

The Opiate

Winter 2016, Vol.4



The Opiate

Your literary dose.

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**"It is sometimes an
appropriate
response to reality
to go insane."**

- Philip K. Dick

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Genna Riviuccio

Poetry Editor
Armando Jaramillo Garcia

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Editor's Note

Winter may be a time of languor, but it is also a time for rumination. Trapped within the confines of your mind as much as you are inside of whatever edifice it is you've managed to afford, this is the season of seriousness, of reflection. With this in mind, it's a particularly contemplative fourth issue of *The Opiate*.

Our intro story from Michael Anthony possesses a rare combination of noir and screwball comedy elements (the best genres from Golden Age Hollywood) that makes Fountain Avenue in Los Angeles the perfect backdrop for it. Indeed, what I love most about this issue is how varied the locations are. Just as in life, the location that a narrative takes place in is often key to our understanding of the story—as is the case with Daniel Ryan Adler's fourth chapter from the novel we've been serializing, *Sebastian's Babylon*. New York, that bitch of a town that seems so closely to mirror the way the protagonist's love interest likes to toy with him, dangle him along until she gets bored. Though, in some cases, like Joel Allegretti's piece, it isn't about the where, so much as the why. Whereas, with Gael DeRoane's tale of a man at his wit's end, it's more about the empathetic feeling you have for Myles Dunning, a man at the mercy of whimsical fate. And then there is Sasha Sosnowski's work, which amazes with its feats in sentence structure, possessing the sort of utter self-control in brevity that many authors try for years to achieve.

In addition, there are our poets, who express the sentiments we often find difficult to say ourselves. It is, admittedly, a top-heavy poetry issue this time around. Some, like Peggy Aylsworth, Nova Reeves and Scott Sherman, have been published on our website before, and are rounding out their work in print, while others are entirely new to the dosing scene here at *The Opiate*, including Ryan Fox, whose "Marriage" poem presents the all too real analogy of that beloved institution being like a form of self-gentrification; Scott Penney, who has a few thoughts on a certain diamond-studded skull by Damien Hirst; Stuart Jay Silverman, whose way with words transcends languages; John J. Trause, who reveals Caligula's depravity extended to architecture; and, finally, Sandy Wang, who has never made the coming together of two vegetables seem more romantic.

Each of the writers in this issue brings something unique not just to the magazine, but the genre which they are speaking to. As for the criticism section, I apologize for it being, once again, by me. It's a bit of a challenge to find fresh voices in this category (so if you're out there, please send something to theopiatemagazine@gmail.com). With regard to the piece, let me bring up what Madonna said in the wake of the Paris attacks: "It is very hard to love that which we do not understand, or that which is different than we are. But we have to." Well, this is one thing I can't seem to do when it comes to Lena Dunham and her memoir.

As always, thank you for reading. A good reader is as important as a good writer.

Yours very sincerely,

Genna Riviaccio

FICTION

The Muse of Fountain Avenue

Michael Anthony



The last thing I needed at that point in my thesis research was another loose end. But, who was this Sophie Bitard and why did this otherwise unknown woman appear so prominently in the personal journals of three mid-century Hollywood screenwriters? I scribbled the name in my notebook, slid the chair in against the desk and left the university archives for the day.

That evening I found nothing online about this mystery woman beyond the address of an S. Bitard across town on Fountain Avenue, a block south of Sunset Boulevard. Considering the woman, if even still alive, would easily be over ninety, perhaps this was a daughter or a relative?

The following day, I pressed the buzzer

in the alcove entryway of the white stucco apartment building hoping to learn if the person whose name was printed inside the small brass rectangle on the front door could shed some light on this enigma.

A harsh shout of “What?” came from behind a closed door that showed years of neglect.

“I’m looking for Sophie Bitard.”

“Who wants her?” the voice replied.

“I do. My name is Matt Albrecht and I’m researching screenwriters.”

“Did Willie send you?”

The unexpected challenge—delivered with a distinctly French accent—tempted me to lie. I didn’t.

“What studio do you work for?” the reedy voice continued.

“I don’t,” I replied cautiously, hoping that would not end the conversation.

“Then go away.”

“Please,” I begged, “I only need a few minutes of your time.”

“They all say that, but then never depart.”

With neither movement nor sound on the other side of the closed door after that cryptic rebuke, I turned to leave. The door cracked open a few inches to reveal an unruly shock of wiry red hair beneath, which a clouded and suspicious gray eye measured me with through the narrow slit.

“What do you want?” the elderly woman demanded.

“I came across your name in several screenwriters’ journals.”

“Who?”

“Robert Riggelson, Lorenz Schubert and Ben Hecht.”

“Ben, yes. The others, no.”

“I’m trying to understand the relationship,” I pressed.

“I said only that I knew him,” she corrected me sharply.

“What about Willie?” I gambled, repeating the name she mentioned earlier.

“Ah...mon petit Willie,” came back in a noticeably softened voice.

“His last name again?” She hadn’t said, but it was worth a try.

“Faulkner, you fool. Now, good day.” The door began to creak closed.

Could this mysterious woman really have known William Faulkner? Unwilling to dismiss such an opportunity, as far-fetched as it

might be, I said, “Excuse me. I have more questions.”

“And, I have no more answers,” she responded.

Sensing an apparent fondness at the mere mention of the famous author’s name I asked, “What was it like with Faulkner?”

After a long pause she sighed, “Heaven and hell.”

“William Faulkner is a major piece of my work,” I exaggerated. “I would be grateful for any information you could share so I do him justice. Please?”

“I am too tired,” she said.

“Tomorrow, perhaps?” I pushed. “Can I bring you anything? Some food, magazines, milk?”

I was flailing, desperate for even the smallest tidbit this woman named Sophie Bitard could offer about William Faulkner. What a coup for my thesis if any of it were true.

The gap between door and jamb stopped shrinking.

“Cognac!” she cackled.

“Okay. What time would be best?”

“Three!” With that, the door slammed shut.

After a shorter but similarly convoluted conversation through the same closed ingress on the following afternoon, the woman threw back the latch and opened the door. My senses overloaded instantly. The small apartment looked like a film set. Heavy maroon velvet curtains filtered the harsh L.A. sunlight into narrow slivers through which dust sprites danced before vanishing into the shadows. Movie posters blanketed nearly every inch of wall space; some bore bold signatures, others handwritten notes.

The furniture was large,

geometric and blanketed with decades of detritus. A coffee table strained beneath uneven ziggurats of yellowed newspapers, old *Life Magazines* and disassembled tabloids.

The aroma of recently applied perfume assaulted my nose in a strong, but not entirely unpleasant way. The hum of traffic along Fountain Avenue gave way to a Bizet overture, which I knew only because the sleeve of the LP leaned against the wall behind the spinning turntable.

“*Entrez.*”

“Thank you for seeing me.” I presented the bottle of liquor with a small blue bow around its neck.

She inspected the label through a squint, saying only, “*Merci.*”

Bent by age and garbed in a flowing red silk robe, the woman directed me to a leather club chair.

“What is your name?”

“Matt Albrecht,” I replied, ignoring the fact that she had already forgotten after I told her yesterday. I slid a sheaf of papers against the armrest.

“What studio?” she asked in a graveled voice that suggested a lifetime of smoking.

“I’m not with a studio. I’m...”

“Writing on spec, eh?” she interrupted while crossing her legs, letting a dark blue velvet slipper dangle from her pale foot.

“Sort of.”

She threw me a hard look.

“I’m writing a thesis for a Master’s Degree in Film History, specifically the influence of major American authors on mid-twentieth century screenwriting.”

“And this involves me how?” she grumbled.

“While doing research in the

library, I found your name mentioned by a number of screenwriters.”

“I am not surprised.” She punctuated her riposte with the arch of a heavily penciled eyebrow.

“May I take notes while we talk?”

“After you pour me a glass of cognac,” Sophie said while flicking her wrist dismissively.

I wrote “S. Bitard, 3 p.m., April 2, 2009” on the first page of the blank notebook balanced on my leg, then began.

“You say you knew William Faulkner?”

If what Sophie shared over the next four hours and subsequent eleven afternoons in that time capsule of an apartment was not entirely a fabrication based on the bottles of cognac she consumed during those sessions, then saying she had lived a fascinating life is a vast understatement.

Sophie Bitard was born in Paris on April 26, 1916. After a grueling fifteen-hour labor that nearly killed mother and child, she fought her way into a world devoid of maternal love. Already emotionally unstable and drained by the ordeal of giving birth, Sophie’s mother, Nathalie, fled the city, leaving the illegitimate, four-week-old with her grandmother, Gisele. Inside a one-room apartment three floors above a foul-smelling butcher shop on Rue Lepic, the elderly woman passed countless nights recounting to her granddaughter her years spent in Arles.

What started as addled recollections set loose by cheap wine would inevitably deteriorate into a rage that almost always ended the

same. The old woman would clutch the tattered hem of her skirt, rise unsteadily from the chair and lift the frayed cloth to expose an unwashed torso.

“This,” Sophie’s grandmother would shriek, “drove Vincent mad!”

Then, she would collapse onto the bed drunk and somnolent. All this played out before the young and impressionable Sophie.

Gisele’s incoherence grew over the eighteen winters Sophie endured with her grandmother until she set sail for America with the equivalent of two hundred dollars, half of which she had connived out of the butcher, Aubin Groleau, telling him it was to place her ailing grandmother in a sanatorium outside of Villeurbanne; the other half she had stolen from him during one of her flirtatious visits when she would flash a thigh or bend low, allowing her blouse to offer Groleau a fleeting glimpse of her lithe body.

She was one of 454 third class passengers whose clothes reeked of fuel oil and coal gas when the S.S. Normandie slid beneath the long gray shadows of the New York skyline on the morning of June 3, 1935. Yet, her embellished version had her crossing the Atlantic on that ship’s maiden voyage in the company of the writer Colette and other first class travelers.

As Sophie freely admitted, this may have been one of her first fictions, but certainly not her last.

Nine months in New York produced little work beyond figure modeling at the Art Students League on 57th Street. Sophie learned English by studying the conversations of instructors and students while she perched naked with arms akimbo

atop a wooden studio platform.

A chance meeting one rainy afternoon near a newspaper stand outside Carnegie Hall led Sophie south in the company of fishing fleet heir, Edgar McCoughlin. One semester shy of a degree, he was thoroughly beguiled by her Parisian accent, which he would confess to her was like the purring of an ocelot in heat.

The twenty-two year old simply walked off the Columbia campus hell-bent on showing Sophie a good time on the way to the family’s Gulfport estate. Despite it being the nadir of the Great Depression, Edgar managed to buy three automobiles between New York and Mississippi. The first, an Oldsmobile, took the pair as far as Maryland, where, at her suggestion, he traded it for something faster: a Chrysler.

Though she had never driven before, Sophie cajoled Edgar into letting her take the wheel just outside of Memphis. A few hundred feet down the road, she misjudged a wicked curve and wrapped that second car around a massive elm. Blessed with fool’s luck, neither was injured seriously. Suitcases in hand, they simply walked away from the smoking wreck laughing, leaving the crumpled Airstream for anyone willing to pry it off the tree.

The rest of their two-month journey south was neither direct nor uneventful.

