

Cacti Fur



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Morgan Staley

Michael Bartelt

So what

He's carrying an Army backpack
upside down and looks distressed.
Veteran or freeloader?

Maybe, on some off chance,
a shaman or something cool.
Maybe he can reveal that liminal space
between veteran and freeloader

because that seems to be
what's over everyone's heads,

just as the things he carries with him
that can't be precisely packaged—
not in a backpack or labels
like "veteran" or "freeloader."

Like you and me, he is
everything and nothing at once,
and I see us as such.

Eman Bouras

Me and A

Aspen makes things burn too quickly with her eyes and her hands and her breath. I let her call my name anyway. She talks to wolves; I talk to my hands. I still let her love me. She's from New Mexico. She eats cacti and spits out the spines; I watch her. She swallows me in gulps now; in chunks and pieces later. I'm a goner. We both know these kinds of things. She's still the same only now she carries something more destroyed than beautiful. We are still the same. Aspen swallows me; I am Aspen now.

Sean Branson

The Accountants Elegy for Praise

It's late
& no one's around
like every teenager's burden of song
& I'm here
keyed to ten to remember:
it's a cliché to write poems
crackling with late night construction
from mind's sleepless buzzing,
humming, both at once, the throat singer's
multiple notes sent
thru pursed lips—
a walky-talky whistle for a nice ass
a taxi, a doberman—
something in my heart *this*
is a take-away & a total to
something in my heart *that*.
My bathroom has been over-
taken by hundreds of stoneflies.
Ever heard of them?
Me neither, I had to look them up.
My beer is warming & the sun is shining
on another country where
stalking caps might be hyper-stylish.
So there's my bottom dollar bet
& if this is funny
if this is funny to cover
I am a bitter thin lake.
Sometimes I don't know
where this dirty road has taken me.
Then I remember: the gas station,
the post office parking lot with the onion patch adjacent;
there you can cry for everything
openly & everyone is fine
with it; assuming you just got there
hoping you're about to leave.

Tyler Campbell

The “Fuck You” Look

For the 10th separate occasion that Sunday
my brother and I were politely asked to smile
for the black Nikon camera,
telepathically we connected without thinking
and stubbornly refused to bare our top gums
for anyone while wearing our lumberjack flannels
so our eyes could cut through any trees that might
decide to become the backbone for someone's
physical copy of this goddamned picture,
and even if The Greek Photographer God
descended and focused upon us to lighten up,
we would remain heavy and hard headed
as if our teeth had a communicable disease
whose wrath we weren't quite ready to unleash on his mom
cause if we were girls (as she had probably originally wanted)
we might have posed for her thinning eyebrows
from behind the lens of the developing picture,
but since we were pissed-off teenage boys
all we could do was glare like the photo until
my father finally intervened
and made the flashes fade
like the contagious smiles
after the camera came out.

William Doreski

Après la fête mémorable

With a paper towel I swab
wine-drips from the corridor,
Best leave no clues. The party
caused very few casualties,
but some screamed so loudly
crows swooped from the cold sky
to gather slops. Police arrived,
nosed about, left grinning. You swept
from the room with tiara glowing
like a crown of brimstone. No one
followed to comfort your comfortable
but old-fashioned body sheathed
in the most impertinent latex.

By now you've wheeled your Alfa
back to your sea-view where ghosts
craft fogs to fit your vision.
Not even the most hideous verbs
can warp you once you install
yourself in a snoozy bubble bath
with all of your privacies tingling.
Meanwhile I sort out the mess
this semi-public event left.
Beer cans bagged for recycling,
wine jugs, paper waste bundled.

Tomorrow I'll drive to the landfill
and discard the evidence. The last
victims, blooming with headache
will rise early, cursing me,
but will recall you as a cloud
on which a mob of angels danced.
No transubstantiation occurred.
No one rose to godhead, no one
spilled over in millions of hues.
Enjoy your bath. The tide creeps in,
slathering, and the crows mate
aloud with sea gulls, clattering
like an avalanche of scrap.

Local Pornography

On your computer a blush
of local pornography occurs.
The neighbor's webcam reports
famous adultery in progress.
While you watch this festering
I prepare for my snowshoe hike
up Monadnock, a sullen trek
I probably won't complete.

The cold looks absolute. Trees
hunch in tragic witness,
hands thrust in their pockets
with expressions of disbelief.
The pornography's so casual
one could fold it into place mats
for Saturday night's church supper.
The mismatched couples proceed

step by step, as recommended,
the way I'll climb that mountain
step by step, my new snowshoes
flinging dust of snow behind me.
You shouldn't watch those amateurs.
They aren't expert enough to explore
the deeper recesses, where flesh
and spirit clash in violent hues.

They aren't flexible enough to pleat
layers of ego and reveal
carnivorous but impersonal
passions of which pagan deities
would be proud. I'll phone you
after my hike, and we can meet
at the pizza shop. By then
those lurid couples will decouple

and shrug back into their clothes
and say goodbye on the stoop.
Maybe from the summit I'll see
their mutual blush simmer
in the frigid winter sundown.
I'll be cold, tired, and hungry
when I reach the shopping center
where the pizzas bask in ovens

of sterile-looking stainless steel.
Purge your computer's browser
before you leave. The pizza
we split might suggest something
you saw on the screen; so cleanse
mind and body before we meet
so the mushrooms, pepper, or sauce
won't refer to something obscene.

Azia DuPont

BEER IN THE SHOWER

I'm having a beer in the shower because I've somehow turned into a desperate
housewife
Wild Blue Lager in my hand like some frat-boy ready to party
The beads of hot water shooting into my skin
& it makes me think of my son & his BB gun but
Can't I just Chug! Chug! Chug! this beer?
Pretend that the college girls are smoking on the porch outside & that they
bummed me a Marlboro Light
The white filter pressed against my lips my hand on my hips & I'm laughing
at this bro take a keg stand
Do a keg stand
I'm so out of touch
It's been weeks since I've been touched
The kids can't seem to stay out of our bed & we can't seem to make love
anywhere without a door
It's cold & maybe I should have brought two beers in here
Had a party
In this shower
& maybe my daughter's Little Mermaid doll
Could take a swig & remember the sea
Take a swig & remember me

Stephen Gadbois

**tried to walk to get curry today and it's only a five minute walk
but I had to stop before I even got to the edge of campus**

The alarm clock by my bed projects the time onto the ceiling.
I haven't changed it since daylight savings time ended in November.
I guess in a few days I won't have to.
I keep a fan on my bed turned on high so I won't feel my heartbeat.
Instead I'll just feel the fan rumbling.
If I try hard enough I can usually feel my heartbeat.
When I walk places it thuds harder than usual, as if a walk
to get curry is more dangerous than drinking
in a friend's apartment in Allston.
Sometimes I feel like I won't be able to draw my next breath.
I sniffle a lot because it makes each breath feel easier.
I'd like to not worry about it and instead worry
about how good you feel pressed up against me on a chair
so close I can smell you.
You smell like brand new books but also like
hundred year-old first editions.
Sometimes you make me forget but more often you just make it worse.

Mitchell Krockmalnik Grabois

Imminence

My parents died when I was still a child
so I've lived with the awareness of death's imminence

I passed on college
to the chagrin of my foster parents
both professors
because I could not see spending years in stuffy buildings
cramming my head with knowledge
that would decay
as soon as my blood stopped pumping

I joined the Merchant Marine instead
worked hard
attended to the operation of my body
felt my muscles slide and contract
spent long hours staring at the sea

In ports
sexual liaisons with the rawest women
but not prostitutes
because prostitutes have lost their edge
and do not crave men
to save them

Nels Hanson

The Round Year

East of our wide valley snow falling
on first Sierra foothills says the lakes
in heaven have frozen solid. Autumn

rain descending in corridors of silver
bars reminds an obscure sin remains
unpaid, harsh sentence spanning all

our lives. The navel orange's leaves
on bending winter stalks can't bear
more weight and spill pools of tulle

fog to quench sandy grains of loam.
Hard frost burns vineyard blossoms
searing every petal to an ashy ghost

as we recall on flatland we're always
stranded between this earth and sky.
Perfumed flower of peach or apricot

starry sun or atom's nucleus for bees
tells in syllables love conquers death.
Ripest summer plum heavy in golden

August light woke in the dark among
dormant things that sleep for months
to finally dream they awake and rise.

