

AFTER HAPPY HOUR REVIEW



ISSUE 9 // SPRING 2018



AFTER
HAPPY
HOUR
REVIEW

TABLE OF CONTENTS — ISSUE 9, SPRING 2018

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the *hour after*
happy hour

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FICTION

- The 45th President of the United States and I Went to a Butcher Shop by Grant Miller 6
- The 45th President of the United States and I Went to Office Depot by Grant Miller 8
- The 45th President of the United States and I Went to Urgent Care by Grant Miller 10
- Relentless Career Advancement in the Tower of Babel by Colin Dodds 20
- Three Pints of Blood by Krista Diamond 58

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

- 39,999 by Shane Griffin 44

POETRY

- First Date by Inga Lea Schmidt 14
- Bodyologies by Inga Lea Schmidt 15
- Washing My Late Father's Coffee Mug on a Saturday Afternoon by Remi Recchia 16
- Dakota, Illinois by Marc Frazier 17
- The Story of Teeth by Katherine Gaffney 38
- The Myth of a Mother by Katherine Gaffney 39
- Philadelphia by Andrew Brown 40
- Salamanca by Andrew Brown 41
- Reading Sontag by Sara Wetzel 42
- New Orleans Dancer Wrecks The Border (...) by Ephraim Sommers 53



MICHELLE NGUYEN

FOREWORD

Dear Reader,

The issue you now have before you represents many overly dramatic fights and intense conflicts amongst the members of the editorial board. No beers were hurdled or spilled and we've come to respect each other's verbal and written (sometimes shouted) opinions a lot better.

But getting there was and isn't easy. Putting together an issue is both an extremely satisfying and at the same time a regrettable task. Out of the hundreds of submissions we receive per edition, only a very small amount of pieces will make it into the journal. We each have that one piece we're fighting for, that one submission that made us think and feel in a different way that isn't shared by enough members of the board.

Over the years we've been getting more and more submissions from younger writers and it is especially difficult to reject those, especially when they were really close to making it.

We've seen some astonishing work by young writers and first time authors and we always get excited when we see another such piece in our inbox. It would be wonderful if we could provide feedback and encouraging words to every submitter but the volume of pieces simply makes that impossible.

What we always strive for, and what we try to accomplish with every release, is to publish works that give you a chance to step into someone else's world and experience life in a way you might not be familiar with, which might even be a bit uncomfortable. It has become somewhat of an obsession to collect and present an eclectic set of experiences and expressions, each working together to give you a full sense of life's mysterious workings. If you're reading these pieces and you have a strong reaction, then we have done our job. Please keep submitting and most of all: keep reading!

—Martin Van Velsen, *After Happy Hour Review* fiction editor

THE 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

BY GRANT GERALD MILLER

The 45th President of the United States and I went to a butcher shop. V
Chicken? Steaks? Hmmmm. The 45th President ran his palms across the gla
45th President said. He pointed to a puddle of blood that had pooled at the
puddle of blood. But it looks good, the 45th President said. He called the bu
butcher said, that's The Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th P
soup or sauce. But that's not all, the butcher said. He disappeared in the bac
and More Handsome Version of the 45th President of the United States wrap
said, but the thighs are really the best cut. He set The Younger and More H
case and went in the back and came back with The Younger and More Hanc
it the 45th President said. The butcher wrapped up the meat up in butcher p
began eating The Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th Presiden
raw chicken, the 45th President said. Blood dribbled down his chin, and the
hand. I began to worry about something, but I couldn't quite put my finger

AND I WENT TO A BUTCHER SHOP

What are we gonna get? The 45th President asked me. I don't know, I said. I was standing in the back while the butcher sliced meat in the back. What about that one? The one at the bottom of one of the meat coolers. That's not meat, I said. It's just a small piece of fat. The butcher over. What's that one? The 45th President asked the butcher. Ah, the 45th President of the United States' blood. It's very rich. It makes a really good soup. The 45th President and when he came back he was carrying a legless and armless Younger Brother of the 45th President of the United States wrapped in butcher paper. I haven't gotten into the shoulder yet, the butcher said. The 45th President of the United States in the butcher paper. The 45th President of the United States' thigh. We'll take it. The 45th President of the United States' thigh. We'll take it. We paid and went outside and the 45th President of the United States' raw thigh, there in the parking lot. It tastes just like the 45th President of the United States' raw thigh, there in the parking lot. In the parking lot I reached out and touched the 45th President's meaty thigh. We got in the car and drove home.

THE 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

BY GRANT GERALD MILLER

The 45th President of the United States of America and I went to Office I
a few different ones, sat in them, rolled them up and down the aisles, stood up
United States took off his shoes and crossed his legs and uncrossed them and h
the ceiling. If you stare at the ceiling here hard enough, the 45th President of t
you. I looked up and tried to see what the 45th President was seeing, but I cou

AND I WENT TO OFFICE DEPOT

Depot. He was looking for an office chair that wouldn't hurt his back. We tried
and sat back down. Leaned backward and forward. The 45th President of the
hooked his fingers behind the back of his head and leaned back and stared at
the United States of America said, you can find men up there who won't hurt
couldn't make anything out but the blaring lights, burning my eyes.

THE 45TH PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED STATES

BY GRANT GERALD MILLER

The 45th President of the United States and I went to urgent care. He had a bump on his foot and let me see, I said. No, he said. It's embarrassing. Okay, I said. We got in from us and stared at the 45th President. I fear for you, she said. The 45th President was talking to you, I said. Just then a nurse came out of the back and called the 45th President. The 45th President took off his shoe. Does it look bad? He asked me. I looked at him and saw some Version of the 45th President of the United States. How embarrassing, I had never seen this before. The 45th President's big toe was squirming and flailing his arm. The 45th President of the United States, the doctor said. We'll have to amputate immediately. Wait here. The Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th President of the United States said. He crammed his shoe over the Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th President and ran out of the room and into the lobby. The old woman was still there. I fear for you, I said. I ran to the parking lot. For some reason, I glanced back into the lobby one last time, but

AND I WENT TO URGENT CARE

and started hobbling around complaining that his foot hurt. Take your shoe off my car and drove to urgent care. In the waiting room, an old woman sat across the 45th President looked over at me. Is she talking to me or you? He said. I think she's talking to the 45th President's name. We followed her into the back. Once in the room, the 45th President showed his foot. His big toe was a whining and squirming Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th President said. The doctor came in. Hmmm, the doctor said. I've never seen anything like this before. It's a Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th President of the United States. The doctor left the room. I looked at the 45th President and I looked at the old woman, flailing there at the end of the 45th President's foot. Let's get out of here, the old woman said. Younger and More Handsome Version of the 45th President of the United States and we hustled out the front door and into the waiting room. The old woman was gone.





PATRICIA HANNAWAY

First Date

BY INGA LEA SCHMIDT

He took me out for sandwiches. We sat in a booth in the back. He pulled his sandwich apart, piece by piece, every fixing laid flat on the table. He asked me what movies I enjoyed. Lifted first the tender bread. Teaspoon of mayonnaise scooped with his finger. Pearl streak on the table. His tall hair, a monolith. Lettuce specks and grainy tomato removed. Said he himself liked screwball romps. Slick of Swiss he held up for inspection. It shivered in the wind from the overhead fan. Pale blocked his face but for dots of concrete cheek bone peeking through the dairy holes. He told a joke. Peels of lunchmeat. Final piece of bread on the plate, imprinted with the weight of previous fillings. Looked with excavating eyes. Trimmed of crusts. Rolled into a ball. Swallowed. He surveyed the specimens splayed on the table. He told me he hated waste. He told me he'd been lonely a long, long time. He took my hand and mouthed it.