Sophie and Edgar argued viciously in Jackson where, despite her false claim to be carrying his child, he refused to marry her and ordered her out of his car. Virtually penniless, she found herself walking alone beneath the broad magnolia canopy of Pinehurst Street. Sophie

struck up a conversation with one of the first people she saw: a gangly, large-eyed woman.

After presenting herself, her purported lineage and her tales of Paris, Sophie proffered an arrangement: a place to sleep in exchange for performing domestic work in and around the woman's large Tudor home. So began a six-month liaison with the 27-year-old Jackson native and budding writer.

While possessing no formal education, Sophie prodded Eudora to add pivotal elements to her

work, especially the finely drawn descriptions of females that infused her short stories. Sophie approached her housekeeping chores with neither enthusiasm nor concern for execution.

Eudora's ebullient praise for another Mississippi writer over in Lafayette County sparked Sophie's curiosity and rekindled her desire for male companionship. She left with little more than the suitcase she carried from Paris and a small photograph Eudora had taken of her. A succession of rides in flatbed farm

trucks overloaded with cotton and soybeans brought her to the outskirts of Oxford, where she set about to find its gentleman writer.

Perched like a wayward sparrow on a white paddock fence, Sophie awaited Bill's return from an early morning ride. Inquiring about what work would befit a young, unattached woman in Oxford, her Parisian accent, unusual in those parts, engaged him instantly. Sidling his chestnut mount to the fence, he studied her smoldering dark eyes and the animated mouth from which the

““Hollywood is a cesspool around which writers swarm like flies bemoaning the stench while happily depositing the studio checks.””

enchantment flowed.

In minutes, Sophie had laughingly spun the tale of her Normandie crossing and her most outrageous claim: being the illegitimate granddaughter of none other than Vincent Van Gogh. Charmed by the girl's shameless audacity, William offered her temporary use of a furnished room adjacent to the stable behind the smokehouse.

Over the coming days he would discover Sophie's penchant for bourbon and American cigarettes, both consumed in large quantities. “Mon petit Willie,” as she playfully dubbed him, disengaged from his wife, Estelle, to spend long nights with his newfound guest.

The passionate hours between dusk and dawn passed in a dizzying blur of calculation and charm. He was all but imprisoned by her auburn hair that, when loosed from twin tortoise shell combs, would cascade over her ivory shoulders; her rounded, but intoxicating torso; and, those dancer's legs which she would lock around his waist. Despite—or perhaps because of—the carnal obsession, William fell increasingly morose at his inability to write anything but long poems describing their illicit liaison.

On the evening of November 4, 1936, Sophie implored him to take her to the Florida Keys where, she said, they would spend the rest of their days swimming naked in the warm gulf waters. Sensing reluctance, Sophie stepped out of her flowered dress and employed her most persuasive weapon—her body. Still refusing to abandon his family outright, she threatened disclosure of his infidelity, which, if discovered,

would be more than a minor inconvenience in such a small town.

An altercation ensued, leaving Sophie cut below her left breast and William with a vicious crosshatch of scratches on his chest and neck. One of Sophie's multiple versions had him lashing her to the bed with his belt while he burned every last poem he had written during those weeks. Another had her torching the papers and sending him into a blind rage.

Stealing a letter sent to William from a fellow writer, she fled Oxford that very night. It was postmarked Asheville, NC. William's second hard loss would come less than a week later with the death of his brother in an airplane crash.

Sophie arrived in Asheville late in the afternoon of November 17, 1936. Her mark was the 40-year-old writer of considerable international acclaim and author of the purloined letter she carried.

Already living a vagabond existence of travel and marital upheaval, F. Scott readily succumbed to Sophie's flirtations in the dining room of the Grove Park Inn. They spent that first evening trading and trumping memories of Paris; he about wife Zelda, and friend Ernest along Rue de Tilsitt; she about her lineage and her grandmother's three-year affair with Van Gogh in Paris and Arles. With a raised finger, Fitzgerald stopped Sophie mid-sentence and asked her to turn in profile. In the undulating light of a hurricane lamp, he confirmed the resemblance to the deranged painter, a kind but insincere gesture.

Thus commenced a two-week tryst that ended only when,

despite asking Sophie to join him in Los Angeles, F. Scott moved unannounced to Tryon. Pocketing the generous wad of money left on the night table by the fleeing writer, Sophie set out for Key West—alone again, but as always, with a clear goal.

A local of some notoriety, F. Scott's friend was easy to find. Sophie strode into a fisherman's dive on Green Street and headed straight for the open stool next to the broad-shouldered man seated at the far end of a mahogany bar worn smooth by decades of elbows.

“Cognac, s'il vous plaît.”

Ernest spun to see who dare order in such perfect French.

“Scotty says hello,” Sophie teased.

Over the next hour, the two downed enough whiskey to dispel any lingering inhibitions. The balance of that day and the next several passed inside the mosquito net that draped his ample bed. He, too, disbelieved the Van Gogh tale that had become her trademark introduction. But, seeing her unclothed body awash in the afternoon sun that broke through the window of the Whitehead Street house, he acknowledged her claim as plausible, if not wholly truthful. Something about the coloration of her skin, he remarked. Sophie refused to explain the scar on her chest.

In Ernest, she believed she had found her soul mate and in the Gulf Stream, her paradise. Even so, like earlier inhabitants of Eden, the stay was idyllic but brief. Eleven days later, a stunning, self-assured blond sauntered into that very same bar just off Duval. By week's end, Ernest would proclaim his infatuation with Martha and his sudden disdain for Sophie.

Her disingenuous boast of William's sexual prowess carried the final insult. Ernest exploded. Hurling her belongings, suitcase and all, off the veranda to the ground below, he demanded she leave at once.

"Out the door on your own or out the window with my help," he bellowed.

In the waning afternoon hours before catching a ride north, Sophie swam naked in the turquoise waters of the Keys. Floating on her back, flecks of golden sunlight warmed her breasts as they broke the languid surface like two perfectly rounded isles.

As her grandmother had followed Vincent from Rue Lepic to Arles, Sophie again sought out the unstable, but irresistible writer from Asheville who Ernest mourned as "having been seduced by the rotting golden calf called Hollywood."

Three weeks and several thousand miles later, Sophie stood outside the epicenter of Hollywood's creativity and decadence—the Garden of Allah on Sunset Boulevard. Though she left each of her seduced writers with only crystalline memories of insatiable sex, she took from each, every spoken word, name and location they conjured. The tradition of the Bitard women demanded nothing less.

Another bar, another man sitting alone. Before the sun set on this unforgiving company town, the 21-year-old had found a bedroom to call home—albeit a temporary one. By the morning of the third day, Sophie managed to "accidentally" bump into F. Scott as he meandered his way through the courtyard to Sheilah Graham's cottage.

Drained by too much alcohol

and too little sleep, his ashen face barely registered the acquaintance. How, he wondered, did this woman get here? Had she followed him? Where had she been these past few weeks? Her carefully scripted answers included Key West, Whitehead Street and a familiar name, Ernest.

A look of relief and, at the same time, jealousy lit his bloodshot eyes. Soon after, F. Scott arranged for her to share a place on Fountain Avenue with a studio hairdresser. Midway between North Laurel and North Hayworth, the location made it easy for him to drop by on his way from the lot, although discretion was key, given Sheilah's new apartment just around the corner.

Sophie took to Hollywood with a passion rivaled only by her lust. Through many late night conversations with "F.S." as she came to call him, she learned that her equestrian Mississippi lover would come west to earn some quick money screenwriting and rush back to the tranquility of Oxford. Ernest had become engulfed by the worsening political situation in Spain, making several trips there. And, commenting on his own demise, F.S. lamented, "Hollywood is a cesspool around which writers swarm like flies bemoaning the stench while happily depositing studio checks."

Sophie's circle of gentlemen callers grew to include Hawks and Hecht, McCoy and Chandler. All seemed right in her new universe, until December 21, 1940 when F.S. succumbed to the second attack on an already weakened heart; and, during that same weekend another acquaintance, Nathanael West, died in a particularly gruesome automobile accident. Two stars of

Sophie's expanding constellation vanished simultaneously, leaving only black voids where once brilliant lights had shone.

Though Paris had fallen to the Nazis earlier that year, Sophie cared little for her grandmother Gisele's safety. The old woman, she said, had survival, not blood, coursing her veins. It was a Bitard trait, no different than eye color or skin tone. After all, Sophie's own mother had fled the responsibilities of parenthood and the Great War by escaping France in the company of a wounded German soldier named Grosz, for whom she would become the subject of his erotic paintings and drawings.

Free of children, Sophie sat out this war in the shade of the palm trees that lined Sunset Boulevard and by modeling for life painting classes at the Los Angeles School of Beau Arts. With F.S. gone, Sophie waltzed through the ranks of writers that blew around the studio backlots like day-old newspapers.

Monogamy held little sway in her social life, which at times hosted three men in 24 hours. Drinks in the Garden of Allah at five; dinner downtown at eight with McCoy; breakfast the following morning with a hot young writer brought west by Curtiz.

To each, she dispensed the rejuvenation they sought. For some, it was only sex; for others, simple companionship; still for others, it was maternal compassion. Sophie could read a man's eyes and know instantly that which he craved.

Her Mississippian came west again in '44. This time, turning out the screenplay *To Have and Have Not* for Hawks. Though her scar had

faded, the visceral attraction between them had not. Their months together left both drained. It would be another seven years before they saw each other again, when he would return one last time for Hawks, who became the axle around which Sophie's liaisons revolved.

Despite approaching her mid-thirties, Sophie neither slowed nor trimmed her voracious appetite for new bodies. Through these often illicit intimacies, Sophie influenced virtually every detective film Hollywood cranked out.

The characters carried neither her name nor resemblance. No, it was that she consumed the souls of these screenwriters. For them, release came keystone by keystone on that much-abused Underwood one had left on her kitchen table. The opportunistic secretary, the hedonist rebel, the conniving moll, the good girl gone bad, the bad girl gone good—they all sprang from the sweaty nights and exhausted mornings Sophie bestowed on the thankful writers.

Dazzled by Technicolor prospects, post-war Hollywood turned its jaundiced eye from the high contrast noir of hard-bitten murder mysteries to sunny, widescreen musicals. It was a future that did not invite Sophie.

Like a Spillane character, the dark side of screenwriting scurried into that new medium: television. Blacklisted writers, sometimes in pairs, hid out in the tiny Fountain Avenue apartment where they tapped out teleplays carrying pseudonyms and post office box return addresses. Few knew, or perhaps even cared, that F.S. or the Mississippian or Hecht had found similar refuge

within these velvet-curtained walls. Yet, each departed knowing Sophie was, or so she claimed, Van Gogh's granddaughter.

For most, her story was little more than a whiskey-induced fallacy, especially since the aura of red hair and smooth complexion had long ago dimmed, replaced by too much rouge, too much henna rinse and far too little sleep.

Though she had spent less than two weeks with Ernest a quarter century earlier, news of his suicide hit the increasingly reclusive Sophie with all the impact of the fatal blast itself. She continued to model in downtown L.A., but the classes no longer attracted young men intent on becoming the next Picasso. Most simply wanted to stare at a naked woman for a few hours.

Invariably, one would paint that scar now partially hidden by a pendulous breast and perhaps even summon the courage to ask its genesis. Her answer never varied: "Too long ago to remember, too painful to recall."