Jon Huerta

Navarro, CA

a thick coastal fog
gathers into dewdrops
between millions of
small green leaflets
eventually the dew
gets so heavy it
falls like rain onto
the ancient Sequoia
a late night two step
older than time itself
witnessed by the few
who care to notice

Given Up

thinking about
the torn up quilt
that was way
too old to keep
the sleeping bag
had seen better days
it would have turned
twelve this week
really missing that
sacred navajo rug
that was in
the back seat
and that worn out
Kelty pack i got when
i was seventeen
all located in the
beat up truck that
was found down
the street
the radiator was
leaking anyway
makes that squeaky
sound when she speaks
much too nerve racking
for any thief
shit i should have
given up years ago
finally had enough
and jumped ship
for someone even
less fortunate than me

Andy Hulme

THE SHUFFLING GAIT.

Toward the shuffling gait I know
I must, like mortal others go.
I could swim against the tide
but senescence will humble pride
and having seen how life corrupts,
how carelessly it interrupts
unbidden, its unwritten span,
I'm inclined while I still can,
to exit with my self intact
and make my last, a conscious act.

Philip Jackey

Remembrance

I try my best but I just can't remember
the last time I felt lucky to be an adult.

I remember age 9 and my winning free throw,
how the popcorn was used for confetti,
how the guys invited me for pizza but I was too shy to go
so mom treated me to McDonald's and for the rest of the night
I took pride in pretending that I was Michael Jordan
doing a Big Mac commercial.

These days I'm lucky if I make it through the week.
Tomorrow is Friday but I'm terrible at optimism.
I'd give it all for a one-track-mind: a Pink Floyd song on repeat.
But sadly I dwell on anything subliminal,
and I'll believe anything I'm told.

And I remember age 9, carefully watching my father
who's lost it all to the power of intolerance.
I'd ask myself: how can he be mad
in a world where a summer night
can loosen the knots in your belly?
I bet he's never listened to the crickets chirp
below the glow of countless stars.
Or let the green grass slide between his fingers
so the moisture could soften his calloused heart,

far unlike my heart: weak & naive but
only when it mattered,
weak when I was scared to look at Playboy
and naive when I was scared not to.

Codependent

I cried again today,
kinda like a 6-year-old might cry:
palms coated with tears & snot.
It's the third time this week and
tomorrow is only Wednesday.
Not to mention I'm a 29-year-old man
with a wife but no clue how to love.
Rather I've learned to belittle,
utilizing the fewest words with
the harshest intent. A slut-cunt-bitch.
Slut and cunt describes the bitch.
The bitch describes my wife.

Our photos are only mimics,
just wall décor to humor the neighbors;
squares & rectangles suspended above more
squares & rectangles resting on
these ridiculous doilies that are almost
always synonymous with dust.

But without my wife,
there's not much I can handle.
Just a bird caught in a room
with a bleeding wing.
And I am way too hysterical
to tell you where it hurts.

Dorine Jennette

Personal

Woman with two cats and fear of the ordinary seeks charmer with changeable eyes.
I believe in cheese. You believe your own best moments. I enjoy paradoxes. You
enjoy power tools. You take your coffee black and balance eggs on their narrow
ends. You need not read. You hustle pool into an art form or a philosophy or both. If
you're a belligerent drunk, I'll get in your car. Must love enactments of martyrdom.
Must sing along with songs about begging and knees. Must lie with conviction.
Must refuse to leave.

Riddle, Sunday Afternoon

I am a sieve that will not filter you,
a grid for measuring leaves in shadow.
I am both cradle and swing.
Full of cold drinks, I cannot hold liquid.
I contain sleep, if I contain anything—
a mesh boat of floatable dreams.
In the breeze, I sway
between friends like a drunk.

You're devoted when warm, but winter wind
will fray me as it pries apart the dead stalks
and the gradually splintering fence.
What is it you're thinking of,
lemonade resting on your chest,
if not the impending cold?



Morgan Staley

Kimalisa Kaczinski

About a River

I've crossed the Mississippi
in a car over the bridge
but I have not tasted the water. Nor have I
felt it run through my fingers, or used the wetness
as a comb. I've seen many a river, floated on my back
in one, and hid like a child in the grass near another.
The Mississippi eludes me.

We drive near it so many times, Dwayne and I, and I always
ask, how far is it to the river from here? Or, where would I walk
to see the river? I'm curious about the flow, Dwayne tells me
about the dredging and the depth but I want to know,
does it sweep the dirt away? Would the water cleanse
my body like holy water? If I made the sign of the cross
with the water of the Mississippi would I be whole?

I still think about Riley and his short life. He only lived
three days. I held Riley before he died and his body was soft
like a spirit. At the funeral, I waited for everyone to leave
and I spent time with Riley, I touched his face. I wished
him a smooth passage and smiled that in such a short
period of time, he brought us an immense amount of joy. A miracle
some might say.

I'd swim in the Mississippi if I could, if there was a swimming hole made somewhere on the river, I would let my body sink and touch the bottom. I'm drinking coffee this morning, made right here in New Orleans and I realize how blessed I am to live here in this grand state. I think about all the states that this river passes through. How are lives defined by the river? That's what I want to know. If I touch the water of the Mississippi three times will a miracle occur?

We'll drive over it again today. I'll tell Dwayne I want to stop. Today is the day I will get out of the car, find my own way of getting there and splash some of the water on my face. I'll think about Riley more at the water's edge. But, I'll be smiling. I'll let the water cool the heat of my body. I'll maybe even pray, send a quiet message to God and tell him to take care of our boy. This is how all poems end.

I'll cross the Mississippi today.

Erren Geraud Kelly

Trying to explain a turducken to a Vermonter

the only time whites here have ever seen black people
was on the cosby show and nobody
wants to be bill cosby these days
i got a plate of red beans and rice and fried chicken
for 20 bucks at a restaurant on church street in burlington
i could make the same dish at home for
less than ten
a white girl tells me of her love for the blues:
she likes b.b. king and chris thomas and is looking forward
to seeing him perform, but she doesn't believe in interracial dating
at least white kids here think wu tang and 2pac is
true hip hop music, not macklemore and justin bieber
at an open mike poetry reading, the m.c.
scoffs at me, finds it hard to believe i've read
jim carroll and the beats
the cops follow me around sometimes, at random
my writing poems in coffeehouses is
considered a terrorist act
a church on college street has
a banner that reads "black lives matter"
and a phishhead has a bumper sticker
on an audi
every other person in burlington is a trust-funder
or a celebrity trying to lay low
or a flatlander who got tired
of the big city
a woman looks at me as i read and asks
"do you really read those books, or is
it just for show?"
i listen to a woman in a club singing
an amy winehouse tune and i realize
it's an imitation of an imitation of
someone who had soul
every other person looks as though
they stepped out of an american eagle
forever 21 or l.l. bean catalog
and in the trendy whole foods supermarket
even the white girls wear their pants
on the ground

Catherine Kyle

Absolution

I will only say this once. That when you told me where you really go, these long Saturday nights, confession clinging jagged to your lip red as a hook, the floor pillowed out, a sofa fort collapsing. That as each syllable clawed out of your mouth, drunk in slow motion but cocked and aimed to harm, the small part of me that still calls you papa placed its cold hands over its eyes, exhaled the scent of loosened harp strings, and slowly turned to quartz. A thing found muddy in earth. You swirl the black with the clinking of ice, a miniature ocean inhospitable to care. The surface of your face became an alien world, all curved line, worry, and sag. That the small part of me that still calls you confidant places its cold hands over its mouth, another pair over its ears. That we want to bear no evil—we eyes, we heart, we mind. That there cannot be enough hands for this. That there can never be enough hands for this. That I wonder what demon stumbled out of a pentagram, tooth and claw and wing erect, to claim my father, the man who once lifted me high on his shoulders to poke at the honey that leaked from the trees. That the smidgen of me that still calls you shepherd melted slowly, discretely, and ran down the sides of your stubble like purplish blood. Small crystalline droplets cascading like birth from a slack jaw heavy with guilt. There is no way to repeat these things. There can never be enough tongues. All have been used, their glass bottles emptied and shorn to the concrete in shards.

Catfish McDaris

Gringo Loco

Quick's sister-in-law in Mexico City found out he loved coffee, so she went to her pantry and got him a bag of special beans from

Chiapas, the coffee was very old and weak, 20 years later she came to the U.S. for the first time to

visit, Quick gave her a roll of toilet paper and a tube of toothpaste, his wife and her sister were not amused

When Quick went south again, they bought tacos from a taqueria, there were 2 tortillas wrapped around the meat, they asked

How he liked them, he said great except the meatless ones needed more salt and salsa and he'd rather eat goat sphincter.

