



Spiral

Volume 1, Issue 3.1
Fall 2008

Part 1 of 2

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Fall 2008

An Oberlin College Publication

La Danza

by Daniella Sanchez

The room takes no notice as he steps through the door,
Yet here is a stranger I've not seen before.
Under his silver-lined tricorn, he wears
An off-white and emerald half-mask, and stares
At the room full of colorful aristocrats
And with a small smile, he lifts off his hat
And slowly removes his midnight blue cloak
Which as he hands off his effects, swirls like smoke
As the leather-masked porter then whisks it away.
Under the lamplight his dress is displayed:
The finest silk stockings the shade of good cream,
Deep black *culottes* with small ribbons in green,
A vest the soft shade of grey heather in bloom,
And an embroidered jacket of a rich forest hue.
As the orchestra strikes up another fine waltz,
He crosses the room, and then suddenly halts
In front of me, and with a flourishing bow,
Peers up as far as his mask will allow.
Bella signora, fa danzare con me?
Mi piacerà molto andare con te.
In silence we take up in each other's arms
And as if under some form of old spell or charm
He leads me about with an effortless glide
And as we are moving I see in his eyes —
Fire and passion and love and desire
That transcends the music, taking us higher
Than mere mortal flesh could have ever known
And only to souls intertwined ever shown.
Yet as the musicians finish at last
The vision is gone, and forever has passed.
Placing on my own gloved hand a kiss,
The stranger in silence himself he dismissed,
His eyes saying *grazie*. He leaves before long;
And yet in my heart he will never be gone.

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* This piece is suggestive or explicit in nature.

Letter from the Editor

As you may have noticed, this edition of *Spiral* is somewhat different from the others: we've printed two magazines this module instead of the usual one. Let me take a moment to tell you why.

First of all, and most importantly, we received almost 100 submissions this module. Not only did we have more submissions, but we accepted more than we ever have before—more than we were physically able to print in one magazine.

Of course we didn't want to cut out any of the pieces we accepted. Though we considered saving some of the pieces to publish next module, this was impractical for several reasons. Not only will we continue to receive submissions from you, but how are we to determine which pieces to print this module, and which to save? (This would be particularly difficult since we've started to establish serial pieces: see *Knockout*—from Summer 2008—on page 18 and *Wasteland* on page 26.)

So we decided to publish two magazines this module. Two separate, but complete magazines. The one you are holding now contains several different genres, including science-fiction and erotica, among others. The other magazine contains the pieces the staff deemed to be more fantastical in nature. Though we hesitate to decide genres for the pieces, we needed some sorting method, and this was the best we could find for dividing the magazine in half. So please take our labels with a grain of salt.

And now, I leave you to your reading pleasure. Make sure to grab the other magazine, but don't feel like you must read them in any particular order! And please continue to submit your amazing genre-fiction pieces!

—**Bryn A. McDonald**
Editor-in-Chief

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Black

by Jim Mattingly

Before anything else, you have to know that Mr. Honesty hates you.

Alexander Black made a decision. He didn't know when, or how, or why, or even what it was, but there was one tiny tick when Alexander Black's life became a beautifully arcing downward spiral. After that moment, Alexander Black fought for his life every day, struggling for food, for shelter; Alexander Black dreamt of small luxuries you take for granted. For example: You live in a world without Black & White.

"Smoke?" Three men, sitting in a car, none of them friends, two of them needing something they can't name, all of them waiting together. This one owns the vehicle and therefore feels a fleeting need to act as the evening's host.

No one answers. The man in the back seat shifts his weight, crosses his legs, and looks out the window; chin in hand, he sees a night-lit city street abundant with detritus. The streetlights are gold in color but the stones of the sidewalks and street reject that majesty; the street is pallid and stifled. He shifts his gaze up to a high window in an apartment building on the next block.

The owner looks back at him and speaks again. "Time, Mr. Honesty?"

Mr. Honesty slowly shakes his head.

The driver takes a deep breath and asks, "How do you know?" This one operates the vehicle and therefore feels a certain power; with his hand on the gearshift he thinks he can afford to question Mr. Honesty.

Nothing happens for a leaden moment, then Mr. Honesty's phone rings once, quietly. Smiling at the driver through the rear view mirror, he steps out into the street and heads for the window.

The men are struck with trepidation. You see, Mr. Honesty is a tall and thin man, possessed of long digits and elfin features, and his gaze is rumored to direct the attention of untold evil. There is a legend among White dealers that Mr. Honesty never smiles, but of course, they all say that this is only because no one has ever seen him smile and survived the night.

It's a great joke until he *does* smile, and you can see his canine teeth, and his dead grey eyes burn into your dreams, and he casts long shadows on the street that remind you of the nightmare you used to have where the long arm reached out from the darkness in your closet and caressed your face with claws, and then when he enters the apartment building you realize you aren't breathing, or moving, and that you can't move your eyes from that door for fear that he will reemerge.

The lights go on in the window, then off. The men in the car say nothing, share nothing, and, terrified and having forgotten why they are here, think nothing. Mr. Honesty comes back just the way he left and slides into the backseat. He holds a tiny black marble, and when he smiles at it, a faint gold light shines from its center. He whispers, "Drive."

"Give me two days of Blue."

"Sorry Black, I'm out."

Alexander Black stands in front of a cart on a street corner with a wide black and white umbrella over a sign that reads "Samson & Jackie's Vivid Colours". Jackie is sitting in the folding chair on the right, situated with quick access both to the cash drawer and the boxes of pills. She pulls out a blue box, opens it, turns it upside down and says, "See? None left."

In the moment of pause, the sky moves slightly: The sun has risen but hasn't yet roused, and the sky is only a pale blue-grey wash. There are clouds, but they are weak, and they don't dream. There is no wind. The streets stretch out for miles, and the buildings reach to the sky, and for this one moment, there is complete silence. The city is waiting hopefully.

Alexander takes in the moment and asks, "Who is Samson?"

Jackie looks at the seat next to her, and at the sign, and an-

swers, "I think I got the sign from a dump to save some money."

Unsatisfied, the city moves on, and the silence gradually sinks into the cacophony of one hundred thousand souls waking and starting their cars.

Alexander and Jackie watch each other for a moment, both dour, waiting for the other to speak. Black speaks first:

"Bye Jackie."

"Bye Black."

Alexander walks on, his routine disturbed. He doesn't remember the last time he didn't get a double dose of Blue before breakfast. Does Blue kick when it leaves your system? Is today a bad day?

At the diner down the street, Black sits at the counter, waiting for service. At this hour he expects to be the only customer, but there is another man sitting in a booth in the far corner, watching him intently. He also expects the waiter to bring him two eggs and a glass of water without any conversation, but the waiter is nowhere to be seen.

The tall man in the booth has no food; he holds a black marble and holds it up to his eye. He smiles at Alexander Black.

There is coughing in the back room and the waiter walks out stiffly. He wipes his face with a dirty towel, walks to the booth, and hands the tall man a card. His eyes are glazed; he appears to hardly notice when the tall man writes something on the card and puts a small bag in his hand, but he returns to the back room. The tall man stands, rubs his hands together, and sits next to Black. He is wearing a perfectly white two-piece suit over a black shirt, and he smiles as he holds his black marble in front of Alexander.

"Take this, and all of your problems are gone. One dose, four k." His voice, as thin as his body, writhes with pleasure.

Alexander turns his head slightly, intrigued if disgusted. "What is it?"

"Black."

Alexander Black hesitates, unsure of the meaning of the response. He looks at the marble. "One dose of Black?"

"Yes."

"Any relation to White?"

"Of course not." Black immediately knows this is a lie.

“How does it work?”

The tall man smiles wider, showing teeth. “Magic.”

“No thanks, friend.” Alexander stands to leave, having forgotten why he is here and feeling too unsettled to converse any farther.

“I’ll make it two for two k.”

Alexander hangs on the decision: He knows this is not a good idea, he doesn’t want to take the deal, but two doses for two thousand is the same price for Blue from Jackie so he’s got cash for that, and for some reason he can’t name he feels compelled to buy Black.

The city hangs with him.

“Two for two k.” Black lays two notes on the table. The tall man takes them, places his marble on the table, then stands and goes into the back room. He comes out with another black marble and places that one next to the first.

