

# THE WEST 4TH



send submissions to [thewest4th@gmail.com](mailto:thewest4th@gmail.com)

MAY 2025

# Founding Statement from the Editor

April 15th, 2025

As a student of history, I have a unique responsibility to identify gaps. Gaps in stories, in analyses, in modes of thought and bodies of writing. Put simply, it is my job to identify a gap and do the work to fill said gap - the work of an historian, therefore, in such abstract terms, is not only to conduct thorough analyses of the past, but to also connect the work of other historians, writers, thinkers, etc. Which brings me to the purpose of creating this literary zine. The West 4th, I mean.

There exists unique and somewhat disparate physical concentrations of artists in this little area of Manhattan, between the Music Inn and Washington Square Park. These are two essential hubs of contemporary artists within the West Village. Washington Square Park is a chaotic soup of artists, skateboarders, singers, Jesus Freaks, German tourists (a lot for some reason), NYPD, the insane, dog walkers, etc. Music Inn is more subdued, curated, inviting yet intimidating, more an excuse to drink than to perform, and, yet, an equally vibrant and artistically important space for young and old artists, those performing in front of others for the first time, and those that see a crowd and just think of that Operation Ivy song (The Crowd) (#relatable).

These two groups should be more connected. Ideas should be shared, writings should be proliferated. The West 4th will not only be a place for writers and artists to share their work, it will also serve as a new artery of the West Village, a paper-bound superhighway for people to know more about each other, their work, to be inspired and to continue to place their energies in the good things.

I will only insert my own writing very infrequently. Or as an Editor's Statement. Etc. I simply want to create a space for others to be and present their unique selves. I happen to think the best way to do this would be through a literary, curated zine that consists of local artists' works.

Submissions can be anything written down. Anything with words in it. It could be a poem, essay, letter, short story, excerpt from a larger story, a screenplay, etc. You get the idea. We will also be accepting visual art as well, such as photos, paintings, etc (Digital formats, of course).

So consider submitting a piece of something to The West 4th. For All Things Written Down and Thought Up.

Jack Kontarinis, Editor

*our*  
**POETS**  
*and*  
**BARDS,**  
**SCRIBBLERS**  
*and*  
**SCHOLARS**

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MAXWELL QUINN  
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# COLUMNS

## By the Brooke

*Brooke Weiss*

In the summer of 2023, I lived in San Francisco, and something terrible happened. I was scammed out of \$1,726.33. But it wasn't the lost money that hurt the most. It was the fact that I got got. It was a psychological attack and I was tricked into thinking my debit card was scammed so that I would answer a (fake) call from my bank. The moment I knew my suspicions were right, it was just too late. I knew how this shit happened to other people and how these people operated - and I still fell for it. They attacked my bank account and my integrity. It hurt.

However, something magnificent came from my anger and frustration of the incident: a solution! Imagine a world where your debit card number can't be used against you. It goes deeper than just debit card or bank account information, though; your social security number, date of birth, home address, email address, driver's license number, passport number, health records, insurance numbers... the list goes on. All of this data is gathered from multiple inputs on the internet and sold as a commodity - all without our control. We as normal people are in a data war against organizations that have collected and sold our data against our will, or failed to safely store it for our protection. Currently, there is no way to really protect ourselves from this.

My proposed solution: implementing blockchain technology as the backbone of the infrastructure by which the economy is run on. Put data on the chain!

I am aware that blockchain is a mysterious buzzword that is passed around most frequently with the concept of crypto currency. Crypto currencies are digital financial assets that use blockchain technology as a ledger for recording transactions, which gives them a decentralized, encrypted, and immutable nature. But crypto is just blockchain's introduction into our vernacular. There are so many other use cases it can be applied to which would help maintain integrity within a transactional system by implementing a decentralized structure that gives power to the people. The solution would create a singular access/input point for our data, only accessible through our own verification, and would be traceable at every point it interacts with other systems on a blockchain thereafter. We could be our own data brokers! Our information wouldn't be able to be used against us. Imagine: data security and culture would change as we know it. That's powerful.

In order to dream so far in the future, I recognize that this idea/concept is decades ahead of its time. The technology has a long road of improvements/developments ahead before it gets to this point. There is a massive knowledge gap around blockchain where the only people that really understand it are the computer engineers behind its code. There will be a cultural tipping point that will come with the advancement of the technology, where people can interact with and exist on the blockchain without needing to understand it. When that happens, and it is integrated into our everyday economy, everything will change. The potential for the future of civilian protection and autonomy is promising.

I feel as though a blockchain conversation is only a fair introduction for this column, but I'll be sure to keep you on your toes. Until the next one :)

## In New York

*Alexander Norton III*

Last night, I went on a date at a French restaurant's happy hour in Harlem. A lovely guy, a well-to-do musical theatre actor who has made his dreams come true in New York. But last night, the date wasn't the only person of interest.

On the walk over, I heard drum beats. Duh, duh, duh duh. Straight ahead, a circle of people tapping bongo drums to a lively rhythm. Two older women, dressed in African diaspora clothing of bright oranges, greens, and yellows, dancing together in the middle of the circle, smiling and having a good time. Across the street, another woman chats away about her guy troubles to a friend. I look see two gay guys powerwalking to the subway station. Late for a 7:30 PM Broadway show?

I arrive at the restaurant, and it's packed inside and outside. Young women are chatting away about boys, older couples are relaxing with glasses of wine watching the passersby, first dates are prodding their food (and each other) awkwardly despite their sexual tension or lack of it. My date is dressed in a navy blue, long-sleeve shirt woven in with Winnie the Pooh, Eeyore, and Piglet. Something evoked the 90s. The conversation was engaging: we talked about our favorite musicals (mine is *Into the Woods* by Stephen Sondheim), vacation plans, and exes. But what happened next overshadows our conversation.

At the table next to us, a woman and old man loudly harangue each other on politics—was Barack Obama a good president, democratic norms, which one of them is a real progressive, etc. It was so loud I had to lean in to hear my own conversation. It's clear they've had too much to drink. All of a sudden, the woman spills her sangria on the ground and almost falls off her chair in an effort to move the glass upright. We're just side-eyeing and chuckling at the mess. The waitress quickly gets another glass of sangria for the woman.

Later on, after the old man heads to the restroom, the drunk woman interjects into our conversation, asking us to watch her drink when she leaves for the restroom afterward. The old man is "95% progressive but wants to badmouth Obama." She believes a man of her political alignment should already be respectful enough to not spike a woman's drink, but she wants to be extra safe just in case. Fair enough. "Call me Auntie," she says to us with a wink as she departs.

Nothing malicious happens. Auntie comes back and thanks us. As she gets up to leave, she offers to pay for our round of drinks, because "you guys are so handsome, and this would help save our democracy." A serious notion—our democracy.

And I won't refuse a stranger's act of kindness. But is it really a political act to go on a date with a romantic interest on a warm spring evening? Is it really a political act to pay for a stranger's drinks?

The date did go well, by the way.

Anyway, there is so much life, so much vibration from the varied people who make up New York. It makes me love being here. And I learned something important to pass on to you, tongue in cheek, of course. Paying for a gay man's drinks is your civic duty as an American.

# COLUMNS

## On Gothic

Joseph Apuzzo

“Gothic” may be considered in two general senses: the one anthropologic, the other aesthetic. In the first place, Romans used the term to designate certain Germanic tribes whom they regarded as antithetical to themselves. This is all that concerns us anthropologically. It concerns us only to illustrate the origins of “Gothic” as a significant early counterculture or counteræsthetic in the history of Europe. The torch of classical civilization that Greece passed on to Rome was faced with the specter of invaders from the primæval forests of Germania bearing their own “primitive” culture. One consequence of Rome’s fall circa 410 was for the Gothic spirit to take root within the remains of the Empire and thereby spread its branches over every facet of European life for the next millennia. High mediævalism was the outgrowing of antiquity. Dark ages preceded Enlightenment as destruction necessarily precedes creation. Such is the natural law of revolution.

So much for the revolutionary history of Gothic. Its revolutionary essence, what its spiritual ascendancy has wrought in this world of ours and may once more; this is of vital import. For Gothic is simply a name for the righteous free expression of the human soul glorified without impediment. It is a force whose genesis is preternatural, immaterial; one with our own; ancient as the green mystic earth; resonant with the wild airs substratospheric; howling like the hills round the mountain struck by John Henry’s Hammer.

*John Henry said to his captain, “Sir,  
A man ain’t nothing but a man  
But before I let a steam drill beat me down  
I’ll die here with my Hammer in my hands!”*

Now John Henry was a steel-driving man. He had to break rock for bread. With every strike he remade the earth and it made him in turn. Gothic is the exchange of life force. Its currency is the matter of the universe itself. There is no other marketplace or economy than this, encompassing the whole of being, in which all is unified: all things built into and blooming out of one another. John Henry is born of stone and realizes himself in it. In earlier times his Hammer would have made arches in the sky instead of holes in the ground. It would produce an image of nature above itself in reverent craftsman’s hand instead of negating it from below.

Gothic is strongest felt in those youthful periods of human history when the spirit of the age enflames itself with the desire to die drowning in the endless love of the Infinite External whence came all things; whither tend all things, whether conscious or otherwise; apparent to all who closely attempt to see, imperceptibly enough, through the veil of guiding motivations working at bottom of all struggles and doings in this world, whether in human society or outside of it. Remark that it takes solitude to comprehend kinship. Walk in nature; let the silence of the stars and the wan moonlight illuminate your path, forest murmurs singing in universal rhythm and the holy key.

## In Our Defense

Jack Kontarinis

Last Thursday, I was sitting outside of the Music Inn and drinking beer. An older woman walked by. I made eye contact with her and she shifted her bags around on her shoulders and approached me.

“This used to be a club right over here, we would go dancing in the 80’s,” she says.

“Oh cool,” I say.

“This neighborhood has changed, you know, it’s changed a lot,” she says.

“I’m sure,” I reply, tasting Heineken.

“For the worse, you know. This younger generation is screwed. They don’t have any culture like we did.”

“Oh, I think I’d disagree,” I say.

“No, it’s true,” she says, a little irked, “all they do now is drink and throw up.” She makes a gagging motion.