The sexual revolution of the Sixties and the burgeoning skin trade along the far end of Hollywood Boulevard lured the voyeurs away. Still, every session started the same. Sophie would enter through the draped doorway, mount the platform in the middle of the loft that overlooked the freeway, loosen the scarlet sash of a robe stained with bourbon and whisper under her breath, "This drove Vincent mad!" Sometimes it was "Ernest" or "mon petit Willie" or "F.S." or any of a hundred other writers, some famous, some infamous, but most unknown.

The art school closed for

good in 1971 and Sophie stopped shedding her robe for men she no longer knew.

The whispered legend of the L.A. writers' muse faded and the Fountain Avenue apartment was no longer a mandatory shrine at which novice screenwriters stopped and worshiped. Sophie became but a minor footnote to Hollywood's Golden Age.

On the morning of May 10th, my doorbell rang. Not expecting anyone, I peered through the peephole to find a bulky man in a jacket too tight, a tie too short and carrying a bulging notebook under his arm.

"Matthew Albrecht?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Detective Tysdal with the LAPD. I'd like to speak with you about a Sophie Bitard," he explained while peering down at an open notebook. "You know her?"

"Sort of. Is everything all right?" I asked anxiously.

"Mind if I come in?"

I stepped back from the open door and pointed him to the table.

"Is something wrong? With Sophie?"

"I'm sorry to tell you this, but we received a call yesterday. When our officers arrived, they found her deceased."

I said nothing because my mind was trying to comprehend his cold announcement to which I could form no intelligible response.

"Can you tell me when you were there last?" Tysdal asked.

The question sounded suspicious.

"Why? Did something happen to her?" I countered.

Tysdal looked up at me and soothed, "Relax. There's no reason for alarm. For now, it appears her death was from natural causes."

My shoulders sank. "Last Thursday. I was supposed to go back this afternoon."

"What were you doing there?"

"I'm working on a thesis for grad school: Screenwriting and Popular American Authors."

Unimpressed with my explanation, he asked, "Go there a lot?"

"Couple times a week."

"Since when?"

"Four, maybe five weeks."

"Did she seem okay to you? Any health problems? See her take any medications while you were there?"

"No."

An unsettling silence blanketed my apartment. I sensed a test of wills to determine who would speak next. After an agonizing two minutes, Tysdal continued, "During the investigation, we found an envelope addressed to you."

He pulled a worn manila rectangle from the notebook and slid it across the table towards my folded hands. My name was inscribed across its face below the RKO Radio Pictures logo in the upper left corner.

"It was in her hand when we got there."

I turned the envelope over and unfastened the metal clip. Inside was another envelope, this one yellowed and delicate, almost translucent. The florid handwriting was clearly that of another era and the faded blue-black ink nearly illegible. An old red French Republic stamp in the upper right corner

bore the heavy black smudge of a postmark indecipherable beyond the year: 1890. I withdrew and unfolded the two fragile pages carefully.

"Hope you can read French."

Tysdal smiled awkwardly.

"I can't."

"Me neither," he said. "But one of our detectives does."

"What does it say?" I asked.

Tysdal looked to his notes and read the loose translation. "It's from a Doctor Gachet. Dated 26 Juin 1890." Tysdal's attempt at the French pronunciation of June was a fleeting moment of relief.

"Says he discovered a woman called Gisele in the bed of a patient named Vincent. When he had her removed, she claimed to be the patient's pregnant wife."

"Anything else?"

"Something about shipping personal effects to Paris. Not much beyond that."

"Thanks. Can I get you anything?" I offered. "Water?"

Tysdal pushed up from the table and peered at his watch. "I have to get going. Just wanted to see that you got this."

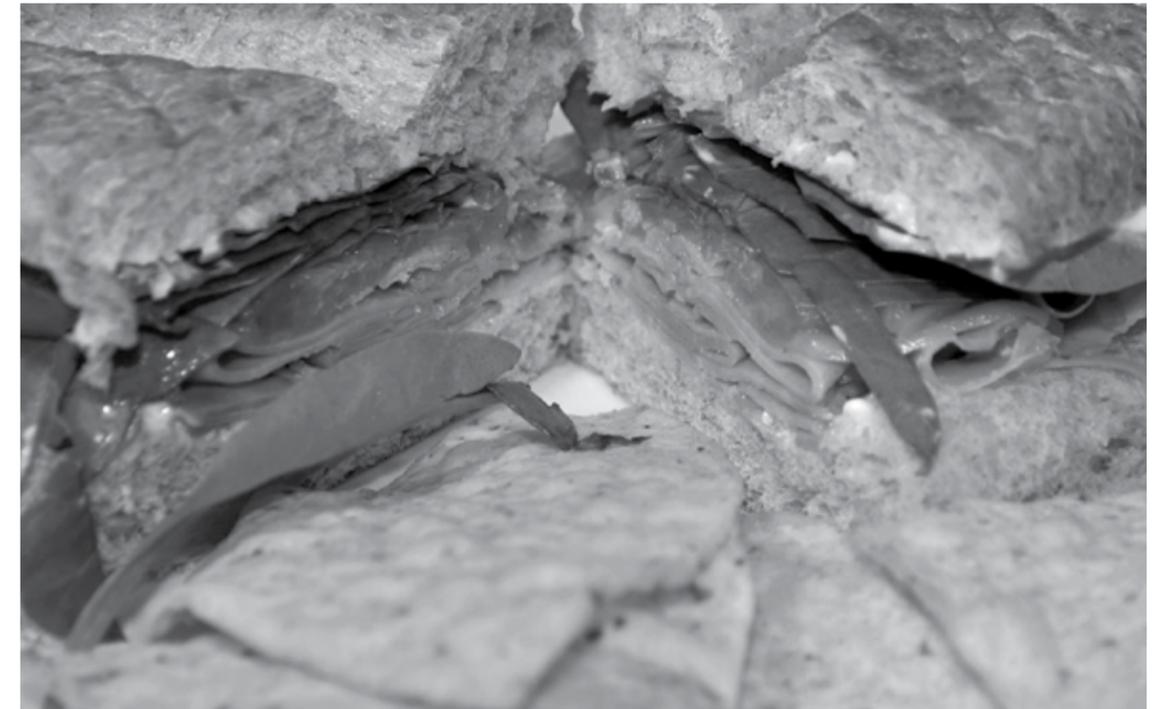
Tysdal straightened his frame as he scanned the living room. I sensed he determined my interactions with Sophie were as stated: nothing more than uninteresting research. He left.

I sat motionless at the table, that spectral letter still in hand. What I hadn't shared with Tysdal was my own investigation into Sophie's most audacious claim. In his final days, Van Gogh had been treated by one Doctor Gachet of Auvers-sur-Oise. So, apparently at least that thread of her life's fabric was not entirely a woven fiction.

If the rest of Sophie's story is to be believed, then the Bitard women had indeed driven artists mad with their passion. Or, perhaps, it was the other way around.

A Picnic Lunch With Ham Sandwiches & A Beatles Song

Joel Allegretti



Monica arranged the food in the cooler as if fitting together the pieces of a puzzle: the tortellini salad here; the cantaloupe slices there; the cashew brownies wedged between the pasta and the melon. Andrew had a yen for ham, so Monica had prepared three kinds of sandwiches: Black Forest ham with whole-grain mustard on pumpernickel, Virginia baked ham with mayonnaise on rye, and prosciutto with fresh basil and fig jam on Italian peasant bread. Herself a vegetarian, Monica had grilled slices of eggplant, sweet red peppers and oyster mushrooms and piled them on the narrow pallet of an oil-moistened baguette. She sprinkled sea salt on the vegetables, covered them with the oth-

er half of the bread, and laid the concoction in plastic wrap on top of the ham sandwiches.

At the sound of the doorbell, Monica glanced at the clock on the wall. It was 10:30, not 10:29 or 10:31.

That's Chip, she thought. I wish I had it in me to be that punctual.

"Come in!" she yelled across the room. The doorbell rang again. "Come *in!*" she hollered at the top of her lungs. Knocking followed. Monica walked the fifteen paces from the kitchen to the front door.

"Didn't you hear me shouting for you to come in?" she asked as soon as she saw Chip.

"Good morning. It's nice to see you, too."

"Don't be smart. We last saw each other twelve hours ago. Come with me to the kitchen."

Chip leaned over the cooler. "I thought it was going to be the three of us. Did you invite your family to the picnic?"

"I'm half Italian and half Jewish," Monica said. "Making a lot of food is a cultural requirement. I'd be cut out of the will if I didn't."

"Are you sure that's all there is to it?" Chip asked.

Monica lifted her head to look Chip in the eye. He was almost a foot taller. "If suspicion was a new suit, you'd appear in a fashion catalogue."

"And if guilt was a mother, you'd be the old woman who lived in a shoe."

"Why don't you just tell me what you're trying to tell me?"

"Fine," Chip said. "I think you're having second thoughts about our friend Andrew."

Monica withdrew bottles of flavored mineral water from the refrigerator. "Would it be so terrible if I did?"

Chip shrugged. "On the face of it, I'd say no, probably not. This is bigger than the three of us put together."

"I feel bad for Andrew. I think he's sweet."

"I guess it depends on how you define 'sweet.' The brownies in the cooler are sweet. How many can you eat in a row?"

Monica pushed a bottle of mineral water against his chest. "Here, lemon flavored. I thought of you when I bought it."

Monica traced a crow's flight

high overhead. Chip stood at the edge of the blanket. Andrew lay back on an elbow and casually ate the last prosciutto sandwich. Oak trees in leafy abundance surrounded them like castle walls. The grass was green and lovely. The sun was comfortably warm.

"You look like you're ready to fall asleep," Monica told Chip.

"I'm about to after that spectacular lunch. Why do you think I'm standing up?"

"You did a great job,"

Andrew echoed.

Monica looked in the cooler at the empty trays and balls of plastic wrap. "There's one more sandwich, baked ham. Anybody want it?"

"Not me," Chip said with a sigh.

"I'll split it with you,"

Andrew said.

"I'll go for that," Chip

replied.

"And you told me I made too much," Monica said. "If anything, I didn't make enough."

"Never doubt Italians and Jews when it comes to food," Chip said.

Monica and Chip watched Andrew eat his half of the sandwich. Her eyes conveyed sympathy. Chip's radiated impatience. Andrew rubbed a paper napkin against his lips.

"Hey, Andrew," Chip said. "Are you in the mood to give us a song?"

Without answering, Andrew reached over to unsnap the hasps of his guitar case. He pulled out the nylon-string guitar and strummed a C chord to make sure it was in tune. His thumb tentatively picked a few notes of a melody on the bass strings and then stopped.

"Keep going," Monica said. "That was nice."

Andrew thought for a few moments. He played a chord progression and began singing "The Long and Winding Road," never turning his eyes away from Monica, not to look at his fingers or Chip or the scenery.

"That was my grandmother's favorite song," Chip said. "It came out in 1970, the year she turned fifteen. I heard the Beatles all the time when I was growing up. I took piano lessons for a couple of years, but I didn't get anywhere with them. So, I dropped the piano and took up soccer."

"How were you at soccer?" Monica asked as Andrew's voice ascended to its upper register.

"Better than I was at the piano, but I didn't get any calls from FIFA."

Andrew finished "The Long and Winding Road." Monica and Chip clapped politely.