Oddly, the perfectly round marbles do not roll at all, and Alexander feels fear, but he pockets them anyway.

“How do I find you?”

“Ask for Mr. Honesty, and I will come.”

As Alexander Black leaves the diner, he feels hungry, and confused, and wonders why he hasn’t eaten yet. As the day moves by, nothing touches him, and he feels only a dull weight on the back of his eyes together with a compulsion to take his new doses.

That night, sitting on his bed, Alexander drops a Black into a glass of water. As it sinks, it glows gold and casts low dancing lights around the room. Alexander drinks, and then he is gone.

In the morning, Alexander is back.

He feels as an empty vessel, relaxed and breathing deep, and he takes in the light shining through the white curtains. His room is larger, the ceiling higher, the walls cleaner, his bed wider, and his wife lies next to him, her face calm and beautiful in the morning light. Alexander recalls the night before, when she took him into her and they made love forever, and his heart soars in the moment, and his world is peace.

He moves to the window and opens the curtains; the city’s light glitters and dances for him in joyous celebration of the morning. It

must have rained overnight, because the golden sunlight is reflecting from the streets and buildings far below to meet the heavens; there are clouds, and their dreams form a pink and blue sunrise that moves to inspire all creatures to love.

His wife stirs in the light, walks to the window and embraces him. They move together to the bed and as the world stirs below them they feel nothing but joy.

The day passes sleepily, and when the sun is down and Alexander drifts into dreaming, he is gone.

In the morning, Alexander is back.

He feels like a car wreck, destroyed and breathing only in wracking coughs, and he takes in the suffocating air coming through a tiny vent in the concrete floor. His room is tiny, the ceiling cracked, the walls filthy, his bed too short, and his remaining dose of Black sitting silently on his dilapidated nightstand. Alexander recalls the night before, when he took the dose of black and dreamt of a perfect world, and his heart sinks in the moment, and his world is pain.

He moves to the window and shuts the curtains; the city’s light laughs in a jeering cacophony and leaves him. It must have rained overnight, because the pale sunlight is reflecting from the streets and buildings above to paint his curtains bone white; there are signs of humanity that mean that Alexander has woken up far too late: Bounty news has already been released.

The dose of Black rolls off his nightstand, crosses the floor and bumps into his heel. He picks it up, grasps it tightly out of anger and roars as he throws it hard against the wall where it shatters and its remains fall to the floor.

A moment of complete desolation passes.

Alexander steps forward, crouches, and collects the shards of Black. He dresses in his one set of clothes and hesitates only slightly before shouldering a bag kept under his bed. His dream fades quickly, and by the time Alexander leaves his room he has forgotten all but a face, a city and a sky all dancing with light.

“Give me two days of blue.”

“Sorry Black, I’m out.”

Alexander reaches into his bag and drops a thick stack of notes on the cart. Jackie stares at them, silently mouthing her counting, and pulls a small grey box out of the cart.

"All the blue skies you could want."

Alexander opens the box, draws out two small blue pills. "Did you have these yesterday?"

"Yes."

"Why didn't you sell them to me?"

Jackie hesitates, looks away, and says, "Mr. Honesty paid me to hold them."

Alexander freezes, looks down the street at the diner, and puts the pills back in the box. "Keep them. And keep the money."

"Why?"

"I won't be buying from you any more."

Jackie shifts her gaze to the money. "Fine."

Alexander moves to walk away, but Jackie says, "Wait."

Both of them stop, waiting for the other to speak first.

"You okay, Black?"

"What makes you ask?"

"You're just different when you're not on Blue."

Alexander pauses, realizes that by now, two days after he last took Blue, it should be completely out of his system. His eyes are back to normal functioning, his heart rate is back up to normal, his breathing is faster, and all of his stress and anger hormones are completely free to run his personality.

He recalls how he once hated this feeling, that there is a heat behind his eyes that wants to forge the world into something stronger and more beautiful and how when he first took Blue he thought that in calming this fury he had found the greatest feeling in the world.

Not anymore.

Alexander bursts into the diner. There is a small breakfast crowd, and an old and slightly panicked chef is trying to wait on all of them. All eyes turn to watch him as he strides straight to the booth where Mr. Honesty was sitting the day before.

On the table is a trace amount of crushed White and a note scrawled on the back of a charge card: Back room, thirty seconds.

"Can I help you?" The chef stands expectantly next to Alexan-

der; the crowd has turned their attentions back to their food.

"Two eggs and water."

"Sure. Hey, you looking for a job?"

Alexander gives the chef a sideways glare.

"I need a waiter to help out around here. I can't keep up with the crowds."

Black pauses, wonders why the chef's offer feels so strange. "Two eggs and water, please."

As the chef walks away, Alexander sits and tries to piece together the shards of Black. As he holds them together, they fuse back into a perfect sphere within his grasp, and the light returns to the center.

A man speaks. "Mornin', Black."

Alexander reflexively reaches into his bag and grabs his taser, but before he can charge it the speaker sits down opposite him, traps the taser against the table with one hand and trains a gun on Black forehead with the other.

"Morning, Kent."

"I've heard there's a bounty on me. One hundred k."

Black looks up, locks eyes with Kent. "I haven't."

"I thought to myself, who's the thief catcher who knows where I live? And who took me in last time, eh? So I thought, who's dyin' this mornin'?"

Without averting his gaze, Alexander slowly collects the White residue in his free hand. "There's a problem with killing a man openly, you know."

"What's that, Black?"

"With a crowd like this?" Black nods his head towards the other diners, all staring at Kent's gun. "They'll make you join the army."

As Kent glances at the onlookers, Black ducks his head away from the barrel and forces the White into Kent's eyes. Kent recoils, screams and fires the gun, striking the wall behind Black, who then jams his taser into Kent's neck, causing him to seize and collapse to the floor.

The other diners are evacuating as the White takes effect. The world shifts slightly and suddenly exhales.

"I'm glad you're turning yourself in, Kent."

The bullet hole behind Black is gone, and his taser is still charged. Kent's eyes are glazed over, but not with tears. Kent's gun is on the table in its component parts and he is offering his wrists to Black.

As Black draws out handcuffs from his bag, Kent speaks: "I don't have a choice. My little girl needs someone to take care of her, and if I get in any more real trouble the City will take her, and I was thinkin' that if I can turn myself in and make a deal or somethin' they won't do that. They can't do that."

"I'll put aside part of the reward to make sure she's okay. Does that work for you, Kent?" Black leads Kent out of the diner, past the frightened and bewildered diners.

"Yeah, yeah, that works. I knew I could count on you, Black."

"Get me Mr. Honesty."

The dealer stares at Alexander with an accusatory look.

"You're insane, you know that?"

"Sure. But: Get me Mr. Honesty."

In any of the underground train stations, as the trains roll to stops, you can see White dealers and unlicensed color dealers making quick sales under the auditory cover of sixty tons of metal screeching to a halt, right next to the stands with pamphlets titled "The Perils of White-Out."

At these impromptu meetings, asking for a death penalty's worth of Red is common, but asking for Mr. Honesty himself is not for the weak of heart.

"I'll put it in the network, but you're not gonna like it when he finds you."

"Thanks." Alexander starts to walk away.

"I hear you put Kent away again this morning."

Black stops. "Yeah, I did."

"And I hear you gave half the reward to his brother to take care of his daughter."

"Yeah."

"So where do you get off asking after Mr. Honesty? You've got a reputation, Black. He knows you're not into this scene. He'll kill you."

Black says nothing.

"Look, Black, he's got a million k prize. The City wants his head. He knows every thief catcher in this city and he's not gonna trust you."

"I'm not after his reward. I want more Black."

The dealer's eyes go wide. "You." He pauses, the moment heavy with fright and incredulity. "You took Black."

"Big deal?"

"Look, I'll just let him know you're asking. Forget it."

Alexander waves and walks off, takes a pamphlet from the shelves on his way. He opens it and gets as far as "Is White-Out real? Yes!" and laughs to himself before tossing it away.

When he reaches the surface, shadows descend upon him.

"Mr. Black."

Alexander Black shakes his head to rouse himself. He can't remember anything after leaving the station.

"Here I am, Mr. Black. What do you want?"