Bodyologies

BY INGA LEA SCHMIDT

Your body doesn't know you're a Baptist.
Zero blood vessels are blessed when you
crisscross your legs.

No cheek believes in the free market.

You've tried to teach your tongue-tied knees
to sing *O say can you* but all they do
is bend dumb. Stomach

having trouble digesting leaflet lunches

and maybe your leaderless breasts are
anarchic but they barely have the energy
to oppose authority these days.

Before, a stone

in your hips you felt sure was stuck there
nice and tight by gospel. *In nomine Patris
et Filii et Corporis Sancti, Amen.*

But then it moved

and your body lived. When you ran
down the hill you rolled your left ankle.
When they dragged you up

by your hair that hair was your hair.

Washing My Late Father's Coffee Mug on a Saturday Afternoon

BY REMI RECCHIA

I drink cold tea and show up late;
my palms are swollen always with last
night's sweat.

The mug is blue and porcelain, a faint
reminder of my own mortality. The wake
is slow and simple.

My mother, a widow, my sister, an orphan—
and I am the captain's cat, and I know
what to do.

What to do with his chair, the stuffing
stiff and thick and unrelenting, medical
bills plump

with an overdraft fee, the oxygen tank
lying prostrate in the corner. His body
is a ready-made casket.

The collection agency comes and leaves disappointed—
we have no money to offer. We've only his 1966
garage band tape,

ribbon spinning and convalescing in on itself,
his black leather gloves to coat, today,
my own shaking.

Dakota, Illinois

BY MARC FRAZIER

Elvis died that day. A bad omen. I did not get the teaching job. In a small greasy spoon after the interview I stirred diminishing options into my coffee. I'd driven the length of Illinois, south to north, to this tiny farm town. When pop icons die, we mourn the loss of our own aspirations, say they die too young, fear our number's almost up. What I'm telling you could be the truth. I need proof I was once young. I need to be inspired. *Love is never enough, I tell you. Not even in the greatest of novels.* A friend of mine wrote that and I still hate her for it. I need more truths like this. I am not in a generous mood much of the time. Once I wrote, *It is hard to distinguish what we lack from greed.* I remember feeling clever but that is never enough. There is another truth: *I have lied in poems just to sound good.* Is that authentic enough for you? Can you trust me now? How close can we get, I wonder, you and I?





PATRICIA HANNAWAY

Relentless Career Advancement in the Tower of Babel

BY COLIN DODDS

Communications was merged into yet another division, and Internal Communications received a new Executive Vice Nimrod, a guy by the name of Jerrozeboth Shamanad Laddorrah. As anyone who'd spent time studying the top lines of their ID tablets, or scrutinizing the ceiling of the hall of the org chart knew, this was a big step down for the executive, who told us just to call him Jerr. It could only be a modified retirement, or a gesture meant to inform his enemies on the Operating Committee that they needn't bother having him killed.

For some reason, he took an interest in me, which probably saved my job. Without him, I never would have made it to Managing Nimrod. He taught me how things really worked, and how the work of Workplace Piety, Communications & Kingdom Marketing played into it. After so many years, it spilled out of him—the big picture and the small. I was junior enough to trust with a few candid words.

“Just kick it off with an ‘In an effort to,’ then go to ‘maximize the potential’ then something about ‘streamlining’ so people get the sense that we’re saving their jobs by moving them to a smaller office on a lower floor, or, gods forbid, the annex,” was how he'd assign an announcement.

It bored him.

I got to know Jerr while he dictated the communications strategy around the announcement that the tower's offices were reorganizing. I remember the day I asked, aghast, if we were moving to the annex. The annex was a series of low office buildings outside the tourist-swarmed West

Gate of the Horn-Spined Bull. Being sent there was an indicator that your team wasn't exactly integral to the tower. To me, it was an exile, if not a variety of death.

He smiled. We all loved the tower, but for different reasons. Jerr, I think, loved the conspiracy of it all—the play of knowing and not knowing, of having and lacking power based on a loose word let slip.

That's not public information, he said. Seeing the panic on my face, he finally said, no, but we're moving down a few levels. I asked if the division was in trouble and he said no, it's just part of how the tower works—it needs more materials and more interns from farther away to grow, so it has to placate more kings. So the tower has to offer them flashy apartments on the good sides of the high floors, which means everyone else has to move. The principalities get our space, and so we move down, lose a few offices, share a few desks, and everyone who matters is happy.

At least we're not going to the annex, I said. That's the spirit, he said.

With that, he walked me through the order for the usual public folderol—the maximizing, the streamlining and the bit about the tower being a creation-wide leader, an ageless brand to whom all is possible, never to be scattered across the face of the earth, and so on.

I asked about the details of the move, like who's going where and when. Leave it out, Jerr said. The plan was to put out the announcement without specifics and to have the Managing Nimrods take the temperature. If there's grumbling, the Operating Committee will probably vote to strip a few perks, maybe charge everyone a little more for office coffee, reduce the oil for the lamps, slow the elevators, maybe something worse. Then Communications put out a few more equally vague announcements about streamlining and efficiency.

I said we were scaring people. But he said no, never—if we scare people, the good ones will move on to greener pastures, because they can. It was more about instilling dread. Dread tended to freeze people where they were. You can't go wrong with general, pervasive dread, he said.

As usual, Jerr was right. By the time anyone knew where their offices would be moving, we were riding infrequent and packed elevators to offices where we drank watery, expensive coffee and grumbled ever more softly in dim offices. More than once, I heard someone from a department relegated to the annex say they were glad to leave the tower. I nodded and was glad I didn't have to tell myself that particular lie.

The relocation took two years and ground us all down. We sophisticated professionals in Internal Communications, more or less versed in all the latest politics, architecture, culture and business, spent our days discussing the best way to communicate tower policy about absconding with a desk lamp, or the unsanctioned switching of an office chair, or the pilfering of parchment. Then we held yet more meetings to brainstorm and craft communications on the coffee pots that had vanished or relocated during the move.

The meetings, usually with some jaded Managing Nimrod of Human Resources, Career Development & Population Verification, revealed a deep misery. It was something I hadn't bothered to notice since my days reading anti-suicide communications to construction interns. These were, after all, office people, who were *inside* the tower. Human resources delivered the hundreds of complaints about prematurely removed coffee pots. It was easy to see that they weren't about the coffee pots. The complaints were in part, the spiteful response of helpless underlings to their callous managers and an uncaring fate. These were mid-tower people, their positions so secure or insecure that they could count the loss of the office coffee pot as

a mighty affront, and perhaps the last straw.

Our initial response, written by those of us junior enough to share some of the fiery rage of our supposed colleagues, was cordial and almost apologetic. It may have lacked Nimrod's Executive Tone. The grumbling, the time-wasting and continued meetings about coffee pots and their trivial equivalents persisted.

Jerr oversaw the next round of communications, which focused on coffee pots brought from home. And it delivered all the policy-and-damnation insinuations the Executive Tone had to offer. That quieted the office grumblers. The short but bold statements hung by every elevator bank, speaking more of termination than coffee. The meetings stopped. Coffee flasks appeared on desks.

"There's no power without desire and no desire without fear," Jerr said at the time. "Increase one and you increase all."