"You have a beautiful voice," Monica said. "Did you ever think about going pro?"

"Not really," Andrew said and then sang a song the others didn't recognize. "*The letter she left had only these words: / 'Anywhere is better than here.'*"

"That was pretty," Monica said. "What was it?"

"A song I wrote about a dozen years ago."

"I didn't know you wrote songs, Chip said. "What's the title?"

"I used to write them once in a while," Andrew said. "That song, 'The Letter She Left,' is the last one I wrote, so it's been a long time."

Chip checked his watch. "Monica, it's now 3:15." Andrew laid

the guitar back in its case and closed the cover. His suppliant face reminded Monica of Cyril, the basset hound she owned when she was a little girl.

"Let's wait," she said. "I'd like to hear another song."

"No," Chip said. "No."

Andrew caressed his guitar case.

Monica, in the passenger

she asked with feigned nonchalance.

"You haven't said a word since we hit the road."

Monica hesitated before saying, "I'm still trying to get used to it. I mean, it hasn't even been a year since I signed on."

"Keep in mind this is what Andrew expected. There were no surprises."

"What are you going to tell

Monica's sentences. Chip sighed and shook his head, as if anticipating that he was going to have the conversation again.

"Look, Monica, I can't blame you for the way you feel. I've seen it too many times. Manipulation is a textbook ploy of the sociopath. You knew his history and still said, 'I think he's sweet.' Andrew had you doubting yourself. He had you convinced

"Never doubt Italians and Jews when it comes to food," said Chip.

seat, gazed at her feet as she and Chip barreled down the empty highway.

"Ten dollars for your thoughts," Chip said from behind the wheel.

"Isn't it supposed to be 'a penny for your thoughts?'"

"I'm taking inflation into consideration. I can see you're still uncomfortable with the job. Am I right or wrong?"

Monica looked through the windshield at the road ahead and out the passenger window at the scenery that hurriedly passed them.

"What makes you say that?"

Goddard?"

"I'll tell him the truth. You're coming along very well."

Monica smiled hopefully. "Thanks. I needed to hear that."

"And you make a wicked ham sandwich." Chip pushed down the signal indicator to make a left turn. "You know, you really have to give yourself a break, Monica. The job isn't like catering a birthday party. Andrew enjoyed himself, and when it comes down to it, isn't that what it was all about?"

"I suppose. I loved hearing him sing." A tinge of regret coated

you were doing the wrong thing, yes or no?"

Monica stared out the passenger window.

"You answered my question," Chip said. "I won't lie to you. I think Andrew was charming and handsome. He sang like an angel. He also beat two people to death, namely his twin brother and their mother, and cut them up into chicken parts. Once upon a time, people on death row were strapped in a chair and zapped with two thousand volts or put to sleep like old dogs. Now they get to choose how they want to spend

their last day before they bid a fond farewell to the world. I remember there was one guy—he had a taste for doing in redheads—he wanted to go to the opera. We took him to a performance of *Tosca*. He even wore a tux. It was a painful night for me. I hate opera. Andrew kept it simple, thank God. He wanted to have a picnic and sing a couple of songs. Now he's where he belongs: frozen solid in the back of the truck."

Headquarters was eleven miles away, but for Monica the ride seemed to last as long as a car trip from New Hampshire to New Mexico. She found herself craving something sweet. Monica rummaged through the glove compartment. There was a chocolate bar behind the vehicle service manual. Sadly, it contained peanuts. She put it back.

"When is the next execution?" Prior to the job, Monica couldn't recall using the word "execution" so frequently, if she ever used it at all.

"Tuesday the seventeenth."

"Who is it?"

"His name is Frederick Earnhardt," Chip reported. "He's eighty-two years old. It seems kind of pointless to eliminate him now. I mean, how much longer could he possibly live?"

"What did he do?"

"Oh, he's a gem. He kept his two daughters locked in a basement for fifteen years."

"Fifteen years!"

"It gets worse," Chip said. "He got them both pregnant more than once. And to top it off, he killed his children-slash-grandchildren right in front of their mothers-slash-his

daughters."

Monica clenched her teeth. "Must you be so graphic? I'm going to get sick all over the dashboard."

Chip drove through the headquarters gate and turned onto the road that led to the morgue.

"You asked me what he did. You'd find out anyway, whether it was today or on the sixteenth. If you want to be excused from the assignment, you can submit a request. It won't be denied."

In her mind's eye Monica saw an old man who had been on the earth far longer than he was entitled to be. She saw him at an art museum, a park, a zoo, or wherever else it was he wanted to pass his final hours. She imagined the look on his shriveled face as the hypodermic needle punctured his forearm.

"Monica?"

"Yes?"

"Did you hear what I said? You can ask to be excused."

Monica leaned back and pictured a cellar occupied by two terrified, almost feral young women whose entire worldview was shaped by four dreary walls, incest, and infanticide.

She then thought of her beloved cousin Laurie, who hanged herself at seventeen.

"On the contrary," she said stoically, "I'll let Goddard know that I'm ready, willing and able—and reporting for duty."

Monica smiled as she and Chip arrived at the morgue.

Sebastian's Babylon, Chapter 4

Daniel Ryan Adler



Two weeks later, Sebastian was walking under a blooming linden tree. He'd planned to meet Lexi and had shown up fifteen minutes late to find that she was still not there. A waitress pivoted between tables, ponytail swinging, legs scissoring like a ballerina's. He might have had better luck asking *her* out.

A text: "Sorry. Tons of work at the office. Rain check Sunday?"

He didn't believe her, but forbid himself from sliding down the rabbit hole of distrust. He put his phone away and ordered the duck confit. While sitting outside, a breeze shook the linden blossoms onto his head. Sweat trickled down his back. Once, walking beside his mother in the fetid August heat, he had wished for January's cold before he realized that he didn't want that, but something between the stink of summer in

the city and the icy wasteland of late winter. For a three-year-old, each season is an epoch, an eternity of waiting. As a man, twelve weeks seemed enduring; he could savor each month for its ripening or decline in the season, especially if, as Shakespeare said, weather reflects people's mood.

Back in his library, he admired his bookshelves full of varicolored spines. *The Alchemist's Handbook* lay open to a diagram of the distillation process. He shifted the plastic skull on his desk sideways, jaw unhinged, to balance the red carnations that reminded him of Lexi's neck, her vanilla, peppery smell. When it became too much, he studied his print of Kupka's *Abstraction Colorée*, its representation of organic creation and lyrical subconscious. Apollinaire too had recognized Kupka's genius, and as Sebastian

gazed at the speckled universe in the painting's upper half, their Orphist circle came to him from another life: Picabia, the Delaunays and Kandinsky entered a salon on the Champs de Mars, sitting in Louis XV chairs, drinking Pernod and talking into the wee hours; Apollinaire stretched on a divan, candelabras dripping wax on the parquet, Sebastian drifting off with a dry mouth as clips of Guillaume's speech rang in his head, turning, twisting around, *toward an art that expressed simultaneous happenings*. A mouse scratches the walls of a Brooklyn flat, friends drink wine around a fountain in Braga; in Manaus a poet scrawls a line of verse, a man removes his sandals before his Guangdong hut, moans over the loamy fields of Asheville; a steak cut in the Burj Khalifa; while across the universe a star explodes, taking a thousand years for us to know—this and a thousand images more Sebastian understood before being brought back by his pale reflection in the glass of the frame. He shook his head. The meek inherit the earth, but how long would he have to wait?

Sebastian had mentally prepared to lose himself in someone, and since Lexi was out, he thought about the others he'd met at Jasper's party, that recovering heroin addict, Pulmonetti and Karl Bagda—something-or-other, who had asked him those odd questions. He had good taste in film, even if he did enjoy dog races. Sebastian reached into his wallet and recalled their awkward interaction, which he associated with the mug shot and practiced smile of Karl's face on his business card. Was it too late to try again? Without

hesitating, Sebastian texted him an invitation.

Karl replied seconds later that he would arrive shortly. Sebastian balanced the framed oil painting he'd recently bought, a dreamy canvas of a woman's legs spread above a white rabbit, which hung in his living room. He laid out his bamboo cutting board and prepared a cave-aged gruyere with water crackers. Then he puttered about, from bedroom to living room, bathroom to kitchen, figuring Karl could show up any moment.

He waited half an hour before Bagdasarian arrived with a smug smile more natural than the one on his business card, a codfish handshake and a six-pack of American craft ales. He wore black chelsea boots that matched his skinny Levi's and a white oxford. He extracted an ale from the plastic bag and set the rest in the fridge.

As he moved into the living room, he levered open his beer with a lighter and it fizzed and foamed onto the hardwood floor. Karl rushed the bottle to his mouth and wiped the dribble on his chin with the back of his hand. "Sorry," he said.

Sebastian already had paper towels in hand.

The leather armchair sighed as Karl flopped into it. "What a day." He drank again. "So get this. I always admire trash, right," he noted as he crossed his legs. Sebastian set the cheese plate on the coffee table and joined him on the maroon leather couch. "And this afternoon, I was walking down Graham Ave. when I saw a beautiful maple desk. I wanted to take it to my apartment, but it was way too heavy so I was looking

through the desk drawers when: guess what I found?"

"I don't know."

"A stack of nine hundred dollar bills in a box of checks."

"Did you take it to the police?"

Karl snorted. "I pocketed the dough and booked it outta there."

"Wasn't there an address on the checks?"

"One man's trash. 'Sides, anyone who's hidin' a thousand bucks in a maple desk has plenty more. Or it was some old woman who died. A bunch of junk was piled next to the desk. Anyway, I needed it. I was broke this morning; I was gonna take my date to Los Padres. I took her to Maxwell's instead." Bagdasarian stood for another beer. "It was a good thing—she's the woman I'm gonna marry."

"How long have you known her?"

"Tonight was our first date but it's as good as done. She wanted to come home with me, but you don't take your future wife home on the first date." He reached for the cheese knife. "It was a good thing you texted me. Gave me an excuse to leave."

Karl drank again, sighed, and set the bottle on his knee. "She's a little fat, but tight fat. Not the loose kind. The stretch marks on her tits kept me hard throughout our date." He drank again. "It lasted four hours."

"Your erection?"

"The date." Karl cast Sebastian a dubious glance. "Bottle of wine, appetizers, steaks." He cut himself a piece of cheese, nodding,

chewing. "Good stuff," he pointed. "But she wanted her own dessert. I told her we should share. If she's gonna be my woman I have to teach her how to eat like a lady. If she loses twenty pounds, she'll be good."

He shrugged. "I gotta figure out how to tell her. Maybe bribe her, say we can have our wedding in a Catholic Church. She's Catholic. Full of guilt and rage."

Sebastian sighed. "It must be great to have a woman return your desire."

"That and her father has a penthouse on the Upper East Side."

Karl upended his bottle, gulped, leaned forward and looked down, two black locks falling over his temple. "Besides that, I'm sick of life." He ran his hands through his hair.

"How could you be sick of life if you're in love?" Sebastian cocked his head, jaw loose. Could Bagdasarian be mentally ill? His belly prickled in fear.

"This ain't puppy love, man. It's marriage, business. I'm getting ready to sign a contract."