Electric Gorilla

Quick was hustling nine ball, shooting with an eagle eye, it was from growing up on snooker and billiard tables in New Mexican domino halls

This dude got pissed off and pulled out a Saturday Night Special and shot him right in the ass, his lady dragged him to the hospital, he felt

Like he was between a dream and a nightmare, Quick was laying on a gurney waiting his turn, when they rolled in a fat heart attack victim, the nurses

Peeled off his shirt, the doc said, "Son of a bitch, this fucker looks like a gorilla" they applied the paddles and turned up the electric juice

His body jumped off the table like a fish out of water, he was flopping on the floor next to Quick, they jolted him again and his chest hair caught on fire

Lucky for him his lady had marshmallows and chopsticks in her purse, they were soon having a nice picnic minus the ants.

Douglas Nordfors

THE IRS

My first real job
was with the IRS, opening envelopes
and sorting the contents into categories.
On break, in the lunchroom, one fellow-

opener would say things to me like:
“Pretty boring work, isn’t it?” and “Why
is life so cruel?” You must remember
she smiled as she talked. Her elegantly

styled hair made her ears stand out.
Her hands looked to me infinitesimally
raw and bruised, like children
who translate the words time

for bed as time for nightmares,
or like shy, awkward adolescents
who fit in nowhere, who can’t take it,
pure and simple. She was married. Her clothes

looked beautiful on her. She would eat slowly,
hold an apple in both hands, for instance,
and breathe on it before taking a quiet bite.
Even now, she begins to laugh, motions to me,

points toward the trees beyond the window
and says things to me like: “Just think, there are
living things out there, and we’re here inside,
making a living.”

Luke Normsy

Bath Time

I always take my

notebook

in with us, but
by the time I

get
help you make
pee undress

sure you
shine my beard

trim my
press shoes
wash wipe our
your the floor
hair

your toys
clothes

dress you

dress me

We're done, with only
the poem of
us
to show.

Gerard Sarnat

Bedfellow Rumblings

I had long lost track of my relative until contacted
by a nursing home about Uncle Al (a confirmed
bachelor last I'd heard), whom the CEO stated
lived lonely alone. She contacted me because
I was known as a stick-in-the-mud lawyer
might tidy up a once non-trivial estate—
and by the way, assisted living expenses
Medicare plus insurance won't touch.

When I did arrive to reintroduce myself decades
since our previous visit, poor Alfred's strapped
into a Geri-chair with fish-eyed TV backdrop,
shares a room with a presumed random bozo
who turned out to be none other than his son.
My cousin inherited premature batshit crazy
on the brain—which as you can imagine
is just so very hard to get across to Fred.

Shuffling through the Tuscaloosa extended
care facility quotidian truth tellers—past taking
vacation days we owed some family up to present
sterilities of our growing aches and much lessening
pleasures (particularly rubbernecking looks at what we
just cain't do no more)—when's the last time I cooked for
anyone, including myself? Unable to answer that question
—I inquire about accommodations next door to Al and Fred's.

Dan Sklar

JUST WONDERING

How come all
of the poets
at the readings
and the
ones you hear
on the radio
are so
confident
in their writing
and think so
highly of
themselves
and their work?
I was wondering,
where is their
humility?
It seems to be
the same
with drug addicts
and alcoholics.

Tim Staley

Rose Colored Dreams

Rose Colored Dreams booked a room at the Ramada Palms.
He checked in as soon as he could and hardly felt his feet
touch the ground. He noticed bright flowers in the flowerpots,
too bright to be real, but he loved them as his brothers.

Rose Colored Dreams went to Walmart to buy some Armor All.
He went to the one that was until recently the newest, the one
on Valley Drive. He took a job there in order to write a novel,
investigative reporter style, he sucked pennies to calm his nerves,
he spent all his time watching them watch him.

Rose Colored Dreams went on a date with Compromised Dreams,
and you wouldn't believe it, Deferred Dream was their waiter.
He had a lisp. He didn't write anything down, he was that good.
Rose Colored Dreams spent the night talking about his penis
and all the other barnacles dragging his ego down.

Rose Colored Dreams heard bad news came in threes, then learned the hard way.
He never saw Compromised Dreams again,
her work kept her busy, but he didn't buy it. She had a little mouth
and he told everybody about it, he'd hold his hand in a tight fist
and say her mouth was that little.

Rose Colored Dreams almost died in a car wreck 14 miles long,
he did misplace his eyes that day. His car was in ruin
for weeks. He couldn't laugh at his sorrows
because he didn't know he was more than sorrow,
he was special, very special.

Smoke

A tangle of hormone and saxophone
when braces at trumpets scrape
when the bell of them is thrown up
like a cheerleader no one's left to catch

When her water
breaks her plans for afternoon
and puddles at my desk
I race to the restroom mirror
to see from my ears the rich
sinewy smoke of a crematorium

When I let them go
they swipe blindly at each other's
sex parts, cries half bovine/half bird
infect the intercom, signal alarm

Strange scents in the lounge
too many to manage, Ms. Mitchell
again mentions cut roses,
I still like them, she says,
even though they're broken
and burning from the inside out

Emily Strauss

Testosterone Poetry: To Bukowski

Don't write when you're stoned
on testosterone, dude,
it's dangerous words
you produce, too many fucking
cocks
and I shudder,
just *shudder*
to hear
balls
even mentioned —

what about Emily
Dickinson
poor chick all alone
in white lace and lawn
in her upstairs room?
Her sister had to search
for her thousand gems
after she died
and not one foul word —
just lots of dashes —
as if
she couldn't decide

I bet *she* never heard
the names of men's parts
writing so pretty
on delicate scented pages,
no fucking dicks
for her
though I would
have taken one [of her poems]
any day.

Marc Swan

A matter of perspective

Moving beyond the soft *queet-queet* of the fire-finch, the Niger flows into my arid dream. The warm current brings flotsam and flowers. I wonder at the blossoms, from what source, and the water birds—purple herons, long-tailed cormorants, egrets, even a flock of white-faced whistling ducks. In the distance, a tall shirtless man in light brown pants casts a net off the bow of his pirogue. Mud huts line the bank, an occasional cow, flanks sunken, skin mottled and gray. There are camels and herdsmen and young women with water jugs precariously balanced on covered heads. The sun beats into dust rising in slow eddies around their feet. Children laugh, sing and play as if this were a small town in Alabama, Louisiana, maybe Ohio.

Jeri Thompson

My Shoes

My shoes tell a story
I cannot live up to.
The red peep-toe slingbacks
Want to stride under full-moon and shooting stars.
The strappy taupe pumps
Mock me with their flirty bows
Remembering summer picnics while
Looking lost in the outback of my closet.
And the boots made for walking
Have gone nowhere for months.

Since I owned only athletic wear
I invested in three pairs of girly-shoes and dresses.
A summer of meeting, romancing,
Dining, dancing: the symphony, a cruise, a museum
And a mayor's inauguration followed.

Now it's winter and they sit, staring at me,
Wagging their tongues and crowding
The throat-line with their empty eyelets.
I assure them they will stride again.
They seem to relax, yet

I hear the rustling of restless ruching.

Lorna Wood

On a dingy street
Pink tulips spray from a tree.

The cat poses too.



Morgan Staley

Chella Courington

Men of Fire

"What do you think of my story?" Tom asked, sitting on the couch perpendicular to her.

"I like it. Your character reminds me of Abner Snopes," Adele said and handed him his manuscript.

"Snopes, the barnburner and horse thief? Are you kidding?"

"No. Your art collector has Snopes' need to control."

He stared at the draft, pen marks turning the pages into illuminated squiggles. She wrapped her fingers around the white mug. Should she zap it? Warm coffee took her home. He had asked her to edit in red but then slumped against the cushions.

"The collector's not a scoundrel whose son abandons him," Tom said.

"Sure, Snopes is openly dishonest. But so is your collector who buys cheap from street artists who paint flamingoes and funky chickens on plywood," Adele said. "The collector knows Outsider Art can claim big bucks in the right galleries," her hand still holding her cup, her voice rising a couple of notes. She couldn't argue with him. He was still an economist, logical from point A through the alphabet, condensing life to an equation and drawing her the graph.

"Arbitrage is the moral equivalent of arson?" he asked. "Aren't you forgetting there are laws against stealing and destroying property?"

"I didn't say that."

She answered so quietly that he leaned closer, asked her to repeat herself, took her free hand.

"All the collector has is passion, the same with Snopes. Men of fire without an art form," she said and let go of her cup, released his hand.