I didn't understand that one at the time, so I made sure to remember it.

The silencing power of those communications on my peers only confirmed my own breakneck brown-nosing and backstabbing career trajectory. I wanted more of that power, even if just as its wordy custodian.

When we finally moved offices, it was like Jerr had promised—lower down and in closer quarters. Being a comer, I had a desk near a window, being junior, that window faced the inner courtyard, with a view of the dizzying concave wall of small windows and the conical heap of broken masonry at the center of that forbidden central precinct.

The department, as a whole, was jammed in about half the space they had before. The ones who lost their offices in the move started to look tired all the time, and seemed to get sick. Yersinia's hair thinned, and her efforts to cover the bald patch made it hard to talk to her without

getting distracted, which was dangerous, as she'd turn vicious in an instant. But I was close enough with Jerr that, aside from sniping in a staff meeting, she didn't go after me the way she had.

The quarter-floor that our division shared with Ambiance Continuity, Number Management & Policy Observance was dark and strangely gorgeous. There are a few like it in the tower, the walls full of arcane and mysterious friezes, frescoes and tracery.

The inner wall of our section was dominated a deep-relief scene—a group of men, gathered in three-quarters profile. One pressed a gimlet into the straining skin of the sky, which dimpled and broke slightly. Another man held a finger up to the gimlet, gathering a drop of fluid from its edge. A third man, with a finger in his mouth, stared off. The carving was exquisite, fascinating and perverse.

Like everything, though, I didn't notice it again after a few weeks.

Huge buttresses and pillars of mismatched brick interrupted the ancient frieze and all of the other carvings that ringed the outer wall of that floor. The walls, with their faces and filigree, someone explained to me, had been carved to celebrate that this was the top floor, the last word.

But some disappointment or later imperative drove the tower higher and required the ugly supports for the floors above, which covered much of the art. Ours was one of several such floors.

Senior Associate - Workplace Piety, Communications & Kingdom Marketing

A year or two went by. Work was good. Those years were like flying on narcotic and erotic tailwinds and updrafts of distraction and self-importance. The fantasy of the world made all-encompassing, tangible and real the way that memos about memos seem to prove themselves by a cheap

principle of reflexivity. When you only spend two or three waking hours a day out of the office, the office becomes a perfect tautology.

People who never experience it have no hope of understanding it. But imagine a life where you never have to think about who you are or if you're right or wrong, good or evil, never had to think about death, or reality, or the fleetingness and futility of it all. And you got paid enough that you never had to worry about money or getting old. When things are good at work, life is a variety of perfect. And it only costs everything.

Eventually, the wind blew from the south through the new moon, and a fresh Festival of Layoffs began. Young men cheered and old men lamented a world they alternately took credit for and, shaking their heads, claimed they did not make. Women wept their coffee-scented tears.

Yersinia, who so loved the Internal Communications Function, was out. Her Internal Communicators Vision & Values Statement, however well distributed by human resources, couldn't save her. Though bald, I doubt she was more than forty. I heard she went back to her kingdom, and got into sovereign correspondence. I didn't know anyone who missed her.

I was junior and useful enough to glide through unscathed. I stayed close to Jerr, and learned a few more things of the variety that might dispirit someone slightly less invested.

I was promoted. Now I could use my little iron ID tablet to ride the executive elevator on late nights and weekends.

But the real promotion was being read into the conspiracy, shown yet more of the trick of the riddle, and advanced from a dupe to a liar. I was proud. I took the raise, said goodbye to my roommates and moved to my own apartment a few floors up. Except for rare weekend jaunts, I rarely left the tower anymore. I liked it that way.

Rumor control was the unofficial name for a lot of what I did then.

Rumor control, tumor patrol, hey lady have you seen a mole? my colleague Brian liked to sing. Brian was born and raised in the tower. With an Executive Commanding Vice Nimrod of Leasing, Odor Suppression & Wind Management for a father, he came in as a Senior Associate, and could take more liberties than most.

He was probably still tipsy from the night before. But his little rhyme made sense. A tumor, as someone explained to me once at a party, is a bit of tissue that's too excited about growing, and so grows at the expense of the rest of the body. Cutting it out helps sometimes, but not always. A rumor works the same way. Except it's very hard to cut out a rumor once it's become fashionable. What a good communications team can do that the body can't is create more and more flesh to encase, confound and drown the rumor. Now a Senior Associate myself, I'd learned a dozen ways to change the subject and call it staying on message.

The tumor that day was big, in that it had big implications. But it was also of no immediate danger to anyone in power, so Brian and I got the call.

It was a Monday after a long weekend in Sodom, where Brian had an apartment, and we were both worse for wear. I was still young then, and would take the occasional trip to Gomorrah and Sodom. I learned some of the vinegar-sour pleasures that the tower, for all its cosmopolitan tolerance, would not allow. The starving men and women in hanging cages, near death, who'd simper as you feasted a few feet away, or the new eunuchs chained to the windows of the brothels, looking on sullenly.

For a provincial like myself, it was too much. But Brian had the purse and the temperament to put those famously debauched cities to the test.

What I recall of that weekend, if I'm not confusing it with others, is

that I begged off in the early morning, leaving Brian in a tavern. I became immediately lost in the warren of alleys that border the expensive precincts that housed the disposable boys and girls homes.

All I remember after a certain point is vomit in my sandals, and the pitying look of a sleepy prostitute as she rubbed my head and patted my pockets. Brian tracked me down after the sun had risen, right when the madam of the establishment where I'd fallen unconscious was about to have me stretched half to death on the "visitor's bed" that the town famously reserved for deadbeats.

Tumor patrooolll! Brian sang that nauseous morning in the office, as he rolled across the office floor on a stool with large wooden wheels.

Jerr yelled to me from his papyrus-screened office. I evicted the idle mad mirth from my face and hurried over, hoping I didn't still smell of Sodom.

He asked if I was on rumor control with "Harrahrad's kid," which was how he referred to Brian. I nodded and he told me to take the lead on it. He gestured for me to sit, and smiled tightly, as if he'd spent considerable time arranging the creases in his face. He asked what I thought of the assignment.

I said what I knew: It should be easy—with the rumor only reported on only three floors. The job was mostly a matter of telling the other side of things—off the record, to give the sense of privilege. The gossips and loudmouths we told would tell the other version of the story. That would confuse the matter and make everyone weary of the subject.

I said I'd make the rumor "die of disinterest," to use Jerr's preferred phrase. He nodded, said it was hard to go wrong with bewilderment. He fixed me for a moment with his eyes—clear, though the flesh around them was like blossoms fried in a pan. That day is still clear to me. I can

see the small arched windows open behind him, the light through their dirty glass marking the walls. It was an old floor, with a brick desk like an altar. What came next was important, and later, I tried to pass it on to the underlings that I liked.

Jerr tapped his desk with a knuckle, gestured around at the office, the tower, and told me that all of this is essentially nothing special. It's just brick, stone, bitumen, glass, rope and iron. That's the truth, and it's what the builders and the dullards will tell you. But the tower is actually made from something else—something more volatile—attention. Jerr paused on that last word. Without attention, there is no tower and there is no life in it. And attention—that's what we're the real architects of.

I wasn't sure what to say. Jerr gestured at the office behind me and asked about something I'd finished, a tablet that was read aloud at two-minute intervals at all the gates over a recent holiday.

He asked me to recite it, and I could. It had to do with which objects and people could pass through the Mouth of the Weeping Thin-Lipped Whisperer, and where other traffic should be rerouted during Nimrod's Camp Holiday.

