

# FICTION



Image courtesy of Janine Cheng

# BEOWULF

Michael Paul Simons

Listen, I tell the girls, I am the whole damn assassination. I'm Oswald perched like a patsy, sixth floor, Texas School Book Depository. I'm Jack Kennedy in the car startled by my own magic bullet reenactment. I'm the CIA, the Russians, the Cubans. I'm every bit of brain on Jackie's pink coat. I'm Jackie reaching out to comfort myself. The Mob, the Secret Service, the grassy knoll. I'm Jack Ruby waiting out that bright, beautiful Dallas day. I am Cecile B. Zapruder filming the whole fucking thing.

So after five days gallivanting not even a caffeine rush can spare you two girls from your crashing. Britney, what goes up must also fall back. Drug use isn't rocket science, sweetheart—hell, it's not even riding a rocket. A monkey can do it. They've proved a monkey can do it. They've proved a monkey can take a capsule into space, come back and pose for *Life* magazine. What a monkey can't do—what you can't do, Montana—is comprehend that payload you're sitting on: rocket boosters blasting, one after the other. You are merely feather-weight accessories attending my brave journey.

Let's not forget, girls, this is about glory—the boys of bygone days had glory, and by-God, I won't die without my fair share.

This Taco Bell isn't safe. There's a freak out there in the shadows, lying in wait. But what do you girls care as long as the soft-drink refills are free?

Well, I'm here, and I will stop him. I brought a ball-peen hammer just in case—but I'm not going to need it. I'll tear him apart bare-handed.

Did you know I know the night manager here?

Hello, Maggie. Are you operating your Taco Bell effectively? Why are there so many strong-arm robberies around? There's

a patrol car parked outside the Exxon across the street—but do you think the cowboy inside is going to protect you? Your tacos aren't safe. Are you listening to me, Maggie?

She's back there. Or maybe she's not. I'll defend the Taco Bell if she won't. I must say I'm disappointed. They don't teach courage these days.

Maggie was my ex-girlfriend—I don't know where we stand now. I remember sketching out a perpetual motion machine in her sociology notebook. Just so. Perfect. Not just theory. I wonder if she still has it.

Britney, fill out an application. Montana has money, but you're going to need a job soon. Free bean burritos. Free drink refills. Advancement opportunities.

So you're sleepy. So you have a headache. You know that woodpecker outside my bedroom window? He keeps at it—six in the morning. You'll hear no complaint from me. He's got a perfectly reasonable reason to be out there knocking his head into the tree. It's a job. It's his place. I have curtains and magnanimity.

Pay attention to these life lessons, sweetheart. Why do you waste your life away? Apply yourself. Get a job. You have little else to do and nowhere else to go. Factories are shutting down, packing their bags, and moving like missionaries to countries you've never heard of. Mexico. China. India. I have job skills, but what do you have? Seventeen-year-old good looks? Britney, love yourself just as you are. You don't need designer lipstick to look beautiful to me. Your being young and impressionable is enough. Look, at least consider getting a job.

Wake up. Turn your head toward the door. SLOWLY. Don't make them think you're watching, Montana. See the ruler markings on the door? If you decide to steal something, babygirl, they're going to know how tall you are. Their cameras are filming us. Should something freaky happen, there'll be an official recording.

Well ladies, in the beginning I boasted that if I wasn't President of the United States by age 35, I would jump off the Hurston Bridge. So you see I'm ambitious.

At 34, I decided, out of the blue, fuck it. Fried eggs and Nancy Reagan notwithstanding. I had lost heart. Your dumping me all those years ago, Maggie, didn't help. There is no real future in television repair or satellite installation. Mind you I knew full well going in the dangers, which is more than I can say for these two dummies. They'll deny they've fallen into the well, and they'll deny the water's chest deep and rising. Make a wish.

These girls like to party and care nothing about my noble experiment. As long as I drive them where they need to be, they are usually good about finding money, or at least Montana is. These girls keep me company, but they don't even know my real name. I told the girls to call me Beowulf. That's before I remembered that Grendel was the monster, and by that time we'd already partied several times, so of course it was too late to change monikers. I regret nothing.

So you'll want to know about my transformation. It was beautiful—it was like how everybody knows where they were standing when Kennedy was shot. I demanded my undoing to be symbolic. I said a little prayer. "Ashes to Ashes." We listened to David Bowie and waited for this guy. I smoked a cigarette. We watched *Apollo 13*. I smoked another cigarette. We burned candles and read tarot cards. I forget how long we waited or whose house we were at.

My first snort—an iron-fisted suckerpunch—and then a flash, apparently official, tore through my bloodstream. At 1:00 pm Central Standard Time I was no longer who I was.

There is nothing I want more than to be another thing. In vino veritas. In taco tacitoss.

At first the girls called me professor because I knew so much. Anybody who can answer a single *Jeopardy!* question would impress them. I am twice their age and infinitely smarter. The

brighter one—Britney believe it or not—had a lightbulb moment when she realized that by adding their ages together you got mine. I breathe life into these two girls. They read Bukowski because of me. Billy Burroughs. Denis Johnson.