Jim Hodgson

Dangerous Dan

CHAPTER ONE

The guy looked like a runner. All the signs were there. The unconscious bending at the knees, the eyes darting to their corners. His forearms even drew up a bit at the elbows. Definitely a runner. "Dangerous" Dan McNamara did not feel like running. Not after this little twerp. Not after anyone.

"Look, let's take a minute to relax here," Dan said, then checked his communicator's readout for the puke's name. "Zunder." Zunder? That's a name? Nevermind.

Dan went on. "Nothing bad is going to happen, Zunder. Let's just take it easy, hm?"

"B-but you want to take me in!"

"Not technically true. What I want is to have a couple of beers and go to sleep."

Zunder looked unsure.

Dan said, "Maybe even have my way with myself first, know what I mean?"

"What is wrong with you?"

"Nothing. Well, plenty, to be completely honest, but let's get back on track. You are in a bit of trouble with Central, yes?"

Zunder squatted slightly.

"Sometimes I play with my nipples a bit." Dan said.

Zunder straightened. "This is bizarre."

"You're right, it is. No doubt. Just hang with me." Dan paused to ensure that Zunder was hanging with him. "As I was saying, bit of trouble, no big deal, really. Big stack of unpaid parking tickets."

"...And you're going to take me in!"

Dan sighed. This little experiment was in danger of becoming every bit as tiresome as just running the guy down.

"All right, have it your way. I'm gonna take you in."

Zunder emitted a squeak, coiled his body, and bolted. Dan drew his sidearm and squeezed the trigger at his hip in a single smooth motion. The weapon made a pleasing beep to indicate that it was out of charge and would not be helpfully stunning anyone just now.

Dan thought: "Balls."

Zunder was gathering speed, and would soon be around a corner in the alleyway. Dan cocked his arm over his head and threw the gun, correcting a few degrees for the turn. Zunder started to round the corner, and the butt of the gun caught

him just behind the right ear. He tumbled.

Dan trotted over, holding his belt up with his left hand, and put a knee on the dazed man to hold him down.

"I tried to talk you out of that," he breathed heavily, winded. Jeez, winded? He'd run, what, ten steps?

"Yeah, with your nipples!" Zunder said, holding his head.

"All right, all right."

Dan let him sit a minute with his hands to his head. When Zunder had gained a measure of composure, Dan put on the cuffs, which he then scanned with his communicator. That done, he signaled a pickup. Minutes later, a Central meat wagon descended into the alleyway. Two fresh cops got out. They busied themselves scanning the complacent Zunder and loading him into the meat wagon, but their eyes scanned Dan. "Dangerous" Dan, their eyes said. Get a good look, Dan looked back.

He'd gotten the nickname "Dangerous" by accident anyway. He didn't introduce himself that way, didn't print up business cards with it on. As far as Dan was concerned his name had become Fuck You.

He'd been an intelligence officer in the Scourge War. As far as anyone knew, an actual Scourge had never set foot on Earth, but they'd employed agents, who had all been controlled via technology. The agents did the usual spy stuff: sought out details on manufacturing, sent maps and photos of key targets on the ground, and generally acted like traitorous dicknecks. According to evidence, many of the human spies attempted to negotiate transfer off Earth before the Scourge exterminated humanity, but the Scourge never engaged them on that topic. They paid via transfer for information, but if a spy asked about how he'd ultimately be handled all he got was silence.

It seemed to Dan that if you wanted to make Earth money selling Earth information to the Scourge, you could, but if you were hoping to be saved from whatever the Scourge would ultimately do to humanity in the event of their victory, you were shit outta luck.

Dan had accepted the intelligence job because he was good on the street and because he wanted to do his part. Humanity was threatened, after all. He had some big successes ferreting out assholes. Some of the less talented guys started sarcastically calling him "Dangerous" Dan, probably to make up for a lack of their own achievements. It stuck, though. The media loved it.

But he hadn't been so dangerous when it counted, had he? Not when Marinka disappeared, and certainly not now. Fat and hungover, tossing his piece at low-level street punks so he didn't have to run.

Dan didn't feel particularly comfortable with achievement. He felt restless and pissed until he found whoever he was looking for, and he had the will to push until he got to the end. Most people just gave up. He didn't. That was all. But then Marinka disappeared and the light just exited his life.

The light's gone out, he thought. The corners of his eyes stung.

The fresh cops finished scanning and keying. One of them came over to scan Dan out. The cop was young, smiling. He had a mustache that started out thin under his nose, then became thick at the ends.

"He says you were talking about your nipples," Weird Mustache The Cop said.

"Sometimes if you say something someone's not expecting, if they're on the verge of running they'll stand still a second and think."

Why did he say that? Weird Mustache was just going to laugh it off. He was too young to understand this kind of work. To his credit, he didn't laugh it off, though.

"Huh," he said. "I'll remember that."

The other cop was just about to close the door when Dan noticed, over Weird Mustache's shoulder, that Zunder was smiling. He very nearly had time to wonder what the puke was smiling about.

Zunder raised his cuffed hands and touched his chest. There was a high-pitched whine, and Dan's eyes malfunctioned. A blurry smudge formed where Zunder was, then the smudge and Zunder were both gone. The pair of cuffs clattered to the floor in the meat wagon, which Dan heard rather than saw because he was now lying on the street with his arms around Weird Mustache, lying mostly on top of the man.

"What are you doing, McNamara?" said the cop, voice rising. Dan let him go. They both sat up.

Dan felt the need to explain as a hot flush. "Sorry, I uh. Saw the puke activating a device. Thought it might be explosive," he said.

The cop turned around to see the empty meat wagon and his partner looking in with disbelief. He scrambled to his feet. Dan took a moment, then got to his feet as well, joining the cops at the open rear door and looking at the empty cuffs.

"You ever seen anything like that?" Weird Mustache asked.

"Nope," Dan said.

"You two wanna hug in the street some more or should we call this in?" asked the other cop.

—

Some higher-ranked cops from Central came to the scene to look at the vacated handcuffs. They ran some scanners, but didn't find anything. The video feed from the meat wagon confirmed Dan and the cops' memory of events, and even provided clear video of Dan reacting to what he thought was an explosive device. The technician paused, rewound, and replayed Dan bunching his body and leaping onto Weird Mustache -- whose name turned out to be Paulson -- for everyone's benefit.

"Jeez, Paulson," the technician said. "I guess you know why they call him 'Dangerous' now. You almost got fornicated right here in the road."

Everyone laughed. Dan forced out a laugh, because it was tactically the right move.

Ultimately no one knew what had happened to the puke Zunder, but they had murders and robberies and whatnot to attend to. They filed reports and left it for someone else to worry about.

Dan was done for the day. He walked back to his hotel. The weather was shitty. The sky looked like farts. Puddles in potholes were murky and topped with the rainbow sheen of pollution. A light mist with clear aspirations of true rain failed utterly to improve itself.

One of the weirdest things about being a cop, he reflected, was how all the old guys told you you'd change. Then you get out of the academy, start working, and you feel normal. All of a sudden, few years later, you realize you've been changing this whole time. Attitude, whole perception of the world, everything. You can see it happening, but you can't stop it. Don't want to stop it, though, because you want to be like the old guys. Then you are one of the old guys, and you wish you could go back to the other side of the curtain.

Of course, he'd fucked it up even worse than that, but no one could've seen that coming. He wasn't technically let go from Central yet, but he'd been turned into a "contractor." His hours had dwindled, and he'd been forced to seek private employment, investigating cheating spouses, that sort of thing. Occasionally he'd get a fat corporate gig as a security advisor, but those had dwindled with his reputation, and, if Dan was brutally honest with himself, his appearance. He didn't look like security anymore. He looked like misery.

Dan's hotel room was dark and cool, and there were beers and some booze. Dan let the TV jabber until he was drunk enough to go to sleep, then climbed into bed with it still on.

CHAPTER TWO

In the morning, he lay on his side, and his belly lay with him. He could slide his hand under it, between his belly and the sheets damp with his sweat. He was in the gap now, sliding down the far side of one mountain of drink and not yet clambering up the next.

Sitting up, his body punished him. He felt hot. Feverish, even though his room was cold enough to store meat. He stood with effort, bent over to get his suit, then stood again, closed his eyes, and wobbled some.

When the pounding in his head subsided, he put one leg and then the other into the suit and pulled the zipper upward from his crotch. It hung just at his navel, not able to draw the two halves together over his belly. He sucked in mightily and pulled. A few teeth joined up, but nothing more.

He breathed for a while, gripping the zipper pull tab so hard his thumb and forefinger burned, then sucked in and shrugged his shoulders upward while yanking desperately on the zipper. It worked. He was in.

