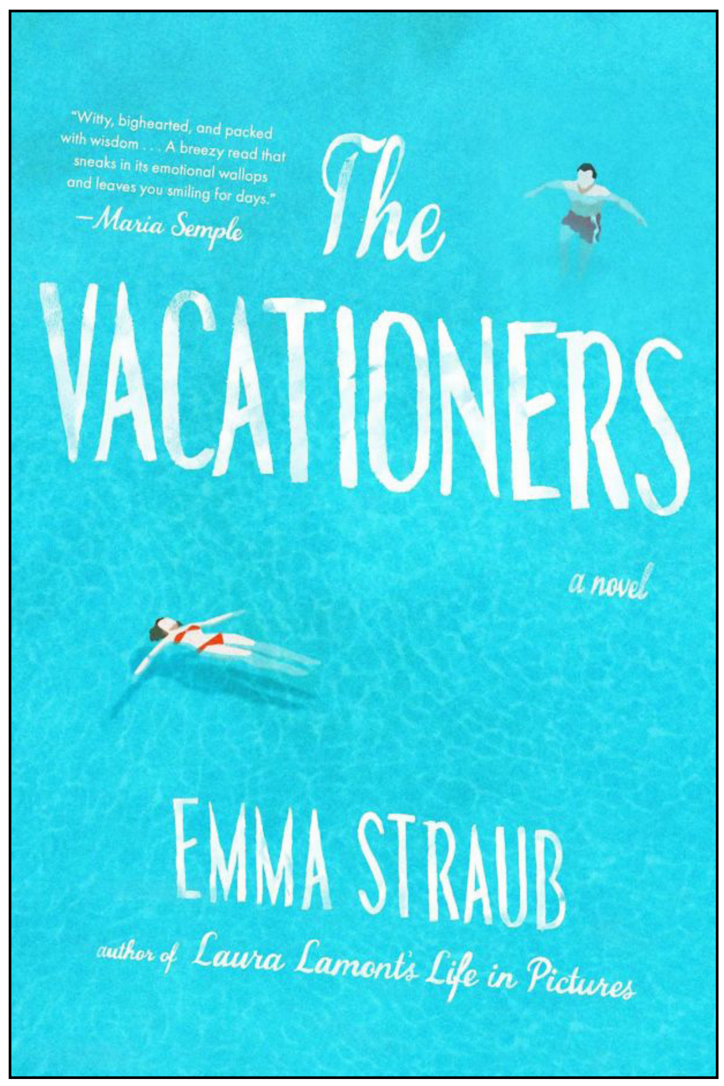
I understand why Ursula K. LeGuin might have been initially suspicious when reviewing new literary-derived entries into the index she's inhabited for years, or why Margaret Atwood, who wrote some of my favorite novels of all time, who may be the greatest science fiction writer of her generation, would let down so many when she tried to distance herself from the label. Because sometimes it sucks to be on the sidelines. To witness 'literature' being discussed as a monolithic format, while the kind of work you do is given the side eye. But shunning your roots is a form of denial. There is something remarkable about embracing the margin. Because the margin is where revolution occurs, and when temerity disguises itself as courage, prejudice is born. It's good that the lines between genres are dissolving, but it should also be remembered that whenever a revolution succeeds in changing the status quo, something is both gained and lost. What looks like authenticity can be bought and sold by the dollar, or played with spit, grit, and power chords.

CRITS BY KRISTIN

Regular reviews from Buffalo Almanack's
very own in-house critic, Kristin D. Urban-Watson!

"The Vacationers"

Novel by Emma Straub



Spain in the summer means good food, beautiful scenery and vast opportunities of leisure for a vacationing American family. Even though Emma Straub's writing has appeared in many journals and publications, including *Slate*, the *Paris Review Daily* and "American Short Fiction," she gained widest acclaim with her second novel, which took place in the Golden Age of Hollywood, *Laura Lamont's Life in Pictures. The Vacationers*, Straub's latest, debuted just a few months ago in late May, just as summer vacation season kicked off.

And this is certainly a summer read. Franny, the type-A matriarch of the Post family, had been happily anticipating the trip to Mallorca months in advance. This vacation was meant to serve as a thirty-fifth wedding anniversary for Franny and her husband, Jim, as well as a last hurrah for their daughter before she starts her freshman year at Brown. But, as it not so surprisingly turns out, all is not perfect.