His wrists are tied; there is a blindfold over his eyes. His mouth is forced open wide and there is soft pressure on his tongue that tastes of iron.

"If you aren't going to speak, Mr. Black, I'll have to terminate this meeting prematurely."

"Mmf."

"Ah! Yes. Here you are." Hands remove the rag stuffed in his mouth.

Alexander spits blood, gagging for the bitter taste left behind.

"Mr. Honesty."

Mr. Honesty smiles, but Mr. Black cannot see.

"I wanted ... I want to buy more Black."

"I am afraid I am out of stock."

"Out?"

"Don't worry, Mr. Black. Procurement is a simple matter, but I require guarantee of a purchase before I will commit to collecting any samples."

"Illegal?"

"Military secret, technically." As he speaks, Mr. Honesty leans

forward and removes Black's blindfold. "It's an unintended byproduct of the new warfare."

Black pauses, takes in the situation: He is seated in a rickety wooden chair under a single bare light bulb in what feels like a wide open industrial basement, though he can only see about ten feet of it. He is alone with Mr. Honesty, the most dangerous man in the city, who is perfectly dressed in his black and white suit, sitting on an overturned rusty oil barrel with legs elegantly crossed, looking completely calm. Black's bag is on the floor next to Mr. Honesty, but all of his cash is in neat piles on the floor.

Alexander counts sixteen small piles and one tall.

"I have a question."

Mr. Honesty grins expectantly. "Yes?"

Alexander inhales deeply to calm himself but brims with anticipation all the same. "Would it be possible to black out?"

Mr. Honesty puts a lithe hand on Alexander's shoulder. "Theoretically."

"Theoretically?"

"I have an experiment to test just that question, but I need a willing assistant."

"For what?"

"Assistance in collecting, to spare expense, of course. And to make the journey."

Black understands, but asks anyway. "The journey?"

"I expect that if a human being were to black out, they would exist in the dream that Black motivates..."

As Mr. Honesty pauses, Alexander recalls the light from his dream. He recalls the hope and he recalls how the dreamt world is more perfectly real than his waking world can ever be.

Mr. Honesty finishes: "... Permanently."

Black sits quietly, feeling the compulsions click into agreement. There is only one true response.

"I'll do it."

Here are two men, sitting in a car, not friends, one of them needing something he can't name, both of them waiting together.

"How does this work?"

"When the time comes, I will collect the sample."

"From a rehab hostel?"

"Of course."

Alexander Black says nothing more. Mr. Honesty is seated behind him, looking out the left window at the front door of a squat beige factory.

There is a sign over the door that reads, "Rehabilitation."

A man in a perfect dark suit opens the door, and a thin, shaking human stumbles out into the twilight. The human is shaved, clothed in a threadbare grey tunic, holds five k and a blank ID card. Its grey eyes glaze over and reflect the sky perfectly.

The doors click shut.

Mr. Honesty approaches, takes the human by the arm, and leads it back to the car. The human and Mr. Honesty sit together in the back seat, and Alexander drives.

Mr. Honesty glances at Alexander, looks at the human, and asks, "What is your name?"

The human looks at Mr. Honesty but does not answer.

Mr. Honesty leans forward and touches Alexander's shoulders over the seat, but watches the human closely. "You see, Mr. Black, when civilians become wholly addicted to White, the military abducts them and farms their spinal fluid, colloquially named Grey. They feed it to the soldiers to make them less susceptible to the social effects of White-Out."

The human does not stir.

"They claim the absence of Grey cures the addiction to White. This is a fabrication. They leave behind an empty shell that is inhabited by only one desire."

The human blinks.

"The soul hungers for White, and I provide."

Mr. Honesty directs Alexander to drive to an abandoned district, to park on a particular dark street with a particular view of a particular window, and leads the human to a building down the block. The lights in the window go on, then off. When he returns, he takes a small phone out of his jacket pocket and sets a timer.

Alexander asks, "What now?"

Mr. Honesty says nothing for a long time, until:

"White-Out."

"What?"

"Don't worry. You'll forget."

Mr. Honesty's phone rings once, quietly. He exits the car.

And Black forgets.

Several weeks later, Alexander is seated in his room with sixteen spherical doses of Black on his nightstand forming a neat circle. He is holding another up to his eye. Mr. Honesty is standing in the doorway, frozen in mid-exit.

The city waits with great anticipation.

"I said, why does Black glow?"

Mr. Honesty remains still and silent for a moment, then relaxes, turns, and lies, "It's a reaction to the chemicals in your exhalations."

"You're lying."

Mr. Honesty's face twists through confusion into anger into stillness.

"That is the light of a human soul reaching out to you." His voice is flat.

Alexander Black knows this is the truth, and says nothing.

A quiet moment passes. The city is satisfied.

"Thank you for your assistance, Mr. Black." With that, Mr. Honesty leaves.

Black slowly lowers the dose and places it on the nightstand several inches away from the others. It is motionless for a moment, then, as Alexander stares, it slowly rolls its way towards the circle. The other doses make way and it slides perfectly into place.

In the morning, Alexander Black is still here.

He is standing in his room, dressed and holding his bag, looking down at his right hand; he holds a chain with a small but brightly glowing circle of Black interlinked. Alexander lifts the pendant over his head, carefully tucking the circle under his shirt.

The city calls to him, and he leaves.



Puzzling Prometheus

by Bryn A. McDonald

How I Long to Be Found in a Time Beyond Love

by Harris Lapiroff

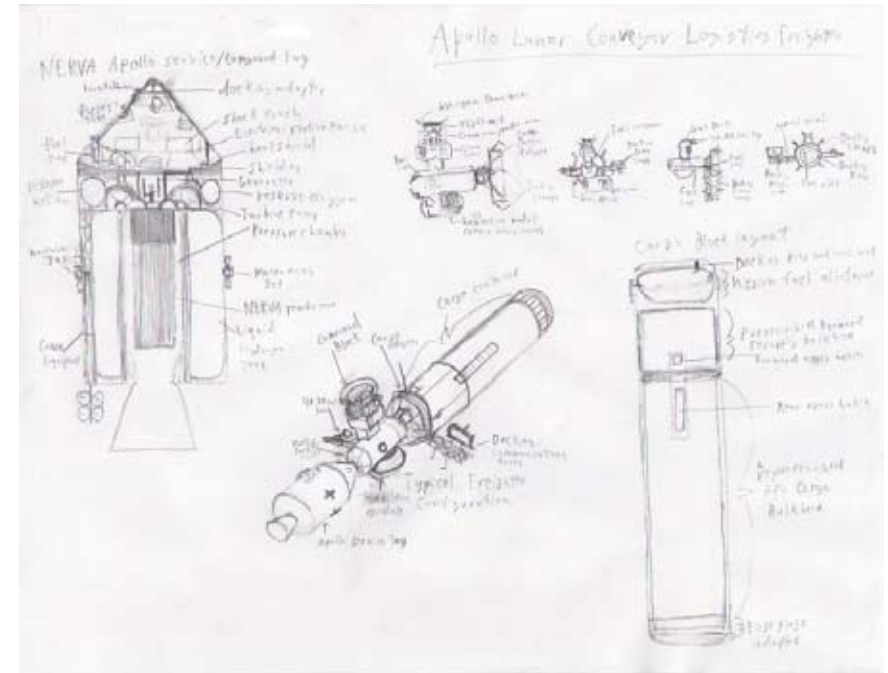
November when air is warm with climate change,
I pray for nuclear winter, another ice age,
a snow that falls soft and lovely and enduring.

You and I wandering the streets of Albany
and out to the beach, flakes of aftermath
dropping one by one onto our limbs
weighing down until we move no longer but only
sleep compressed.

Millennia later, under thousands of pounds of powder,
found by excavators with tinted goggles and laser drills.

Our bodies on the news,
kept below zero in a block of ice
preserving our perfect anatomy.

An archeologist leading a tour points and says
see their strange clothes, the flat way they wear their hair
see the way their eyes light up at one another
and the way their fingers twine.



Apollo

by Mike Rauscher

Gardens

by Daniella Sanchez

The morning sunlight filters through the vines against the wall;
I sigh and let my bare feet
Sink deeper in the cool, damp grass.
The wild jasmine climbs across
The old stone fountain
The sweet perfume mingling with the trickling sound of water
That fills this tiny hidden garden.