Jerr said that announcement had altered the meaning of that gate, of the people who passed through it, or went around. It had reinforced the meaning of the year and sanctity of our organizational hierarchy. He reminded me of the hundred subtle tonal elements of the screamed announcement, the thousands of words not used. It avoided mention of the lawgiver, avoided apology, avoided a hundred other wrong or puzzling impressions. It protected the certitude of the quotidian, he said. Thanks, I think, I said. Jerr asked if I understood exactly why we couldn't have three floors of decorators, idol-buyers and low-level astronomers going around saying that the purpose of the tower is to wage war on the gods. I asked

if it was because of what happened in Shinursba. I clenched my jaw at the mention of it.

Good, he said, and asked me what happened in Shinursba. I told him that the Lord God, in multiple form, cast His righteous anger on the small city and smote it with a low orange deluge of flame that burned for half a day and simmered for forty more. Jerr nodded, said he hadn't heard all the details. I told him I was from there. He asked if we had ten righteous men. I said we thought so.

He said it's a tricky business—righteous men—but we're getting off the subject. He tried to remember what he was talking about, and said *attention*. Attention is volatile; we live in a house made of lamp oil. And if that attention were to shift—to the grievances of which we are all rightful heirs, or to the numberless tedious and humiliating scenarios that keep us alive, the million dreams not coming true, the ever-sinking sensation that you are no capstone but the gray murk of old bitumen between lower support stones, or even if that attention were to turn to the sudden ecstasy that springs from no man or earthly authority, but surges overpoweringly and unites all of creation in a flash—then before very long no stone would stand upon a stone, our name would evaporate, and we would be scattered across the formless face of the earth.

From his face, I could tell Jerr had gone somewhere when he'd spoken. Like most senior managers, he'd grown up in the tower. What I'd just heard was, I think, what the tower had told him at some very early age.

We sat in some silence for a moment. My hangover throbbed. I remember stuttering a little before choking out the next sentence. I asked how I should push the attention for this latest assignment.

Jerr took a breath and gave me the background. There are a few basic rumors about the tower that Internal Comms has to patrol and either con-

found or refute again and again, he said, leaning back in his chair.

One is that the tower is siege ladder. That's the gossip that the lower-floor embroiderers, calendrists, stargazers and idol carvers were all aflutter about that day.

The second is that the tower is a gift from the gods by which we may eventually reach them, attain their stature, and live in peaceful communion with them.

Three is that the tower is a pillar meant to buttress the heavens and keep the floodwaters above from again crashing down and drowning every living creature.

The fourth is that the tower is a garish spectacle by which the cynical rulers of the five kingdoms embellish their greatness, and divert their intelligent underlings from courtly plotting.

Five is that the tower is an arbitrary center for the attention of man, an island of sensible social reality piled to block out the chaos that roils our own natures, as well as the oblivion that rages from past and future, above and below, blowing in every wind.

The sixth is that it is a bulwark against death and time, the signature of our undying name on the earth, and a lasting reminder that we exist, and have existed.

There are a few others, Jerr said, but those are the most frequent ones that pop up.

I struggled to get it all down on the scraps of scraped, mismatched parchment that I always carried back then. I asked which story we espoused.

Jerr smiled as he sat down behind his desk. So you want to know what the tower is for? he asked me. I shrugged, afraid I'd misspoken. Do you? Do you want to know in service to what truth do we suppress these

stories? he asked. I said yes, but softly, as if mumbling made me less culpable.

Our work serves no truth, Jerr said, it serves the tower. Whatever ideas happen to be in fashion, we can make them serve the tower, he said. But it can never work the other way around. Never. He asked if I could understand that. I said yes, and apologized, blaming my background in the priesthood. He said it's okay, it's good even, having a basic knowledge of deeper reasons made me better at my job. Eternal verities are great for us, he said, especially when we don't have to massage them away later.

He saw I wanted to say something and told me to spit it out. I asked if it was all just obfuscation and distraction. He smiled.

You think you're wrestling with reality, and that's good, but you're not, Jerr said, kindly, like a father. He looked off and said something I'd later repeat.

"We, by which I mean the tower, are a colossus. Don't forget that. But we're a colossus on a high wire. We are the culmination of hundreds of generations, languages, races, nations, religions all gathered to speak with a single colossal voice, to build something that means all things at once. Something like the tower occurs so rarely that you might as well round it down to never. We are a freestanding scandal upon the devouring murk of the earth. In this preposterous position, the colossus twitches a hand here, bends a knee slightly, jerks up an arm, ventures a foot slightly outward, crouches halfway. The dance signifies nothing. But without it, the colossus would plummet into an abyss past nostalgia or regret. All we do, with the words we use, is to shift a finger minutely, to flex the inside of an ankle, to shift a shoulder to keep from falling. That's Communications, in a nutshell."

That afternoon confirmed me in my career, eliminated all my naive

doubts and hopes. It drew me still farther in.

Associate Manager - Divine Compliance, Workplace Piety & Communications

I learned how to run meetings, and how to subvert those of my rivals. It was part politics, part long hours, part plotting and part honest friendships. But I was promoted until I was one of the seven or eight most powerful internal communications executives in the entire group. Smarter men, stronger men with wittier repartee and better connections fell away like damp scaffolding after the autumn rains. I surpassed those born to wealth, to sophistication, to the tower. Brian left to start a restaurant with a couple guys he went to school with.

The work could be dispiriting if you were prone to idealism or ambivalence, or if you had other options. I had none of that. It could be frustrating if you wanted to get something done. The interdepartmental contradictions, cumbersome review process, senseless redactions and insertions from higher ups, made the job less about conveying a message or sharing information and more about maintaining a subtle but unyielding mesh of organizational taboos and unspoken truces among bickering bureaucracies.

But we weren't the least free of all the scribes in the tower. We had one guy join our team, a young and thoughtful fellow named Jedla, whose quick smile only later revealed itself as the visible reed of a deep-rooted panic. He had transferred in from Potentate Relations, and was amazed at how few reviews and strictures we had in Communications. In his old department, weeks of work were spent on the honorifics and salutations. The rest was a matter of negotiating with the ambassadorial grammarians. For Jedla, Communications presented an impossible amount of freedom.

He was always asking questions, so many questions, and didn't last past the next festival of layoffs.

The job was hard on the decent, the ones who couldn't quite shake the feeling of dishonesty and subtle wrongdoing. Maybe they could do the job, but they rarely advanced very far. With each shrewd maneuver, you increased your culpability. This was best understood by the best of us, who found a way to quit despite their ambitions, with insomnia, depression, chronic misspellings, or worse.

But I had no outside interests, no family, nothing calling from outside the office, not even the light debauchery of my station. My weekends in Gomorrah grew farther apart. There was something wrong with the pleasures of the pleasure towns. Even in the best of the houses, on whose silken pillows and lush perfumes one seemed to float, every visit cost a little more than the last, and revealed some new small flaw in the mirage. Finally the city's exacting exuberance added up to a nervous titter against the miserable silence that swallowed the horizon on all sides.

So I mostly stayed in the tower. I despised anything else. Work was all I desired, and there was more than enough work. Nimrod and his Operating Committee were always rewriting the Sacred Tenets of Responsible Ascension, or the Vision & Values Statements for recently reorganized departments, or changing the Relentless Career Advancement program, to a something it called *Capabilities and Community*.