In fact, it is a crowded vacation, full of bickering, high-emotions, secrets, and judgment. The book is littered with characters we see a dozen times or more, yet none of them quite reach that necessary level of authenticity in order to be relatable. There's the cheating husband, the fussy wife and mother, the gay best friend and his baby-crazy husband, the misunderstood teenager and the mismatched couple, provided by Franny's son and his toned girlfriend.

All of these exaggerated and colorful characters are squashed into a picturesque house set into a hilltop in Mallorca, and owned by a friend of a friend. While Straub sets up clichéd characters within a commonplace setting, she still manages to make it a clever, and entertaining read. Within the world of the vacation, each character shares a sometimes dysfunctional, but almost always complicated relationship with the group. There are numerous microscopic stories within *The Vacationers.* Watching them play out is enjoyable, even if you can guess what will happen, much like a sitcom.

Sylvia, the angsty teenager, is determined to start fresh post-high school, where she was nobody, and where nobody screwed her. She even makes a to-do list, with number four sticking out: "lose virginity." Lo and behold, the Spanish tutor that her mother has employed is a slice of sexy Mallorcan heaven, way beyond Sylvia's reach. But is he, really?

Bobby Post, the eldest child, and the New York-to-Florida transplant, has himself an older girlfriend who hardly eats, and who does hundreds of squats a day — in contrast to Bobby's plump and food loving mother. Forced smiles and awkward conversations ensue, and the reader can sit back and watch it all unfold.

Charles (Franny's gay BFF) and his husband Lawrence are madly in love, but Lawrence wants a baby, and Charles has a small secret of his own. Even though they are in domestic bliss, is it enough for them?

As these little dramas unravel, there is one story that takes the foreground: will Franny forgive her handsome, recently 'retired' husband for cheating on her? In a predictable book, the answer isn't too difficult to come by. But even so, Straub perfectly captures a family under strain, and all of their personal grievances. She also successfully captures the familiar sensation of the overloaded vacationer — too much time with family, too little space. The greatest fault with this book is the easy guesswork, and the lack of connection that the reader will feel with many of the characters. But it is a amusing page-turner, one that readers might well gobble up.

The Vacationers
Emma Straub
Riverhead Books
320 pages, $11.40

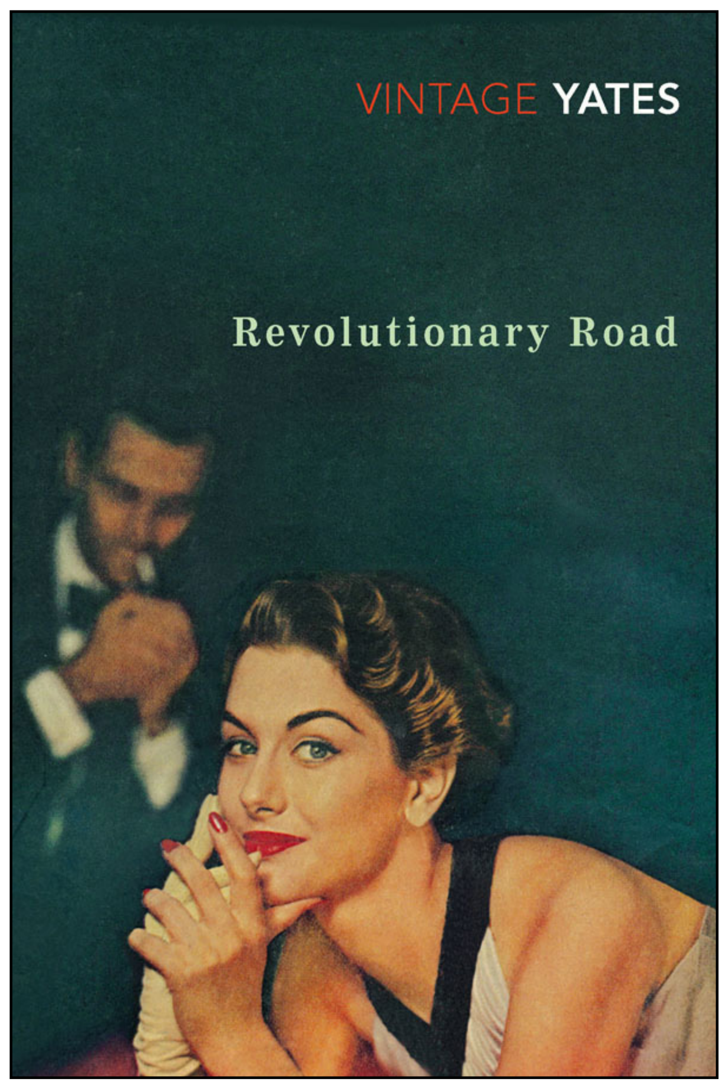
What do you mean, “It’s September??”