A few years ago, I might have agreed with this random boomer. I used to get really nostalgic for the past and think “oh my, hum hum, life was so much better in the neolithic era,” etc.

But I’ve realized two things within the past few whatever units of time. (1) Nostalgia is bullhonkey topped with ballyhoo. (2) Our generation is just as culturally productive as any other.

(1) Whenever we think back to some lost era, it is always coated with a nice glaze of irrationality and simple naivety. Sure, the 50s seems cool, what with the cars and the way they talked and all that. But racism. The Bomb. Millions of souls recently extinguished. Etc. Any time period that is romanticized, even a time from your own life, is inevitably sent through your brain’s Shred-Master 3000®<sup>®</sup>, and you just get the nice little slivers of what was good. So while maybe my snapchat memories makes it look like I had a lot of fun in high school, I also couldn’t talk to a girl without getting a blood clot. Etc.

(2) Our generation is just as culturally productive as any other. True. It’s just in completely different ways than that random pissed-off old lady could understand. First of all, she was literally standing outside a cultural hub (the Music Inn) for the neighborhood. Sure, all the apartments around it are wildly expensive. But the people that do the creating still exist, just as they always have. But, in a place like New York, you just can’t really live like the Beatniks or Bob Dylan anymore. At least in Manhattan. Rent is no longer \$30 on Bleecker Street. So the creatives live elsewhere, now, and a lot of culture now lies outside of boomers’ grasps, like on the internet.

It just pisses me off when they say stuff like that. It’s sad because it shows the person hasn’t really tried to understand what the new culture is. They see a reel or two or watch Fox News and call it a day. And I know for a fact that that woman who so casually dismissed an entire generation felt the same indignation that I felt when her parents, who might’ve been born before the telephone, told her the same thing. That jukeboxes were ruining America, or that video games make young boys want to kill people, etc. I wish people would think just a little bit harder sometimes about what they are saying.

# Exchange

# The Bench of Perpetual Doom

By Maxwell Quinn

by Clementine Braddock

A creature whispers to its comrade  
 It's been discovered that creatures whisper.  
 It sends a timid signal to its compatriot.  
 It assumes this other fella is its compatriot.  
 The compatriot whispers back.  
 There's a trust forming. Though neither realizes this is what's happening, there's a trust forming.  
 They start whispering more personal messages. Leaning closer to each other at the bar.  
 They end up confessing all sorts of personal information. It makes them feel good to do this.  
 They share their lives with each other. They pour their hearts out, and then walk away.  
 They walk away and go into noise. Noisy, thick world.  
 But they are lighter. Lighter now that they've poured some of themselves out.  
 It's interesting, because they haven't literally poured out any material weight, to make themselves lighter.  
 They've shared information, and walked away feeling lighter.  
 But the thing is— they've picked up more information. The information of the other.  
 Somehow this doesn't weigh them down the way their own stuff does. It can sometimes make them feel lighter to pick up the information of others.  
 We don't feel the weight of our bodies so much when we're watching movies. This information we're receiving, the information of others, does something to us. We like it.  
 We ask strangers what they do for a living.  
 We ask them where they're from. We hear about their divorce. Heavy, but somehow easy.  
 We feel at ease during exchange. We like to exchange.

two benches down  
 (& one lamp post leaning)  
 i sit  
 not for shade  
 not even for the lovers  
 (open-palmed & throat-laughing)  
 who peel fruit with their teeth  
 i sit  
 because the pool remembers  
 what i forget  
 a boy once swam in june &  
 never made it to july—  
 someone carved  
 a hole in the world  
 too big for my mouth  
 i've been strangled here  
 twice  
 once by a pair of hands  
 that mistook softness for surrender  
 once by a memory  
 that clutched tighter  
 some days the air tastes like  
 nickels and prayer  
 some days a child laughs  
 & it sounds  
 like breaking glass  
 underwater

# Living Things

By Maxwell Quinn

They say that statue has blood on the inside. They say that building has veins. That car can breathe.  
 That wood will rot but in a different way than we rot.  
 Can stars rot?  
 Anyway, There goes the phone again, aren't you excited? Why aren't you excited?  
 You're in a cemetery, you're walking all over dead bodies. Why aren't you sad?  
 I'm laying in a soft bed, why aren't I comfortable?  
 There's guns everywhere and everyone's chewing gum everywhere. There's fun over there, why aren't they having more fun over there?  
 I eat animals. I eat their flesh. Wow.  
 I'm wearing hours of hard work. I'm wearing hours of thought. This stuff will rot but I won't see it rot, I'll be somewhere else wearing someone else. Who's scaring someone else right now? They should stop doing that.  
 That dog is fully electric I'm fully electric. My engine is somewhere I can never see and that statue probably has blood inside of it.

i come here for  
 the not-speaking  
 i come here for  
 the echo of games i never played  
 i come here  
 to watch  
 the living leave  
 notes  
 behind their eyes  
 and maybe—  
 if i sit long enough  
 with the rot of my own  
 pocketed grief  
 (crumpled, warm,  
 slightly sugared)  
 the world will  
 fold inwards  
 and this bench—  
 two down, left side—  
 will open  
 its throat  
 and swallow  
 me whole.

# *i am not i!*

*by Asal Takesh*

so my bottom teeth are straightening  
i find i am contained in my recoiling  
to a tether that exists in this life and not another

when i sleep  
top molars grind on the enamel of progress  
and what i see  
is still my front doors painted lime green  
but i am not i  
and this is not my house  
nor my dog nor my street

it is not an act of will or a natural flaw  
it is circumstance  
and i am but a tension that has been given form  
mindless and innocent of all memory  
swinging on a branch  
i pass the time, terribly

that day i do not witness knows how long to take  
spring, it comes

but i went back to the old house  
as an apparition  
in the shadow of the streetlight  
much has been said about the door  
where the morning still comes to without promise  
and the wind blows the balcony open  
in courtesy of you

i was a kid kicking up dirt  
the ground has shifted

from where i am  
i see only the tops of trees  
naked and petrified  
the overhang weeping  
god's hands wandering

and the steady hum of the radiator  
plays in exact intervals  
syncopated  
does not ramble  
does not possess intent

do you have what you need?  
are you going steady?

the outside is mute from behind the glass  
it is sobering

# Think of Me

*by Lord Ord*

When you dream do you think of me?  
What else could I be?  
Another shadowy figure  
Claiming light you see

Deaf and blind and dumb  
Born to lead no one  
So I bestow on you  
What I think to be true

And you take it  
And you thank me

I list the possible outcomes  
You think there only could be one  
So I open up your eyes  
Show you what's under these lies

And you take it  
And you thank me

Teach you how to read my word  
So it'll never go unheard  
And so you'll know where to find me  
You'll get what you deserve

Or so I say  
And you take it  
Or so I say  
And you thank me

# Mortal Longings

*By Laura Gulbranson*

Are you willing to journey to the ends of the earth?  
For a mere mortal's kiss?  
Would you sacrifice your humanity?  
To live it all again?

There are words for fellow dreamers  
They are called fools for a reason.

When there are no rainbows...  
After the rain,  
They paint the shades of faded gray  
On their hearts instead.

When there are no stars to light the way...  
Will you journey to the ends of the earth instead?  
To relive the moment of one pair of mortal lips  
Over and over again?

# Changing of the Guards

By Parker Otto

Walking through Washington Square Park at dawn, I  
observe the changing of the guards  
When evening stops and day begins as the same place is  
made over anew

The junkies coming off their comatose high with  
trembling arms and teeth and thighs lumber  
towards the street in search of food and meaning and the  
means for their fix

The homeless breaking slumber on a nearby bench as they  
sing their songs in payment for a  
club sandwich or a fresh pair of socks

The students gathering by the arch tearing down the  
makeshift walls as an act of conscience for  
the freedom of those who were shot, who were bombed,  
who were starved, who were

imprisoned, who were sent from the ruins of their homes  
and who were turned from human  
beings into vermin by the words of titans and madmen  
and big business

The artists manning stands to sell their pottery and  
waxworks while making caricatures and  
portraits of tourists from Walla Walla, Washington for \$10  
bucks a head

The poets keeping the used typewriter business afloat as  
they dribble their prose for pennies on  
the pound

The chessmen setting up their pawns, playing them for  
suckers as they make their first move  
with the white knight

A dancer in black paint using her limbs in their graceful  
movements as brushes on the Pollock  
canvas beneath her feet

The dogs chasing down tennis balls with the glint of their  
wolf ancestors shining in their eyes

The buskers standing and strumming up and down,  
wanting the dough for which they make  
their bread

Bright reflections bounce off the campus buildings and  
coffee houses and porno shops and pass  
through the raging waters of the center fountain, sparkling  
a million rainbows so small they'd fit  
in the used Espresso cups of Café Reggio

Sidewalks dusted with cigarette butts and the aftertaste of  
marijuana with an occasional empty  
bottle of Fireball to round out the remnants of a night on  
the town

Through these eternally active sidewalks and grassy paths,  
I make my way to see the action of  
the day before night falls and the guards change again.

I see the cliques and groups and throngs of people and  
wonder which I should absorb into when

I decide to keep my course of solitude, tipping a folk singer  
\$5 for a so-so ballad that still  
contains some much sought after sincerity

The difference of 12 hours as 3 p.m. spells out vibrancy and  
cushy photos to post on digital  
town squares for the masses while 3 a.m. means to walk  
cautiously and to keep one hand  
pulsing on the can of mace

The chaos of this place from day to day cannot be  
explained yet it is the cultural lifeblood that  
makes the rest of this island wonderful, foreboding and  
immaculate all in one swoop.

This I see and I know that I am home.

# The American Dream

By Cara Fogg

The American Dream didn't make a skid mark out of us

We were young and wild and free  
Bound only by our love for each other

Children became adults  
Life became worth living

I never wanted to sleep or wear sunglasses  
I look outside my window and see life

The city on a Sunday

Children scream, lovers hold hands

The elderly get fresh bread

I close my eyes and wait

# Untitled

By D. Kwasny

those who grew up on purple mountains forget their majesty  
yet i would die to live amongst the waves upon the sea  
and comb the beach hair with my hands

i was born a weed in those flat fields  
yearning for unfamiliar lands

the prairies never fit me well  
the city lights are blinding  
but what's a twinkle in the eyes  
when it's you you're finding?