As I wait, I plait my heavy hair in braids
And weave the little blossoms
In and out,
Hoping to please him when he arrives.

There is a rustling at the gate
And quietly, he steps through,
A smile on his face that radiates the world
And keeps silence like the prayers in my heart.

Parvati, my Parvati

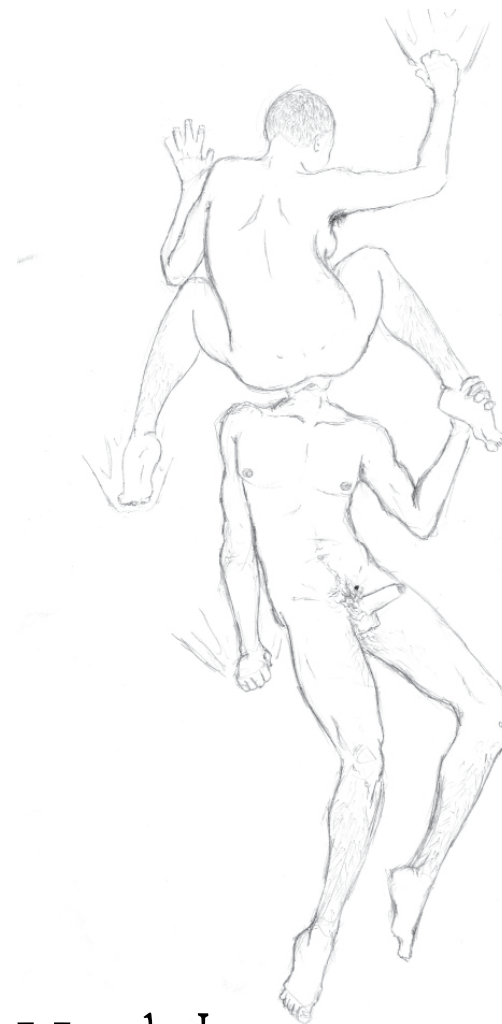
He sweeps me in his arms,
Two in my hair
Two at my waist
Gleaming cobalt blends him with the cobalt of the sky—
Violet lips press like jasmine blossoms up against my own
As he destroys my will
As he destroys the earth.

A dream of love
Of hopes, and promises
Of twining four and two and gods and men
Like shadows on the sun.

Shiva, my Shiva

Trapa Pir

by Sean Hanson



Untitled

by Grey Castro

Trapa pir

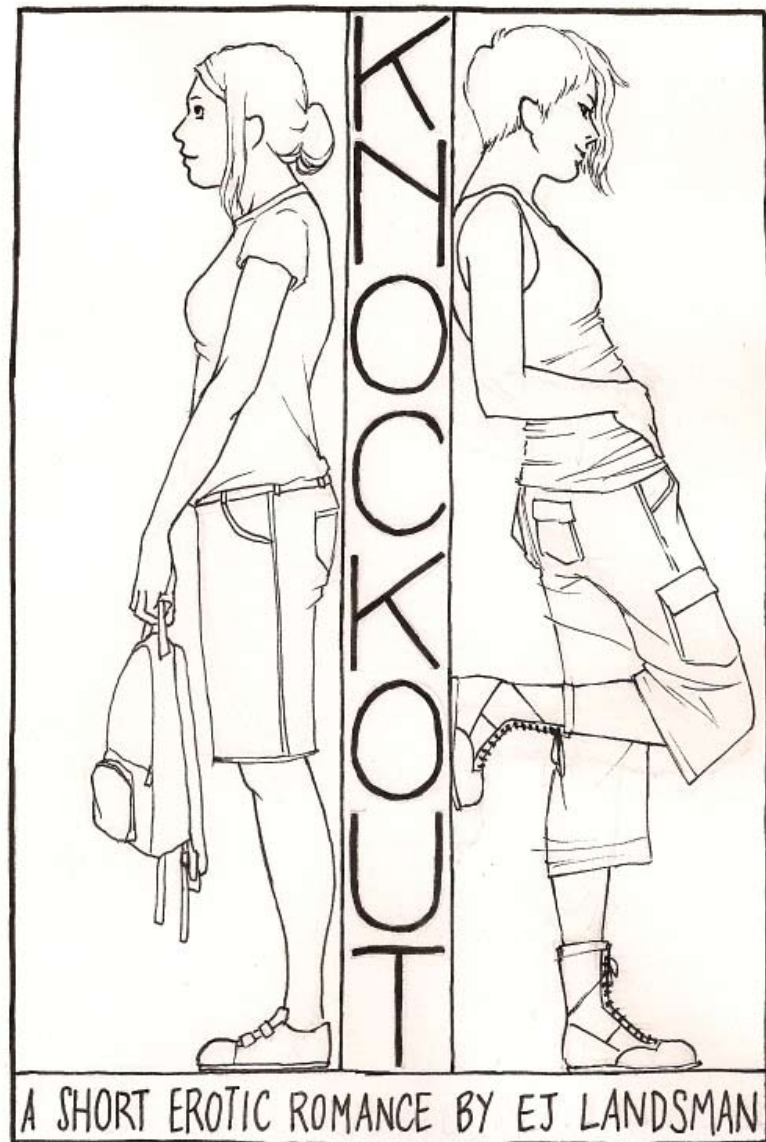
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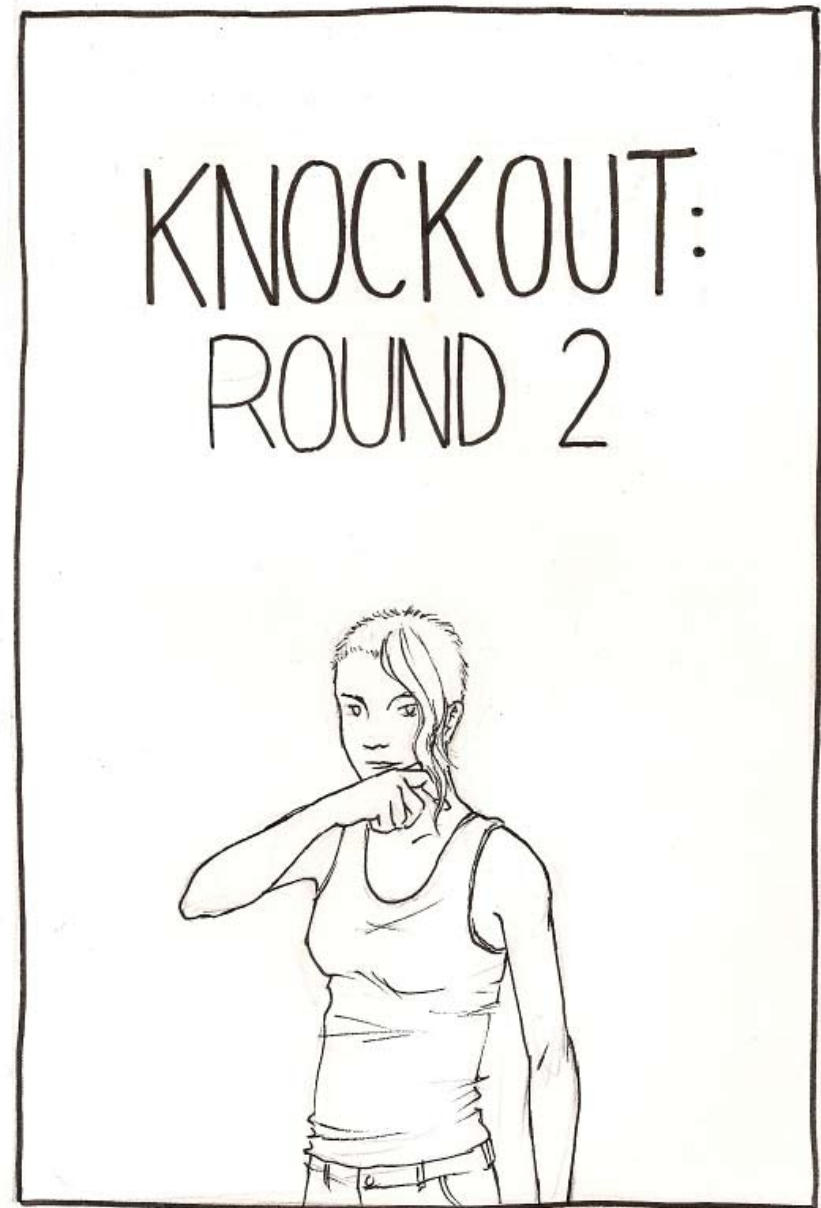
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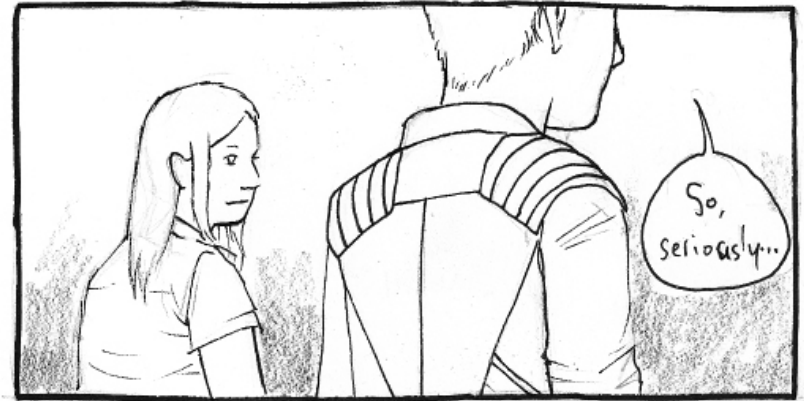
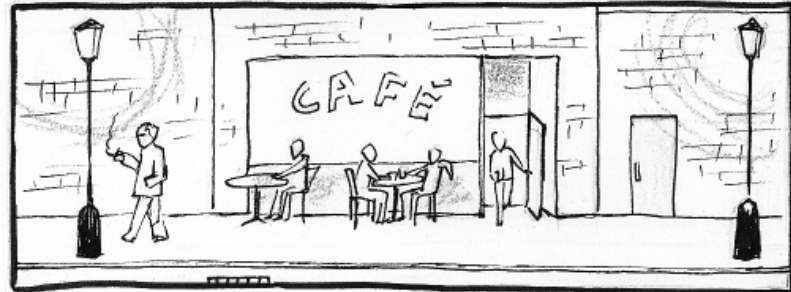
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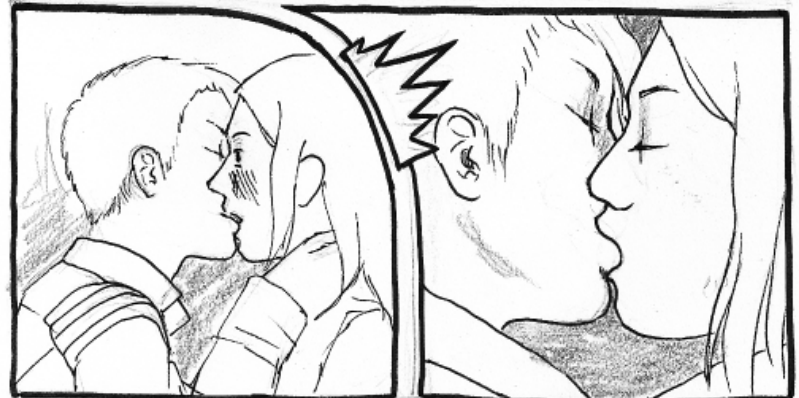
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* This piece is the second in a four part series.
Please read Volume 1, Issue 2 for the first part.