Karl took off his thick glasses and held them before his face. It took a moment for his dark eyes to focus and he reminded Sebastian of a large animal, his gaze sensitive and dull without magnification. Without those frames hiding his eyes, Karl's crow's feet became evident, and it seemed his smoker's lines were more prominent too; clearly this man had seen something of life. Karl breathed onto his lenses and wiped them with his shirttails.

"In any business, you have

to think about how to satisfy your customer." He replaced his thick glasses on his nose and resumed his caricature grin.

Sebastian hung his head. "My future wife barely knows my name."

Karl said nothing.

Sebastian scratched his temple. "Doesn't it make you happy to make her happy?"

"I take what's given to me. I don't know what happiness is." Karl rested an elbow on his knee, jaw in his palm, long fingers lining his cheek. He leaned back and drank. "I'm sorry. I'm jaded. A month ago, my girlfriend dumped me a week after I was fired from Spunderkind Gallery, a month after I bought her a Fendi bag. It'll take me years to pay that off. So I took the first job that came my way, cleaning toilets at Port Authority, and now I'm living on my best friend's floor. And already I'm headed back toward a relationship?" He shook his head, "It's a series of mistakes."

"At least you're living."

"You want to hear about living? I'll tell you a story about living."

The prospect of a yarn brought Sebastian closer, and Karl, sensing that he had an audience took advantage.

"You mind if I smoke?" His host waved him on and he extracted a pack of Blues from his breast pocket. He lit one, dragging deep and holding it, tense for a moment before he sighed out a blue cloud.

"I was in Bucharest at a place called The Mongoose, a gypsy hostel, a weird fuckin' place man. My plan was to camp in the woods on the way

to the Black Sea because I was broke, and then come spring find work on a farm or something. Before I left the city, I wanted this weathered copy of *Robinson Crusoe* on the trade-in shelf for when I was at my lowest. I asked the gypsy who ran the place if I could buy it, but you had to trade a book to take one. I'd recently started *Moby Dick* and I wanted to finish it so I forgot about *Crusoe*." Karl smoked like an old Chinese man: eyes half-closed, fingers splayed, he exhaled in a stream and paused in his recollection, "I used my last twenty bones for canned pork, beans and beets, trying to prepare, but it didn't matter. I had no idea what I was in for. My sleeping bag was cheap and my first night in the woods I barely slept because of the cold. When I woke, my boots were frozen bricks. I walked three miles to the closest town with plastic bags on my feet. But the physical suffering was easy, the hard part was being alone. Some days I read while I ate lunch. *Moby Dick* inspired me. There was nothing to do except walk and it was like the forest was an ocean and I was Ahab, searching for my whale. I'd walk all day until sunset and build a fire to heat my beans. As soon as they were hot, I had to put the flame out so the wild boars wouldn't come around. By seven I'd be in bed fully clothed. Of course, I couldn't fall asleep right away, so I'd lie awake for a few hours, trying to learn the constellations. I slept about six hours a night. Then I'd wake up at four to keep walking."

Sebastian touched his index finger to his nose and moved his hand to his chin.

"After three weeks I arrived at the Black Sea. I was early for the

“‘Besides that, I’m sick of life.’

He ran his hands through his hair.

‘How could you be sick of life if you’re in love?’ Sebastian cocked his head, jaw loose.”

great white pelican migration, so I stayed in a house on the water for a few leu a night and e-mailed my brother to wire me money. On dial-up man. Remember those sounds? Any who, I used the address of the gypsy hostel, The Mongoose, and walked the way I’d come after a few days of recuperation. Two weeks later, I was in the belly of The Mongoose, stoned as a goat with a bunch more beans

and canned pork for the next leg of my trip. *Robinson Crusoe* was still there and I had a hundred pages of *Moby Dick* left. Each night there cost me fifteen bucks and I couldn’t finish it fast enough to trade it for the *Crusoe*; I was too poor. I had to walk the Danube to Germany where I could stay a few days with a girl I’d met in Prague, maybe longer if we had the sex. But first I needed that book.

Next morning, before breakfast I stashed it in my bag, ate my porridge and left. By week’s end, I was out of Romania and a hundred pages in. I was practiced by then, I had a good sleeping bag and I knew how to fend off the wild boars if they came round. I arrived in Belgrade two weeks later to stay with a friend of a friend, a beautiful girl who could’ve been a model. Her father was nicer than she

was. I kept thinking of the country farmer who says what’s mine is yours, except my daughter, stay away from her. I wanted her, even if it meant her old man chasing me out of his house with a shotgun. That night, they made a Serbian feast and her dad kept giving us vodka until three in the morning when we went to the club. Her old man was piss drunk and didn’t care that I was grinding all up on his daughter. I invited her to meet me in the bathroom. She protested no, I can’t, my boyfriend. I kissed her and led her by the hand to a stall. But I was too drunk to get it up. Fuckin’ vodka. Fuckin’ Serbs.” Karl shook his head.

“We dragged her old man back to their apartment and I slept on the floor. When I woke the next afternoon, everyone was still asleep. I left without waking them and took the bus as far as I could out of the city. At the last stop I started walking. It was almost dark. Then a car pulled up beside me and the guys who got out had gold teeth. One pulled a knife, another told me to hand over my bag. I did as they said, and then something came over me and I banged one of the gypsy’s heads against the door. He collapsed, dead, and I ran. A knife whistled past my ear and landed in the snow ahead of me. I kept running until I was deep in the forest. I crouched in a snow drift, silent as a marmot. When my breathing returned to normal, it was so quiet, I couldn’t even hear the cars on the highway. I peeked over the ridge, nothing. I walked back through the forest, afraid that at any moment I’d have a four-inch blade stabbed into my back. But the gypsies

had long gone. It took another two hours before I was on the last bus back into town. Without my bag I had no supplies, though I still had my passport and wallet on my belt. It was all because of *Robinson Crusoe*; the Mongoose gypsy proprietor had cursed me. I was so upset I maxed out my credit card for a night in a hotel and called my sister for an advance on a plane ticket home. I should have kept going but I pushed out.” He took a last drag and slid the yellow filter into his empty beer bottle with a sizzle. “Hindsight don’t mean much when you’re starin’ into a bottle.”

“Good suffering,” Sebastian said.

Karl shrugged. “I like what makes life strange. That’s why I want to get married.”

He ran a hand through his hair again and met Sebastian’s eyes before he dropped his gaze to the floor. He continued, “Yesterday I walked down my street to a *pollo vivera*. The lady asked me what I wanted. A turkey was in the back, bigger than all the others, with its big blue head crowned by black tail feathers. I pointed.” Karl squinted and nodded slowly. “That one. Twenty minutes later, they gave it to me wrapped in butcher paper, gutted and plucked. At home, the head was still on. I took my butcher’s knife—.” He squinted and nodded again.

“When the blade hit that block, I’d grown up a little. I peeled off the skin, threw the gizzards away and kept the breast and legs. Ten pounds of fresh turkey for forty bucks. This was before I found that money.”

Sebastian mused, “It’s one of my regrets that I’ve never killed an

animal. In our supermarket societies, hardly any of us have. And what’s worse is I’m afraid to; I don’t think I could do it.”

“My brother lives in the Rockies. He camps in the forest and walks into town for beans and coffee and hunts all the rest of his food. Survives off of fowl and small game. A better man than I.” Karl shook his head and pushed his glasses up his nose. “I tried and failed.”

“You could try again. After all, you have a great story. And isn’t that why we live?”

“I live to drink.” He stood for another beer.

Sebastian imagined himself in Bagdasarian’s place, as a nomad trekking across the Hungarian plain, approaching an ocean of steppes.

“If only we were at war.” Karl resumed his seat. “Then at least we could confront death instead of having to pretend like we’re not afraid of it.”

“Enlist. Go to Iraq.”

“Fuck that. I want the war of our grandparents, with trenches and pig-sized rats. Parades and girls in the streets when you return. If you return. War that makes a man of you or eats you alive. None of this imperial bullshit, men being shot by ragheads in the desert for corporate brass and oil strongmen. We missed the most perfect war the world’s ever known, War’s Golden Age.”

“We were born late.” Sebastian shook his head. “Today, we have to fight against twelve hour days, average salaries and taking work home. People hope for a Christmas bonus or a promotion and wind up living for pensions, scared of growing

old. They think people like your brother are crazy. But they have it backwards.”

“I wouldn't've minded being born later. Then those wars wouldn't seem so close. Money wouldn't matter as much either; the government would be taking care of everyone.”

“You ever think of moving to Norway?”

“I guess that's my only option. Revolution is finished. Anarchism was destroyed by the Punk Movement. Communism is a joke.”

“Thank the Russians. You can't bring about communism by willing it. They didn't realize that Marx was writing about the course of human civilization,” said Sebastian.

“*Laissez-faire* is here to stay.”

“We won't know communism for another five hundred years at least. Meanwhile, media corporations sell us products for lifestyles that increase productivity without caring about our quality of life. People still work in cubicles! Society still hasn't figured out how to treat creative people. As long as most people make enough money to buy the latest iPhone, they're satisfied. Except for those Sunday nights spent trying to ignore the source of their angst, life is bearable.”

Karl finished his beer and straightened. “I'm about ready to ignore the source of my angst too—I found nine hundred dollars today and I'm ready to spend some more of it.”

Under a Brooklyn moon, a train roared and they came closer to the neon Pabst sign on the corner of Dodworth and Broadway. Candles lit the bar and an island light hung over

a pool table in the back. Karl elbowed through the crowd to the bartender, who wobbled, visibly drunk as he overfilled a line of shot glasses.

Sebastian sat against the wall and stared into the candle's flame. Behind it was a pentacle carved into the wooden table. The fire controlled his eyes and an atavistic body rose to life, dancing—an androgynous figure from a tribal time. The thud of mugs on the table snapped him to.

“Cheers,” Karl raised his glass and clanked it on the lip of the other.

“Is that for me?” Sebastian said. “I don't drink, remember?”

Karl nodded at a couple of girls behind them. “Want a drink?” he called.

The girls sat cat-like in the candlelight, slender and unconcerned. He stood and handed them the extra.

“They'll be over,” he whispered.

Karl spilled some wax on the table, covering the pentacle, his other hand on his highball.

He declared, “My next trip I'm going to Ulan Bator.”

“Real adventure there. Wild horses, the steppes, hot tea...”

And soon they were discoursing wildly, each drink making Karl more powerful. They became sultans, khans stampeding across a continent desiring to know inflections used and fashions worn, muslins spread in markets and marble mosques beyond hillocks, meadows and desert sands; in stately pleasure domes they decreed the boundaries of their khanates; on lakeside evening walks dragonfly wings buzzed as

blackness fell. They had lived it once before, worlds ago, and now they did so again. After Karl's desire to drink had run its course, their recollected dreams faded in candelabra darkness.

The next day Sebastian woke at noon, remembering what he'd left unsaid.

“Last night was fun,” he texted his new friend. He closed his eyes and reclined on the down pillow, recounting Burmese pagodas.

His phone buzzed twice. “On my way home last night I went to Rattlesnake to look for the ugliest girl.

After you meet the girl you're going to marry you have to find the ugliest one you can to sleep with because she's the last one before you have only one for the rest of your life. She had pockmarks bad teeth greasy hair and smelled like hippies. We made out at the bar and I took her outside. We were going to on the street between two SUVs but she wanted to go to my place. I said, ‘We can't go to mine so the only way we're not going to yours is if you squat in a burnt-out loft.’ She said, ‘Yes I do squat in a burnt-out loft.’ So I left. She was too busted anyway.”