# Dead Man's Guitar

By Jimmy Climbs

Well I know a man, had many a mile  
He shared a drink and his crooked smile  
Could hardly walk, but could surely sing  
No lost notes, he remembered everything

He'd known many a bar, many a glass  
Been dropped some times on his wooden ass  
Lived life in the dark being slung around,  
And love by many for his sweet, lasting sound

He'd stay quiet and sit upright  
Unless provoked, then he'd play all night  
Ballads n' bridges, he'd play till he's blue  
Every word he spoke would always ring true

If I'm being quite honest, he was no man at all  
And by today's standards he stood quite small

Yet it still rings true, he'd been near n' far  
This supposed man I mention, is the dead man's guitar

# The Human Condition

By Cara Fogg

The summer that you longed for comes around  
The heat warms your skin and you feel all  
The frigid muscles  
The stagnant movements  
Melt away  
Soon it becomes unbearable  
Sweat matts frizzy hair  
The nights are too hot to sleep  
You beg for winter  
Winter comes and it lasts far too long  
Well those hot nights weren't so bad, were they?  
It all repeats  
Again  
Over and over again  
Every year, every season, every lover, every heartbreak  
Is the human condition to long for what we've lost?  
To miss what we once touched that is now just out of reach?  
To never be content?  
Forever we live in past or future  
Past and future  
Comparison is that thing that gets us through the day  
Every day  
The snake eats its own tail  
Maybe one day we will find ourselves  
Content in our longing

Get me back to that never-ending carpeted hallway

I missed you

# Seven Years of Bad Luck

By Quinn Etoll

The mirror on my desk is a gift from the previous tenant: a Canadian actress who needed a spot when I didn't. I imagine it was a gift, not just abandoned. Strangers give gifts to strangers who give them a discount on their subtlet sometimes. The mirror is plastic, gray, from a Target or a Target-adjacent institution of mass produced garbage made for underpaid underprofessionals, and, now, broken.

The mornings are unwieldy. I have yet to find my elbows spontaneously blessed with any level of precision in their movements. So, we have a plate of mirror cracked. The magnifying side, already warped beyond providing any real world utility, remains safe. God bless.

Seven years, down the drain. I would consider myself clumsy before I would consider myself unlucky. I lavish in a roof over my head and soft flesh mottled in green and purple, a symptom of my peripheral vision finding a doorway where my body finds a wall. Lucky and clumsy. Lucky and clumsy.

A part of me wonders if it's such bad luck because mirrors are so damn expensive. I know that the sages of our ancestral, luck based wisdom would never base their proverbs and warnings in a capitalist struggle to avoid spending another \$70 on a vanity mirror, but the thought persists.

I suppose this is the end, then. I'll have my luck restored in my thirties. It will all be just fine then. The interim is up for interpretation.

# Hotels

By Jimmy Climbs

Ding ding!

Another floor awaits  
My little feet scurry along  
The never-ending carpeted hallway

Why is the whole hallway carpet?  
Don't know, doesn't matter  
Now I can stealthily run along it

Ding ding!

Another e-mail awaits  
My callused feet scurry back to my desk  
Another week of keeping a computer on

Back at another hotel  
"Congratulations on silver status,"  
the lady exclaims  
'Who cares about hotel status?'  
I think to myself

# Circus Infiltration

*By Parker Otto*

Sitting in the bar of bohemian rest I await the coming of the circus

The anticipation of actors, magicians, ringmasters and a troupe of colors keep the hair on my neck standing tall

I keep the jitters at bay with sour drink and my beaten paperback

Before anyone can anticipate the coming of the whirlwind, they arrive with tents in hand as they make themselves at home on the cold sidewalks of 23rd Street

Neon blazes and the wheels go backwards as banks become flower shops and plastic becomes metal

Things that were built to last come back temporarily

Day turns and the rosy haze of dusk brings spectators who seek a glimpse of dazzling

attractions to come

Their smiles are big but intentions are superficial

They are more interested in laughing at the geek covered in the life of his poultry kill

They talk when they should listen

I alone emerge from the bar, dressed like I belong: scuffed brown boots, checkered flannel shirt

and a cap that brings back nonexistent memories of hawking the Hearst publications.

Forcefully, I forge false origins cut from the cloth of Kerouac, pretending that I came off of train

tracks instead of a cushy ride in a rented automobile

I slink into the tents and for the briefest of hours I feel like I am a part of this ever changing

troupe

I could just slip in and pick up a shovel

Make my rounds and eventually someone will have to take me away from the monotony, take

me from hustling and let me do the most menial labor if it means I can someday ride the proud

pachyderms down the streets I once moseyed down in depressed states of desperation

I see the people who live the life I have envisioned moving from tent to tent with Guthrie

aphorisms sewn on the rags they've cobbled into uniform as they attend daily chores

I want to be them

But I'm too late

This circus is full up on labor

It's not my time

Not even to shovel shit

But I still hope, hope against all others that next time will be the break

The circus always comes back

I'll always come back

# Alsatian Skies

*By Laura Gulbranson*

We stepped over dried, long-haired grass, sauntering through the fields and trekking up soft hills. The sheep called out and the grazing cows mooed their hellos as we set foot in the open fields of their home. My host family, Jean and Amy, walked hand in hand, laughing with a lightness enough to make any trodden heart sprout wings.

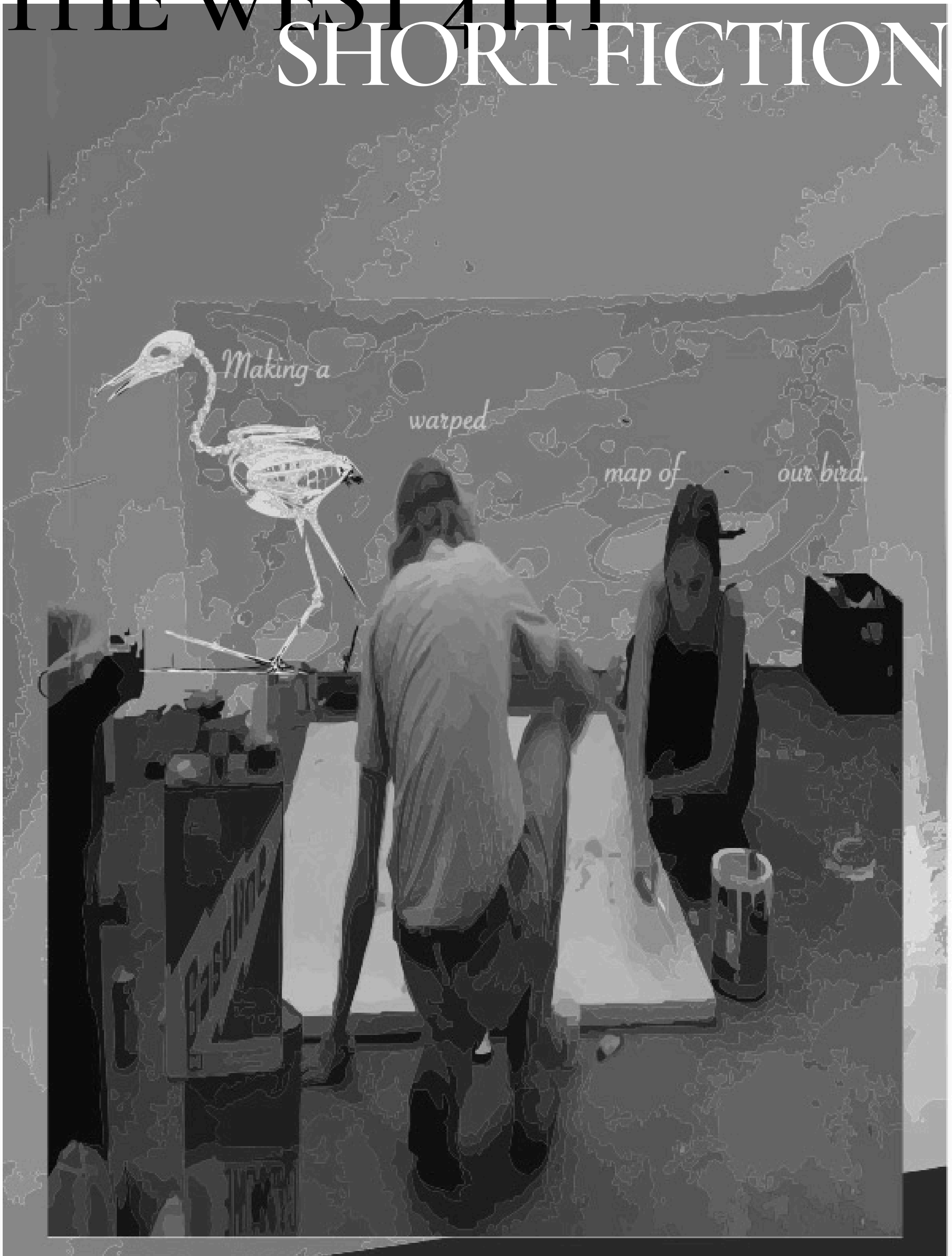
We picked up fallen fruit from the pear trees and fed them to the sheep. I looked over to Jean's father, Louis, his suspenders tied over his tank shirt, his socks pulled up to his knees. I couldn't help but think of my own father. Maybe it was the socks, or perhaps it was in the way Louis gazed with love at the animals and the billowing trees.

Louis made a series of clicking sounds, beckoning the sheep in our direction. We had fruit ready in our hands, our eyes wide in wonder at these majestic, gentle beasts.

My aim was abysmal as a fruit rolled to the side of the fence, but the sheep came, plucking the piece of fruit from the grass and chomping the sweet treat between their teeth. When we ran out of fruit, we continued on our trek, reluctantly bidding farewell to the sheep. In response, they baaed back their adieus until the next time we'd meet.

By the time we made it atop the tallest hill, the sky filled with warm light. Louis unbuckled a satchel wound around his shoulder, his eyes glued to the sky. To my surprise, he pulled out a pair of binoculars. Not a camera, not a phone. Louis motioned me to come over where he stood. He handed me his binoculars for me to take a peek — at the mountains which shaded the sun and the tiny cross upon a hill that could be seen from the distance.