Wherever You Go

Or, What Happens to Shady Victorian Gentlemen Who
Seduce Young Women and Proceed to Murder Them
for Their Fortunes

by Frances Visintainer

You look a bit surprised, my love
To see me standing, here,
Or perhaps you're terrified -
Let me assure you, there's nothing to fear.
Why so startled?
Don't you recall?
I made a vow one year ago
I've loved you, darling, through it all,
I swore I'd follow wherever you go.
I swore I'd return from what tore me away,
And fight to be here – at your side –
Why do you retreat, my love, my dear?
I love you still, I've nothing to hide.
No love – don't run.
Don't try, you can't--
You loved me then, remember, you said,
The most beautiful girl in all the world...
Until, of course, I was left alone
in darkness never-ending,
A lonely sort of place, you see,
That left me mad with wanting
I died a thousand times that day
And just before the last,
I felt you smile, laugh, and aim-
And break me, hate me, heart and soul
You said it was perfection you craved,
You found in blood and shattered bone



Bared

by Bryn A. McDonald

Well, here I am! To much applause,
The deadliest perfection known.
I'm only what you made me, love,
So listen closely when I speak
No one will have you as I live,
I've laid my claim upon your heart.
I'll still follow wherever you go,
Even death is no relief,
For I've been there and back, you know,
Your prayers don't mean a thing.
So take my hand – ignore the blood –
And walk with me to bed,
And through the night you'll learn to love –
To touch, to kiss, embrace the dead.

Wasteland

by Aries Indenbaum

Part One

The difference between a modern city and a pre-modern city is shit. Crap, feces, excrement, rubbish and shit. As the number of eating, breathing, defecating humans increase in a city, the shit needs to go somewhere. For decades, Central City shipped its shit into the mountains surrounding the bay. Big plastic tubes gushed millions of tons of filth into septic tanks dug into the nooks and crannies of the peaks.

But after Central City broke the hundred million mark, the waste clogged all the tanks and eventually, all the pipes on the island. The shit spilled over, seeping into the gulf. After a few weeks, some of the feces had started to float above the water in little clumps. The fish started to die, and bobbed to the surface now and again, their bodies swollen with pollutants. From the sky, the bay looked like a toilet bowl hosting the remains of an illness, flecks of vomit floating in the stained water. In their longboats, the fishermen sobbed.

The city began to reek. Maddened at the smell of its own stench, the population rioted. There was a General Strike, Public Disorder, and other signs of Great Unrest. Children shat in the streets; no one picked up after their dogs. The public fountains ran yellow with the people's disapproval. By the wharf and docks, the fishermen began protests, leading mobs with raunchy sailor songs. The crowds thundered against City Hall, howling at the officials. They threw rocks, eggs, rotten fish, balloons filled with offal against the marble façade: anything that would leave a violent stain.

As the bureaucrats hid inside, the Mayor stood up on his podium, in front of the screaming crowd and announced a new plan.

"The suburbs," he said. "We'll send the waste there." The sub-

urbs were already wastelands, sites of disaster, only barely reclaimed after the wars. There was nothing to lose. Throughout his speech, the Mayor used the word 'waste' seventy times, occasionally replacing it with the word 'filth,' 'dirt' or 'slime.' "We will eliminate the waste," he said, in a thousand different verses. "The filth will be cleared."

So the shit traveled across the water to the suburbs. Deserted schoolhouses and mega churches became refuse-clearance sites. The old transit tunnels, enormous cavernous tubes that linked the City to the mainland, were smoothed down to use as sewage pipes. In an underground station within a high school, the end of the subway line, the workers added giant furnaces to ignite the giant pools where the waste collected. The entire sewer line would catch, creating a giant plume of smoke that never dispersed, just varying in girth.

The disgusting odor lifted from Central City. As the masses ceased their rioting, the Mayor's janitorial staff returned the marble façade to a white sheen. The fishermen resumed business, weeding the rotten fish out of the bay.

But accompanying the calm went a new migration: the human filth of the city. The chronic cases, mentally or physically disabled: ambulances rounded them up and took them to work in the suburbs. It was a perfect solution- the filth cleaning the filth, coupled with the bonus of eliminating a class of parasitic citizens, sucking up the benefits of the City's valuable, universal health care. The Mayor shipped them out with the garbage.

All was well.

When Adin awoke, Central City had already started to rise. Clenched into a ball beside his window, Adin watched the City glow brighter and brighter. He shivered and drew his blanket closer. With his finger, he traced the outlines of each building that he could distinguish.

The lights flickered, starting to bud up and out, like the birth of a star. Realizing the time, Adin reached for his work clothes. After pulling on his ragged shirt and pants, Adin looked around the apartment. His parents had gone, leaving their bed unmade. He folded

the blanket and sneezed a few times. With a few safety pins, he fixed his pants to his shirt. The clothes barely fit him. Before he opened the front door, Adin pulled a bandana over his mouth.