As The Mission Statement of Nimrod's Mighty Tower to the Heavens will tell you in bullet point number two: "We speak with one language." This was true only because we were very busy erasing the one we used the day before.

One day, Nimrod decided that work on the tower had slowed unacceptably. So he publicly stated that the tower was a pillar holding the

heavenly floodwaters at a safe distance, and the sky was starting to sag. It was my job to spread this story. I knew it well—it was a rumor I'd helped to confound a few years earlier.

From afar, I can't imagine anything more shameless than us on Nimrod's Communications team as we undid the work we had done only a few months earlier. I can't imagine more effort resulting in less meaning. But I lacked even a glimmer of the voice I'm using with you today.

For real Communications executives, undoing our own work was the real proof of our skill. It was our glory. That you might not understand it—that's our glory, too.

Jerr brought me to new meetings with real Senior People, where I learned the boardroom language of raised eyebrows, slight nods, small wags of the chin, about those above us. In this eminently disavowable mix of facial semaphore and insinuation, I was admitted further into how the place really worked.

After, we'd go back to his office, where he'd explain what had just happened. Jerr's talks, full of good gossip and practical advice, would often end with a strenuous pep talk. I didn't need one, but I think he did. Looking back, I realize that Jerr was trying to explain how he'd spent his life to himself.

The gossip, especially about Executive Directing Vice Nimrods and above, was gold. Any connection to those blessed executive tiers was. The gradation of ranks determined the flow of deference or abuse in the tower. Everyone wanted a little more money, slightly cleaner water, somewhat fresher food, marginally prettier lovers, and, above all, to eat a little less crap. At the top, presumably eating no crap, was the figure of Nimrod, the Mighty Hunter. Sometimes Jerr would talk about Nimrod, but not the descendant of Noah or the hunter to whom the animals meekly offered their

necks. To hear Jerr tell it, he was something more mortal, an executive.

To hear Jerr talk about what Nimrod liked, what he didn't, who and which enterprises were in favor and which were out—to me, it was like hearing about the toilet habits of God. His gossip made me imagine my next promotion. And promotion was the only perpendicular move against the ever-horizontal hand of death. Achieving rank seemed the only measure that you were worth being born at all. I labored under these assumptions for most of my life. The tower had a way of blotting out the rest of world like that.

I wasn't alone. Nimrod (and to a lesser extent, the regularly shifting roster of executives on the Operating Committee) was the obsession of most in the tower. From the cold mud of a deluge-ruined world, he'd fired bricks and began building. Now he was the boss of all of us, upon whose tenderest whim our fates relied. Maybe you'd catch sight of him at a festival, or giving an impromptu speech to a division that had achieved a notable success, but even if you didn't, he was everywhere.

Each gate of the tower bore the face of an animal that no longer walked the earth, thanks to Nimrod's mastery as a hunter. The three-eyed lion, the featherless, six-winged eagle, the bull with a spine of horns were all gone from the earth, and adorned the East, South and West Gates.

In the time when Nimrod hunted, some whispered that destroying a species so soon after the flood wasn't exactly the accomplishment that Nimrod and his people made it out to be. Nimrod hunted those whisperers just as effectively, so that the world might speak one language. The thin-lipped whisperer's agonized grimace adorned the tower's shady North Gate.

In those days, I dreamt of Nimrod. We'd walk the upper floors talking about plumbing, about the weights and counterbalances of the

dumbwaiters, about the conical crumbled ruin visible in the center of the tower's courtyard, which no one ever spoke of. The mood was very casual.

In one dream, we were leaving through the Lion's Mouth on an ox-cart, dressed as retired temple prostitutes, with dresses of flowing ribbons over our distended stomachs. We rode on rough sacks and laughed as we drank sour wine, its sediment sticking in our teeth. I asked what was in the sacks we were sitting on. Nimrod's face, like it was in all these dreams shifted in the shifting light, a composite made from the million ill-wrought or well-worn tower coins.

He told me these sacks were full of eyeballs. I asked if they were human. He closed his own eyes and nodded. Yes, he said. Does it hurt? I asked. Yes, a great deal, he said. But if we didn't sit on them, they'd spill in the mud and blow away in the wind.



DAVID RODRIGUEZ

The Story of Teeth

BY KATHERINE GAFFNEY

The left is shorter than the right and the taste of language
glides between them onto the tongue. I'm aroused
when you spell out the name of our street: November, Echo,
Whiskey on the phone. Your cheek pressed to the keys like the virgin
in prayer. Have you ever chewed on glass? Feel the sexy slide
of Zsa Zsa Gabor rise from your chords—scintillating as a glass
of water touching dry lips, sensual as the snap of hydrangea
stems when brittle. I'll trace the letters in your palm,
but you have to shut your eyes and feel. Fear? The reality
of communication is buried like the dead or pulled up like nonnative
plants and yet the height of the grass, we're told, communicates
our class, but doesn't the wetness of a cheek word more
than you can wring from your defiant tongue when weeping: the heart-
beat funneling through a hand on a heaving back, the contact
of skin, the impression of teeth on skin, a character, a letter.

The Myth of a Mother

BY KATHERINE GAFFNEY

Hips nod to the noon sun, deaf
to the dustsouls that lace between
mothers with their prams. Budding
chins arc to that same star while

one mother dreams of placing her baby
in a little boat and pushing it out onto
the water so she can seek out men who
trace her ribs as though her belly

were still tight, to pant beneath
their weight, to pink her mouth
with sliced beets from the fridge,
after her men are done.

Philadelphia

BY ANDREW BROWN

Dirty but familiar place where severe eyes intrude on the particulars.
Trains to the west run straight to Purgatory. Heaven is elusive.
Like sex for a butcher. Like romance for a farmer. Like time for an egg.
Exactly what do you intend to do in the City of Brotherly Love?
Eat pretzels and donuts. Slide on my hands and knees to the edge of Delaware.
Lots of respect, lots of respect, lots of respect for my American forefathers.
But mothers live here too. Sisters live here too. Daughters live here too.
The heart of the body it is in. That is what it is known as or should be.
As if it were good enough. As if there were not antagonism.
As if it were in my best interests. As if my voice were smaller than it is.
As if not a word I say has any meaning to you. Look around.
Big teeth. Big mouth. Smells a little musty. Has an uncharismatic effect on the soul.
Impatient and lovely. Traumatized at birth. Speaks in tongues when it's moved to.
She's my hand. I said. She's my way home.



AADITYAKRISHNA SATHISH



AADITYAKRISHNA SATHISH

Salamanca

BY ANDREW BROWN

Lost among the narrow streets, it is hours before we find the Tormes.
Dark river on a dark night: the bridge that spans it is over 2,000 years old.
The reflections of stars on its velvety surface glimmer like diamonds in a box.
The Plaza Mayor empties at this hour—a vacuum of silence rushes in.
What I am looking for now is what I have always been seeking.
Stirred in my heart the hope.
Hundreds of the, hundreds of the, hundreds of the...
Lazarillo holds the old man's hand.
Blundering river.
Lost but not anxious river. Alone but confident river. Old but not immortal river.
The streets orient themselves toward the center of the town and the river.
She was content with me, and I was content with her.
Pistachio ice cream at night. A wet, creamy kiss.
Silence and confidence, no fear of death in a city that isn't dead.

Reading Sontag

BY SARA WETZEL

In photographs of the catacombs in Palermo, there are skeletons of children draped in ruffles, skulls with bits of ribbon, wreaths of flowers.