PAST PERFECT

Revisting yesterday's greats, today

"Revolutionary Road"

Classic Novel by Richard Yates
Review by Alexa Dooseman



Revolutionary Road begins with a play. The year is 1955 and the location is a suburb in Connecticut. April Wheeler takes the stage as part of the Laurel Players, an amateur theater company attempting to bring culture and "serious plays" to the suburbs. When the show begins, everything appears fine — April is radiant, a shining talent in the midst of a small community, the audience murmuring how "lovely" she is. Then, slowly but surely, the play falls apart.

Within these first ten pages, Richard Yates sets up the heart of his brilliant, heartbreaking work: a world where an audience of neighbors watches, whispers about and witnesses a downfall. Where the characters aren't so much telling their own stories but instead lines they have memorized and performing roles in which they have been cast. The Laurel Players' performance only lasts a brief moment in the book, but there's a sense that the acting never ends.

Written in 1961, Revolutionary Road follows the lives of Frank and April Wheeler, a beautiful, charming couple who move their family to a "sweet little house" on the eponymous Revolutionary Road. But lest you believe they are suburbanites, the Wheelers are quick to point out — especially to themselves — that they are not the type of people who move to places like Revolutionary Road. They are somehow different, special. This move to the "sweet little house" is an ironic joke that they are playing.

It is April who recognizes that the joke is on themselves. They are, in fact, no different from those around them. Frank wakes up, takes the train to New York City, works at a boring job; April stays home, cleans the house, cooks the meals. Once believing themselves exceptional, they have undertaken an act of binding normalcy. To April, this outcome will not do, and the only answer is to change, to move on. She concocts a plan: they'll move to Europe, a place where people are really living.

And here's where things get incredibly interesting. It is April who puts the move to Europe in motion — and this escape route becomes the crux of the plot — but it is not from April's point of view that we discover the plan. In fact, it is not from April's point of view that we discover anything (with one notable exception). Instead, Yates has a zoned-in third person point of view from Frank's perspective. And then from the Wheelers' friend and neighbor, Shep Campbell. And then from another neighbor, Mrs. Givings. This shifting perspective creates three different audience members to April's life. How they view her, what role they've assigned to her and what degree of trust they put into the lines she's reciting depends entirely on how they're viewing her performance. What this shifting perspective doesn't create is a grounded center, a sense that someone, somewhere understands just what play they all are in.

To make matters more convoluted, each POV character has cast himself or herself in the wrong role. Frank talks a mile a minute because he fancies himself a genius, yet he has no true interest in anything. Shep Campbell imagines himself in some sort of romantic drama, yet his life is standard-suburbs with a wife, children and a house on Revolutionary Hill. Mrs. Givings believes herself to be a great judge of character, yet her opinions are, at best, mercurial. It is because of these shaded points of view, these characters' self-delusions, that they cannot see anyone clearly. So what does it say that it is through these characters that we experience April, that we experience the entire story?

In the larger context, it says something about how Yates saw the time period. These characters have reached the so-call goal of modern living — the house, the suburb, the car, the family — and yet their experiences come across as a kaleidoscope of boredom, regret and desire. Nothing appears genuine. It's telling that the only character who seems to see the world clearly is the one who owns the least. John Givings, the wayward son of Mrs. Givings, lives in a psych ward, but makes key appearances to lob observation bombs into the mix. He seems acutely aware of everyone's façades, saying things like, "You want to play very nice house, very sweet house, then you got to have a job you don't like." He practically uses the language of the suburbs, except he understands the operative word: "play."