# THE WEST 4TH SHORT FICTION



# THE HAWK MOTHER

BY COLEMAN HICKS

She is as cold as the wind. Moving with effortless speed, her machinelike frame betrays a hot beating heart beneath steely feathers, breaking across the sky. Eyes like painted glass, clear, steady, beyond lethal and honed through eons of ancestral carnage. She is fierce, she is fast, perceptions of weight and balance inform every minute movement or redirection. Driven by neither hate nor hunger, only raw instinctual lust, the hunt is but a solitary motion.

On the Earth's frozen skin, the winding creature slinks through the snow like a quadrupedal snake, drenched in olfactory sensation and feeling nothing but racing blood. It reaches its head up and gives a lighthouse survey, across the flat snow and black evergreens, for any sign of motion. Sees nothing, continues. Rushing water ahead, it reaches the creekbed and continues along the icy sand and stones, searching for some bitter morsel or flesh unhibernated in this wasteland. Fleeting scents, cattail or rose hips, feces, frozen dreary water. The hawk hears a ringing like the static of a tree before lightning.

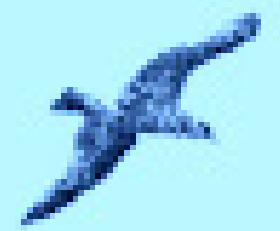
She has already begun to descend, it is not a decision but an action taken like breath. Wings shuttered like a knifeblade into a sheath, legs and talons made prone, her tail fans and curves. Quickly, she is cutting and diving through the lower atmosphere like a smear across the sky, witnessless and perfect. Her neck stays eyes on the unfortunate one, the tender hot flesh beneath white fur like irony among plains of ice. A tree's length up she careens and swings down, opens her wings and drops the talons like jaws into fresh fruit.

The hawk has a split-instant premonition of adrenaline or sexual violence or hunger before being tackled and ruptured. Along the frozen bank, among the empty tallgrass stalks and shadowed trees and fertile loam a writhing and twisting body convulses and shrieks and shreds itself apart beneath the penetrating grip of its aggressor. The bird cuts apart those delicate nerves and that skeletal architecture like a rapist hound, as if a symphony of instrumental precision among the falling snow could be followed by the cacophonous screams of war.

The hawk twists like a burning coil of exposed muscle and bone until the point end of a beak sinks into the jugular vein. Those mortal ferret eyes watch the water, scribes of a short and painful mystery. This varmint's rapid breath slows as its will recedes, and the body becomes limp, powerless as the bird begins to peel and swallow strips of lifegiving body. A simple brain draws still, sensation of internal hemorrhaging and a fleeting desire for nourishment and sex and then nothing. Nothing at all. The hawk makes a scene of terrible destruction out of the slain, ripping and breaking and violating a once cherished organism, a little house for a little mind, God's own creature.

She slows, picks up her wings to catch the air and makes a soft landing, beating lightly with practiced expertise, executes a brief movement as she enters the hood of the cave, lightly orange among the failing sun, to feed her progeny among stalagmites and frozen droppings. Vomiting her love, she nurtures commencing lives, who will live in her selfsame violent retribution. She feels a love for them like brutal hatred against anything that could stand between their delicate lives and the calculating cruelty she knows so well. Like parasites breeding, she lives for them, regurgitating the digested remains of beings, tiny mammals, other birds, sometimes other's children. She burns with her every atom a defense against nature's hand, to fight against the current and bring them to her very same maturity, without reason or knowledge, a primal cycle of death and birth.

She walks across the stone with her halting and unfit gait, as one not meant for land, across the bend to where her brood would lay in insatiable anticipation, little demons who will eat one another if she tarries. She finds not an ugly batch of neonate raptors, but a butchery of white furlike feathers and decimated crimson ribbons, across the nest of twigs like a circus of horror. Tiny eyes and beaks lay strewn, little yellow legs and bladders and spines separated without reckoning, only oblivion or imperfect negation, as if the little birdlings had imploded. The hawk mother is caught with a blade of instant anguish, her wings drop to the ground and spread immobile, her beak opens and the cave is filled with the guffawing shrieks of a purest agony. Her body begins to seethe, shake and vibrate with every breath a banshee wail that would be fit for the depths of a fiery netherworld. Utter defeat, utter completeness, she is gone. Gone to where she has brought so many in final moments of piercing fear, but no one is there to cut her from the world as she does to them.



She is beating against the air like she could fight against the force of nature's law, as if she is buoyed and brought up through sheer hatred against the abyssal universe. She is careening through a pitchblack sky, with effort and heat and nausea and suicide. The moon lights its candle among the stars, bearing witness as she speeds faster and faster, higher and higher and tactless and empty. She has not tears nor a heart, only degrees of pain and hatred to fill an avian body. Time does not exist in this realm, above the great castles of cumulonimbus, cathedrals of boiling thunder. Earth's solitary satellite casts a blank and eggshell glow across their top, almost purple in the sky's blackness, against the winking stars, but the predator cannot sense beauty.

# IN CASE I GO MISSING

BY C. E. FOSTER

The artifact wasn't menacing, as some can be, but my skin began to prickle at the sight of it, and I felt my knees begin to shake. It appeared to be a sort of...blade, forged in what looked like obsidian or another volcanic stone, curved at the end like a crescent moon and melded into a bronze handle with decorative motifs I had never, in all my years of cultural study, seen anything like before. They seemed to be geometric, but did not follow a shape I could pin down. I can't exactly explain it, but every time I looked at it, the design seemed to...change. I thought I must've been having a visual migraine, as I occasionally do, but when I glanced back at Tony, I could tell he saw it too. Atop the hilt of the blade, there was a round, birdcage-like ornament made of a rougher material than the rest of the handle, and the bars of the cage were gnarled and jointed. Out of instinct, I reached down to touch the item, resting my index finger on the obsidian portion. I inhaled sharply and immediately pulled it back. The blade was—hot. Not scalding by any means, but hot, like a lightbulb left on too long. I stepped back from the table, wracking my brain to find an explanation.

“Did the box say where it came from?” I asked him, feeling my heart speed up..

He cautiously shook his head. “Um, no,” he replied. He reached down under the table to get the parcel. “But it has a number. Here—” he pulled a thick piece of ivory-colored stationary out of the box and handed it to me. In sprawling black letters, the note read, *Take All Precautions*, followed by the number 837-6-1.

Without a word I darted away from Tony's station and attacked my desk, wrenching the drawers out of it and pouring them out onto the dirty floor. I clumsily rifled through forms, research documents, letters and paper images, ripping many of them in the process, until I snatched up a tiny, green note. The writing on it had been interrupted by the creases from all the ways I had folded it to fit into my shirt pocket, but it was still perfectly clear. I had long ago shoved it in the bottom of the drawer to stop thinking about it, and this had evidently worked. I shakily stepped back to Tony's station and set the note on the table next to the stationary. The handwriting was different, but the numbers matched.

“What is this?” Tony asked, grabbing the green note. “Where did you get this?” He studied it closely.

“It's, um—” My mouth had dried up. I tried to swallow. “It's the last thing the old conservator wrote to me.”

Tony glanced from me to the note and back again, puzzled. “But we don't have a category 837—”

“I know,” I said curtly. I looked back at the artifact. I could not for the life of me pinpoint why, but staring at it made my temples sweat. Against all of my survival instincts, I had to get a closer look. “Tony, go ahead and take your lunch break. We can come back to this when you're done.”

“Are you sure? My lunch isn't until two—”

“I know, Tony, but you've been working hard all morning. Go get some air.” I flicked my hand in his direction, signaling for him to get going. He stood up slowly, keeping his eye on me as he left the room.

I don't know why I sent him out. He would've been a great help, I'm sure, but something inside me reverted back to my days of solitary study. Even the sound of his breathing would've caused me immense irritation.

I sat down at his station and pulled out my glasses. I noticed that the handle was hot as well, but not like the blade. At first I thought it may have just been from being under the light, but it slowly dawned on me that the handle's heat was far more similar to that of a living body. As soon as I registered this, I quickly set it down on the table's foam examination pad. I tried to push this out of my brain as I examined it visually for surface information—the thing I knew how to do, the thing I was comfortable with. It looked to be quite ancient from the way the obsidian was chipped; it took on more of a Mesolithic look when only the blade was considered, but the handle pushed it into at least the early Bronze age, depending on its location of origin, which was—where? I thought back to seeing something of a similar shape in a Tibetan exhibit; however, though I haven't the slightest idea how, I knew at once that this wasn't Tibetan. Was it Latin American? Incan, maybe? I knew many indigenous peoples of that region used ceremonial blades; perhaps this was a style yet unexamined. Nevertheless, something told me this too was incorrect. I cautiously took it up once more and began squinting at the cage-like object on the handle, desperately seeking the identity of its material. It looked almost like—

“Hello.”

My body jerked and I set the object back on the table, missing the foam pad entirely. I did not hear it break, so I assumed it remained intact as I wheeled around to the direction of the voice.

Standing by the door a few feet away was a man. A simple-looking man with his hands clasped behind his back, dressed in a well-pressed navy leisure suit and gray tie. He stared out at me from a pale, nearly transparent face,

topped with a graying mess of jaw-length hair. His eyes were what startled me. I could see the whites of his eyes, but the emotion in them wasn't fear. It was intrigue, possibly even something like hunger. Their color was an impossible blue. I felt my chest seize up.

"I'm sorry," I began, mentally scrambling for the old script Sergey had taught me for unwanted visitors, all the while being unable to pull my eyes away from his. "th-this lab is off-limits to visitors. The artifacts here will be available in the viewing areas after they are treated." I seemed to regain my composure as my artifact-protection reflexes overtook my disturbance. "I'm going to have to ask you to leave."

The man by the door stayed still. Not simply his body, but his face as well. He did not blink once. "You are mistaken," he said. I could feel all the color drain from my face. His voice was wrong. I don't know how, but it was wrong. The best I think I can say is that it was—doubled? Like a chorus of wild parakeets mimicking human conversation.

"You see," he continued, taking a few rigid steps towards me. "I need that."

I spluttered out a few words. "You—what?"