One of the last things Susan Sontag's mother asked her was, "What are you doing here?"

I was not singing. I did not sing of the ravishing things I've seen or worse of the things I've somehow forgotten.

She followed it with the request, "Why don't you go back to the hotel?"

Yesterday, I stared into the empty sky long enough to remember standing on the peak of Mt. Kenya skipping small stones across a frozen lake.

I believe my footprints are still there, in the glacier, even twenty years later.

Seven years after her death, I am exhausted by the unwritten letters and unmade telephone calls that passed between me and my mother.

I am still, as Sontag wrote, "serving out the prison sentence" of girlhood.

The guide woke me at 2 a.m. to make the final ascent. I remember the nausea. The guide threw up. I threw up.

A month later I forgot to call my mother on Christmas Day.

I remember the ascent, the altitude sickness, and then a feeling of euphoria. I don't remember what I was doing that Christmas.

I never wrote my mother a letter. I never sent her an email. There is nothing written down of the conversations we never had.

When the sun rose over the Kenyan clouds, the frozen lake reflecting the empty sky looked on fire.

My mother said to me from her hospital bed, “We both know how this ends.”

Sontag wrote, “Some nights, I dream of dragging her back by her long hair, just as she’s about to jump into a river.”

For a while I thought it must somehow rain even that far above the clouds.

I don’t remember Palermo. It’s the little bits of cloth and ribbon from its catacombs that haunt me.



39,999

BY SHANE GRIFFIN

A news story predicted the United States would suffer approximately 40,000 casualties in the first ninety-six hours of the invasion. I tried not to think about that, but it was hard to wipe that number out of your mind when you are 19 years old and on a warship bound for the Persian Gulf in support of Desert Shield. It was New Year's Eve and I focused on some much needed shore-leave in the Philippines. From the ship, we could hear the fireworks going off in Olongapo City as our Company Commander granted us leave for twenty-four hours; that's how long it took to refit the *USS Tripoli* with food, fuel, complete repairs, and a take on a Seal Team who are hitching a ride with us to the Persian Gulf.

It must have been funny to see my platoon on the flight deck of the *Tripoli*, wearing our Gold's Gym tie-died tank tops tucked into stone-washed jeans we bought at the PX in Kaneohe Bay, Hawaii. Nearly all of us had the Marine Corps high and tight haircuts and wore our dog tags on the outside of our shirts; and to think I used to wonder why women in America wouldn't come near us.

After our Platoon Commander let us loose, we rushed down the gangway and made our way into town. My friend Eric, from Idaho, and I tagged along with a couple of experienced Marines who had been to the Philippines before and knew the best place to go for women and booze.

In Subic Bay, the streets were busy with locals, selling anything they could to us: food, clothes, watches, stereos, women. The traffic was thick and cars honked to clear the way. Bicyclists weaved in and out of cars and pedestrians. Eric and I stopped and talked to some of the girls and

looked around at the street vendors selling food. Whatever it was called, it smelled good; meat cooked on metal skewers over small charcoal grills made of cinder block and steel grates.

The older Marines told us to forget the vendors and prostitutes in Subic Bay and they found bus to take us on the eight-mile trip to Olongapo City.

“It’s where the beer is cheap and so are the women,” one of them said, “and for five bucks you could get a Filipino woman. She will bring you back to her apartment and do anything for you.”

“First, they wash your junk, then they massage your entire body before you do the deed.” Another Marine in my platoon told us this as we bounced along in the back of the bus with dense jungle to our right and a view of the ocean on the left.

A sailor, chimed in from across the aisle, “Fuck yeah! Those chicks are so small you feel like you are going to break them in two!”

I was anxious and ready to forget what could happen to all of us in the coming months. I wanted to forget that I was in the Marine Corps and that by evening I had to return to a ship with 5,000 other men heading to war.

We arrived in Olongapo City to dense traffic. The bus driver honked his horn and shouted something in Spanish I couldn’t understand to move people out of the way. One of the Marines we were with stood next to the bus driver and tried to explain to him where the club was at. The bus driver nodded and parked at an intersection then pointed down a street to his right. The Marines we were with got off and Eric and I followed them. The other passengers ran and scattered as soon when they got off the bus, like little kids racing to a playground for recess.

It was wild there. The New Year's Eve celebration had started. People threw firecrackers in the street and set off rockets, whistling and hissing as they climbed and then exploded overhead. I was impressed with the power of the fireworks: huge rockets and bandoliers of firecrackers at least ten times the size of the Black Cats you could buy in the States. The explosions were much louder and the rockets screamed and sprayed sparks all over, starting a small fire by a street vendor selling replica athletic jerseys. Locals screamed as they beat the flames with anything they could find--the shirts off their backs, the shoes off their feet. The fire finally went out when an old woman dumped two bottles of water on it.

The other Marines found the club they had told us about. It was, dark, crowded, and loud. The music was in Spanish and the bass was turned up so high the speakers' sound distorted and cracked. There was a large stage at the back of the club. Women spun on poles, some danced, and other swung on swings hung from the ceiling, kicking their feet back and forth to go higher and higher. Men cheered and whistled through fingers stuck between their teeth. We side-stepped through men talking with women and we ordered our drinks at the bar. The beer was cold, the glass sweat from the high humidity, and I drank them as fast as I ordered them. Eric and I tried to be cool like we had done this a million times over, but it was obvious that we were green, we were the only males in the club sitting alone and not talking to any women. Eric shrugged his shoulders at me. I nodded back. He was shy. I knew I would have to take the lead.

I hailed one of the women like calling for a cab. Soon, several sat beside us, sitting on our laps, all over us, trying to get our attention. When one got up, another took her place. It reminded me of *Close Encounters*

of the Third Kind, when Richard Dreyfuss was surrounded by the short aliens, reaching out with their long skinny arms to touch his skin and his face, while he stared at them smiling, in awe of their alien curiosity. The girls gave me so much attention, I felt flattered. I thought I loved all of those women and I thought they loved me.

“Do you want a date?” One of them asked me in hard-to-understand English.

“A what?” I loved her smile, her straight black hair, bronze skin, and eyes so dark I could fall into them forever and never come out. She was dressed for work: transparent white slip with a yellow bra and thong underneath.

“Do you want a date?” She repeated and shook her breasts at me.

“Oh, uh, yeah, sure.” Is this how it a transaction starts? I thought. My words started to slur. I bartered with her on the price of her own body, and I couldn’t believe how easy it was. Maybe she really did like me to make such a good deal like that, or maybe she just needed the money?

Eric smiled a lot, and didn’t talk much. He just nodded and blushed when they talked to him and raked their fingernails through his hair. I think he was virgin, but I never asked him. One of them grabbed his behind and he spit out his beer and coughed.

We made our arrangements and left the bar to go to their room.

It was dark and the fireworks were more intense. The streets were filled with firework smoke like a fog. My ears rang from the explosions.

My eyesight clouded with sunspots from the flashes. I tried to walk, but felt uneasy, my legs were unsure. My date held me up, because I was too drunk to walk straight. Euphoria swept over me like I was an ordi-

nary man living his life, sometime in the future, somewhere else, not heading to war and maybe to my death. But I was in the United States Marine Corps. I was a lean mean fighting machine, an efficient killing machine, a born killer for the United States' government. I had my gun in my pants and I could not wait for it to go off. I had to suck it up and remember who I was and where I was at and why.