He went to the mirror and looked at himself. His hair was stringy-looking. Was it thinning? Probably. He smoothed it with his hands. It looked worse.

Outside in the sunlight his boots clomped along strangely. When he'd bought them their heels pounded each step with a satisfying beat. Now they had a drab, shuffling quality, and the right one even pinched his ankle awkwardly. He made a mental note to get some new boots.

He reached the window.

"The strong stuff," he said, leaning against the tiny counter to keep from falling.

The alien behind the window reached a tentacle toward a bottle, but didn't hand it over.

Xenobiologists had all manner of classifications for the various alien species who had wandered to Earth over the years, but not being trained in xenobiology, Dan had developed his own classification system. He thought of non-humans by what he estimated their mixture of three primary physical ingredients to be. Those being Man, Bug, and Snake.

For example, using his Man/Bug/Snake theory to classify this asshole, who had become so monumentally difficult of late when Dan required booze, you'd need nearly equal parts bug and snake, but very little man content, which gave him many appendages (owing to its buggishness), and a scaly hide and weird-looking eyes (thanks to the snake content), but no readily discernible face. The historical image of an alien from long ago, before Earth had made contact with actual aliens, with the long limbs and big heads, would be a great example of a mixture of the man and snake elements with very little bug. An alien with an equal mix of all three might have six limbs, a head, mostly soft or scaly skin, and eyes on stalks.

His least favorite were aliens with high bug content. He felt that their motives were hardest to understand, and he also resented their hard carapaces, which amounted to free heavy-duty armor. Additionally, they just looked gross.

"Don't do this to me again. Hand it over," Dan said.

The alien's face was unreadable. Was it a face? It seemed like a face. The alien wore a T-shirt with extra arm holes sewed into it and a name tag that read "Chuck." Dan knew the name to be a dead end, though, as it'd been wearing one that said "Brad" the day previous. Someone up the chain must think it prudent for customer-facing aliens to have human-seeming names.

Dan had always felt he had the power to read what any living being was thinking merely by staring into its face. He also felt that this ability had served him well in his years as a cop and intelligence agent, though some persnickety types might quibble with his methods. Staring into people's faces to determine meaning presented a problem, however, with species whose input facilities weren't grouped closely together, but this particular specimen had a cluster of ridges and bumps parked just north of a wide mouth. Dan could work with that.

The alien seemed to be coming down on the stubborn side of things. A woman and her young child stopped uncertainly a few paces behind Dan, their questioning faces reflected in the laser-proof window.

"Listen to me, you greasy pile of filth," Dan said, low and menacing. "You can do what you want, but I swear before God that I will run every one of your little cousins into Central before the day is out. There's no way those little shits are legal. You know it. I know it. And you know that I have friends. Now hand me that... fucking... bottle."

The alien seemed to decide that this wasn't his problem, and wrapped a tentacle around a bottle. It placed the bottle into his side of the security lock, but didn't push it through.

Dan looked up. The alien was motionless. A moment passed, then another. Dan simmered. He felt a hot prickling on the back of his neck. Was this fucker getting wise? Dan boiled.

"That's it, you-" he pounded the little shelf with a fist.

Just then the alien shoved the bottle out the hole in the window hard enough to

bounce it off Dan's gut. Dan flailed for it, bobbled it, then caught it by the neck.

"Ha, ha!" He turned, brandishing his bottle at the woman and girl. They didn't laugh. Their eyes rolled around in embarrassment.

"Ha ha haaa!" he said, this time supernova triumphant.

On the last "haaa!" syllable, his suit failed. The zipper split with a stern metal fart, ripping outward in both directions from his straining middle. His belly sprang free and jiggled, and the little girl screamed. Dan's free hand flew down to cover his pubic hair and the base of his cock, now peeking out of the split zipper just under his belly.

The woman hid her child's eyes and stared with horror, and Dan shuffled away toward his room, half hunched, mumbling apologies over his shoulder. He was almost to the safety of his room when he noticed that the door wasn't closed. Had he? No. He had shut it. Someone was inside.

He took a quick inventory. No gun, split suit, jiggly belly, bottle of drink, greasy hair, dick in the wind, pinchy right boot.

Protocol dictated that he had to kick the door open and swagger inside. After all, you don't get a nickname like "Dangerous" by peeking around corners or knocking politely. Whoever was in there knew he was unarmed anyway. Might as well make a show of it.

He stuck the bottle of booze down his suit. It rested against his pubic bone uncomfortably and the neck poked into his belly, but at least it obscured his pubes and cock. He kicked the door open, holding the bottle's neck with one hand. The door whacked against the flimsy room's wall and rebounded with a shudder. It swung to again, but not before Dan saw who was inside.

Dan pushed the door open and looked at his former partner. She looked like the only real thing in the room. Her suit's greens and yellows and blacks were vibrant, the leather un-scuffed, her dark hair shiny. She was taut, athletic, effective, with the same fair skin as her sister. She even still carried a black marker in a loop on her left arm, for writing notes. Who actually wrote things down instead of typing them, or even better, just forgetting them? Estrella did.

"There is," Dan said, deliberately, once he was sure the door was no longer a threat, "a problem with my suit."

"I see that."

He slumped into the room's solitary chair, which creaked a loud fart.

"That was the chair," he said.

"It really doesn't matter,"

"No, seriously. I can make it do it again. Watch."

"Look, stop doing that. Stop it! We found something."

Dan stopped thrusting. "What?"

She pulled her communicator from its clip and pulled out the screen, fixing it open. She crossed the room and handed it to him. A video waited to play. He looked up at her face, read sincerity there. He shrugged, sighed, and tapped the screen.

There was static, then a woman came into view. Her blonde hair pulled back into a ponytail, a blue cloth suit with a black collar. She was in a ship. She began to speak.

"Doctor Marinka Delilah, Central," she said. The video ended. Estrella's communicator showed a tiny green light to indicate that the digital signature of the

video was verified and correct. You saw fake videos all the time, posted on the Internet by jokers and jackasses for reasons unknown. Most showed an amber light to denote that the digital signature, or digisig, was questionable, not verified. Of course any encryption could be broken, but it took huge amounts of time. More time than had elapsed in the universe so far. Unless...

"Someone's found a way to hack her sig," Dan said.

"Maybe. Only one way to find out."

That meant going into the Southeast Region Central Police Headquarters. That meant going into Central looking like this. He might even have to go to a hospital. He looked down at his zipper.

"I need a little time to clean up."

—

When a person turned 18, they were put through what was known as a "Full Test." The procedure had a medical name, but it was of the kind that escaped Dan's brain as soon as he heard it. In order to full-test someone, you hooked them up to a series of machines which would explore every inch of their body, inside and out. Down every capillary, along every synapse, over every pore. The end result would be a very, very long series of numbers, also known as a digital signature or digisig. Medicine hadn't come up with a way to manufacture an entire human yet, most likely because it was so inexpensive and entertaining to produce them naturally, but if it had, every piece of information necessary to do so would be contained in their digisig.

The procedure was usually done once in early adulthood and never again. The effects of full-testing adults were not well documented, but teenagers usually survived. Some were judged too infirm to undergo the process and led impaired lives as a result, not being able to verify their own communications or financial transactions without the help of legal representation, which was expensive.

Since Dan and Marinka were married, their signatures had been encoded together for the purposes of joint banking, as well as predicting any genetic issues their children might face. The mathematics of cryptology were a far sight from the sphere of Dan's understanding, but the upshot was that using his digisig together with his and Marinka's joint digisig, they could work out whether the digisig used to sign the video of her was real.

The only problem would be if Dan was too far physically from where he'd been the last time he'd seen a doc. The thought filled Dan with a north wind of dread. He hadn't seen a doctor in years. He didn't want to be told what he already knew: that he was fat and depressed and drinking too much. He hoped he'd still be within the acceptable deviation from his last update, or however that worked, but his dread thought was he probably wasn't. If he wasn't, and he absolutely wanted to know whether the video was real, he'd have to submit to a full test. At his age. At his weight.

It would undoubtedly hurt like a sumbitch and ultimately be for nothing. Would he do it? Would he go through that when the video of Marinka was probably from some jackass who just wanted to yank his chain? He didn't know. He thought he didn't know. But he did know. Yeah, he'd go through it. Fuck.

Dan met Dr. Marinka Markov Delilah through her sister, his Central Police Force partner, Estrella Mary Delilah. At the time, Marinka was just graduate student Delilah, but there was little doubt she'd eventually win her doctorate. Like Dan, she was restless and pissed until she achieved. It was his favorite thing about her, just as it was his favorite thing about himself. It didn't hurt that she was attractive, had pretty blonde hair and a sweet, easy smile.