Sebastian laughed, imagining Bagdasarian's scene, his willingness to encounter the meek and dispossessed. He stared at the paint flecks on his ceiling. His only problem was that someone Lexi was seeing. Part of him wished the ceiling would cave in, to end his patient ennui.

He threw back the sheets and walked to the kitchen, filled the kettle and set it on the stove, then ground enough beans to jolt him awake. When his coffee was ready he brought it to his desk and tried to journal

about last night, but all that came was an image of a minotaur thrusting over the dangling arms of a woman who looked like his love. He clicked and unclicked his pen vacantly.

“Who doesn't want a present?” Lexi replied.

They were at Socarrat on Sunday night. She scooped a bite of paella into her mouth. Sebastian had taken great pains to present himself as a man who could not be denied: hair parted, pressed white blake cotton shirt, jeans well-broken in, black high-tops (not too new). So far, he had succeeded in making her laugh and the power scales had remained in balance.

“Might I try a scallop?” Palm open, he wiggled his fingers and leaned his elbows onto the table to lighten his mood and smell her sweet, peppery scent. She had ordered better than him: scallop and fluke paella so hot that the rice was still popping, wafting saffron.

“No,” she said. Eyes on her plate, she took another tiny bite. “I don't share food.”

“Fine.” He set his fork down, his paella an open wound. He hated himself for this rising, uncontrollable passion, a mixture of embarrassment that gave way to a lust that burned his face and spread into his neck, causing him to breathe heavy like a dog in heat.

“So what's this present?”

“Right.” He forced a laugh. If she doesn't accept, I'll forget about her. I could always invite Karl or Jasper. But he knew his happiness hinged on her response.

“In three weeks I'm going

to Venice,” he exhaled, settling his gaze on her parted lips. “And,” he continued, “if you decide to join me, you are too.”

She swallowed, set her lips and lowered her chin. “Have you already bought the tickets?”

“Yes.”

“I...”

“I'm paying for everything,” he said, challenging her with his eyes. “My treat.”

A smile tugged the corners of her mouth. “Okay.” She spread her fingers on the table and lowered her eyebrows. “But if I go, it's as a friend. Nothing more.”

“Of course. Like this dinner.” She looked like she had swallowed a bird. He hid his pleasure by taking a sip of water and forking a chunk of crab.

Outside, after he paid the \$120 bill, she cast an arm over his neck and pecked his cheek. A few steps away, she half-turned and waved. “Call me.”

His shoes clapped the pavement to a beat. The moon flashed green. Thank you, Sweet Selene! Brash tactics work. Before he reached the corner of 23rd, a cluster of sparrows alighted from a tree branch. A bit late for birds, wasn't it?

Green subway bulbs lighted his way into the station and in a dance, he clickety-clacked onto the train, which pulled in as he reached the southern end of the platform. He imagined how he would share a room with Lexi, roll over in bed to gaze upon her goldenrod belly, watch sunbeams cross the carpet to cover white terrycloth robes; a blow dryer through a bathroom door, a

gondolier's oar-strokes under the Bridge of Sighs, past marble-faced *palazzi*, into turquoise lagoons and on, maybe toward something more.

The Curious Life of Myles Dunning

Gael DeRoane



His employment at the Corporation having reached its breaking point, Myles Dunning arrived at work in a starched white shirt, yellow power tie, propeller beanie, Bronco Buster pajama bottoms, and fluffy bunny slippers. *I'll show them*, he thought, striding, briefcase in hand, past the tittering secretaries toward his office.

For the first hour of his day, Myles sat quietly at his desk reading an obscure pamphlet on astral projection. At ten o'clock he was summoned to the conference room for his presentation to the board of directors. He could not recall what he was supposed to present, but this did not concern him.

"I'm a great admirer of Thomas Pynchon," he began, as the board members, billionaire CEO included, stared at his outfit in disbelief. "Consequently, I would like to christen all my associates with Pynchonesque monikers." Facing the man seated at his left, the distinguished corporate attorney Braden Quillington, he said, "Henceforth, you shall be called Geronimo Sangfroid." He continued in this fashion, conferring upon these august gentlemen such names as Blip Nerdstrom, Basillio Cumquat, and,

for the CEO himself, not only a name, but a title: Lee Muria, New-Age Twit.

No one addressed Myles directly, but someone whispered, "*He's gone mad.*" The CEO was considering a compassionate intervention, but noticed that Myles' genitalia were visible through the aperture of his pajama bottoms. Disgusted, he called security at once.

Although Myles did not resist, the burleys treated him roughly, holding his arms in a vise grip as they descended the elevator, then frog-marched him out the front entrance. With a flourish (one of them actually shouted, "Heave ho!"), they lobbed him face-first onto the busy sidewalk.

Myles picked up his briefcase, retrieved his propeller beanie, straightened his tie and reflected upon his good fortune. He was free at last! But at precisely that moment a trio of skinheads came around the corner, their fists clenching and unclenching, eager to pummel some character whose general disposition seemed inimical to the standards and practices of the Aryan Brotherhood.

And so began a new adventure in the curious life of Myles Dunning...

Helpless, An Exercise...

Sasha Sosnowski



Angela has a crush on Harry. Harry has a crush on Harriet. Harriet is buxom and blasé. Angela is adequate but homely. Harry sits around the morass of indecision and over-contemplation. Harry struggles with the "big" questions; life, love, meaning, identity—and moves about it all slower than a steamboat. Harriet leads men on and attaches herself to them because she's insecure, spoiled, and has nothing better to do. Her breasts have largely gotten her nearly everywhere and everything she knows. Angela is capable and caring. Angela, oh Angela; she could be a real winner. But she wastes her time in patient consternation, certain of the virtues of the wait and little else.

Harry calls himself a writer. But Harry only writes about himself. Rather, he writes less "about himself" than what he's merely thinking or feeling at any given moment. Angela believes Harry has untapped potential, he only lacks commitment. Harriet just likes Harry's silly penchants for danger through overcompensating

showmanship. Harry has never been too sure he likes his silly penchants. Harry gets high quite often now. Harry isn't even a pot-smoker. Jeffrey smokes pot all day long. See, high Harry wars with himself constantly. It's like the blitzkrieg in his head. Sober Harry laments. So there he sits in vacillation. Sometimes, Harriet and Harry get high together. They have sex. Afterwards, sometimes Harry tries to delve deeper—into himself, into other things. Harriet makes a face or dramatically misunderstands. As far as depth is concerned, Harriet is self-involved enough for her own liking. Angela violently knits. She knits scarves, sweaters, hats—for her older sister's triplets she babysits. Meanwhile, she cries.

Jeffrey has dreams but no backbone. Sometimes he plays guitar. Sometimes he plays piano. Sometimes he even paints. Most times, Jeffrey drowns his stagnant discontent with whatever he can get. He now slams everything. Harry is not a drug abuser. He is only an "experimenter." He now slams everything too.

Harry tries to help Jeffrey do. Jeffrey tries to help Harry be. Together, Harry and Jeffrey go get high. This has now gone on for months. Harriet comes and goes. She drinks and nags. Angela visits occasionally. She brings Harry gifts. Sometimes, she brings Jeffrey gifts too. But Harry and Jeffrey can now only appreciate in words. Angela refuses to give up. Harry has no answers. Harry hates himself a little bit more each time he flakes.

One evening Harry is much, much too loaded. Ashamed, he must flake on Angela again. Angela hangs up the phone understandingly. The triplets cry, so does Angela. Suddenly, the tears on her cheeks are from laughter. Fed up, she hatches a vengeful plan of awakening. Inspired, she gets drunk. Drunk, she falls asleep. Asleep and unattended, one of the triplets dies of asphyxia. The cuckoo clock calls midnight. Drunken Harriet barges over Harry's and calls him a lazy, existentially bankrupt junky. She dishes a look of disavowal at Jeffrey. Harriet demands to go out. She bemoans Harry's newfound paralysis. Harriet eggs Harry to climb the scaffolding at the local construction site once more. Reluctant though emasculated, Harry accepts. The two wander the hazy navy night. Harriet continues to drink. She dumps all her deep-lurking nastiness upon him. Harriet justifies this as her deep desire for what's best for him. Harry only broods. He furrows his brow and stares at the ground, scratching at his body.

Harriet and Harry reach the skeleton of a five-story building. Harriet pushes Harry belligerently and tells him they should have sex on top and be happy like they used to. Harry doesn't recall that time. Floor by floor

they ascend. Harriet takes stupid sips. Harry tells Harriet she shouldn't drink yet. Harriet tells Harry he shouldn't be loaded. The procedure from floor four to floor five and roof access is more complicated. Harry explains this to Harriet. Harry questions Harriet for confirmation. Once. Twice. Three times. Harriet growls something back. Harry makes the ascension and prepares to assist Harriet. Harriet tries for another stupid sip but the bottle slips from her hand and tumbles to an imminent shatter. Harry shakes his head dejectedly. Harriet takes a deep breath. Harry asks if she's certain. He recommends they go back. Harriet starts to cry. She mumbles despair and apology. Harry starts to return. Harriet starts toward Harry. Harriet slips and tumbles to her imminent death. She does not shatter. She cracks like a wooden box, thumps like a large watermelon. Harry vomits.

The night is deep and black. A traffic light in the distance throbs yellow. Harry finally descends. He leaves the premises. He does not go back to the body. He marches into the aimless night, wraithlike. Meanwhile, Jeffrey stirs. Harry's bed is still empty; a fatter shot thus remains. Jeffrey slinks to the bathroom to cook the remains of the sack. The bubbles fizz and dance wildly. His eyebrows dance wildly, too. He loads the stew into the outfit. The bathroom light bulb flickers. Jeffrey is startled, then shrugs. He tourniquets his left arm. The light bulb flickers again. A moth has crashed loudly into it. Jeffrey chuckles. He finds a working vein and inserts without restraint. The liquid goes from *marron* to maroon to gone. Jeffrey must sit back on the toilet. The sound of pipes flushing is heard. His lips turn a pale blue. His eyes roll up

and back. The moth crashes loudly into the light bulb without restraint. Jeffrey's body slumps. The moth collapses to the floor without a sound. Jeffrey dies without a sound.

Harry trudges through the darkness, gaunt and forsaken. He broods deeply and concludes—Angela. He is heading straight for Angela's house. Harry will confess everything and apologize. He will ask for forgiveness and promise to become a better man, a stronger man. He will commit—he will marry her if need be. He announces his wretchedness aloud to the darkness. Four raccoons scurrying up and down a tree stop and look. Harry marches along. The raccoons shrug and watch. Harry is entranced in his disaster and redemption. The raccoons look at each other and hunt onwards for food.

The night is purple as dawn approaches. Angela awakens to the cries of a baby. Her eyes spring open and scan the room. Two cries. She rises. Two cries. She walks out of the room to the triplets'. A loud shriek. Two cries and a sob. Stood over the crib, Angela recedes completely. After a period of recollection, she looks back at a half-empty bottle. She grows pale; her eyes renounce their luster. Angela walks to a closet and reaches for a shoebox. Angela pulls out a small revolver. The twins continue to wail. Angela marches straight to the living room telephone. Her right hand clutches the revolver.