In the more specific context of April, the characters' unstable perspectives reveal the impossibility of understanding someone else — especially when that someone else is in a role that is supposed to be understandable. What do these characters do with a housewife who cannot stand to be a housewife? They try as hard as they can to grasp her, but only through the lens of how they want to see her. As would be expected, this leads to failure. There's a moment when April tells Shep that she doesn't really know him and ends with, "You see I don't know who I am, either." What April comprehends is that when a person is cast purely as a part (mother, wife, father, husband), the person inside becomes unknowable. These roles make everyone strangers, broadening the distance between what someone has and what someone is, to the point that everyone is a mystery, even to themselves.

It is not until the very end of the book that April finally gets a point of view —and the reader gets a central feeling of authenticity. In this chapter, April's awareness of how much her life is an act is laid bare. She knows very well that the lines she delivers are false, that she has traded dreams of being an actress on stage for being an actress in her own life. To push this point even further, the scene right before has Frank watching April through the kitchen window, once more casting April's pain as a piece of performance. Yates saves April's blast of self-awareness to make all the other versions of these characters' lives sound even more off-key, even more removed from anything real. It turns out that someone, somewhere did know just what play they all were in — and it's very different than what they were expecting.

To top off this incredible narrative strategy, after April's point of view, we barely go back to Frank's. This is partly for plot reasons that I don't want to give away, but it's also because of something much bigger. Throughout the book, April asks Frank to stop talking. She says things like, "Could we sort of stop talking about it now?" and "All right. Can I talk now?" Frank pretends to listen, but inevitably goes on with whatever it is he wants to discuss. What April does in her chapter disables Frank's talking, his roundabout monologues, justifications and deliberations. By presenting a real portrayal of herself, April silences Frank. She finally pulls the curtain on his performance.

When I picked up Revolutionary Road, I thought that I knew what it was all about. After all, suburban life in the 1950s is a well-discussed subject. But nothing prepared me for just how brilliant this book is and how much it transcends its time period. Yes, it's about the societal expectations of marriage, neighbors and community. But, for me, the bigger picture is about how people view one another and how people present themselves; how a character can be thinking one thing and say something completely different because that is what a person ought to say. That truth is timeless. After all, the props and roles have changed in the past several decades, but have we really stopped being on a self-imposed stage? In the time of social media when every photo comes with a built-in audience, have we not just traded one version of performance for another? It is for this reason that Revolutionary Road should be read and re-read. Often.

Revolutionary Road
Richard Yates
Vintage
355 pages, $14.10

Contributors

Colton Adrian is twenty-one. He keeps the lights on for work and creates when he's not doing that. He escaped via C-section and was birthed in Williamsburg, Virginia. He's been there ever since and has been plotting a breakout involving photos and words for the last two years.

Chris Ames is a writer who also draws. He lives and works in San Francisco. You can visit him at chrisames.net.

Alexa Dooseman is a freelance writer living in Portland, Oregon. She writes humor pieces, reviews, essays and is currently at work on a middle grade novel. Her work has appeared on *McSweeney's Internet Tendency*, the *Rumpus*, *BuzzFeed* and more.

Erica X Eisen is currently an undergraduate at Harvard University, where she studies art history. In 2015 she received the Cyrilly Abels Short Story Prize for the best story by a female undergraduate. Her work is due to be published in *Little Star Journal* and the upcoming Fabula Press anthology.

Contributors

Tamar Hammer was born in Afula, Israel and grew up in Israel. She earned her BFA in the Bezalel Academy of Arts and Design in Jerusalem. In 2004 she immigrated to the U.S. with her spouse and son. Since moving to Portland, Oregon in 2013, Tamar has been dividing her time between painting, writing and extreme cooking.

Reggie Mills is pursuing a M.Sc. in organic chemistry at the University of Toronto. His hobbies include eating toast and drinking coffee. This is his first publication.

Dan Moore is a writer from Springfield, Illinois, whose work has been published in *Midwestern Gothic*, *McSweeney's Internet Tendency* and elsewhere. He lives with his wife in Arizona. Photo by Ann Kornuta.