Estrella was not entirely comfortable with Marinka seeing Dan at first. Estrella and Dan had a trusting relationship at work, of course, but her baby sister was another story entirely. Dan knew he couldn't see Marinka casually. He had to be in it for the long haul or not at all.

He wasn't particularly good with women. In his experience, women would often seem interested, but when he expressed interest in them they suddenly acted shocked and annoyed. He wasn't a pig. He was sweet to women, just as he'd been raised to be, but they seemed to prefer rich assholes. He felt lucky to be free of that cycle when he met Marinka, and married her just two months before the Scourge showed up and everything went insane.

He was lucky in the war, if anyone can be lucky in a war. Since his job was to chase down assholes in and around Atlanta where he already lived, he got to serve humanity and sleep in his own bed with his own wife at the same time. Most of the fighting took place out in space, or at least in the sky. The Scourge blew up ground targets from time to time, but they didn't seem interested in landing infantry and marching them around.

Dan returned to his house late one night to find the front door open to the apartment he and Marinka shared. He stopped in his tracks and listened. There was no sound. A car started somewhere behind him, but that sound was a familiar one. A neighbor. He pushed the door open. The apartment was dark. He cleared it room by room. She must have been out, but where would she be at 1:15? And there was that feeling in his gut. Not a good feeling. Much too heavy, that feeling.

The feeling stayed and Marinka never surfaced. He went through the regular channels. He plumbed the depths of the seediest underbelly. He questioned the innocent, the guilty. There was nothing. Not a wisp. Not a ghost, not a whisper. She was just gone. She hadn't left him. She hadn't moved. She'd just been at her lab pursuing her work and then she was gone. Coworkers said she hadn't mentioned anything. She hadn't been acting strange.

Dan was prepared to divert every thread of the war effort under his control to the search for his wife. He was ready to beg and cajole, to steal if he had to, but two days later the Scourge retreated to their motherships and disappeared. The war was over. Humanity was saved. Everyone in his life was tearfully hugging one another, as he was trying desperately to get help finding his wife, but her story was just one of millions. Lots of people are lost, buddy. We're sorry.

So, it was up to him. Fine. He was used to achieving alone. Just get the problem in your teeth and don't let go until you've finished it. But he couldn't finish it.

The next thing he knew, she'd been gone a year. He tried to leave as much of their apartment just the way she left it, but he had to clean up. Things got bumped to new positions. Towels got used and replaced, washing her stray blonde hairs off them. Slowly, the ripples in reality that her presence had created went smooth.

Dan became shit at work. They sent him to shrinks. He didn't even want to leave the apartment. He started drinking nightly, just to ease his mind so he could get to sleep a little faster. The drinks started earlier and earlier in the day. Then he was drinking a bit in the morning to get by. He ordered pizzas and sat at home. He slept as much as possible. Watched the television more and more.

Estrella was hit hard too, but she'd been through loss once before as a kid. Her father died under mysterious circumstances when she was 11. Marinka had been 7, too young to really understand what was happening. The cops thought her mother had done it. They questioned. They leaned. It was messy and unnecessary, and Estrella never forgot how it made her feel. It made her want to be a cop herself, to handle those situations correctly and with dignity where able. That's how she tried to approach Dan's depression, but he couldn't be dislodged. He seemed determined to drink and be slovenly. It was a mess.

She felt responsible for getting Dan back on track. After a year and a half of Marinka's absence, she began strongly suggesting to Dan that he might see other women, at least as friends. Dan agreed, because it seemed like the right thing to do, to just move on, but in practice it was not an enjoyable experiment. He sensed that in order to attract women he needed to be fun, and his light was out.

Estrella decided after many months of cajoling and introducing that you can't help someone who doesn't want to be helped. Dan would either eventually turn around or he wouldn't. If he did, she could help. If he didn't, well...

CHAPTER THREE

Dan showered while Estrella waited outside. He put on his short summer suit, styled to look like a normal suit, but with the legs cut off for Earthbound hot weather. Being wet and chilly outside, it was far too cold out for the summer suit, but it was all he had. His white legs seemed to glow between the tops of his boots and the bottom of the short suit. He grabbed his split suit, threw it over his shoulder. He looked at the bottle.

He drank a long, long drink, gulp after gulp. Burns when you do it like that, but he needed to stock up. He set the bottle down and went out.

He met Estrella outside, held up the suit. "I need to make a stop to get this fixed."

"No problem, Central has a--"

"Not at Central. Before."

Estrella nodded and turned, heading for the parking tree.

Since real estate was at such a premium and most people couldn't afford a car, parking lots had long since been developed. Instead of those, the hotel had a tower with an array of pads sprouting from its sides, known as a parking tree. Estrella and Dan got into a lift at the base, and she hit a button. They were whisked upward, and stepped out

onto a circular walkway. She led the way around to the left, and they walked out onto the pad containing her Central cruiser. When the car recognized Estrella's digisig the outline of the doors glowed green.

Dan went around to the far side, tossed his suit in the back, and plopped into his seat. Estrella gripped the controls and piloted the cruiser off the pad into a designated climbing area. The engines hummed distantly. They reached the Eastward altitude, shown by the car's display projected onto the windscreen, exited the updraft, and moved forward.

Dan looked out over the city. He'd felt like a king in a car like this once. He wished he'd brought along his bottle.

"So, what's been keeping you busy?" Estrella asked.

"Oh, you know, this and that. Private work, mostly."

"Really?"

He turned to look at her. She was looking out the window. "No, not really. Mostly I drink."

"The hell is that?" Estrella said, staring into the display.

"Yeah, I know. I gotta cut back. I mean to, it's just--"

"Not that, that!" she pointed at her display.

A red warning winked to indicate that a nearby car was ignoring the prescribed directional altitudes. She thumbed a button to change the perspective of the virtual display to a wider scope. A red car-shaped marker was angling downward from the North altitude plane.

"Some old lady asleep at the sticks?" Dan offered.

"Maybe," Estrella said, but then the car's display lit up with screaming warnings. The sound of the rushing air changed slightly. A split second later, a muffled crack and whine came from the rear. Laser strike. Dan put his hands out to brace himself against the dash and stared at the display. The plummeting car behind leveled off on their altitude.

"Nope, they mean business. Hang on."

Dan held on. The intensely annoying thing about being fired upon with modern lasers was that they didn't make much noise, weren't in the visible spectrum, and could cut through anything in almost no time. Only the astronomical expense of weapons-grade lasers kept every cop in Central from having his tits burnt off in the field.

Estrella whipped her head around the car, decided she had clear air, and pushed the controls. The car dove straight down, plunging through the South altitude first, then the West. She yanked back on the sticks and they leveled off at parking altitude. This was a dangerous height at speed, like doing seventy on a sidewalk. She dodged the tops of parking trees and swung wide around people movers. A few irritated horns blew.

Estrella keyed in to Central. A tone sounded to let her know she was online and her digisig recognized. A window appeared on the lower left of her display showing a man's head and a headset.

"Officer under fire," she said. "Unknown car. Lasers. Likely ultraviolet. Coming in hot at parking level"

The man's eyebrows shot up, but his training overtook him. "Read you," he said, punching a sequence of buttons. A mile in the distance, Dan saw the lights on the top of

the Central building go from yellow to red. Some flashed. Others whirled. Civilian cars inside the mile radius were gliding to a halt at their current altitude, stopped in place by the Central signal. The chasing car's computer was hacked. It ignored the All Stop signal, and lit them up again. This time there was a whine and loud clatter from the rear of the car.

The car pitched nose up and to the left. The left rear engine must have been killed. Estrella corrected quickly, but the chase car got in a shot while they were pitched up. Dan saw the glass of the windscreen disappear in a perfect circle near the center of the car. He jerked his legs to the right just as Estrella corrected their attitude. He was thrown forward, and there was a brief searing pain high on his left arm. Two cracks and two whines sounded, barely audible now over the air rushing in the hole.

He swore, and his right hand came up to feel wetness. He didn't look. It didn't feel too bad.

"Pressure!" barked Estrella, as if Dan didn't know what to do with a wound, then over her headset "One wounded!"

Ahead, cop cars were lifting off the Central building in a swarm. They were mere hundreds of yards away. The car's display lit an approach path to show them where to land, on an emergency pad away from the main parking tree. It also showed that the chase car was peeling away.

The first of the cop cars were flashing past them at full speed. "Get that fucker," Estrella said. She slowed her car, which lurched to and fro as the computers attempted to correct for the malfunctioning engine. They slowed over the emergency pad, scraped the car's rear, then set down heavily.