His eyes remained fixed on me. "I need that." he repeated patiently, like he was speaking to a frightened child in need of reassurance. I shook my head in confusion. The man rolled his eyes slowly away from me and rested them on the table next to me. "I need that."

I jerked my head around and found the artifact in the path of his gaze. Instinctually, I put my hand over it. "No, no. This needs to be studied. I need to—" quicker than I could register it, the man strode up to the table, slipped his hand out from behind his back and snatched up the object. I went to grab it back, but his other hand gripped my wrist and pushed it down onto the table. I tried to pull it off of me, but it wouldn't budge. In the shock of how quickly he had moved, I stood still. My other hand felt lifeless.

As he held the object up, I noticed he only had a thumb and an index finger on that hand. The place where the others had been was covered in a thick mass of scar tissue that was greatly healed over. His eyes became even wider with the object in his proximity. I looked down at the hand holding my wrist to the table and saw it was the same. Without a thought, I said the only thing that came to my hopelessly curious brain.

"What is it?" I breathed. The man said nothing. He brought the object to his forehead, lightly pressing the handle into his skin. When he pulled it back, the imprint of the orb-cage remained in his forehead, almost burned-in, like a cattle brand. There was no sizzle, no smell like there normally would be at such a thing, but it reddened and bubbled nonetheless. His eyes rolled back temporarily as he whispered something I didn't catch. Next, he held the object up beside my head, closing one enormous eye as if he were measuring something against the sky—yes. That's exactly what he was doing. Measuring. I shiver to think of it now.

I was entirely frozen. My joints stiffened and my jaw was locked open, unable to speak. Whether this was from fear, confusion, or something else entirely, I have no idea. All I knew was that I could not escape. A sinking feeling washed over me.

The man returned his gaze to me, eyes alight with something akin to excitement. His eyes widened even more. He parted his lips and smiled impossibly wide, showing his teeth to be crooked and browning. "Let me show you," he whispered in that doubled cadence, lifting his free hand off of my wrist, and before I could act, he clamped his fingers down on my temples so hard I feared my skull would shatter under his strength.

I collapsed like a loose marionette. I felt my bones rattle upon a solid, damp, stone floor—not the lab's dirty linoleum. It took me several minutes to open my eyes, as if a temporary paralysis had overcome my body, but when I did, I wasn't sure what I saw. It was dark overall, but flickers of what looked like flames migrated in and out of my periphery. I smelled wood burning and something rough like animal fur. I got to my knees somehow, vision still hazy, but stopped there. I attempted to move my head to the side, but it wouldn't budge. I couldn't feel anything on my neck that would cause this bound effect, yet it was there nonetheless. In fact, my whole body was rigid. I was on my knees, back arched up, chest open, and arms outstretched like a crucifix. For all I couldn't move, I felt no ropes on my body, no confines—just my own rigidity, a trance-like stillness. The air around me was sweltering and thick, and I could feel sweat cling to every inch of my body. There was a rhythmic drumming seeping into my ears, but I couldn't tell where from. Moments or hours later, a figure came into my view. It was human, towering above me with thick shoulders and white face, cloaked in what appeared to be animal skins. As it moved closer to me with jagged, lurching steps, I could tell through the fog of my daze that it was the man. Even in the near darkness his eyes shown strikingly blue, bulging and seemingly pulsating inside his head. They seemed to glow. His hair was gone, instead replaced by a circlet of what looked like teeth—thinking of it now, I think they were human. He locked eyes with me, slowly and smoothly tilting his head to one side. His face was motionless, unblinking like a porcelain doll. Had I use of my limbs I would have shivered. Then his face broke into a grin. His teeth had now sharpened into points, nearly as white and reflective as his eyes. He lifted his arms to match my pose, letting out a shrieking laugh in his double voice, echoing through the space and making the flickers around my vision dance. It kept going, and in the echo, he began speaking a language I couldn't place. It was a chant, I think, in a dissonant harmony with the laugh behind it.

I couldn't tell you how long the chant lasted, except that it got louder every moment until it roared and twisted in my ears. Suddenly, the man brought his arms down and reached into his cloak, producing the obsidian artifact—except it seemed to be missing the cage. I watched in disarray as he lifted the curved blade with his right hand, now full of fingers, and thrashed it down upon his left, cleanly severing his last three fingers. As the blade collided, he screeched, never letting the grin leave his face. He repeated this with his right. Ever squeamish, I felt the urge to gag, but it seemed that even my internal functions had halted. All I could do was watch as he picked up the six loose fingers with his remaining four and nimbly tied them, still bleeding, to the hilt of the knife with a thread produced from his cloak. His chanting voice continued to grow louder around me, though he seemed to have stopped speaking through his teeth. He was now approaching me, swinging the blade from left hand to right and back again in delight. I fought desperately to wrench free from my invisible binds, to stand up, bowl the man over and leave the blade far behind me, but my bones had turned to iron, and nothing moved. He knelt, making us nearly nose to nose. That animal smell became overwhelming. He lifted what was left of his left hand, steady as a stone, and slowly dragged it over my face. I felt the hot blood from his missing fingers mix with my sweat and drip off my nose. He pulled the hand back and brought it to his mouth greedily sucking the wounds. His eyes rolled back in ecstasy. He slurped it nearly clean. When he had finished, he brusquely grabbed hold of my outstretched arm and drove the blade into it with one swift motion. Though I could not move it, he slowly brought my arm into my line of vision as he ran the smooth obsidian along my forearm, taking the top layer of skin with it. It cut like butter. My lungs contracted, but no scream escaped. He stopped at my elbow and held my flesh up to my face, shaking it as if it were a steak with which he was teasing a dog. My arm burned with an agony I can't describe, the exposed muscle bleeding profusely onto my thighs. He then lightly ran the underside of my skin over my face, distracting me from my arm. It felt like a wet blanket. I find myself nauseous thinking about it now. All the while a grin was plastered across his face, and the chant went on, his mouth now unmoving. When he was apparently satisfied, he discarded his prize by throwing it over his shoulder. Even in the deafening chant I swear I could hear its squelching slap as it hit the floor. My other arm was next. This one he finished to the shoulder repeating his previous actions of showing me and allowing me to feel my detached flesh. The pain seared and shot through my system like a lethal injection, and I began to feel faint. After he had flayed my arms to the muscle, he sat back, examining his work. The chant swelled in my ears and beat against my brain with such a ferocity I feared I would burst. The only function I seemed to have left was to close my eyes, so I did so. I told myself it wasn't real, that I had been drugged, but the heat on my forehead and the pain exploding in my arms told me otherwise. Suddenly, I felt fingers force my eyelids open, and I once again sat face to face with my torturer. His eyes burned bright with an undeniable joy. I cannot seem to forget it. He pressed a thumb into my forehead, seemingly burning his fingerprint into my skin before clamping hard onto my temples, causing a searing pain to shoot through my head and blind me with its white hot agony. I felt my limbs give out, and I collapsed again.

When I awoke, I was face down on the lab's floor, gritty outside-dirt on my cheeks. I screamed. I screamed to know I still could, and that I hadn't been paralyzed. I shot up from the floor, turning my neck like a swivel chair to make sure I was where I thought I was. My arms still burned with pain, but as I lifted my cardigan sleeves and examined them, I saw that they were completely intact. No skin was missing—there wasn't even a scratch. I began to shake uncontrollably and realized I was still screaming. It was almost a disembodied sound echoing through the lab, full of more anguish and terror I thought myself capable of producing. I didn't stop. Before I knew it, someone was surrounding me. I felt thick arms gently grasping my body, and a flicker of a voice in my right ear. "...Erika? Erika, what's wrong? Erika? Dr. Nassif? ERIKA?" I jerked my head towards it and saw Tony on the verge of tears, brows knit together. My scream quelled for a moment as I felt hot tears come to my eyes. "What's wrong?" he repeated urgently. "What happened?" I tried to speak, but all that escaped was a shrieking sob, then another. I couldn't stop.

I know I was heavily sedated moments later. I woke up later that week lying in my own bed next to my wife, Janelle, who was sitting upright and shaking slightly. She told me The Museum called her and said I'd had some sort of breakdown, and that she needed to retrieve me from the hospital. I had broken Tony's grasp on me and began to vomit profusely on the lab floor, convulsing and shaking from my core. Tony thought I was having a seizure. "I don't understand it. You haven't been stressed; you only break down like that only happens when you're stressed." she said, stroking my hair. I'd had breakdowns before.

"This wasn't like that," I croaked shakily, my voice still ragged from the screaming.

She paused. "Erika, what happened?"

I took an unsteady, deep breath, and began to detail my experience. I glanced at her periodically, watching her progressively pale. At some point she took her hand off my head and her breathing grew erratic. When I finished, shaking in my skin, she said nothing, only staring at me with her deeply concerned eyes.

Eventually she spoke. "Babe, I think he drugged you." I nodded, but it wasn't sincere. I was later told that there was no trace of anything foreign in my bloodstream when samples were taken at the hospital. It was real, I knew it was. But I wasn't ready to have that conversation.

I slept dreamlessly on a high dose of Ativan for about two and a half weeks, but when I was awake, only one thing pulsed through my mind. I ran through my encounter with the man over and over again, and one thing stuck out to me. I never heard him open the door. The lab door was steel and heavily bolted. It was impossible to enter without announcing one's presence. This meant the man must've been inside the lab before we arrived that morning. Or something else. As soon as I had the strength, I called Tony from my bed. He answered after a single ring.

"Hey, Erika," he said gently so as not to scare me off.

"Let's skip the pleasantries," I began, coughing a bit. "I need you to do something for me."

There was a brief silence. "Ok, but I have to tell you something first. They put that knife on display."

I stopped dead. "What?"

"Yeah, some specialist came in a couple days ago and identified it. Said it was some ceremonial knife used for flaying animal sacrifices." I felt sick. Animal sacrifices, I thought.

"Tony, they can't do that. We didn't study it. They can't, they didn't." Tony stayed silent. Impossible, I thought. An artifact like could not be displayed until a full study of it occurred. Did Sergey approve this?

"Did they at least say where it was from? They can't put it up without information." I asked, shaking again.

"Yes, but I know that specialist was wrong. I just know it couldn't have been what he said."