The run to the bus took eight agonizing minutes. In the early morning, the air stung his eyes. As much as he could, he kept them shut, feeling the little particles of sleep itching at his tear duct. As he ran, the morning's chill broke away.

The bus was unreliable: sometimes early, sometimes late. He had to run, then wait. Right next to the stop was the Doctor's home. He was one of the very few doctors outside of the city and the most respectable of the lot. Even now, in the earliest dregs of morning, there was a line in front of his door. Adin peered at the people, a hodgepodge of drifters and respectable folks in various levels of need. The stone path to the house shone with a few splatters of blood and mucus, giving off a bit of a sheen.

The Doctor's yard had something very, very curious in it. Like the cardinals: sometimes she was there, sometimes she had flown off elsewhere. But when she was there, there was something brighter about the day; the human equivalent of sprinkles.

And today, there she was. She sat on a red and white checkerboard blanket, as if she was about to enjoy a picnic for one. In front of her lay a pile of power tools. She held a rag in one hand and was cleaning each tool carefully, her fingers delving into each crevice. Rather than the sandstorm-braving outfit he used, she wore a simple white dress, stained with many-colored splotches. Huge goggles hugged her face. Her arms were bare, marked by a few scars and bruises. She seemed a bit older than him.

Their eyes met.

Or, they would have, if she were not wearing goggles and if he hadn't looked away immediately, to seek out the bus. Nothing.

But when he looked back, she had flipped up the goggles. Her lips were stretched out, exposing her teeth. He smiled back.

She lifted the powerdrill to the sky and flicked the power switch on, letting the buzz fill the air. A spatter of grease and water fell on her. A few of the people on line turned around, but most kept their gaze on the grass or the body in front of them.

Adin grinned and waved, his hand flopping around like a dying

fish. From behind, he heard the oncoming rumble of the bus. He bowed and turned to leave.

The girl yelled at him, some meaningless cry, maybe hello, maybe goodbye, maybe her name. Adin looked behind him, saw the bus's distance and took a few steps forward. She cried again, "Sasha! My name's Sasha!" She punctuated her name by flinging a small object at him, the size of a ball.

He caught it, waved to her and ran towards the bus.

From his seat, he waved to her through the dusty windows. She had a name now.

On the bus, it seemed as if the world was one long road. It still fascinated Adin, how everything spread from the long stripe of asphalt. All the broken storefronts, the fractured grocery stores, the Blockbusters, Big Bargains and Best Buys with their windows smashed and their merchandise lay in front of them, like the organs of an eviscerated corpse. The parking lots served as growth containers for a frightening variety of organisms, an open dumping ground for the ruins of war. Little mammals and flowers, fertilized with bomb's toxicity, grown amid trash. He wondered how long the road went on, how many Waffle Houses lay in ruin; how many Denny's had been pillaged. Perhaps the road looped around the world, the spine of the earth. It had begun to break down in parts, and small flakes of grass poked out through the cement. Little pebbles and potholes dotted the roadway, like a teenager's spoiled acne-smear face.

After contemplating a crunched megachurch, Adin examined the object Sasha had thrown at him.

It was a fruit, similar to an apple, but more rounded. It smelled like melons, but the skin was a good deal thinner. He bit into it, a sharp bite. The flesh was crisp, lively. The bus bounced as Adin gnawed.

He rested his head against the plastic window and watched the Teddybear Cactus sway in the breeze, the yellow bulbs bobbing, as if they were in one sweeping sea. The cactus had taken over the sidewalks, its needles dotting the road, occasionally puncturing tires. Across the parking lots and plazas in front of the ruined commercial backdrop, the Teddybear spread its claws. When the barbs stuck,

nothing short of pliers could rip them out.

Even the wild dogs had learned to avoid them, as much as they could learn anything. A few dog corpses lay by the roadside, arranged in piles. The packs would drag them for miles, sometimes, just to dump them with their brethren. Many of the bodies had been ripped apart, bits of barbs wrenched into their eyes and skin. Adin watched a pack speed past the bus, brushing against the tires, tilting the vehicle.

Adin's bus drove by a long row of buses coming from the opposite direction, his parents riding in one of them. Adin fixed his eyes on the vanishing dog pack. Adin's parents gazed at each other. The buses sped past, passing without a wave or a honk.

In their bus, Adin's parents kept quiet, a comfortable silence hanging around them. Elias gripped Alma's hand. Alma smiled and clenched her fingers around her husband's. She lifted his hand to her lips and kissed his middle knuckle. She no longer smelled the filth, even when she rested against her head next to his.

The bus carried them from the sewer mouth, where the waste of the City burned. The fires had started an hour ago, and the waste smoke had started to disperse towards the sky. Though the air was not at its cleanest, many of the refuse workers pressed their faces to the bus window, to inhale as much as they could. Better this air than the air within the pits.

Alma and Elias had just finished 16 hours of work in the pit: standing in the mouth of the sewer, sweeping long brooms to separate shit from non-shit. Dressed in coveralls and big plastic boots, the couple kept their eyes fixed on their feet on the continuous stream of filth. Their task was to remove the inflammable product, such as small pieces of metal, trapped within the folds of excrement. Hair and flesh were tolerable, as they would burn quickly. The hardest to spot were teeth, which often hid underneath the larger smears of rubbish.

To receive food, they had to collect the suspect pieces in large latex bags and carry them, thick with refuse from the sewer mouth to the base camp. Whenever one of them left, the other had to wade through with a faster gush of heavy brown liquid. Though the con-

tents of the sewer line caught fire each day, they had to remove the sediment, or it would clog the line. Without them, society would choke on its own offal. Theirs was an important task.

Years ago, Alma had found a way to make the stream of filth lyrical; she could eloquently describe the fat blobs that flowed like hippos, sloshing through the sewer. The soft plopping of bubbles, as the shit churned, reminded her of the tapping of hail. As they lay in bed, Alma would tease Eliot about how much he twitched when the leeches stuck to his boots.

In the bus, Alma and Elias clasped the other tightly. Their skin was sodden, clammy as wet raisins, the product of fifteen years of hyper-charged showers, but they couldn't tell that anymore. Today was the last day. Today, they had memorized the last of the sewer map, and their escape could begin.

In Alma's ear, Elias started to recite in a sing-song tone:
"J-3, left for twenty yards."

She sang it back: "J-3, J-3, take the left twenty yards."

The bus bumped a few times, the pavement still spotty. The man seated in the section ahead of them coughed loudly, spraying a throat-full of snot out the window.

The plume of smoke was vast now. Though the furnaces only incinerated for few hours, the ignited feces burned for most of the day. They had all of that time off, as well as the following hour, to wait for the pipes to relubricate themselves with warm, flowing dung. As they pulled on their plastic suits, the waste carried the previous day's sediment to the mouth of the sewer. Then, they could remove the metals and bits of grit, swept to them like crabs washed up from high tide. It was beautiful cycle.

"Post-left to L242, double stairs."

Alma rejoined, gripping his flaccid fingers. "After the left at L242, do the double stairs."

They locked eyes and sang the last part together: "Up the stairs and out, and out."

When he was a child, Elias's father had told him a story of a German monk who traveled to China centuries ago to convert the masses. Though he was one of the finest preachers in Germany, he found himself utterly befuddled by the Chinese language. Not a sin-

gle soul listened to him. He resolved to learn the language, without textbooks, or tutors.

To capture Chinese language, the monk constructed a word palace, giving each character a new room to live in. The palace became huge: syntax and grammar formed beams, walls, ceilings and a foundation. To make a simple sentence, he would explore each room, pick up a verb in a bureau, or snag a noun off the floor. The mnemonic took up more space than anything else the monk knew-German faded to a quiet, fuzzy memory. As the palace grew and grew, the names of his parents and his genealogy vanished into the developed landscape, the history of his monastery replaced with oriental tile and carpeting.

Similarly, Alma and Elias constructed a memory palace to hold their map of the sewer. They walked through each section each day, hand in hand through the many tubes, stairs and open rooms. There was no other way to go to the City. Alma wished they could bring the map they'd drawn up at home, but there was no way to read clearly in the sewers, especially as it got darker and darker.