Estrella sat back in her seat and slowly let go of the sticks.

"Welcome back," she said.

A man can kick a chemical addiction. It's a simple thing. Not easy, no, but simple. You just don't do that one little thing this time. You leave next time for next time. After a while you've strung together a bunch of this times and then it's easier. That's chemicals. But war, now. Action? That is a different thing.

Dan stomped down the half dozen steps from the Emergency pad. Four medics stood by, two for Estrella and two ready to tend to him. One already had a medical implement of some kind in one half-raised hand. Dan brushed past them.

"Hey!" the implement holder said. "Hey, you're bleeding!"

"Who, me?" Dan barked over his shoulder.

Head high, right hand still pressed to his arm, he strode through the throng of cops rushing every direction, into the top floor, and then down the steps to the right, medics trailing behind. He wanted to get as far into the building as he could, and he knew the medics wouldn't be ready for this maneuver. He wanted as many cops as possible to see that he was wounded. It would go a long way to make up for his protruding belly, stringy hair, and pasty legs poking out of his suit.

The medics stopped short at the top of the stairs, calling down after Dan. "Sir!"

One had to stop to mind the stretcher, but the other plunged along after Dan, who was clomping down the stairs in his boots, white legs working smartly. He passed more cops milling around excitedly, their eyes lingering on his wound, which was starting to hurt quite a lot now. His head felt a little loose for a second, but he hung on.

He figured he'd gotten far enough in, nudged a chair back from a lounge area table with a foot and sat. The trailing medic descended on him, his communicator buzzing with questions from his partner.

Dan held his hand away slightly from the wound. It pulled a bit. Cops gathered around to look.

"Yep, okay. Let me get you some skin," the medic nodded tersely, then into his communicator: "Fourteenth."

"Any special reason we couldn't do this on the roof?" the medic asked.

"Yes." Dan said.

On the wall, a display glowed to indicate that the second medic in the lift had changed its direction.

Dan's breathing was slowing to normal, but the glow that came with action was still hot in his spine and his chest. It drew his head down, made him look out from under his brows at the world. It made him sneer.

The lift dinged open and the second medic pushed out the stretcher. The medics gave Dan a look to see if he was going to resist. He nodded, breathed, stood with the help of a medic under either arm, and then got onto it without fuss, wondering if anyone could see up his shorts.

Kevin Munley

Falling Down

Maybe mom was right. Maybe he had damaged his brain with beer and destroyed his heart with cigarettes. After watching him sleep like a suckling pig for hours and then throwing up all kinds of bright greens and yellows into our toilet like a bewildered beast, I never touched the stuff. My childhood was shit because of it. You wouldn't touch the stuff either if you saw your old man falling down the stairs screaming at invisible demons.

Sure, it was difficult for me when I first got to school. Everyone wanted to know why I didn't drink. Some guys in particular can be pushy. You know how those jock types can be? It makes them feel uncomfortable if others aren't drinking with them. Jana was good about it though. She didn't ask. We'd just do dinner and a movie and let the rest have their keg parties. Eventually I told her about my family. But despite her support, I started hearing this voice at night. With Jana beside me, I would try to sleep and a whispery hum would distinctly resonate between the buzzing of the dorm room heater.

"My son. Patrick, my son."

According to my dad's case manager, he was off his medication again, which meant another lengthy hospital stay. My mom hadn't spoken to him in years, but I still kept in touch—keeping emotional distance, of course. I had his case manager's number and she kept me informed of his progress, or lack of progress.

I had to see him today though. I had to. I know it's crazy, but before my mom, before a psychiatrist, and even before Jana whom I trusted and loved so much, I had to talk to Dad. I needed to talk to him about that whispery "Patrick" I hear in my ear. I needed to find out what he hears. I had that ugly word in my head for days now, and I kept going back to it like a dry, unscratchable itch: *schizophrenia*. Even the mumblings of that word make children cry and dogs whimper. Jesus Christ, my family...

The psych unit was typical of them. People in robes wandered in and out of their rectangular rooms like ranched cattle. The nurse's aide that led me down the hall was a giant with a neck that would put a bull's to shame. He could and should be working as a bouncer somewhere. But instead he was here to restrain this unit's regulars and bounce them off the walls at his leisure. I'd ask him how my dad was doing, but I got the sense he didn't know or care.

The common area was empty except for my dad watching some awful talk show. He was wearing those stupid hospital socks that keep you from falling down; his feet were up on another chair as if he were the Goddamned prince of the psych ward. I never understood those socks; it was like some depressive somewhere had tried to

commit suicide by falling down. If all the pills and booze hadn't killed my dad by now, he had little to fear from a fall.

It was just me and him, which was perfect. As I pulled up a chair beside him, he barely looked away from his show—*Maury* or *Montel* or something.

"Hey Dad. How are you?"

He gestured toward the trashy rednecks yelling about a paternity test on the TV and asked, "Do you think this is about me?"

"It's not about you, Dad." But he didn't look convinced, his eyes glued to the spectacle. There was a deep sadness in those eyes, which oozed down into dark flesh pockets underneath.

On the screen, a heavy-set woman was screaming at her husband that their child was his. "Just look at his face and tell me? You're the only one with a nose that crooked!" she screamed, her fingers flailing in dangerous sweeps around the stage. The audience loved her for it and hooted and hollered approval. In the background, between the estranged couple, their child was on a live feed. The camera cut to the kid's nose to illustrate the point; the audience loudly cooing at his cuteness.

My dad wiped away tears from his eye. Was he moved by this child's situation? I couldn't recall him ever this being emotional over me, who he should have lost to DCF hundreds of times in my youth.

The supposed father of the baby didn't look impressed by the nose evidence. He pointed and screamed about the difference between his forehead and the child's.

"You sure they didn't write it about us?"

"Nah, it's a reality show. Dad, you know those voices you hear, are they ever about me?" Pretty direct, I know. But I've found this kind of directness worked well with Dad. Often, if I wasn't upfront with my questions, he wouldn't catch the drift and we'd get nowhere.

"They've got me on a new medication in here. I don't hear the demons now. I still hear the monsters. But the demons are gone. Do you think that's your mother? You know your mother slept with a monster." A big, wild beast of a woman was welcoming the other possible father of the baby onto the show. In seconds, the two men were on each other, pushing and pulling like a pair of rabid roosters.

"What the fuck, Dad?"

He turned to me with fire in his eyes now. The sadness was gone, if it ever was there. Here it comes. Whatever comes out of his mouth now is sure to be a pearl of schizophrenia. I grew used to these little psychotic fortune cookies of wisdom in my youth.