I paused, aghast, remembering that feeling. "Right, right." I took in an unsteady breath. "Tony, can you get into the security office?"

"Yeah, sure I can. I mean Sergey'll—".

"I don't care what Sergey says," I spat. "I need you to check the tapes from that day, immediately. Tell me what you see."

Tony asked no questions. He agreed, said he'd get back to me, and hung up. Feeling somewhat better, I threw the covers over my head and fell back asleep.

Hours later, I awoke to Janelle gently shaking my shoulder, telling me my phone was ringing.

"Tony?" I said eagerly, answering it.

"Yeah boss, it's me." there was something unstable in his voice. "Listen, I looked at the tapes. Sergey nearly killed me, but I saw them."

"And?"

He paused. "I can't exactly explain it."

"Tony, just tell me."

He paused. "Well, it shows me going to lunch and you studying that knife, but then it gets—complicated."

I held my breath. "What do you mean, complicated?"

"Well," another pause. "You kind of—start talking to the door, then pick up the knife thing and hold it up for half an hour, then throw it to the side and collapse."

"No man? There was no man there?" I was almost yelling.

"No." Tony said, getting quiet. "Listen Erika, I think you need to take a leave—"

"Thank you, Tony." I hung up and slammed the phone down on the bed, panting, deep horror settling in over my body. My mother was right, I thought. It skips a generation.

I passed out for another few hours, this time unmedicated. Janelle woke me the next morning, presenting me with a plate of eggs and beans.

"You've got to eat, babe. Please," she begged with tears just behind her eyes. I took the plate and slowly ate, thinking if it were the right time to tell her she'd married a liability. Instead, I suggested we turn on the TV. She curled up next to me in our bed, kissing me on the forehead and hugging me close to her. It was always a blessing to smell her skin and perfume after spending so many hours of my life in a muted lab. I noted that I should memorize this smell for when I get institutionalized.

We switched on the news and watched as the anchors dragged on about English politics and petty drama. It was mindless, like identifying Roman pottery, and I took great comfort in it. At one point, Janelle got up to make tea.

The anchor stopped his political banter for a moment and touched his earpiece, getting a new story in live. He mentioned breaking news, and I sat up. His face became grave as he began to speak.

"Two evenings ago in Bexley, it appears that there was a confirmed double suicide," he detailed as the television displayed an image of a building two blocks from mine. "It was first suspected to be a homicide due to the nature of the deceased, but after police examined the security tapes from the complex, they found there was no killer on the scene of this heartbreaking event."

I snatched my phone up from the bedside table and searched the suicide. Two blocks, I thought. Only two blocks. My thumb quivered as I scrolled through the articles, landing on one that seemed to be the most comprehensive. It read—

On the morning of July 29th, Gerard and Mary Tarkin were found dead in their Bexley flat by a concerned neighbor. They appeared to have died due to severe blood loss and stab wounds, possible signifiers of a homicide. Police scoured the flat for signs of struggle or a potential break in, but there were none. The neighbor who found the couple later recalled that they had installed security cameras in their main room as a precaution against thieves, and after the police gained access to the footage, they found the event to be a peculiar suicide. The footage showed the couple seemingly addressing something at the door to their flat, then producing a curious blade and proceeding to slice each other for several minutes. They died nearly two hours later. The blade was found in the parlour of the flat, and has been identified as an artifact recently stolen from The \_\_\_\_\_ Museum, specifically, a Tibetan ceremonial flaying knife. More information to come regarding the theft—

I tossed my phone aside. It's not Tibetan, I thought. It's not Tibetan.

I launched out of bed and ran to my desk. That is where I'm sitting now, writing. I can hear Janelle yelling at me from the kitchen. She's asking if I want biscuits with my tea.

In case I go missing, know that this is what happened. This is the definitive account. I give you full permission to use this in court if necessary—I'm afraid it might be, and soon.

Signed,  
Erika T. Nassif, PhD

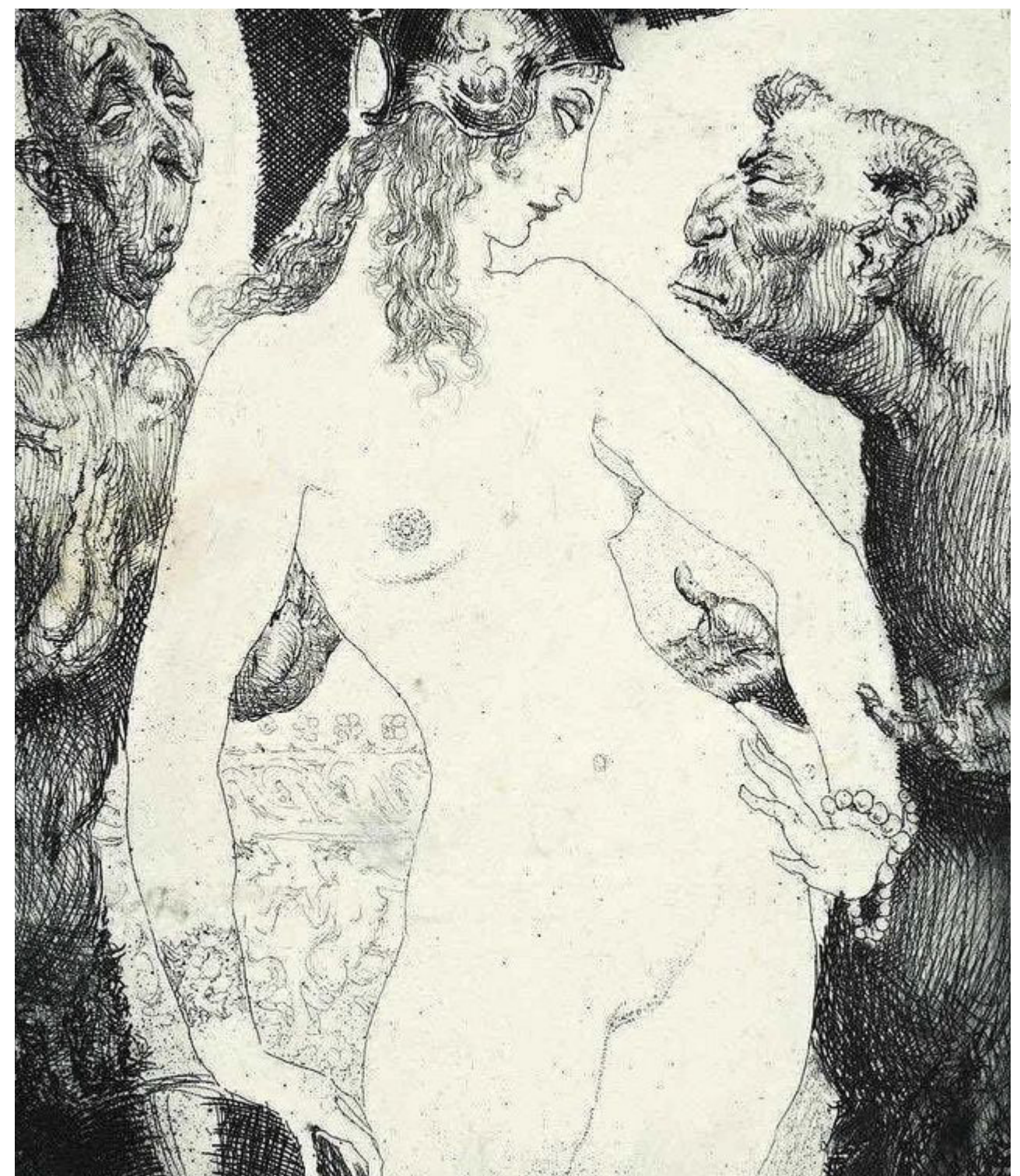
# O' ANCIENT: WHY? DO I RESURRECT THEE!

BY GIOVANNI SAFARELLA

See we upon us the dawn of man's fundamental call—*the call to survival*—reaching out with her twisted, o' degenerate will... *a call to morality!*—yes!—for she proliferates the survival of her imaginary ego, her “identity,” upon the rotting structure which is her dying self.

And so how are we to take this...*this broken will?*—*blindly*, and as it is?—shall we hold hands; eyes covered; picking apart things as they appear to us?—*picking apart appearances?* Or shall we rather uproot them entirely?—for impossible is to know any depth, any current—any abyss—and thus: any solution, without the over-arching...the inaugural: *why?*—and such a being —*this omnisciently metamorphic. why?*—do we find today crippled; sickly and starved... “but ye do I resurrect!” —“riseth!—thou trembling creature!”—out from this improvised grave in which the people have thus set you, from which the people have so tragically neglected you!

O' resounding : *why?*—how you have let them stand above you!—how you have let them look down upon you so unfortunately : with such guileful superiority—with such apathetic regard?—O' my friend—are you pathetic!



# GUNK SEEKS GUNK

"I'll give you a rundown," Director Cocks says. He leans forward. "Somehow, some way, we're not entirely sure yet on the particulars, but somehow a batch of Blue Ribbon beers got contaminated with something. Something strange," he says. "Forensics is still working on the beer cans. We think it may be the Russians. Anyhow, the contaminant in the beer cans had a, let's say, liquifying effect on its consumers."

"Poison?" I ask.

"Not necessarily," he says, "it essentially changed the molecular structure of the people that drank the beers. To be frank, it was turning people into, for lack of a better word, *gunk*."

"Gunk, sir?" I say.

"Gunk, Agent Ball. There's not really a better term for it. These *aff-ected* individuals were still maintaining their personalities, but they were growing increasingly *con-sumptive*. They began eating things. Anything they could get their slimy flaps on. And they were multiplying, too. It was getting out of hand."

"Jesus. Total?" I say.

"Nearly," Cocks says, "it was spreading throughout the town. At this point, there is now a small New England suburb that no longer exists."

"It got that bad?"

"Unfortunately. We had to move quickly. We've got memory teams working up there now. Shouldn't be too difficult."

"So where do I fit into this?" I ask.

Cocks pulls out another cigarette. He lights it with a match. His hands are hairy, veiny, and ringless. I pull out a cigarette of my own and start puffing.

"Well, Agent Ball," Cocks continues, "we managed to capture two of the things. We've got them in two separate holding chambers. The big boys upstairs called for extermination, but we figured that we could study them for a bit before we pull their plug. Figure them out, so to speak."