Rebecca Norris Webb has published five photography books. Originally a poet, Rebecca often interweaves her text and photographs in her books, most notably with *My Dakota* — an elegy for her brother who died unexpectedly — with a solo exhibition of the work this past summer at the Cleveland Museum of Art. Her photographs have appeared in the *New Yorker*, *Time*, and *Le Monde Magazine*.

Contributors

AE Reiff is a scribe of the social-medicinal history of native southwest plants who operates a bakery near Marfa, TX. These plants are not confined to the Utah canyons and deserts, but range south to Marfa and Big Bend, which impacts the sightings of those mythogmas, the cartoon shadows of the world indexed at encouragementsforsuch.blogspot.com, light and shadow of society and world by day, intercessor by night.

Mikhail Revlock lives in Philadelphia with his partner and two cats. "Milking Dmitry" is his first published story. It is one piece in a half-finished collection of semi-linked fictions.

Samuel Sattin is a novelist and essayist. He is the author of the upcoming novel *The Silent End* and *League of Somebodies*, described by Pop Matters as "One of the most important novels of 2013." His work has appeared in the *Atlantic*, *Salon Magazine*, *io9*, *Kotaku* and elsewhere. Also an illustrator, he holds an MFA in Comics from California College of the Arts and has a creative writing MFA from Mills College. He lives in Oakland, California.

Nathan Susnik is a biomedical researcher currently living near Hanover, Germany. A product of the Wisconsin public school system, performing only his Ph.D. abroad, he writes stories and takes photographs as a temporary escape from scientific logic. Other than pictomicrographs, these are his first published photographs.

Contributors

Kristin D. Urban-Watson is a writer, art teacher, book reviewer, and yoga enthusiast. She enjoys good books, nature walks, and spending time with her black lab.

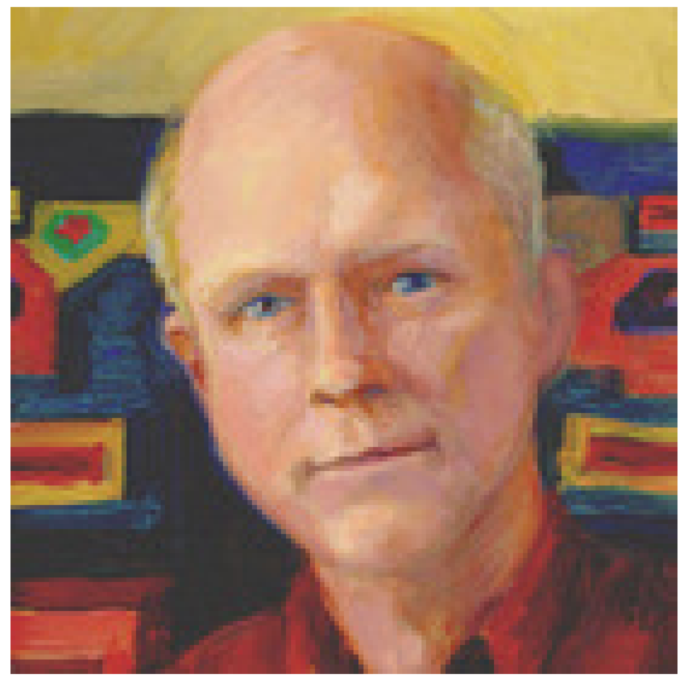
About the Editors

Maxine Allison Vande Vaarst is a scholar, writer and critic, as well as the founding editor of *Buffalo Almanack*. She has lectured at conferences from Paris to Toronto, and her stories have been featured in numerous publications, including *BULL*, *Inscape* and *A cappella Zoo*. She lives in Laramie, Wyoming with her wife Alissa and is pursuing an M.A. in American Studies from the University of Wyoming. Max is a proud transgender woman, and an even prouder daughter of the great(est) state of New Jersey.

She is an unapologetic fan of the New York Jets and doesn't care that you know this.

Katie Morrison serves as Visual Arts Editor for *Buffalo Almanack*. She received her M.A. in Art History from the University of Colorado and is presently committed to spreading her love for art throughout Indiana, through her work with both the Tippecanoe Arts Federation and Purdue University. Her research tracks issues of race, violence, and urban identity in American photography. She is an avid cat enthusiast and possesses a deep passion for iced coffee.