In Elias's hand gestures, Alma remembered the many turns and curves of the path; all the twists of the sewer bowels. In Alma's voice, wobbling with the bouncing of the bus, Elias saw the ladders. Reaching from the first sewage pit into the bowels of Central City, the ladders would run stories and stories up, taller than any point in the Reclamation Zone. They would climb into the base of the City. Nothing after that would matter.

In the City, the air was filtered. They'd live somewhere clean. They'd met in the water, years and years ago. After hours of separating firm from loosened solids, Elias, Alma and the other sewage workers took long, terrible showers to strip most of the physical sediment away. Naked, they stood under the nozzles, beaten by gallons of hot water, laced with powerful disinfectants.

The shower room was vast, the walls tiles sticky and dark with mildew. The workers stood quietly, staring nowhere and everywhere as the acids and sanitizers burned their skins. They formed an amorphous cloud of people, each one indistinguishable from the last. On their first days as refuse workers, Alma and Elias averted their eyes. They looked away from one another: to the drains, clogged with

hair; at the scratch marks on the floor; at each inch of their bodies, trying to remove the awful stench.

Through the weeks, they grew dirtier, and the smell clenched into their bodies. When they walked outside, the other workers would avoid them, recognizing them by their stench. By default, they walked closer together, taking covert glances at the other.

Elias was not a handsome man. His eyes were too large; his mouth hardly able to hold his teeth. While they worked, Alma watched the muscles of his arms tense to do the smallest lifting. When he spoke, he had a melody to his voice, a soft sloping tone. She overheard him sometimes, speaking in arpeggios. He was smart, she noticed, when he talked back to their superior. He had a few palsies, a few tics, but Alma paid them little mind.

In his sneaking glances, Elias studied Alma. She had an odd charm to her face, a sweet asymmetry in her eyes. Her form was small, each one of her breasts was the size of a baby's fist.

But she was forgetful. Terribly so- little things became lost so easily in the curves of her mind, and she would find things slipping some days, everything except her name. "Alma," she would say as she worked. "Alma."

They never looked at each other directly, until the body.

The excellent thing about the showers was that anything left there would be sanitized. The space was sloped in, so that the water all collected in the center by the drains. The strange, tainted water that soaked up the worker's toxic sweat trickled down that drain, poisoning the groundwater below.

One day, in the center of the drain, laid a corpse. Every bit of it had shriveled. The skin was white and curled, each bit of his naked form ravaged. A low babble broke out among the sewage workers, but they all kept away from the drain, moving closer to the showers. Only Alma and Elias moved towards the body. Their eyes crept from one naked cold body to the other. Alma's gaze slid up Elias's bony ankles to the swell of his muscular thighs, as Elias's eyes swam across Alma's form, dotting from her freckled shoulders to the soft curve of her belly.

Their looks swirled around the other and after that day, they

began to talk. Their conversations were short and laden, maddening in their promise.

And one day, under the pressure of the mindless job, and his growing attraction, Elias felt his shoulder cramp. And powerfully, and painfully, he began to twitch in the shower. Control slid away and the spasm overtook him. From his toes to his thighs, each of his muscles tensed; his body tugged against itself.

Alma thought he was dancing. So she started to dance, crazed, frenetic and gorgeous. Her breasts shook, hair flying, arms swinging in wide circles. The water seemed cool to her now and she spun around, faster and faster. He felt his muscles seize then fall into relaxation: his hamstrings clenched, then loosened. Elias started dancing in earnest then, bobbing his head, jerking his legs up and down and letting his body move from side to side. His feet flew; his arms wiggled. The other workers drifted away as Alma and Elias started to dance towards each other.

They left together, still dancing.

When they reached the house at the top of Broadview, they made the adjustments to the map. The entire sewage system was plotted there, drilled, memorized and immortalized. They read through it again, the path outlined in red marker. Alma had forgotten a path, so they sang it out. Right-left-left to the end, to the end, left, right.

After reviewing the path, Alma finished the letter they'd been preparing for Adin since the day he was born. Elias brought out the envelope he'd made years ago and scribbled "Adin" on the front. Then, they went to the bath and soaked. In the water, they clung together, their hair intermingling. Their limbs slipped around each other, flippers that slid and gripped. As they kissed, Elias's head dipped under the water. His knees began to tremble and Alma moved closer, lifting his face above the surface.

Sometimes, Alma repeated herself, but whenever she did, Elias took it as a time to relish her words and her loveliness again, for new qualities. The quirk in her lips when she pondered, the curve of her eyebrow as she drove home a point. Every day, Alma brought him tiny flowers she had grown, though she had forgotten she did this every day. She was always surprised to see him; he was always new.

She was shocked at how strong he was, how smart and certain.

And they both wanted out. While they had never lived in the City, each building and street was vivid, as lucid as a strand of hair. Elias could practically smell the fish in the harbor, Alma could almost hear the cacophony of accents and languages by the financial district.

On the day they married, they promised the other the City. Sometimes, Alma needed reminding, but whenever Elias explained it again, she could see it as clearly as he did.

In the bath, Alma whispered, "Who are you," as her eyes dipped shut.

"I'm your partner," he said, in his sloping tone, and she quieted.

"Elias," she said as she slid her body over his. "Elias."

After the wars, the suburbs were forgotten. There was too much wreckage to consider doing anything to rebuild. The inhabitants had died or migrated; the mansions, bars and big-box stores sat empty, like a movie set the day after shooting wraps. The walls seemed thinner, the windows more plastic. All the well-bred dogs ran with the mutts, the chubby cats fought with the strays for the newly-free parakeets and macaw.

All of the roads leading from the suburbs to Central City crumbled. No transport connected one place to the other. The bridges over the bay became faulty. Invasive plants – long weeds with ruffled tops, many-stemmed dandelions, leafy green monsters- tore up the five-lane highways that grew from the bay. Around the roads, the rabid dogs lingered and tore into any trespassers into their domain.

When the Mayor shipped the defectives and the wastes to the suburbs, they transported the first workers in the old cruise ships that used to swarm the City's harbor. Only the worst were expelled at first- the hospitalized chronic conditions, the disabled, the convicts who plead for labor over confinement. The police loaded them into the cruise ships, packing them into the holding areas for luggage, the dining rooms and the dance halls. They were allowed one piece of luggage each.

It was all for the best, really. In the city, the defectives were mocked and abused. The working people resented paying for their special housing and hospital bills.

They settled the defectives into the houses of the rich, the belongings still around, mostly untouched. Women rifled through the closets of their homes, finding slim-cut dresses; they wore fine-tailored slacks to do the manual labor, just for the fun of it. Elias's grandfather, Paul, spotted his soon-to-be conquest at her worksite, wearing a party dress to lay cement. From the lunch delivery truck, Paul watched the woman bend over, mortar smeared on her slim thighs, her ass in the air. In the little black dress, her hamstrings formed a smooth, gorgeous line. His grandfather doted on this woman, Kaileen, making sure he delivered lunch to her site first, saving her the best pieces of gruel. Though she was a disabled, he came to fancy her, enjoying her funny bobbing walk, her one elongated leg. Though she had no real interest in him, he brought her food. That was more than enough, in those days.

Kaileen was helping convert the old subway tunnels to sewage tubes; other workers transformed the old grade schools into treatment plants. They had random tasks, jobs imported from the cities, to fold and stack trash together for it to be packed together, made into degenerate material. They were human compactors.

One day, as Kaileen leaned over to the truck to get her lunch, Paul snatched her up. He drove off with her, neglecting to deliver lunch to any of the worksites on his route. It was never clear to Elias whether his grandmother had been swept off her feet or lured into a van. Whichever it was, the act seemed terribly romantic.

He would never know, as she died as she gave birth to Elias's father. Coinciding with the birth came the name-change. It was now the Reclamation Zone.

The suburbs could now treat the sewage, and manage the wastes. The defectives began to understand that they would never get back to the city.

As always, work was awful. For the last two weeks, Adin and the crew had been salvaging metals at a crumpled-in Quiznos. Before he was born, most of the buildings had been flattened. During the

stormy seasons, the remains had been swept around, scattering plastic wrappers, toys, cutlery, pots and cans around the recovery site. A few plastic bags hosted colonies of bugs, feeding on the rotted remains of condiments. Rats had clung to the ruins, with small blind babies dropped everywhere.