Britney, Montana, you two and that baby boy you have been fucking don't know half of the hell you're up against. You think you have will power. You tested your will power to prove you had it. Well of course you think you do and that's the beauty of the whole thing. As long as there's some guy in a house somewhere cooking down Mexican cough syrup there's always going to be some pretty illusion that you have it under control. It's a postmodern spin on the teenage trip—you two are gorgeous—that you can pretend to be teenagers when in fact you are nothing of the kind. What I love most about you is how many bean burritos you buy but don't eat. How many sodas you drink, my pretties, and never ever seem to gain weight.

You are fearless and you should have fear. If you are dreaming right now, I sincerely hope your dreams are nightmares. Dear Britney, dear Montana, sooner or later something will happen. The life of each body will be crushed.

If I wasn't loitering at this Taco Bell I would loiter at another. There are so many.

Nothing, nothing, nothing out there prevents the slow approach of that maniac.

I realize you are not listening, Maggie, but really perhaps you should.

To be perfectly honest, I've considered robbing this Taco Bell myself. No offense intended. Before we came, we had plans to rob the place. I drafted them myself. Imagine our rushing in as a mob, storming the counter.

Yes, we could rob you. But then you'd know as we left how tall we are. You could be more responsible, Maggie. I don't think you are a good nightshift manager. I don't think the Taco Bell executives would approve. They ought to see how tall you stand

as you walk out the door later tonight. If you walk out tonight...

I have the weaponry and the brute strength to overtake anybody. Also, I have the brain of thirty geniuses. And it's that guy out there you should be wary of—the one you hear about on the police scanner. He's rising up out of the thick fen of night.

The danger is real, yet I'm the only one with eyes open enough to see.

Five days wide awake and now in the plastic booth of the Taco Bell my blondies sleep like sweet potatoes. And where are you? The little girls sleep. They show no concern for desperados or your personal safety. They are peaceful, law-abiding. But where are you?

A fog born of showers conceals so you can't see the Exxon station across the road. Something walks through the fog. Approaching slowly.

I am not afraid of this wretched creature.

Montana, tell Maggie how the earth is 6,000 years old. That's what good Christian girls believe, right? Giants once walked the earth. And dinosaurs coexisted with man. What did your father teach you? That God was fucking with us when it came to the dinosaurs, sneaking bones under rocks? The whole story of humankind is one of depravity. We were once nothing. Do you know that? We came into being like a big bang in your mother's crotch. Then we evolved—you can trace our degraded form right back to Cain. We are still marked. Yet, as a species we can create complex social orders like the Taco Bell. Life must be a miracle!

He's here! I see him—mostly I see my reflection in the window, but he is behind it—he's walking up the parking lot. Approaching slowly. I am ready. If he steps one foot through that door I will tear him from limb to limb.

Wake up. You two should record this for future generations. My only hope for survival is to speak directly to the surveillance camera, hope my message will ride microwaves into the distant reaches, touch every surface of the universe like a gentle breath.

All is vanity. All is breath. Fame and immortality. Distant and future generations will replay my saga. Like the reruns of *I Love Lucy*. I will be known and live forever.

Wait for applause.

I choose to use. I choose to use and do the other things—not because they are easy, but because they are hard. Because I am the exception that proves the rule. Because my only living peer is John Glenn. We have balls, blasting into orbit strapped inside a suicide capsule—knowing the pipedream chance of making it back to earth. I do not waste my time. I am not afraid of doom.

This morning—no, not this morning, but recently—I woke up in a bed. Fresh linens. And that crack of light wedged between the curtains. The woodpecker. I'd like to invite that woodpecker inside. He seems to be a good finder of things. I never liked living here. I never liked living here. I never liked living here.

My earliest memory not lost to oblivion: stretching my hand up into the black glove of space. Reaching and reaching. Jumping up. Laughing. Climbing anything I could find. Laughing. Laughing and crying. Crying and screaming. Shouting. Shouting and gasping. Casting a net of blame. Furious. Feverish. A porch light bleaching out my one best shot. Belting out inconsolable anguish.

No—there's no way this metaphor will hold. I'm stuck in this capsule shooting ten thousand miles per hour back to earth and there's no way this metaphor will hold. The rivets are groaning. There are no reverse rockets. I'm man versus machine versus science itself. I told Maggie that. Why aren't you listening? There are no more heroes. I am the last. I am John Glenn. My reentry will burn brighter than any ball of fire—it will be the blinding confusion that is God. You will know my name. You will know my name. Already I smell the bright red phosphorous breath of my undoing.

Pause.

Then silence.

**I see God.**

**Thrown on my back and facing the star-ridden void of space,  
God appears immaculate and glorious and He sings "Stardust."  
He sings for Kennedy, He sings for Me.**

**Again silence. The hwaet, hwaet, hwaet of my heart beating. A  
suggestion: "I'm still here."**

**Godspeed, John Glenn, and good luck.**

The following three works—"One Last Drive", "The Assessment" and "Father"—are excerpts from a text/image collaboration between musician and photographer **JOHN SELLEKAERS** and writer **BRIAN EVENSON**, with the latter writing short pieces in response to the former's photographs. It is their third collaboration, the first being a spoken word/music CD (<http://www.discogs.com/release/402267>) and the second being music with an accompanying story (<http://www.discogs.com/release/608482>).