Harry turns a corner. He passes one house. Two houses. Three houses. At the fourth he turns up a walk. Harry climbs four stairs onto a porch. The pink daphne's are fragrant in the damp, early dawn air. Harry pounds on the door. Angela breaks from her trance and looks to

her right. Harry yells Angela's name. Angela's eyes narrow. She rises and walks to the door. She stops short. There is a mirror on the wall to her left. Her face is torn and tragic. Harry pounds on the door. Angela looks right and peers through the peephole. Harry's face is torn and tragic. Angela takes a deep breath. She opens the door. Harry launches in. He sees her and exhales relief in embrace. He repeats the word "sorry" over and over. Angela's expression is unchanged. She lifts her right hand slowly. Putting it to Harry's stomach from within his hug, Angela pulls the trigger. And again. And again.

Harry's face melts in remorse. He collapses to the floor as Angela steps out from under him. Angela's expression changes. Looking over the dying body, she erupts in regret. The twins have continued to wail. Angela paces a circle around Harry. Harry is bleeding out. The twins continue to wail. Angela paces a circle around Harry. Harry garbles something and dies. The twins continue to wail. Angela paces a circle around Harry's body. She stops, dizzied. She sobs meekly. The sun begins to rise over the town. Angela puts the barrel of the revolver into her slowly unfolding mouth. Light streams in delicately through the blinds. Angela closes her searing emerald eyes. The twins stop their wailing. Daylight creeps in to fill the room. Angela pulls the trigger. Her body makes a solitary thud. Angela, oh Angela; she could have been a real winner.

POETRY

Straight With Necessary Curves

Peggy Aylsworth

Enlightenment has yet to reach
the twenty-first century. I'm not

here to praise its tenets or curse
the blind who will not see. Let Kant

and Russell preach their principles
as headlines blare the worldwide

evidence that spits in reason's face.
As Trump would thrust us back and

back to righteous barricades, the stride
of rational thought falls into slough.

One can drive too far on strictly
charted roads. The spirit balks.

Those by-ways through the tangled
forest lead to sprouts of blue-green

seeds fed by the moon. And as we reap
they shine new color beyond the literal.



Motion (little death)

Nova Reeves

Motion

Held with small hands
 in a ring
 the circle
 Life
 sex
 "little death"
 Birth
 we want to play with each other.

Ecstatic messy meeting
 ripple of life and death in the body
 vulva vas deferens night
 and opening.
 Staying open?

Ecstatic meeting of our mortal parts
 yes, this body remembers
 then temporarily releases
 ah but so much must needs be,
 must is and will be, released

Releasing, effortless let-loose flight

But not releasing the dead, only because
 they will not talk to me, yes only because I cannot grab them,
 tear at their clothes,
 fall at their feet shrieking,
 demanding to be loved.

You need I need
 smooth touch skin smooth
 motion, faith
 in motion
 and love, in love with motion
 in love with motion,
 of rhythmic, musical
 ways to get back to our inner
 Life is force is thrill is height
 joy in equilibrium oh the mania slips
 in so that,

ebb and flow,
 faith in equilibrium
 in ecstasy ebbing and flowing,
 no matter who else dims the
 heart structure faith,
 Ecstatic ebb and flow.

In love with what lasts, not with what comes and goes.
 Yes, it was painful long ago,
 and no, it is not still so
 painful
 but rhythmically
 getting back to where we started.

Love; a woman.
 Love her strongly
 Release her, love love
 life,
 sex
 "little death"

birth
 motion love her motion
 hold her in small hands,
 cry out as loudly as you can,
 Hold her.



Onion

Sandy Wang

This is not about
how she makes me cry.
It's not even

about the tender heart, tied
to a secret, hidden
beneath her

white organza dress, unattainable
despite my teary efforts.
You see—this is about

her coming to ripeness in my garden,
a full moon rising
to the high throne. Indubitably she is

the queen's picking, fattened virgin
bulb, green stalks
soon to flower. Overnight,

poignantly and nervously, she drags
her robe of white mist
in slow waltz, my sweet deb.

Come daybreak I will have to take her
out of her loam-perfumed
boudoir, and marry her off to the gentle

yellow bell pepper.



Will Marxism Give Health to the Sick?

Stuart Jay Silverman

maybe it was the polio, which she had as a child, and which left its streaky mark like a single fingernail
down her side corrupt as original sin

maybe it was the accident, the one that seemed to move slowly as a woman sultry with heat across a room
toward the man who has taken her heart

maybe, just maybe, one doctor opined, it was that her back had not been right since birth, since before birth,
congenital scoliosis axing her axis

or, it might have been Diego, whose weight crushed her breasts which opened like Indian offerings
spread on an altar to bleed his dark seed,

the pelvis crooked as Lombard Street in San Francisco where they lived in 1940 after they remarried and where he
had painted *Treasure Island*

and they got along without sex, got along without sex with each other, though he had his women and she lovers and
her own deep-delving fingers

so wrenched out of true, her pelvic bore, she could not bear a child, though accessible to the boneless tube
a man could thread into her, she willing

and she paints *My Nurse and I* in 1937, black hair framing a basalt mask behind which the nurse's face
must lie whose features she has forgotten,

but she lies cradled in those brown arms, a seepage of milk from the left breast trickling into her adult mouth, her
child's body in a satin shorty

and helpless in those brown arms, as she was in Diego's embrace, and she painted *My Birth*, earlier, 1932,
the adult head, as then, enhaloed by blood

resting on the white sheet, neck still stuck in the pelvic passage of the figure covered from the breasts up
by a white cloth, and she painted herself

many times, with Fulang-Chang, her monkey, peering over her shoulder, or held to her like a baby, or she festooned
herself in tropical birds and set

vines and fruit alongside or as a backdrop for her almost-meeting eyebrows, under which her obsidian eyes rivet the
viewer and her scarlet lips

tighten, a clasp snapped shut, in contempt, or indifference, or holding in the pain that flooded her being until she could escape into the painting

you see, or another, perhaps *The Broken Column*, her body wreathed with straps through which breasts push, splayed out from a shattered marble

colonnade exposed by the torso torn open belly to throat, or the still life of magnolias: heavy oil-green leaves, curls of white petals, stiff yellow stigma.



Ballad of the Three-Gaited Whores

Stuart Jay Silverman

Note: *This poem derives from a paragraph in The London Review of Books several years ago. The Hamburg contingent of prostitutes had doubled or trebled with the addition of expatriate women from other countries, mainly Turkey. The local women wrote up a list of services with prices to help the newcomers. Silverman composed the verses in German and, then, translated them into English and French.*

DIE SPEISEKARTE

*Ein Anal ist so schwer
Es kostet etwas mehr.
Französisch kostet etwas schlimmer.
Bei hand's ein Augenblick,
Doch eine Tittenfick
Machts langsam, und es braucht ein Zimmer.*

BILL OF FARE

A backdoor's pretty rough—
It's extra for that stuff.
For somewhat less, I'm prepared to eat it.
By hand, you get off quick,
But tit-fucking's a trick
Takes a room, and leisure to complete it.

LA CARTE

*Dans cou, c'est formidable!
Il coute en plus, semblable.
A la bouche coute à meilleur marché.
Par main, c'est un coup d'oeil vite,
Mais entre les seins, je dite,
Va lentement, et demande se coucher.*



Gaius Caligula, Gephyromaniac

John F. Trause

[2. *Life on the Edge: Marginality as the Center of Public Art*

Inside the gallery/museum, the artist functions as the center of a particular system; once outside that system, the artist is lost between worlds —]

=> “the artist’s position in our culture is marginal. The public artist can turn that marginality to advantage. Forced, physically, off to the side, the public artist is asked to deal not with the building but with the sidewalk, not with the road but with the benches at the side of the road, not with the city but with the bridges between cities.”

<= [Outside and in between centers, the public artist is under cover; public art functions, literally, as a marginal note; it tries to comment on, and contradict, the main body of the text as a culture.]

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
When he was Emperor of ancient Rome, being
Heir to Tiberius, reigned in insanity:
Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac.

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
When he was Emperor, grew very passionate
And more obsessed, one would even say violently,
This time with bridges — yes, gephyrophilia.

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
Grew more obsessed and not only with building them,
But also he’d just adore being close to them:
How could you satisfy such an arch specialty?

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
When he was little had read in Herodotus
How in the Persian War Xerxes, the emperor
Of all of Persia invaded the Greek mainland

By crossing over what we call the Dardanelles,
Then called the Hellespont, gateway to Asia,
By building over this body of water a
Gigantic bridge, that stretched nearly a mile, so

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
In a mad effort to outdo that emperor
Stretched a huge bridge all the way from Puteoli
To Bauli over the wide Bay of Naples, and

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
Rode on his chariot, crowned with a golden wreath,

Cloaked in a purple robe, fit for an emperor,
Over his bridge — ah yes, gephyrophilia.

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
When on the Rhine in the inlands of Germany,
During the time of the German hostilities,
Camped on the bridges and maintained his quarters there:

Gaius Caligula out of perversity
Sat on a bridge one day arguing violently
With the divinity of the Rhine River, as,
Deep in insanity he at least thought he was.

When his poor uncle, Tiberius Claudius,
Limping and stammering came up to visit him,
Gaius Caligula ordered poor Claudius
To be thrown into the Rhine as a sacrilege:

Gaius Caligula watched from his bridge as old
Claudius, lame and a spastic on land, but in
Water as home as a fish, fished around in the
Currents until safely he came to shore.

Gaius Caligula, while still in Germany,
Rode on his chariot just for the fun of it
Over the Rhine in the zone of the enemy,
Fearlessly flouting the fears of his bodyguard:

When someone carelessly had remarked what if the
Enemy were to show up, very suddenly
Gaius Caligula panicked and jumped on his
Stallion and raced toward the bridges, and since they were

Loaded with baggage and crowded with servants, he
Ordered that he be passed overhead hand to hand:
Reaching his bridge, the mad Gaius Caligula
Clung to it tightly — yes, gephyrophilia.

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
Had by this time made his claim to divinity
Through metamorphosis, so he believed it that
He was as powerful ... nay, he *was* Jupiter:

Gaius Caligula (let’s not say Jupiter),
Since he was Emperor, lived on the Palatine
Close by the Capitol, where stood the Temple of
Jupiter Optimus Maximus, so the mad

VITO ACCONCI

Gaius Caligula built a long bridge from the
Roof of his Palace and over the Forum then
Up to the Capitol, so he could visit, as
He said, his Temple, and there on the Capitol

Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac,
Used to converse with the statue of Jupiter
And could be heard laughing, shouting, or whispering:
Gaius Caligula, gephyromaniac.

Postscript

Great wits are sure to madness near allied,
And thin partitions do their bounds divide.

Dryden

A l'histoire, Caligula, à l'histoire



Idols

Scott Sherman

Nothing is pain like watching something age.
I remember the family dog standing up slower,
arthritis in the back legs.
It made my rib cage raw.
My family told me it was something that happened,
so when dad began to fall asleep before seven
call out of work & miss dinners
I wondered how comforting it would be if he knew
it was just something that happened.

The doctor did that for me,
after we rushed to the hospital when we found dad
passed out in the bathroom.
I wondered how the dog did it for so long.
The stiffness in my legs ached where it never had.