I lean back in my chair and blow out smoke.

"What else do I need to know about them?" I ask.

"Well, these two that we have are particularly interesting. They seem to have ingested certain forms of media, and have now integrated those medias into their personalities."

"What do you mean?"

"You'll see. The running hypothesis is that one of them, who some quack named Criseyde, ingested some kid's book report. The other gunk pile calls itself Buggy, and we think he may have ingested a television. Or something," he says. He runs a hand across his face. "It's all in the file," he says.

"Anything else I should know?" I ask.

Cocks ponders this for a moment.

"Don't get too attached," he says, "they're real charmers. All they want is to mold together. Our scientists think they're parts of a superorganism. They take over their hosts, multiply, gel-together with other gunk piles. It's a real mess. So just don't let them get in your head. Or in your intestinal tract. It'll be the worst laxative you'll ever take."

I get up. Cocks and I shake hands. He tells me that I start tomorrow. Classic security clearance protocol. Don't tell nobody.

I turn down another hallway and come to the door on the file. B11-004. The basement of this place always amazes me. I've heard of B11. It's where they keep a lot of our cases. A buddy of mine in the Flesh Interface Department once told me that this place had thirty basement levels. I told him I've seen a file that said B98. He said I was lying. But I wasn't. It's so deep in the ground down there that people say you can feel the heat of the Earth. I don't like to think about what goes on down there.

I open the door. I come into a small room with two doors on either side. The one on the left has a piece of duct tape with Buggy scrawled on it. The one on the right says Criseyde. There is a little desk in between them, with a single lamp, a cup of pencils, and an ashtray. I close the door behind me and set the file on the desk.

I hear a gurgling noise from behind Buggy's door. It sounds like someone slowly stepping into a mud puddle. It goes on for a little bit and then it stops.

Then I hear something else from Criseyde's door. It sounds like a woman humming. Then the gurgling starts again from Buggy's door. It's a little bit louder now. I get a few goosebumps. I slap myself in the face and take out my notebook. I grab a pencil from the little cup and put a cigarette behind my ear.

I'm standing in front of Criseyde's door now. The humming has stopped. So did the gurgling. I take a deep breath and push the door open.

The room is pitch black. I reach for the wall and flip the switch.

"Egad!" a woman's voice screams suddenly.

In front of me is a hulking mass of gray jelly. It is shaped like beans from a can and it's quivering in fear. Screams emanate from the gunk, echoing off the cement-brick walls of the little room. Strange shapes float within the transparent flesh.

"Please, sir, the lights! The lights! By God, the lights!" I quickly flip the switch back off. My heart is thumping like a jackhammer.

"I'm, I'm sorry," I manage to say.

"By God," the gunk says, her voice tearful, "Scared so was I."

I gulp. The desk light from behind me casts a faint orange glow around the shivering jelly, making its skin look like gasoline in a puddle.

"Pleaseth you it may," the gunk says, "methinks a candle wouldst us good do."

"A candle," I say. I am thankful for the return of the quiet. Behind me, gurgling begins to come through Buggy's door.

"A candle," I say again, "I can do that."

"Thou art kind," the gunk says. Its voice has returned to a quiet feminine whisper. I close the door and go back into the center room. My fingers shake as I press on the intercom.

"Get me some candles in B11-004, please," I say.

A trapdoor above my head opens with a mechanical whir. Candles are shimmed down on a plate from the opening. I grab the candles and press a button, sending the plate back up through the trapdoor.

I'm trying to compose myself. I go back up to the door that says Criseyde and try to slow my breathing. I slap myself in the face and light a cigarette. I place the candles in the crook of my arm as I open the door again, this time slowly.

I close the door behind me. The room is pitch black and silent now. Just a foot away from me lies this big hunk of goo. I feel its weight, its massive presence before me. It's like the feeling you get when you feel like you're being watched.

"I brought the candles," I say.

"Oh, joy!" the goo says.

I grope for a chair. There is none. I sit down cross-legged on the floor and place the candles next to me. I light three of them. They don't produce much light. In the flickering orange silence, I can only see the faint outline of the gunk. What looks like a belly is the only thing that I can kind of see. Something within the translucent flesh slithers through a tube. It makes a *shhlerk* noise.

"I'm sorry about the lights, earlier," I say.

"Let it trouble you not," it says, "forgiveness rights all who wrongeth."

"Sure," I say. I take out my notebook. I have to squint to see the lines.

"I'm Agent Ball," I say, "what should I call you?"

"Criseyde," it says, "but, kind sir, what be thine purpose? What reason dost explain this captivity?"

"We'll get to that, Criseyde," I say, "but first we should get to know each other a little bit."

"Bold flesh that I am, I must you privy upon lamentations mine," it says, "and what hath spurn my heart so."

"Let's slow it down, Criseyde. You mind if I call you Crissy?"

"Thou tongue is of salt. Speak not but my true name forthhence," it says.

"Okay, I'll stick with Criseyde," I say, "let's just start simple. Where are you from?"

The goo begins to shake again. I can see its membrane jiggle in the candlelight.

"Why must thou anger me so? How mayst one talk of idle thoughts when one's second heart beats but nay near mine own?"

"Alright, Criseyde, let's just--"

"Where doth mine gentle heart lay? Where is he thus? Where?" it says, tears beginning to form in its voice. It is shaking more and the candles are starting to flicker.

"Criseyde, please, let's--"

"Go to! Go to! Away from here, from mine quivering flesh, vile earthshaker! Away!"

The goo is now beginning to swirl around in a sort of spiral within itself. The candles go out and screams are starting to come from the gunkheap. My heart starts pumping throughout my body.

"Okay, Criseyde, I'm gonna come back when--"

"AAAWAYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYYY," it screams. The gunk begins to throb and expand towards me. I shoot up and wrench the door open. I feel the heat from the gunk on my back, it's humid and sticky and it makes my shirt cling to my skin. I feel it right behind me.

I slam the door shut and lean up against it. I'm expecting the gunk to rip the door off its hinges at any moment. I breathe. The screams behind me turn to sobs, gentle sobs that seep underneath the door. I hear a slimy, dragging sound. I press my hand over my heart.

"Wretched, wretched, it is so wretched," I hear the gunk whisper from her dungeon. I reach for a cigarette and light it. I sit down at the little desk. I catch my breath.

I look up at the clock. I've still got a few more hours until I can clock out. The room is silent now, no gurgling or whimpering or anything. Just my breath and little cigarette crackles. The clock ticks too.

I straighten my tie and pull out my notebook. I scribble Criseyde and underline it. I make some bullet points:

- CANDLES
- Old English
- Two hearts?

I put my notebook in my shirt pocket and go up to Buggy's door. This time I think I should knock, but then I remember that they are just big globs of gunk. The doorknob clacks open. The lights are already on.

"What took you so long?" a voice says.

I close the door behind me. In front of me now is a smaller, yet equally unsettling gunk pile. It is a translucent gray. It looks like a demented soft-serve. There is a folding chair in this room. I grab it and sit down in front of the goo pile. We're only about a foot apart from each other.

"Hello," I say. "I'm Agent Ball."

A mouth-shaped hole glugs around from the other side of the gunk and faces me.

"I know who you are. What, you think I don't got ears? I heard you over there."

I take out my notebook. I look at the mouth for a second. It is more like a pocket than a mouth, but it moves like one. Its lips stick together after each word, little stalagmites of spittle and goo string around its corners. I look down at my notebook.

"Let's start with the basics. What should I call you?"

"Bugsy, kid. Buggy Malone. That's me," it says.

"Alright Buggy," I say, "where're you from?"

Bugsy laughs.

"Well, kid," it says, "you could say I'm from a lot of places. I've been around. Maybe I've been around too much. Let's just say that some places know me better than I know them. And vice versa."

"Alright," I say, "well, where were you before you... got here?"

"You got a cigarette?"

"Um, yes," I say.

I take one out and hold it towards Buggy. Buggy shimmies towards me. A long shaft of goo extends out and sticks to the cigarette. It then retracts, sucking the cigarette back into Buggy. I will stop attempting to recreate some of the noises that these things make.

"Ah, I've been wanting one of these babies," Buggy says.

"So, Buggy, where--"

"I heard you the first time, kid. You fellas are all the same. I can smell it on you. First year on the job?"

"Yes," I say.

"Back in '46 I started out on the force," he says. "The war had just ended. I was in Los Ang-geles. I coulda melted out there on the street. It was hot, then, see? I mean, what with the minorities starting to move in. I voted for old Rubber Legs, see, but that don't mean I ain't got some morals."

"Yes," I say.

"Anyways, it was 1947 when I got promoted. Homicide. Boy, I'll never forget it. Ted Williams was hitting over 300. Germany was getting itself back together. And I had a badge. That meant something, kid. I don't know what's it to you, but it meant something to me."

"You were in Los Angeles in 1947?" I asked.

"There's some days when I wish I wasn't. I remember this one time, I had a partner, see, his name was Tommy. He had a heart a'brass. You couldn't scare him with a gorilla in a weather balloon. He was tough as nails. We were cruising around off of Sunset Boulevard. The palm trees, the broads walking around, the sea was so close I felt I was made a'salt," Buggy says. "Then, boom. Three stiffs in a dumpster. Syndicate by the looks of it. Their limbs looked like tree branches, they were all over the place. And whatever sick sonuvabitch that did it, well he used those schmucks' intestines as rope. I'll never forget Tommy's face that night. He looked like the ass-end of a subway train."

I watch the cigarette slowly dissolve in Buggy's goeey insides. I think that Buggy is crazy. Or maybe I'm crazy.

"That's quite a story, Buggy."

"I'm an open book, kid. I've got a million of 'em. What else you wanna know?"

"Well," I say, "what's your relation to Criseyde?"

Buggy seems to grow thoughtful. His membrane sort of shrinks a tiny bit.

"What a dame," Buggy says, "I tell you I've never known a broad like her in my life. And that's saying something, kid. I remember in '53 there was--"

"Buggy, if you don't mind, let's try to stick to my questions? I'm trying to help you guys out here," I say.

"Sure thing kid. One thing about me is that I can ramble like a lawnmower in August," he says. "Criseyde. I love her with all my heart, kid, that's the honest truth."