## ONE LAST DRIVE

Later, when the oil reserves ran out, many of us took one last drive in our vehicles and then abandoned them where they died, slowly walking home or slowly plodding forward in whatever direction the car was pointing. Certain people began to think of themselves as their car's spirit, straying farther and farther away from the deceased chassis, connected to it by a thin strand of thought, until they separated completely from it to become a sort of ghost.

Still others found themselves unwilling to leave their vehicles at all. They remained at the wheel, motionless, staring out the windshield. Over time they passed from the motionlessness of life to the motionlessness of death, and their bodies slowly mummified. We know better than to do anything but simply leave them there, simply let them be.



## THE ASSESSMENT

They had formulated, so they claimed, a revolutionary and all-new concept for the open-air urinal. Sergeant Douglas, though on leave, was quick to volunteer for the test run.

Standing at a discreet distance, we eagerly awaited his assessment.





## FATHER

Nights, we kept father confined to his room by draping the walls with black velvet curtains to hide the door—which in his sleep-addled state he did not entirely remember existed—and by hanging the drawing of the girl on the window. He would get up, not even half awake, grope around in the dark until he found the flashlight, and then make for the window. When he caught sight of the girl's image, he would give a shriek. Then we would

come and turn on the lights to find him tangled in the curtains. We calmed him—sometimes vodka was enough, sometimes we had to resort to tranquilizers, sometimes there was nothing for it but to beat him with sticks until he lost consciousness.

In the morning father was always his old, arrogant self: blunt, cheerfully deranged, in command of even the minute comings and goings of the house, his domain. He ordered us about our tasks and, when dissatisfied, jeered at us or fixed upon us his reproachful and imperious eye or sentenced us to a few hours' confinement in the darkened cellar.

But at night, everything was different for him. How we had had the foresight to draw the girl's portrait before her disappearance we did not know. But we knew we couldn't have done without it.

# PHANTOM VIBRATIONS

Raleigh Holliday

After an unbearable night of dreamless half-sleep, interrupted by bouts of nervous vomiting, I awoke with new resolve.

First thing in the morning, I left Amy a letter under her door, handwritten, which I never do:

*Our prolonged separation has sent me spiraling into a cavernous depression. I think I may be going insane, and it's very exciting.*

Like everything I write, it was a wild exaggeration, and completely honest.

She responded later in the day with a text message:

*Let's go to the mall.*

We were walking down together, arms locked, when a car swerved by. Some joker in the back seat leaned out the window and yelled at me. I couldn't tell if he said, "The wild man is about to puke," or maybe, "That woman is a bag of prunes."

That woman being Amy, I guess. She did not resemble prunes, physically or cosmically. Physically she carried the slim curves of a pear slice, the blush of a mango—very gorgeous—but cosmically I had always pinned her as dragon fruit.

"If you were a fruit, what would you be?" I asked her.

"Freddie Mercury," she said.

"I've always thought of you as dragon fruit." I said.

"Does that mean I strike you as dry-skinned and fire-breathing?"

"It's fruit from cacti. Exotic. Delicious. Only blooms at night. Native Americans call it 'Queen of the Night.'"

"So now I'm a night-walking tramp."

“I meant dragon fruit in the cosmic sense,” I said. “You know, cosmically. It was supposed to be a compliment?” I shrugged.

“I prefer sunlight,” she said.



Later that day, I was meeting with the guru Mitch in his room. His dorm is set up like an opium den: cheap, bare mattresses rest over dingy white-brown shag carpeting in such a pattern as to cover as many wine stains as possible. The beds are often populated with incapacitated strangers, who Mitch refers to as his ‘dreamscape cosmonauts.’ Tapestries depicting tribal hunts line the walls; wooden beads dangle over the windows and door. Tiny piles of shit pellets pepper the carpet, left by the two camouflaged snow rabbits that roam stealthily about the room. A blue plastic Fischer Price kindergarten work table occupies center stage, supporting a hefty stack of books on hypnosis and lucid dreaming. A lawn chair draped with a rainbow-patterned afghan flanks the table—Mitch’s throne.

“The mall?” he asked.

“I know,” I said, collapsing onto a mattress. “The belly of the beast. A misanthrope like me should never have gone.”

“Embrace it,” Mitch said. “The corporate commons will lift you places not even the most twisted acid trip can.” He settled back into his lawn chair, propped his feet up on the table. He wore a pair of canvas moccasins with fake Nike swooshes stitched on their sides.

“I only went so I could spend time with Amy,” I said. “I hadn’t seen her in a month, and I think that might have something to do with my recent illness.”

“Indeed,” Mitch said. “She’s a beautiful creature. Curative. You should study her habits closely.”

“I *would* like to get to know her better.”

“When my cosmonauts say that, they mean they want to copulate while experimenting with mind-expanding drugs.”

“Something like that would be nice,” I said. “But also, you know, something less ephemeral.”

“Hence the necessity of studiousness,” Mitch said. “Capture her essence in your waking life, and you may reproduce it *ad infinitum* elsewhere.”