Never more than in those years
do I want to be a time traveler,
see how the dog managed so long
& say goodbye once more. Practice.

This is not about saying goodbye,
I'm not ready yet.
There will be a day when you're too tired to make it up the stairs
& sleeping at the bottom will sound good enough.

I was awake in my room every morning
when dad carried the dog up to the kitchen.
He taught me to lift idols up
so I will.



Thoughts on a diamond-studded skull by Damien Hirst

Scott Penney

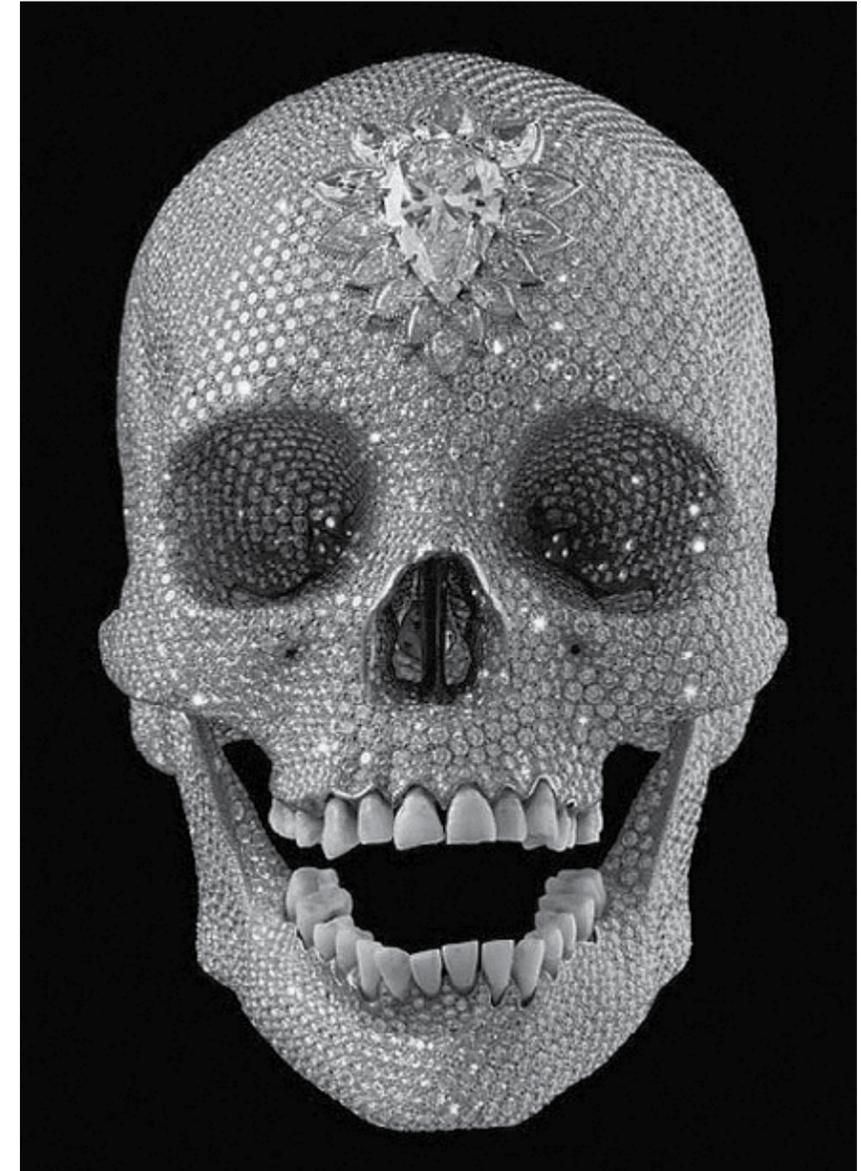
Regard this diamond skull that artist Damien Hirst construed, derived from diamonds hard-wired on a steel mesh frame, cornrows arrayed as exactly as those in the garden of Cyrus— regard the value of even those most tearless of eye-sockets, edgy hollows lachrymose with nothing but art-world track-light.

Artist Damien Hirst has made a masterpiece no one can afford— not even the most star- or diamond-studded semi-celebrity. No insurance plan nor all of Lloyd's can underwrite the skull suspended in the Plexiglas cage of the London gallery

Each diamond on the little skull refracts a point of light cupping in its precious radius another viewer, eye that altering all beams back each gaze that hails it, each flashbulb-popping camera angle. What paparazzi member is not astonished, awed?

Each eye-beam joins each beam of light each discrete gem bends— grin that gapes back at its buyer wannabe, each inert eye-socket invested with millions, world of mineral wealth in a worm-hole.

Such the conceits the brain-vault beams to the absent cortex.
Pièce de résistance: being pinned to a pedestal. And all along the thoughts a botoxed skull beams back: *regard my void*.



Marriage

Ryan Fox

Even the most knotted among us are tenderized by it—
the most dangerous rendered acceptable for household use—
in unity and for one prolonged moment even
the most forbidding among us is gentrified by it—
even my wild and wind-blown heart

is now just a mallet
I leave on the counter for you to find and when you do
you take out your own four-chambered briefly beating thing
and lay it down like the good home cook you are
on the graphite cutting board next to the bowl of salt.

For the sake of tenderness I have waged many wars
because a man must have a cause I sang the black-throated
blue warbler back to sleep I dismissed the sumptuary laws
as no laws at all

and borne on the budget wings
of alcohol I said submit she said submit and the yoke was mild
for a while the shackles lay lightly on our wrists.

Illustration by Jeff Pike



CRITICISM



The Problem With the Children of New York

Gemma Rivieccio

To be born in New York City is to be born delusional. By virtue of your birthplace, you are somehow automatically indoctrinated with the notion that you—and others like you—are the most significant and interesting beings on Earth. There is quite possibly no better recent indication of this than a certain memoir called *Not That Kind of Girl*, which has gained a second wind in the wake of its paperback release and translation into various foreign languages; yet, it's hard to fathom how one could ever get across the vapidness of the content as effectively in any tongue beyond English. Presented as “a collection of personal

essays,” the “book” is a random smattering of sexual experiences, white girl problems (which, yes, is a derogatory term, but too applicable to avoid in this case) and elucidations of how lifelong privilege and a built-in destiny for fame makes you utterly oblivious to reality. The frequent mention of French bulldogs and clawfoot tubs is just one indication of how out of touch Lena Dunham is not only with the average person, but with the average New Yorker (meaning someone born elsewhere).

Not only are the cutesy little drawings throughout the “novel” a testament to its utter frivolity, but so, too, are tales of her sexual

discovery and her various travels. For instance, Dunham bloviates, “I am going to London. All alone. I haven’t been to London since age fourteen, a European jaunt continues with, “A wood-paneled, dusty room, low ceilings, and cigarettes smoked inside. Nellie orders red wine, so I and the struggle to lose her virginity. Her obsession with a proverbial NYC cool kid named Jared Krauter is one of many forays into the inane

“Dunham’s so-called literature puts a spotlight on the incestuousness of youths of a certain class from New York.”

when I was angry my mother forced me to ride a Ferris wheel and even angrier because I liked it.”

Apart from sentence structure designed for a children’s book, the subject matter (or lack thereof) contained within her prose is frequently as vacuous as this.

Her trite interpretation of

do, too, fiddling nervously with the strings of my purse. She introduces me to various Wilde-ish characters and mentions Aristotle, Ibsen, and George Michael in one breath...” And yet, sadly, her rehashing of experiences spent abroad are far more interesting than listening to her prattle on about college life at Oberlin

descriptions of her quest for sex: “This was not technically the first time I’d seen Jared. He was a city kid, and he used to hang around outside my high school waiting for his friend from camp. Every time I spotted him I’d think to myself, That is one hot piece of ass.” Colloquialisms aside, Dunham’s so-called literature puts

a spotlight on the incestuousness of youths of a certain social class from New York, all damned to be among one another, to know the same people and to bear the same exact self-deceptions of importance.

The relationship she has with her sister, Grace, is portrayed in a less than kosher way as well. Even when ignoring tales of “sororal” vaginal inspection, Dunham’s complaints about having to share her bed with Grace are almost more bizarre than the joint sleeping arrangement itself as Dunham screams to her mother, “No other teenagers have to share beds unless they’re REALLY POOR!” And thus, for as “down to earth”—as “woman of the people”—as Dunham would like to believe herself to be (recently evidenced by her new website, Lenny Letter), she can’t eradicate the formation of her entire character within context of the false reality of New York City, born to parents already “successful” in the art scene (painter Carroll Dunham and photographer Laurie Simmons). This circumstance of birth is undeniably what has led Dunham to believe that every action, every thought of hers is of the utmost significance, and will be useful to others—specifically women—trying to navigate through the awkwardness of life.

Highlighting the minutiae of her existence may be her ostensible shtick, but none of it serves to enlighten anyone other than herself. Case in point, Dunham’s (one of many) non-sequitur moments in a chapter entitled “Platonic Bed Sharing: A Great Idea (for People Who Hate Themselves)” prompt her to spew, “In response I wrote a short story, tragic and Carver-esque, about a young woman who had come to the

city to make it as a Broadway actress and been seduced by a controlling construction worker who had forced her into domestic slavery.” Again, this sort of grandiosity is imposed by Dunham onto her reader, comparing herself to easily one of the greatest authors of all time. It is indeed this element of the novel (apart from its spurts and near orgasms toward some kind of plot) that is the most incensing. The sheer braggadocio of it all, fakely masked as a veneer of self-deprecation. And again, this characteristic brings us back to the majority of famous people from New York City who act in a similar manner—who have the power of skewed perception to believe in the normalcy of their reality, and that in it there is a place for their vanity, and associated projects.

Like another New Yorker who came to prominence during the same era, Lady Gaga, there is a certain latent shame that this NY-raised breed feels for the wealth and privilege it possesses, as evidenced by Lady Gaga’s need to iterate that her parents “both came from lower-class families, so we’ve worked for everything—my mother worked eight to eight out of the house, in telecommunications, and so did my father.” The desire to defend living an elitist life on the Upper West Side is more than Dunham can offer, however, as she spent most of her youth in the bubbles of SoHo and a costly private school in Brooklyn.

Admittedly, part of Dunham’s grotesque compulsion to document even the most inane of occurrences (“I learned to masturbate the summer after third grade”) in her book stems from being a part of a generation of egoists; these people

have been told they are special and also have the social media outlets to prove as much by any bombastic means necessary. However, unlike, say, Marie Calloway or Emily Gould, Dunham can’t even take the risk of going truly “full exposure” in her writing (though, yes, she can do this physically in her HBO show). And at the core, it is her New Yorkness that makes her this way: wanting to be provocative and meaningful, but ultimately coming across as utterly hollow. Sure, one could counter, “What about people from Los Angeles? They’re the worst too.” But this simply isn’t so, because at least Californians have the warmth of spirit and the chillness in vibes to know when it’s time to stop taking themselves seriously. New York-born ilk do not have this filter or capability. It is, for this reason, that outsiders must come to the city and work toward a more legitimate type of fame. Like Andy Warhol, who is responsible for the most insightful thing said in Dunham’s memoir, when she quotes the aphorism, “I always run into strong women who are looking for weak men to dominate them.” Unfortunately, no such luck occurred during the writing of this psychological spotlight on the children of New York and their unbridled narcissism, paired with an inflated sense of self.