Then someone threw an exploding bandolier into the street in front of us. Eric and his girlfriend were in the middle of the noise and the fire. My date and I turned our backs to the explosions. I felt pieces of gravel and chunks of fireworks pepper my back and we crouched down. She screamed or maybe that was me? When the explosions stopped, I turned around and looked for Eric and couldn't see him right away. The haze was thick and stung my throat when I breathed. I coughed. I squinted. I covered my eyes with my hands like I was looking at the sun, and I saw Eric sitting on a curb holding his hand. His date sat beside him with her arm around him consoling him. Blood ran down his forearm like tassels of red rope and pooled underneath him on the street.

"What happened?" I tried to open his hand to look at the injury.

Eric wouldn't let his hand loose so I could look at it. Don't touch it, Griff." He grimaced. "One of them damn things landed in my hand just went off."

"We got to get you back to the boat."

"No, you stay. I'll be fine." Eric took off his shirt and wrapped his hand.

"No way, man. Well, are you sure?"

He nodded.

I looked at my date through the haze-choked the street. Even if it was for money, she was the first woman who had expressed an interest in me

since we left California over a month earlier. How long could it take anyway? But I can't leave a friend behind, especially Eric. We said goodbye to the girls, and tried to get our money back, but they turned, laughed and went back to the bar we picked them up at. They would be someone else's dates tonight. I realized then that it was all about business to them, they didn't love me, the beer was talking, telling me I was lonely.

I helped Eric to his feet and slung his good arm around my neck. We walked slow, swaying, together through the street and watched other Marines with their dates, their arms wrapped around them, laughing and groping.

We had stumbled back to the *Tripoli*. We were pretty fucked up, but managed to climb the gangway together and then to sick bay. Eric sat on the exam table and I propped myself against it. The Navy doctor told Eric that he had to be flown back to Hawaii for surgery. The firecracker was so powerful that it had ripped the inside of his palm apart and damaged ligaments and muscle. His trigger finger was limp, lifeless.

While the doctor stitched Eric's hand to stop the bleeding, our Battalion Sergeant Major, who served three tours in Vietnam and was wounded twice, visited him in sick bay. "I was shot in the thigh and it burned like hell. But the landmine thing still bothers me. It was an antipersonnel mine designed to kill in a radius, it blew outward, rather than up. It spared me death, but killed two Marines who were next to me. All I got were some shrapnel wounds to my ankle. I spent two months in a hospital in Saigon and then I was shipped back to my platoon. You'll be back with us when you get better. Who knows how long this thing will last. You'll be flown to Clark tomorrow for a flight back to Hawaii." Then he just left. The nerves in my face tingled. My throat was dry, I couldn't swallow.

I wanted to go with Eric to Hawaii, I didn't want to be one of the 40,000 casualties. I wanted to live. I wanted to go back into town and find my date. Instead, I helped Eric back to his bunk, and we tried to sleep as other Marines straggled in from their wild night in town. They whooped and hollered and told their stories. They held their fingers under their noses and told each other to sniff. One of them ran through the berthing area naked and jammed his cock into another Marine's face, only to get punched in the balls. We were kids, a bunch of horny drunk kids, away from home and on our way to our probable deaths with everything to lose.

I lay in my bunk, Eric above me in his. I heard him crying, he didn't want to go to Hawaii. He wanted to go to the Gulf. Since the first day of boot camp, we were trained for war and we had one on the horizon. Iraq was our first worthy adversary since Vietnam. But I secretly wanted to go instead of Eric. Everyday the *Tripoli* was at sea it sailed closer to the Gulf.

I thought more and more about my life and my future.

The whole thing of dying for your country didn't comfort me; I would not have made a good samurai or a kamikaze. I wanted the enemy to die for his country, so I could live on and join the civilian world once again, go to college, pay taxes, have 3.1 kids, a modern wife, with a suburban four-bedroom house with an attached garage.

I covered my ears and thought about what it would be like to die; I wondered if it would hurt or does everything just go black? If I was captured, how bad would the torture be? But I wouldn't be captured, I thought, I would make sure to save one bullet for myself.

The next day we were to depart from the Philippines. We were all in uniform and in formation on the flight deck of the *Tripoli*. Our Platoon Commander waited to address us until after Eric's helicopter lifted off. Its rotors blew wind over us and the chopping of the air beat my ear drums.

I maintained my military discipline and stood at attention, looking straight ahead. I saw Eric out of the corner of my eye, his hand bandaged in the shape of a white club, walking toward the helicopter escorted by two other Marines carrying his sea bags. He boarded onto the helicopter and was headed to Clark Air Force Base for a flight back to K-bay.

I had been with him since boot camp and through the Marine Corps School of Infantry. We had talked about everything and what brought us to the Marines. I imagined him back in Idaho, elk hunting with his dad.

He could never tell anyone that he went to war, but that he almost made it. He would have a scar on his hand to remind him of that night in the Philippines.

The helicopter lifted off, banked and blew the rotor wash over us, flying away from the *Tripoli* over the water. The beating of the blades in the humid air grew faint, and my Platoon Commander began to address us.

“Marines, we are leaving Subic Bay and the next stop will be Iraq. We will start getting serious about training in the next few days. We will be in the Gulf within the week...”

Our commander continued to talk, but I didn't listen, my mind trailed off. Storm clouds had formed to the west of us, the sea was choppy, and some of the big waves had made it through the breakwater, causing the mighty *Tripoli* to rise and fall, lift and list. My stomach churned and I thought I was going to throw up. I wished that I had been a few steps ahead of Eric, taking the brunt of the fireworks so I could go to Hawaii. But I remained on the *Tripoli*. We were designated to be the amphibious assault force, onto the shores of Kuwait to attack the Iraqis. I considered Eric to be the first casualty of the war. Only 39,999 left to go and I hoped that I would not be one of them.



PATRICIA HANNAWAY

NEW ORLEANS DANCER WRECKS THE BORDER BETWEEN FLORIDA AND LOUISIANA

BY EPHRAIM SCOTT SOMMERS

My wife hoists
a hot gallon of mayonnaise
like a fat newborn
up to the Louisiana sun,
and Summer rubs
its greasy butter knives
across our foreheads,
and, friends, we've finally given up
drawing lines across our lives, and you, too, should join us,
for maybe we never were from any place,
for if desire is a thing
we can hold
only with our eyes,
then let us allow ourselves to keep looking a little longer
at everything in front of us,
for this is what it means to belong to the future.
This is the hour
of invincibility and deliciousness,
this propane barbecue party
on the back patio

of Hustler's Strip Club
at high noon
where a woman named Alicia
in yellow, high-top Jordans is lovingly manning the hissing grill.
Alicia, topless
and tiger-stripe tattooed,
Alicia, juggling meat patties
and spatulas with a thin square of American cheese pasted crooked
over one nipple,
Alicia, the woman my wife shares a big
thick and lit Cuban cigar with.
So this is love, friends, and you're here too, friends,
and there is no music blasting too bass-heavy
over this scene
of twenty or so topless bodies,
no screaming, no belligerence,
just the humming buzz of coming to common ground together,
of our elbows bubbling up
from the mimosas alive inside us,
and like experimental angels
newly arrived to our new heaven
let us enjoy this barbecue
where a flat-top man