Mitch is a squirrelly guy, but some might say handsome—boney in a sleek kind of way. He’s always wearing button-up corduroy shirts, tailored himself, that entirely lack buttons. His chest is pale and hairless. “We should arrange for a preliminary dreamscape encounter,” he said. He plucked a thick, worn paperback from atop his work station—*The Lucid Reader*—and, with the elongated nail of his right pinky finger, began flipping through the pages.

“If you’re trying to concoct a wet dream for me, you heinous dreamland pimp, I’ll have to politely decline,” I said. “I prefer love in the real world.”

“What is reality but synapses firing in the brain?” Mitch said. “Dreaming is as real as anything else. And in a lucid dream, anything is possible. You’re in complete control. Coitus is no longer confined by the laws of physics, or the trappings of a society arrested by prudence.”

“Just because you can only find affection in your own little fantasy world—”

“Back flip fucking,” Mitch said. “Unicycle sex. Fucking on the moon. Fucking while flying. Fucking while fucking, and fucking that fucking—that’s meta-fucking. Everything in spades. It’s a lifestyle choice,” Mitch said. “A vessel of transcendence. Don’t miss your boat.”

“I don’t dream anymore,” I said, “so I suppose I’ll have to find some other ship to the sublime.”

“Nonsense. You may not remember your dreams, but you must dream. The brain requires it. You should keep a dream journal. Write in it just as you wake up, that’s when you remember best. It’ll help you keep tabs on your sanity.”

“I haven’t dreamt in years,” I said, suppressing a yawn. “I’ve just been living the dream.”

Mitch reached into a drawer and pulled out a curled-open can of what looked to be albino carrots. He picked one out, snapped it in half, and then dipped it in a jar of snowy goop. I craned my neck and gave him an inquisitive look.

“Hearts of palm dipped in marshmallow fluff,” he said. “A bizarre, abrupt shift in diet can sometimes hotwire the mind, lubricate lucidity.”

“Hotwire the mind?”

“It’s not escapism,” Mitch said. “It’s engage-ism.”

“Whatever,” I said. “Throw me a bite.” Mitch tossed me the other half of the heart, dressed in fluff. I chomped it down in a single bite. It tasted as if someone who had just consumed a gallon of vinegar and a pound of powdered sugar was pissing down my throat. The revolting flavor combo jackknifed my brain, turned my stomach on its ass. A severe, latent queasiness awoke inside me—one with which, of late, I had been frequently and inexplicably afflicted.

“So, how was it?” I heard Mitch ask.

“It’s fucking disgusting” I gagged. “I think I’m going to puke.” I could barely see through the fog of nausea, its noxious body entering my nostrils and striking deep into my guts. Employing a technique Mitch taught me, I closed my eyes, breathed slowly, evacuated my mind—meditating in an attempt to quell the insurgency rising against my throat.

“No,” Mitch said with a chasmic echo. “I meant the mall, your romp with Amy. How was it?” His voice was submerged.

I focused on the void. My inner monologue flattened into a meadow of snow. The mattress exhaled beneath me. My spine uncurled an inch. And then, with frightening lucidity, I felt the fingers of an impossibly smooth hand caress my cheek—the gesture of a phantom presence. I shot straight up and looked right at Mitch. “It was stranger than even the most twisted acid

trip,” I said.



Coming from campus, the first sign of the mall is its giant coliseum of stacked parking spots, plotted like graves. I couldn't help but imagine being buried alive beneath the cement, chunks of gravel filling my lungs. I felt obscenely at peace with the idea.

Amy squeezed my hand. “Isn't there some children's story about a group of kids living in a shopping mall for a year?” she asked.

I considered the prospect of a year's internment. My organs started trading places. “Please, not now,” I moaned to myself, groping at my stomach.

“What's that?” Amy asked.

As a distraction, I dug deeper into my ruminations on cement entombment, imagining myself waking breathless and sweating in the pitch black. I would be terrified at first, but then I would feel—with my nose, my fingertips, and the knuckles of my toes—all the protective walls of my casket cordoning me from intruders. “Nobody could survive a year in there,” I said.

“I would love it,” Amy said. “I could get in good with the Hard Wok Cafe people and live off free samples of orange chicken, nap on those space-aged mattresses in the Better Sleep Store, teach myself to play the piano on that synth in Radio Shack, read junk mags in the Brookstone massage chairs. At night, I could even get a little intimate with one of those handheld vibrating neck massagers.”

My nausea mounted. “Would you really want to be surrounded by all those walls?”

“Think about all the people I would meet,” Amy said. “I could steal away with one of those handsome Abercrombie employees and make wild, sinful love in a dressing room.”

I pictured Amy in a cramped stall straddling some thick-

chedsted, blonde-locked narcissist who cocked his neck to stare at himself in the mirror and lick his teeth clean while Amy went to work on him. The image wrenched me from my concrete womb, stuck my forehead with a syringe of angst. I rubbed my temples and groaned.

“Is something wrong?” Amy asked, poking my nose with her pinky finger. “I never know what you’re thinking.”

“Isn’t that how it’s supposed to work?” I asked.

“I guess,” Amy said. “But you could strive a little harder for clarity of self-expression. Nobody likes mixed-up signals.”

“Clarity,” I said.