About the Illustrator



John Gummere operates Studio 264, a graphic design studio serving businesses, institutions and non-profits coast-to-coast. Illustration has long been his specialty, and he works in a variety of media and styles depending on what is most suitable for his client's needs. He received his B.A. in architecture from Columbia University in 1977 and lives in Philadelphia.

The Inkslinger Award

A lesser-known element of the famed Paul Bunyan legend, Johnny Inkslinger served as Bunyan's office clerk and bookkeeper. To keep up with the demands of his boss's outsized work, Inkslinger invented a heavy-duty fountain pen, which drew its ink from a barrel-tap and hose.

Buffalo Almanack is pleased to have established the Inkslinger Award for Creative Excellence in his honor. This award is issued to the best short story and individual visual art piece of each issue, as selected by our editors. The cash prize as of now is $50 per winner, though this amount may be raised in the future as more funds becomes available.

There are no fees required for entry into the Inkslinger sweepstakes and all submissions to *Buffalo Almanack* are automatically in the running. Winners are notified shortly before the release of their respective issue and are recognized on the *Buffalo Almanack* website, as well as in the pages of our digital journal. A pair of money orders will be delivered to the winners via the U.S.P.S. sometime during that same month.

About Buffalo Almanack

Founded in Denver, Colorado in 2013, *Buffalo Almanack* is an attempt to dredge the online arts journal — as saturated an endeavor as any these days — from the morass of clinical snobbishness. We don't care if our contributors hold fine arts degrees or *just okay* arts degrees no arts degrees at all, and we sure as hell don't care if our readers do. Our lone desire is to showcase talent to the world, regardless of how that talent finds us.

As such, *Buffalo Almanack* considers fiction of all styles and genres. We neither discriminate against the traditional nor the experimental, neither the "literary" nor the fantastic. Our interest in domestic micro-fiction is as great as our interest in space-travel novellas and we'll always save a seat for the remarkable and unexpected.

Concerning the visual arts, we invest in a diverse range of subjects and styles, and welcome submissions from each and every medium under the sun. We are attracted foremost to strong composition, skilled technical craft and assertive authorial presence. We want art that tells stories, whether through a single frame or a broader narrative series. We want art that makes us ask questions, that leads us to wish we had been there behind the brush, pencil or camera ourselves.

CHECKING IN ON #BUFFALONATION

What's the old saying? A buffalo never forgets?

Publishing with Buffalo Almanack isn't just a fantastic way to share your art with the public, it also marks you as a proud lifelong sister or brother in our big, sexy litmag family. On this page we check in with our past contributors to see what kind of accomplishments they've secured in the time since they appeared in our pages.

ELEANOR LEONNE BENNETT (Photographer, Issue No. 7)

I have recently taken on a role as the Arts & Painting Editor for *Contemporary Literary Review India*. I also have two book covers being released in September 2015: Myra Connell's *House* and David Clarke's *Arc*. You may read my interview with the *Photo Fundamentalist* – online now!

MICHAEL DEAGLER (Author, "Fishtown, Down," Issue No. 7)

My story "Heavens" appeared in *Front Porch Journal*. I also have stories forthcoming in the *New England Review* (Issue 36.3, available in December 2015) and the *Minnesota Review* (Issue 86, available in January 2016).

ALLEN FORREST (Illustrator, Issue No. 6)

I won the Leslie Jacoby Honor for Art at San Jose State University and was featured on the cover of their journal, *Reed*. I am in many magazines and just finished doing a cover for *Mount Hope*, the Rhode Island University literary magazine, due for release Fall 2015.

ANA PRUNDARU (Photographer, Issue No. 5)

I have a collage out from *Dirty Chai* and another image currently at *Gone Lawn*.

PETER WITTE (Comic artist, Issue No. 7)

I have recently had several comics published, including "Bacon, Egg, & Oats" in the Rumpus and "Devolution of My Parenting Philosophy" and "Wrigley Field," both in *Hobart*. I've also had a personal essay, "Enigma" published in the *Sun*.

Buffalo Almanack

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