As Adin lugged metal tubing over to the scrap heap, the wind brushed along the underside of his shirt, tickling his back. He loved the early fall. No matter how toxic, the air was cool. As the work grew seemingly more and more exhausting, and sweat fell faster along his back, the wind came to dry him off, a kindhearted breeze enfolding him like a towel.

After he'd been moving armfuls of trash for 2 hours, the other boys catcalled. Dooler, Chokey and Skye had found a vat of dressing, untouched after years. A slim skin of plastic covered it, presently hosting many colored molds and fungi. Dooler lifted a slim metal pole and dropped it on the center of the plastic lid. The lip popped. Chokey let out a low moan of disgust as the reek leaked out of the vat. Dooler approached it and kicked it over, watching the gelatinous sludge slip across the ground. There was a funny consistency to the liquid, as if it was made of thousands of slow, creeping slugs.

After four hours of work, the lunch truck drove by, a converted fuel truck. One of the managers took a look at the worksite as the driver prepared the truck. If the manager didn't like their work, they didn't get lunch. The boys stood as still as they could while the manager took a look around. When the manager did on-site work, the days were terrible, as the manager took a particular delight in humiliating the boys, especially Chokey.

But today, he nodded, and returned to the car. Under his breath, Dooler let out a few obscenities as he and the others readied the soup bucket. Lunch was hosed into in large kegs, a thin mixture of bouillon-sludge, water and spices. They filled one bucket with soup, the other with water. Then, the lunch truck drove away to the next site.

Today, the soup tasted of tapioca. In his belly, the liquid trembled and sloshed; Adin thought about the consistency of the dressing. He stopped after two bowls, unable to exorcize the look of the white sludge from his mind. He didn't like the taste of tapioca, but it

might mean there was something at the bottom of the bucket. After finishing, they had to clean out the kegs and sanitize them for the next day. Though the cleaner bleach made Adin's fingers tingle, the ability to possibly fish something out of the bottom of the keg was very attractive. Digging his fingers into the smoking bottom of the keg, Adin found small white strips. He held one up to Chokey.

"That's a bone," Chokey proclaimed. "Probably one of the little ones."

"From a hand?" Adin asked.

Chokey shrugged. "You'd know as well as me. You used to work in the body yard?"

Adin nodded. His stomach curdled at the thought.

Dooler cried out, "Pass it to me!"

With a nod, Adin tossed the piece. It had been oddly soft.

Dooler took the bit of bone and nibbled on it, his eyes crossed in delighted concentration. "Tastes like hard pudding. It's pretty nasty," he said jubilantly and passed it to Skye to sample. Skye swallowed the bone whole and flashed Adin his typical shit-eating grin. Adin shook his head, smiling a bit at Skye's dementia.

He spent the rest of the day crouched, sorting useless slag from less-useless slag. Rust flaked on his ragged fingers and by the end of the day, they turned a putrid shade of maroon. Out of the garbage, he found a few pieces of stained glass that he stuffed away in his rucksack. Adin took a sip of water, using a bit of it to clean off the glass, if not his hands. He built his sculptures out of the prettiest bits of the trash- the best part of the sorting job was finding so many weird, precious treasures.

The bus was late; Dooler and Skye had a snot-fight to pass the time. As Dooler and Skye wiped the goo off their faces, Chokey tried to piss in an exact stream. They didn't think about the City. They didn't really think of much.

After work, Adin walked by the Doctor's house. The line had swollen through the day as the air had cleared. It had grown wider, with small families clustered like beads on a string. He looked through the yard for the girl, but saw nothing: the checkerboard blanket had been folded into a ball. Near the blanket, a man had fallen, twitching

with a holy fury. A woman, feet firmly planted in line, screamed at him: "Get up. Get up!" Some of the children were sobbing.

Adin approached the house, wondering where she would be. Sasha. As he got closer to the building, he saw the superb state it was in. Every other house of the block was faded and cracked, pockmarked from the bombs dropped decades ago. In contrast, the Doctor's estate wore a fresh coat of paint, a shining layer that reflected the meager rays of sun. The Teddybear Cactus growing in the front yard was trimmed and pruned carefully, each needle dulled. Adin watched a former patient clearing up a bit of the trash blown into the Doctor's territory. His body was freshly patched, the gauze around his knees still puffy.

At the back of the driveway stood an old ambulance, rusted and painted light blue. Most of the lights on the roof looked broken. It seemed a relic of years past, some historical model.

He let his hand follow the line of the railing, moving to the back of the house. There was a window, large and open, the light projecting the scene inside like a film screen. He peered through it. The girl, Sasha, wore a long white suit over her dress. She was leaning over a male figure on a bed, securing his limbs. Only his foot was exposed. The flesh of his foot was clenched, as if he was trying pick up a tennis ball. The soles of his feet were rough and rotten, the skin peeled away from the man's toes.

A man in a long lab coat approached the bed, wielding a powerdrill. His look intent, the Doctor leaned over the patient within the bed. The drill flickered on and the man's toe trembled. Adin looked away and when he looked back, Sasha's coat had been splattered with blood. It didn't seem real, the blood settling in drops. Her lips were pursed. Adin vacillated between watching her face and watching the man's toe tremble. The Doctor passed Sasha the drill, and began to palpate the area. Slowly, Sasha lowered the drill. Her grip looked very gentle. Her mouth hung open a bit, her lips pouted out.

For a long while, Adin watched the scene, seeing the strength in her fingers and the soft focus in her eyes, as if she was watching a documentary. As it grew darker, the screaming man quieted, his toes going limp. The blood flecked Sasha's goggles.

The patient sat, his face pale as paper. He reached to touch his sides, a long incision mark sewn shut. Gingerly, he felt the strange swollen line of plastic stitching, his face warped into amazement. Sasha gestured for him to lay back down. Though he did, he took care to squeeze the Doctor and his daughters' coats, leaving grateful smears of nameless bile.

They brought in new patients: a small, shrieking woman; the man without legs; a boy who made no noises. For each of them, Sasha and the Doctor traded tools, sometimes stripping off their coats for new, clean ones, wiping off their goggles. He got used to the sound of the canvas cinching over restless hands, he came to expect the squeals of the drills, the crunches of the saws and the different tones of screeches, screams and moans.

Until Adin felt the wind change, he didn't realize how long he had been standing there. At midnight, the smells of the sewage plants began to disperse through the suburbs, spreading a noxious wind. The smell began to whirl around him. Above him, the sky was dusky and grey, as light as false dawn. Adin ran as he heard the slow whine of an alarm. Around him, the air felt heavy, quaking with thick, poisonous wind. He ran faster.

The toxicity of the refuse was incredible- breathing in a full mouthful at this hour could make the healthiest man ill. He shut his eyes, his feet stumbling forward. He raced against the storm. Even at this hour, the house wasn't quiet. For years, Adin's family had shared the house with a family of seven, whose proud matriarch spent much of her nights noisily copulating with her husband, or yelling at her children about their various flaws and failures. Adin had fallen asleep to her squeals, screams and moans for his entire life. When his head hit the pillow, he could hear the echoes of screams. Today, the neighbors were fucking. Not so tenderly.

His parents had left for work long ago, and in the quiet of the night, he didn't notice that all of their leftover food, all their back-up supplies were gone. The yelps of orgasm, both male and female, pounded through his bedroom. Over his pillow lay a note; Adin laid the envelope aside and stripped off his clothes. Naked, he slept, lulled by the rhythmic grunts.

In his sleep, Adin flew over the city in a bomber jet. The city was under the clouds, a blank layer of fuzz between himself and the buildings. He floated above, avoiding the thin spirals of antenna poking into his path. He couldn't remember his mission, only a criss-cross map, abstracted and dull. There was a target, he remembered; there was a mission. And then, the jet was breaking apart. And Adin was falling, hurting past the buildings.

He awoke late, and caught the bus just as it was pulling away.



Sunburst

by Becky Strauss

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Deadlines for Next Semester:

March 1st at 11:59 pm

(Volume 2, Issue 1: Winter 2009)

May 1st at 11:59 pm

(Volume 2, Issue 2: Spring 2009)

Front Cover Art:
“La Danza”
by Daniella Sanchez

Back Cover Art:
“No Sign of Bowie”
by Mike Rauscher



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