Amy nodded. She took me by the elbow and tugged me along towards the mall’s main entrance. The turbulent throng of shoppers thickened around us—an undifferentiated ocean of human color and noise. The backs of my ears, my palms, and my knee caps began to sweat as foreign bodies passed dangerously close to my own. I looked straight up as we strode towards the towering brass-rimmed doors, and, as an alternative escape, began to imagine the opposite of a live burial.

I saw myself roused on mile-high stilts, far above the harassment of human glances, but deep into the grasp of vertigo. The only way I could save myself would be to look straight ahead, walk right into the middle of the ocean, where it would eventually be deep enough for me to dive from my stilts without injury. Then I would assemble a makeshift raft from the wood and endure a hermitic, hardscrabble life, surviving off the tightfisted offerings of the sea. To preserve my sanity, I would use the excess stilt lumber to craft myself a companion—a simple, wooden woman, whose gaze would never implicate me in anything.

I understood the impossibility of the scenario. The sheer weight of a mile-long stilt would prevent me from lifting it to take even a single stride. I would have to get someone I could trust to steady the beams as I climbed down—down into a

boisterous, salivating crowd—or else resign myself to fits of lightheadedness and the inevitable fall...

“Freeze,” Amy said, jabbing me playfully in the kidney. “What are you thinking about right now?”

I looked down abruptly, dizzying myself. Everything seemed distant. “The plummet,” I said, inelegantly loud. The crowd about me swiveled for a beat—a patchwork of single eyes peaking over lapels.

Amy’s face, strangely grieved, was locked right onto mine. Barely audible murmurs reached the back of my mind. “You’re as pale as a ghost,” Amy said, her eyes widening.

I felt accused of some horrible crime I had yet to commit. My insides did a back flip and I found myself hugging a stair rail, vomiting over its side into a dogwood tree. The liquid was thick like mucus, and splattered loudly onto a crotch of roots. As soon as I was emptied, an incredible sense of complacency steadied my breathing, renewed the world around me. Amy held me by the waist.

“Oh, god, I’m sorry,” I said, almost laughing, for some reason, at the sheer volume and force of my heaves. “I really am. I don’t know what happened.”

“We should head back,” Amy said, softly touching my cheek.

“No, no,” I said. “I’m feeling fine now. I’m great, I’m ready. I was just, you know, seasick or something.”



“I send mixed signals?” I asked.

“You send mixed signals,” Mitch said. He got up from his lawn chair and lowered himself into the lotus position on a mattress next to mine. “In the dreamscape as well as waking life, one must cultivate lucidity.”

“What the hell are these signals? Signals about what?” I asked.

“About everything,” Mitch said. “This is a bad era for

equivocation, man. We post-humans are acutely aware of our semiotic selves. Clarity is a must.”

“Fucking clarity,” I said. “I don’t pretend that things are any more confounding than they really are.”

“Everything’s pretend. Everything’s real.”

“And I don’t pretend to be anyone other than my sickly self.”

“Or maybe you’re very good at pretending to be someone who doesn’t pretend to be anyone other than his sickly self,” Mitch said. “And yet even that notion would presuppose a pure, static ontology of self to appeal to.”

“Are you actually trying to make sentences with your words right now?”

“We live in a world of signifiers,” Mitch said, stretching his arms above his head. “What do you signify?”

I stood up. “And what the goddamn piss hell,” I said, “is that shit even supposed to mean?”

“It means you must mean something. It means you’ve got to get the meaning of your signals straight.”

I tugged at my cheeks. “Well I never mean to mean much of anything.”

“Intentionality has nothing to do with mixed meanings,” Mitch said. “Regardless of whether you mean them to be or not, your meanings are mixed.”

“Well fucking shit, man, my mind is mixed! I’m fucking mixed!”

“Chex Mix mixed.”

“Mixed,” I said, flailing my arms, “in my mind, is where. About everything.”

“Pub Mix mixed,” Mitch said. “Pretzels and peanuts.”

“You’re not helping,” I said.

“Am I supposed to be helping?” Mitch asked.

“Yes!” I nearly hollered, collapsing back onto my mattress.

“Then shut your face hole for a moment and take a dose.” Mitch sidled towards me across his mattress until our tuck-

legged knees were nearly touching. He reached over and grasped my forehead. "Relax your thoughts," he said. "I'm going to mine the depths."

"Christ, Mitch," I said. "I can't be hypnotized."

"A dubious claim."

I sighed, shut my eyes. "Fine," I said. "Just keep an eye on the canary in the colliery."

Mitch began forcefully massaging my brow. "Get settled," he said.

His fingers were freezing cold, fabulously firm and defined. I began my meditation. I felt as if I could, by focusing all my mental capacities, discern every minute groove of Mitch's fingerprints against my skin, and the infinitesimal gaps between. As the cool, ellipsoidal kneading continued against my temples, the emptiness of each inter-print rimple seemed to expand outward into space, allowing my thoughts to leak along their rivulets and acquire an odd, unsuppressed numbness. And yet, the pressure of Mitch's digits was increasingly vice-like and tyrannical. "You're feeling sleepy, serene," he said.

"No, honestly, I'm not."

"Meet me half way, you fuck."