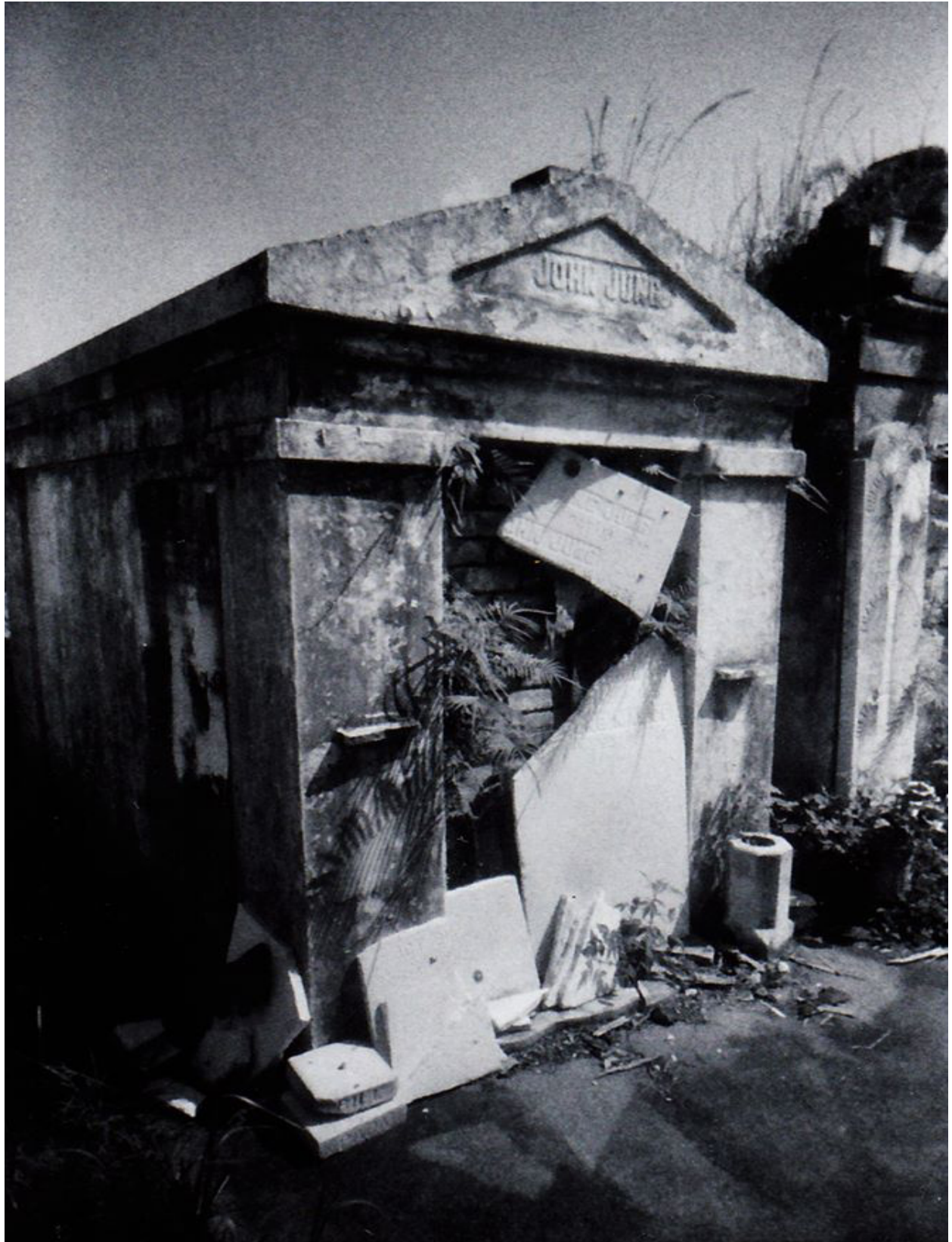
"Don't swear and don't call me 'Dad.' I'm not your dad. It's that monster that crawled out of the basement and laid in bed with your mother. He fucked her and then you popped out."

On the screen, *Maury* or *Montel* opened an envelope and, as if it were Oscar night, the result of the paternity test was announced. The winner celebrated by spiking his chair to the ground and dancing demonstratively. He thanked his family and friends and was led off stage by the host. The father sat quietly, while the mother continued to scream, "I told you so. I told you so." A child was being thrown to the wolves, and it was captivating television.

I didn't have much to say to the old booze bag after that. My dad was whispering to himself now about monsters and demons and I sat there listening myself. Maybe I could hear what he was hearing too? Was it "*Patrick, Patrick*"? I heard fuck all, just the sounds of his quiet mutterings. It was pointless to visit him.

My dad's psychiatrist was nice enough to talk to me before I left the hospital. We talked about my dad's progress and he told me about new trends in schizophrenia treatment. They wanted to try him on this new drug recently approved by the FDA. The doctor was very hopeful. The old drug targeted his depleted dopamine receptors, which they used to think caused schizophrenia, whereas this new drug would target his misfiring glutamine receptors, which they now think causes schizophrenia. On my way out I crossed paths with an array of patients shuffling through the halls like the animated dead. Their bodies were rotting from the inside out from the Thorazine and Clozaril. Maybe the doctors would try ECT if that didn't work? I can't believe that is popular again. The doctors were trying, but it all seemed so desperate. I didn't expect much from this new drug.

Afterward, I walked down toward the lakefront. The weather had brought all the families out. Fathers were playing with the children; the men were young and full of hope and care for their kids and the children were too young to say otherwise. The streets were filled with commotion and cars. I couldn't hear past the wall of sound created by honks and shrieks. Only the blue sky was quiet. I thought I heard from somewhere up high, "My beloved son." But I wasn't listening anymore. Jana would be waiting for me, so I only lingered for a second and headed home.



Morgan Staley

Mads Kellaway

A Hobby to Humble Me

3.22.15

It starts with my friend Josh, who is very confident, while I'm like cereal that's been soaking in milk too long. Nothing about me is crisp, but Josh, he does push-ups for fun and he wasn't scared at all about running this stretch of the Arkansas River in a two man inflatable raft. This Colorado stretch from Fisherman's Bridge to Hecla Junction has 14 rapids, two of which are Class IV. Class IV means "intense, powerful but predictable rapids requiring precise raft handling in turbulent water." This doesn't worry Josh at all.

At first the water's calm. The sun's out and we're waving to people fishing. I'm up front, and Josh in the back. The river's wide and I let the old confidence out, saying stuff like, "Hell, we could do this stretch at night," or, "Hell, we should have brought beer." Right after Ruby Mountain we pull up on the sandy shore and eat lunch. I say, "This river's boring. We definitely should have brought weed."

Back in the raft the miles slide over river stones like clouds over snowy peaks. Then Browns Canyon starts to narrow and the river picks up speed and boulders suddenly appear: over the water, on the water, and "lunch counters" hiding under the water. Relentlessly down river, obstacles rush at us, faster, the current, the froth, the howl of water into a chute slamming, the wind shoving, a turn, another turn, a turn we almost don't make. I'm thrown two feet into the air and come down on the right side of the raft; somehow I recover without going in or losing my paddle. "That was a close one," Josh says. I say something about my amazing balance.

We go, rapid after rapid. We're in a rapid, we're looking at the rapids ahead of us, we're looking at rapids behind us. Wow, this is fun. I remember this, this is my hobby. I love this, etc. Next thing we know our raft is sideways and folding. The snowmelt of the Collegiate Peaks pressing hard into us, pulling us from our raft. The raft is folding in on us, maybe I should let go, I'm gonna let go, I have to let go, "Josh! I'm letting go!" and I'm sucked into the current, spread like lukewarm butter over the rapids and lunch counters, over and under, tumbling headlong like a fragment of styrofoam over the waves, trying desperately to get my feet in front of me. Always put your feet in front of you to protect your head. It's cold in here. Where's my paddle, where's Josh, where's the raft? I'm charging down this rapid then another one and I'm mostly above water holding on to my paddle, on to my breath, a quarter mile, a half mile...

The river slows enough for me to fight the current to a shore of slippery boulders. Somehow Josh manages to not lose the raft. We shake it off, but not all cute

like Taylor Swift. We know this is part of paddling. We balance for a minute on the rocks until our bodies stop shaking. We get back in the raft, what else can we do with canyon walls so high on either side? When I'm at work dreaming about running rivers, this is my favorite part of paddling a river: you have to go forward no matter what, there are no guards to help you, there are no emergency exits, no going up, just down.

We turn a bend in the river and all I see is boulders. It's like the river just disappears into a wall of boulders. Where the hell did the river go?! I scream to Josh, "Aim right!" and suddenly we're sideways in a white fang of water, the raft folds again like a banana in a vice, and I'm in the middle of the raft and have to let go, but where? I'm sucked under the raft. I haven't told my wife or my mom this part. You don't tell your wife or your mom this part, if you ever want to paddle again.

But here I am, paused, right in the middle of this part, under the raft, underwater. I look up and see the bottom of the raft. How long am I under there, a second? A year? An MFA? A decade? How long am I caught in the palm of that rapid, in the fist of that force? I don't have my paddle. I don't have anything but a breath I don't remember taking. I'm not a father or a lover or a son or a brother, I'm not anything but letting go. What am I holding onto? A pretense? A hobby? A dare? I let my body go and shoot into a dark tunnel of stone that spits me out a ways downriver. And the water's speeding as I gasp for air and the same old questions: where're my feet, where's my paddle, where's Josh, where's the raft, where does this end? I see my paddle floating behind me. With my left hand I grab the paddle, with my right hand I stroke hard for the shore.

On shore I find Josh and the raft. Even though we have wetsuits on we're shivering, mostly out of fear. It's 60 degrees and sunny. We both want to quit. Screw this hobby. Whose idea is this hobby? I start looking down at the river stones, so peaceful there in the shallows. So austere and relaxed. I'm tired of moving. We get back in the raft, shattered and weak. We get back in the raft reminded that nature has the upper hand, and with that upper hand she has spanked us, twice. Maybe I deserve it. We get back in the raft trusting in life's softer moments, while simultaneously feeling betrayed by the hard ones. I guess if it were easy to do, to get back in the raft, it wouldn't interest me much as a hobby. I need my hobbies to be humbling, sort of like Jack London does.

As our takeout, Hecla Junction, approaches in the distance, Josh says, "I didn't want to tell you, because I needed you to be confident, but a river guide told me last week that we could expect to be flipped twice." I don't blame him. I wouldn't have told me either.