"When did you two meet?"

"It was a few weeks ago, if I remember right. Yeah. Somewhere up near the coast. South a'Boston. I was out on the beach. I was drinking Pabst. I saw her coming up along the waterline. She struck me like a sports car hitting a streetlight, kid, I tell you."

I think that if two massive goo monsters were walking around in Massachusetts, I would've heard about it. But I'm not going to put any pressure on Buggy. I'm thankful he's talking. And I sort of like the way he talks, too.

"Look kid," he says suddenly, "I don't really know what you fellas'a picked me up for. I mean, no one read me my rights, see. And I don't even know what the charges are. I tell you this, though, if I'da done something, I would'a come clean about it. That's me for you. I'm an honest-to-God

American, kid, and I come clean when I can.”

“I understand, Bugsy,” I say. “We’re still working that out right now upstairs.”

“I get it,” he says, “you boys’ve gotta job to do. Hell, I was on the force. I remember it. Long nights in a café with nothing but cigarettes and coffee to keep you warm. You think about the broad you got back home, and you think if you’ll live another night to see her. You think if you could just catch that one bastard, that one lowlife that derailed a cargo train, that dirty fighter that put nails in his gloves and holes in the other guys’ cheek, you think maybe you can make a difference in this city. They call it the city of Angels,” he says, “I’ve never seen one.”

“Sure,” I say. I light another cigarette. I think this gooball has ingested one too many Humphrey Bogart movies.

“Look, kid, I wanna see Criseyde,” Bugsy says.

“I can’t do that right now, Bugsy, I’m sorry. We’re still sorting things out,” I say.

“I just wanna see her face again,” he says.

“If you tell me something worthwhile, maybe we can arrange something.”

“Conjugal?”

“Um, maybe.”

“Alright, kid,” Bugsy says. He extends a gooey arm out to me again, and I give him another cigarette.

“I’ll shoot straight with you,” he says.

I look through my notebook again as the elevator doors close. My wife says my handwriting is chicken scratch, which it is. The longer letters swirl around at the tails and dip through the lines.

I get to Cocks’ door and knock my knuckles against the glass. I hear a squeak and a “come in.”

“Director Cocks?” I say.

“Agent Ball,” he says, sitting in his chair.

“I wanted to discuss my case with you,” I say. He gestures for me to sit down.

The walls seem to have gotten blacker since yesterday. Cocks’ tie is slightly undone, and there is a bit of ash on his shirt.

“What’s up?” he says.

“I’ve got a story from Bugsy, and I wanted to run it by you,” I say. “I’m not sure about its legitimacy, however.”

“Let me stop you right there, Ball,” Cocks says.

“Sir?”

“It happened again out in Montana just last night,” he says, “same chain of events. Only some agents out there got two of those gunk heaps to talk.”

“What’d they say?”

“Apparently, they’re from a different solar system. We’re waiting on confirmation on that one. But, apparently, these gunk heaps were all on some sort of nursery ship. They crashed somewhere in Canada. Thing is, it seems as though these things start out as some kind of a spore, and they grow by eating things. They start off through hosts. That’s why they’re doing so well from the beer cans. But eventually they take their hosts over and become what you’ve been talking to.”

“And all that is confirmed?” I ask.

“We’re waiting on that right now,” he says, “but the one they were talking to was face-to-face with an industrial food processor. So we think there’s some validity there.”

Cocks hands me a cigarette. It is harsh and stings my throat a bit.

“That’s what Bugsy was telling me,” I say, “but his case is...”

“Yes?”

“Him and that other one, Criseyde,” I say, “they’re in love.”

“In love?”

“Yes. It’s hard to get particulars since Bugsy thinks he’s either Clark Gable or Don Corleone, but I think they have somehow formed an intense longing for one another.”

“Interesting,” Cocks says, “that’s a shame.”

“Why, sir?”

“We’re gonna have to incinerate these things anyway,” he says, stroking his chin. “They’re too dangerous. We’ll keep one around for a bit, maybe, just to get some more intel on what kind of intent they had with that ship. But they get too hungry. Besides,” he says, “no one really wants some big wads of gunk walking around. Especially when they’re eating people.”

“I suppose,” I say.

## THE FERRY IS FREE

BY M. E. LINK

Orange as a hazard, the Alice Austin ferryboat chugs along the Hudson Bay against a backdrop of a scarcely starry sky. Ripples run away dancing in the foam of her wake. It’s the witching hour on a brisk spring morning, and this vessel is certainly headed South—down to where the last of my aspirations seethes in a salty brine of cynicism. On the wall in front of me, a scrawled inscription reads:

*All ye who board this barge  
Run risk of stiffening ligaments  
Of lips pursing in disenchantment  
And, for no good cause, losing patience*

In my earlier years, no matter where my adventures took me, my quixotic mind would paint the world as my home. Now, I hear a wishful echo of my hubris ringing among the hum of the boat’s motor. The fluorescent lighting casts the ambiance of a waiting room. Perhaps a doctor will call my name to deliver a dose of that Proper Medicine I’ve been a-huntin’, a-waitin’, a-wantin’, through all of my wanderings.

Reality at last checks me with the savagery of an ice hockey enforcer as we dock in St. George, Staten Island. Watchful and silent, I stand among passengers of every walk of life. At this hour, certain souls strike me as ghosts more than anything living, crumpled and shuffling through found objects like broken-down vultures in a dream-like demise.

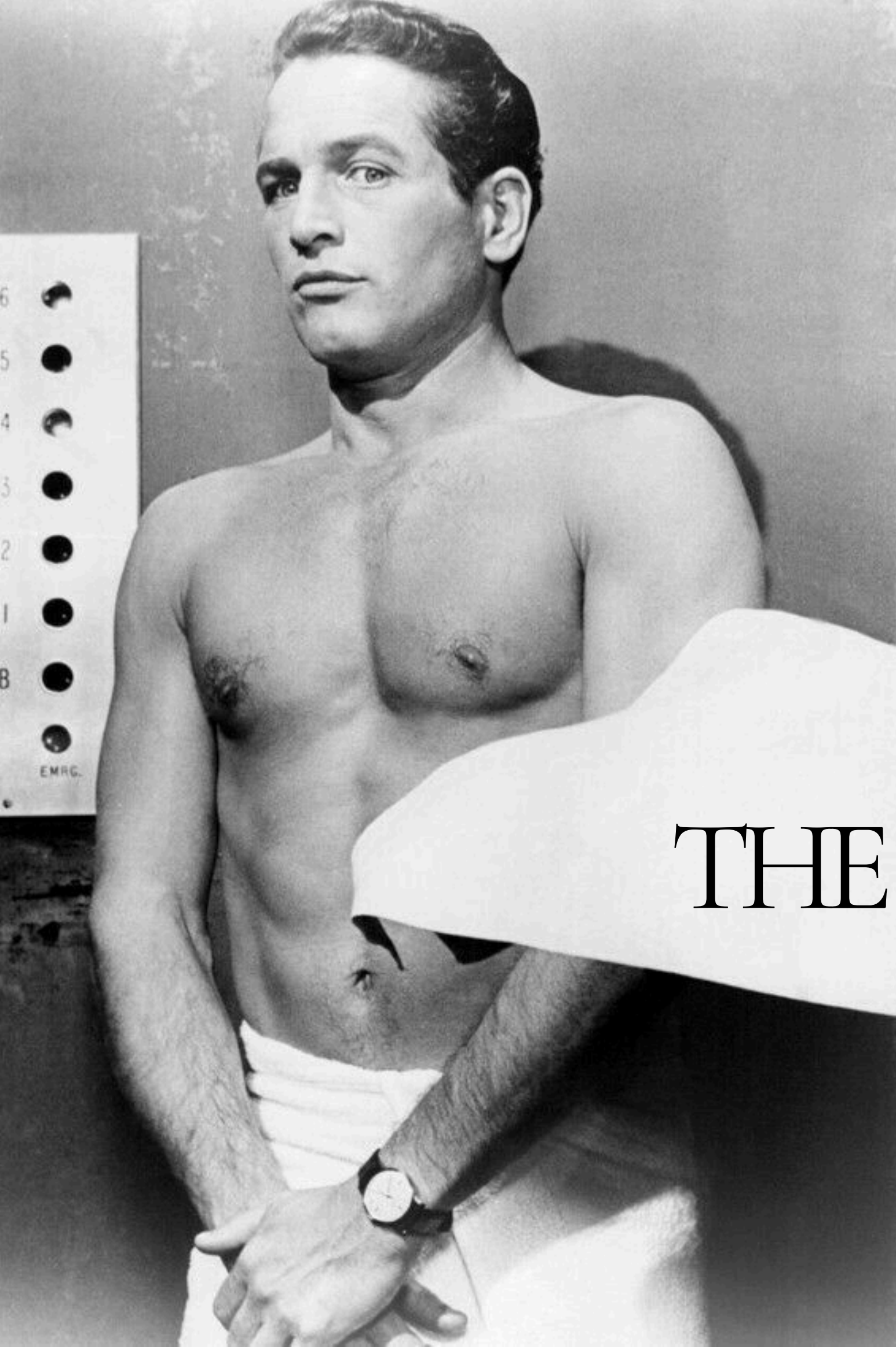
The deckhands withdraw the mooring ropes, in turn releasing their control of the small crowd. I take off running, ahead of the herd, darting over linoleum tiles through the terminal doors to gate D. The concrete walkway smells of old piss, dotted with ten thousand wads of spit-out chewing gum, stepped on by uncountable numbers of feet. There, I wait indignantly for bus B52, sensing in the back of my throat a sour hint of regret for ever having stationed myself on Staten Island, the land that bewilders my reveries.

## WHAT DOES WORK

BY GIOVANNI SAFARELLA

I find that often, a major way in which people oppress themselves is by an acquired negative view of the possibility of everything—so to say, that they focus mainly on how and why certain successes which they desire to pursue “*will*” not work—and never on how they perhaps actually could...

This parasitic negativity—over time—digs away slowly at the foundations of their very imaginations (and most importantly: their abilities to imagination)—which become replaced, entirely—within these people, as a single, uniform “*I will not*”—a fervent “*I can not*.”



THE WEST 4TH