"Fine, I'm feeling sleepy, but certainly not serene. Can't you ease up on the vice grip, Robocop?"

"Let yourself fade away entirely."

"I've been trying for years."

"Let's tap the ores of your unconscious." His hands tightened further around my head. My skull felt like a tender melon being ruptured and violently evaporated. I squinched my eyes as they began to tear.

"What do you want to know?" I winced.

"No," Mitch said. "The question is: what do you want to know?" The vice grip suddenly ceased. I opened my eyes just in time to see, through a blur of saline, Mitch's open palm, wound fully back, swoop in with a piñata club's celerity and connect

emphatically with my cheek—a brain-boggling slap.

“Shit!” I yelped.

“Quick,” Mitch said. “With authority, ask the first question that comes to mind.”

An eerie, dormant numbness stayed my protest. “Where is my phantom woman now,” I asked, “with her sweet wooden ways?”



After spending forty fruitless minutes in the seven and a half section of Payless, Amy was prodding me to lead the way to the next store. “It’s your turn to shop,” she said. “You can’t come to the mall and not buy anything.”

“But that was precisely my plan,” I said, “and I never make plans.”

She started pinching my ass. “Giddy up,” she said. “Come on, it’ll be fun.”

So I walked next door. It was Gap Kids.

“Let’s buy booties,” Amy said excitedly, and went wending into the racks of clothes.

She left me alone in front of a giant, terrifying photo-ad. There were two young boys pictured, no older than six or seven. They were dressed identically: sharp blue-striped dress shirts under preppy dark-navy sweater vests, pleated khakis with a stiff ironed crease down each leg, slim leather belts and shining leather loafers. They both wore idiotic smiles, and as a kicker, had croquet mallets propped pompously on their shoulders.

I imagined the photo in motion: the first kid pivoted sideways, wound back his croquet mallet, widened his idiotic grin, and then cracked the shit out of the other one’s jaw, knocking it clean off. A trail of shattered teeth smiled skyward. Still grinning maniacally, the pre-school aggressor stepped from his frame, right onto the floor in front of me, and stared straight into my

mouth.

I was just about to flee when Amy broke my daze. She sprang between the boy and me, holding tiny pink booties. She looked at my face, frowned. “Do I dare ask what you’re thinking?”

“You really shouldn’t,” I said.

She threw the booties to the floor and grasped both of my hands into hers. She stood on her tip toes, leaned in to kiss my nose, then bobbed back. She turned my hands over and began thumbing at my open palms. “I’m going to read your mind,” she said. “I’ll get a direct line to your inner monologue, the ticker tape of your consciousness. So start printing clearly.”

“Clarity,” I said.

She nodded. She took a long breath through her nose, closed her eyes, and squeezed my hands. I stared at her, looked her up and down. She stood slim, seductive, all of her curves sassily-wrapped and vibrantly accessorized—an outfit with the color and shine of a candy machine.

In my mind, with a pair of phantom hands, I began slowly unraveling the fashion from her body: a lavender silk scarf worked loose and fell lightly from her shoulders; the slim straps of a bright yellow tank top were snipped in half and yanked up over her head, spilling her straight black hair from its bun; her bra, red lace, unfastened of its own accord and fluttered away; the zipper of her jeans started the slow descent earthward.

Then there was a swelling, somewhere in the back of my brain or the bottom of my gut, and all of the sudden I felt horribly ashamed, and entirely empty. I looked away. I remembered the volumes of fluids I had purged over the staircase. “Listen,” I said. “I realized just now, in my mind, that I’m contracting a merciless case of vacancy. I need to move. I need to eat. I’m famished. I need an entire meal of food.”

“Let’s hit the Wok,” Amy said, opening her eyes with renewed alacrity.

“I could really do with some beef lo mein to the face right

now," I said.

Amy shivered and smiled. She looked around. "Ever feel like a ghost's walked through you?"

"You lost your scarf thingy," I said, bending down to retrieve it for her.



"Did you capture her hypothetical nude image?" Mitch asked.

"Not exactly," I said.

Mitch slouched in his lawn chair. He looked down his chin as he packed an old polished wooden pipe full of cherry tobacco. His shirt hung wide open, and he dribbled pinches of the leaf onto his chest, dabbing them back up with his ring finger and dropping them gingerly into the bowl. "Let me tell you a story that's true," he said. "It'll cheer you right up."

"I'd rather you fabricate something for me," I said.

Mitch held the pipe in one hand and shoved the other down his pants to scratch himself. "There was this midget trapeze act in a traveling circus," he said, "and one time they were doing a show in one ring of the circus while there was a hippopotamus act going on in the adjacent ring."

"The truth is always too confusing."

"One of the midgets missed a crucial grab and went sailing into the hippo ring," Mitch said. "And one of the hippos just happened to be yawning."

"I don't think 'midget' is the proper term," I said. "Is this supposed to be funny?"

"The midget flew right into those savage jaws. A perfect landing."

"Please stop."

"Hippos, as you may know, have a vicious reverse gag reflex. Swallowed the poor little bastard whole. The crowd thought it was part of the act, so they all started cheering." Mitch pulled

his hand out and sniffed it.

“That’s the story?” I asked.

“I thought it was hilarious.”

“It’s tragic,” I said. “It’s incomplete. We need to know this midget, his plight. We need back story. We need to be invested.”

“Investment is not my forte,” Mitch said. He struck a match on the side of his table and lit the pipe.

I sat for a while in silence, attempting to banish the image of the little man’s final moments from my mind. But I couldn’t stop thinking: he was slain to the sound of wild applause, swallowed whole so he lived long enough to hear it. The sounds of the dulled crowd seizing with laughter rose all around me; I felt suddenly trapped, writhing and drowning in that putrid sack of hippo digestive juice.

I leaned into my lap. “I think I’m going to be sick,” I said. “Get me out of these guts.”

“Can you imagine?” Mitch said, bending from his seat to offer me a puff. “Gobbled by a goddamn hippo.”

“I shit you not,” I said. “I’m going to ralph.” I drew my hand over my mouth. I felt like someone had reattached my umbilical cord and was pumping my stomach full of ranch dressing.

Mitch leapt up, grabbed the bucket that he used to collect his rabbit shit, and shoved it between my legs. He placed his hand on the back of my neck. “Have at,” he said. “Purge those demons.”

His hand was still freezing, and impressed its chill onto the green heat of my nausea. The heavy, even, glacial indifference of his grasp—injecting the upper rungs of my spine with ice—rendered my faculties increasingly torpid. I shut my eyes, inhaled deeply.

“You’re feeling sleepy, serene,” Mitch said.

“Yeah, okay,” I droned, my stomach slowly anesthetized.

“You’re going to upchuck right into this bucket, flush out the chaos from thine innards.”

“No, slow the roll. I’m just beginning to make contact.”

“Squeeze out the sickness. Cleanse yourself into renewed lucidity.”

“Here she comes,” I said. Mitch took this as a cue to raise the bucket to my chin. But I meant it another way: from the ether, the phantom presence had returned, and now her fingers were tickling around the button of my jeans, teasing at my zipper. The warmth of her touch reanimated my spine, sending me into an episode of nearly imperceptible convulsions. She bit at the nape of my neck, squeezed my inner thigh. “Hey!” I said, opening my eyes. I looked down at my crotch. There was nothing there but the inklings of an erection.

“Are you going to get queasy on me or not?” Mitch said.

I shook my head, crossed my legs to hide my boner. “I just can’t make sense of this sickness,” I moaned.

Mitch took his hand from my neck and sighed. He pulled the bucket away and dropped back into his lawn chair. “You and your mixed signals,” he said.

My stomach lurched again. I sprang upright. Chunks of beef lo mein rocketed through my throat, splattering a fresh stain on Mitch’s shag.



After lunch came lingerie.

Amey went sniffing around the store, swiped a few skimpy sets from the racks, red and pink and black. I stood lamely in the middle of the floor, drooling over the massive wall-sized mural photos of pinup princesses posing with pouty faces and perky tits. To my side, there stood a sickly female mannequin that wore the strangled expression of a hophead crashing down from a long dope run. She was stiff, but strangely real—an impoverished soul suffocating beneath sharp wooden cheeks brushed in bronze blush, human misery boiling beneath muted eyes that lay racooned in deep purple liner. I reached out and

clenched her by the neck. It was thin and cold and lifeless. I wished, in a moment of childish sorrow, to fill this twig with pulsing veins, to birth it into flesh.

“Do you need help?” a voice called.

“For god’s sake, yes,” I said.

The store assistant startled me from behind. I wheeled around and looked into her face: a photocopy of the mannequin’s. For an instant, I thought that in some twisted manner my wish had come true, that I was beholding my own human creation, and I realized I had made a terrible mistake. I tightened my grip on the dummy’s neck.

“Can I help you find something?” the mannequin incarnate asked.

“Satisfaction,” I said.

She smiled meekly. “I’m sorry?”

“Listen,” I said. “I’m looking for lift. Which of these provides the most lift?” I let go of the dummy and waved an arm towards a rack of bras.

“Well—”

“And I do mean lift in the cosmic sense,” I said. “You know, cosmically.”

She squinted her glittered eyes with severity. “Cosmically?” she asked.

“Yes,” I said. “The cosmos. What here can lift me there?” I pointed up toward the dimmed maroon mood lighting buzzing down from the sheetrock sky. She looked. I took her by the wrist. Her eyes widened as I pulled her carefully towards me. “You must think about the cosmos,” I said. “How else do you stay sane?”

She looked right into me. It was not panic, but companionship. “I keep a diary of my dreams,” she said.

I touched her waist, ran a finger down the blade of her hip and looped it into the belt strap of her jeans. “I once dreamt, when I was a small child, that my face was printed on an

army of giant, floating balloons,” I said. “It’s the last dream I remember having.” She stepped closer. We stood and breathed. I could smell her voice before she spoke—a surreal perfume of manufactured romance.

“Last night, I dreamt that I was fat,” she said. “I mean really fat. Too fat to move or think.” She leaned in. She whispered onto my cheek. “It was glorious.”

“Ah,” I breathed. “I’ve heard of that dream.”

We floated for a moment, together, in what I believe a poet might call grace.

Then Amy came stomping up and grabbed me from behind. “Come on,” she said, clawing at my collar, “quit talking with dolls. I need a good critic.” She gave me a vicious yank at the neck. I stumbled backwards, reached out in desperation towards my dreaming dummy. She blinked at me through the saddest eyes I’ve ever seen. But Amy had me by the belt, and I was pulled into a labyrinth of frill and lace.

She dragged me into a fitting room, tossed her bundle of lingerie onto the floor, and began undressing. I slouched into a chair wedged in the corner and stared at her reflection through a mirror that spanned the entire back wall. She faced the mirror as she stripped.

“Did you know, when I was young, I used to not be able to look at myself in the mirror?” Amy said. She threw her scarf and shirt off, unhooked her bra. “Sometimes I would even get these panic attacks where I wouldn’t let any one part of my body touch any other part.” She cupped her breasts and shook them.

“Technically, aren’t all parts of your body touching other parts of your body?” I asked.

“I guess so,” she said. She tugged her jeans and underwear off, and was now completely naked. “But I just wouldn’t want my knees to touch, my ankles to bump, or anything like that.” She started knocking her legs together. The fullness of her thighs moved in waves.

“I wouldn’t mind bumpin’ ankles with you, if you catch my drift,” I said.

She turned and faced me. She stood, nude. She bent down, reached for one of the sets of lingerie, but stopped, stood again. “We could fuck, right now, here, in the dressing room,” she said. “We could be as loud as we wanted. They would never stop us.”

I continued to stare into the mirror, tracing Amy’s profile. All her flesh hung perfectly at rest.



I sat scrubbing my lunch out of Mitch’s rug, dumping Febreze into the carpet. Suddenly, from the camouflage of the shag fur, one of the snow rabbits pounced into my lap. I jumped and squealed. The rabbit scurried back into the brush, and a tingling lit up my inner thigh. I reached into my pocket to grab my cell, expecting a call from Amy. But my phone was blank.

“Shit,” I said. “Do you ever get that thing where you mistakenly think your phone’s vibrating in your pocket?”

“You mean phantom vibrations?” Mitch asked. He observed my cleaning progress from his throne, still puffing away at his pipe.

“It happens to me all the time,” I said. “I always think I’m getting a call—I feel a buzzing in my pocket—but it’s just my mind playing tricks on me.”

“Phantom vibrations are typically indicative of some very serious psychological issues,” Mitch said.

“Maybe I yearn for people to communicate with me.”

“Or maybe you’re afraid they will.”

“I really do enjoy speaking with people, interacting.”

“It’s just like any irrational fear,” Mitch said. “For instance, if you’re an arachnophobe, sometimes your mind will conjure images of spiders on a dark sidewalk, even if it’s just a twig or a rock. Or sometimes tall buildings will turn into hulking, mutant arachnids and impale you with their slimy incisors.”

**“No, I think I just crave human connection.”**

**Mitch blew a series of smoke rings. “An unhealthy mind will create what it loathes the most.”**



**She straddled me, letting her naked crotch kiss coolly onto my own. Her skin had a fantastic, dreamlike quality—incredibly firm and smooth, as if polished to perfection.**

**“What do you think of this bra?” she asked. I brought my hand up to it, felt its tight black fabric, hugging her breasts high and close, strangely constrained and motionless. “It’s supposed to be the one with the most lift.”**

**“Do you feel lifted?” I asked.**

**“I want to feel lifted,” she said. She pressed herself stiffly against me. Her hips rose and settled rhythmically, light yet unyielding.**

**“I think the reason we call it making love,” I said, faintly swooning, “is because it is literally the process of creating love, not simply expressing it.”**

**She held her arms at odd angles. Her breasts remained static under the bra as she bobbed atop me, awkwardly upright, like a buoy at sea. “I need the support,” she said. “In lingerie as in life.”**

**“Life,” I mused, almost breathlessly. “I stepped into a big pile of it today.”**

**She eyed me with a look of unfaltering certainty.**

**“I mean the cereal,” I said. “Life cereal. Did you ever eat that brand as a kid?” She pressed harder into me. I hiccupped with pleasure, ran my hands across her ass, fit and firm as fiberglass. “Someone had spilled a bunch outside my dorm,” I moaned. “I crunched a big pile of Life under my feet. It was a magnificent feeling.”**

**“I’m so glad you came back for me,” she said. She moved**

rapidly now, rubbed herself smoothly over me, almost in a fury.

I vaulted into a disembodied state, waxing transcendent, as if I were making love to the very substance of the love we were creating together—meta-lovemaking. But just as I burst, so did the dressing-room door—wide open—and there was Amy, standing with her shopping bag, looking terribly impatient. She beheld me and my mannequin, dropped her bag, her jaw.

“What the hell’s going on?” Amy screamed. The color fled her flesh, leaving her with a ghostly pallor. I looked down at my waning erection and the semen splashed across the mannequin’s crotch. The answer to Amy’s question seemed obvious even to the doll, whose face was locked in an expression that said, ‘I am never puzzled. I am always willing.’

I sat there inert, nude, lathered in my own ejaculate, yet oddly unashamed. I was suddenly sleepy, ready to leave. My phantom inhabitant had fled.