with perfect abs
in the doughboy pool
is receiving an underwater hand job,
and I love the way
each of us allows it,
how each of us is side-eyeing with a stretching of arms,
a readjustment of the shoulders
or sunshades which is to say I love our nonchalance, today, my friends.
I love the way you are un-anxious with us (thank you),
and I love the way even live nudity
after so much looking
has become routine,
and since my wife and I
and you and the flat-top man with perfect abs
have shared our histories
and our shish kebobs
with our new friends who are still clocked in,
my wife is asking them
for a few dances, now,
asking as easily as when a southern grandmother
stops a stranger at the market
for directions to the candied hams,
and the ATM deals out the green stacks of ones

like confetti into the celebration
of our fingers, my friends, and we are not nervous
though this is our first time
because Alicia shall take great care with us,
she has assured,
and we didn't bring you inside this room for sexiness,
exactly, my friends, or boners,
or the perfume, no,
we've come, today, to shimmy ourselves a wee-bit different
through the coming decade's long parade of sameness,
the room exploding
in a storm of neon, now,
the music's decibels swelling mountainous, now,
but we can still hear our friend Alicia assuring us
while she slides
and sizzles and wiggles
smooth around her pillar of chrome, the stage
her throne, and I want to watch
my wife
and I and you
and Alicia
destroy the old world of brick walls together
(will you come with us?),

to wreck the border and trundle glistening and glittered into the
new territory
of the proud body, appeased,
so Alicia places a chair
on stage
into which she places
my wife
onto whom she places
herself doing a headstand
and through my wife's jeans
while the mostly empty room and you
and the flat-top man with perfect abs
linger on and on,
Alicia blows laughter
into my wife's vagina,
then reels me up on stage,
removes my shirt,
guides me down on all fours,
and trots me around
the slippery wood
like some damn brand-new, birthday pony,
and we are not ashamed.



PATRICIA HANNAWAY

Three Pints of Blood

BY KRISTA DIAMOND

I'm standing inside a pyramid.

The pyramid is made of shiny blue glass. On the outside it's silent, but inside it's buzzing with neon and noise. Jingles crescendo from the penny slots. Lights flash the words *Win here*. A faded poster shows a greasy-faced woman holding a gigantic check. *Jane won \$10,320*. A discarded pamphlet by a video poker machine depicts a sunset and some platitudes about gambling addiction. *When the fun stops*, it says.

Rob is holding me by the waist, his fingers digging into my stomach as he guides me to the front desk. He is chomping on gum and wearing the really black sunglasses that I don't like, the ones he bought at a gas station in Baker the last time we drove from San Bernardino to Las Vegas. Three years ago, Rob won a thousand dollars at the Luxor and it's been his casino of choice ever since, not that he ever gets lucky anymore.

Throngs of people carry fluorescent blue drinks. High above them, there's a place at the top of the pyramid where it looks dark and quiet. The pills have made me woozy, and I will myself to float up into that space, to dissolve like fancy bath soap into the beam of light that shoots out of the hotel. Nausea floods my body and I suck in air, pulling it into my lungs and pushing the rising bile down.

"Next in line," the clerk says, and Rob nudges me forward. I stumble and catch myself on the lip of the front desk. The pale clerk doesn't look up from her computer.

"Hello," I say, blinking at her.

Rob shushes me.

I hear him remind the girl at the desk that the room is comped, but I can barely make out his words because my head is spinning and the burning vomit is rising in my throat again.

“Next,” the clerk says.

Rob slides his fingers through the belt loops of my jeans and pulls me towards the elevator.

“How far up are we going?” I ask.

He snaps his gum and doesn't look at me.

“All the way,” he says.

When we get to the top floor, he guides me to the hotel room and slides the key in the door. The door beeps yes and he pushes me inside. I tumble onto the bed. The light in the room is inky blue and I can see the city through the floor-to-ceiling windows. It shimmers gold and pink in the night.

Rob's silhouette looks fuzzy, and I hate that he is still wearing the dark glasses. I turn my head to the window, and the city winks at me.

The bed is as cool and pillowy as a cloud. I try to kick my sneakers off, but I give up.

Rob sets my pink duffle bag on the floor.

“You're going to stay here until it's over,” he says on his way out.

“Mmm-hmm,” I say.

The door slams shut, and he's gone.

* * *

I wake up alone on the white bed. The sunlight trembles. The room

tilts and then rights itself as I climb to my feet.

The neon has dimmed and the city is gray.

“There’s nothing uglier than Las Vegas during the day,” Rob once said, but here we are again.

Not we, I remind myself. Just me.

Last week another letter came in the mail with a little blue pyramid embossed on the front:

We’d like to thank you for your continued loyalty by personally offering you a complimentary stay at the Luxor for the evening of your choice, where you’ll experience true Egyptian elegance in one of our suites.

“We’re going,” Rob said, waving his paycheck from the restaurant. “You’ll be fine.”

I touch my hands to the window. It’s slanted along the line of the pyramid. The glass is thick like the porthole of a ship, and I am seasick. I close my eyes and listen for the honking horns of the traffic, the jangling of slots, but I hear nothing. Every motion of the city below me, from the crowds on the boulevard to the billboards depicting blondes in underwear, is like a TV on mute.

Rob has left the room keys on the nightstand, my duffle bag on the floor. I wonder if he is lighting a cigarette somewhere and mouthing the words, “All in.” I wonder if he is peeling out of the parking garage and chasing his luck to some other casino in some other tumbleweed-strewn Nevada town.

There’s nothing to do but unpack. I unzip the bag and pull out what he’s packed me: Two pairs of underwear, two t-shirts and a dirty pair of

jeans. I unfold and refold each item, sliding each one into the drawer of the dresser. I pretend I am unpacking at my new home where I will live inside walls of cool blue glass, so different than the walls of our apartment which are stained yellow from cigarette smoke.

On the TV there's a channel that relays information about the hotel in a low, silky voice. I watch, imagining that the people on the screen are all below me on the casino floor, smiling and waiting for me to join.

The Luxor was named after a city along the Nile River, it says. The hotel's design is an homage to the pyramids of Egypt, which serve as lavish graves for mighty pharaohs.

There's a dark bloodstain the size of my palm on the sheets. It's then that I realize my jeans are wet between my thighs. I can feel blood seeping through the fabric.

My stomach cramps up, tight, like my insides are a wet towel that someone is ringing out.

The entrance to the Luxor is guarded by a great golden Sphinx, the TV continues. Though some historians have claimed that the Sphinx's east-facing direction translates to bad luck, we'll let you be the judge of that at our world-class casino!

The flesh beneath my skin is sizzling like cooked steak. I pull my clothes off. My head is buzzy and I fall to my knees, then onto my back, disintegrating into the hotel carpet.

I always wanted to see the inside of a pyramid, I imagine myself telling someone, though I'm not sure who. That's why I live here now.

* * *

My eyes flutter open and for a moment I forget that I am naked. I reach between my bare legs. The blood is bright red, almost pink on my fingertips. The carpet is wet beneath me. My skin has cooled and the thudding inside my skull has quieted, but the nausea swirls in my stomach, and I know that if I stand up too fast I'll vomit.

I am fine, I repeat in my head. Fine, fine, fine.

I roll over and find myself staring underneath the bed. In the darkness, something glitters. The cramps return, like fists pummeling my insides, but I focus on the sparkle. I crawl towards it. It's some sort of silver, sequined material. I ball it up in my fist and drag it towards me. A dress. I put my hands on the bed and pull myself up, seeing that the bloodstain on the floor is worse than I thought it would be. I study the dress in the dull light of the hotel room, remembering the sequins I wore the first time Rob took me to Las Vegas. He bought me a champagne gold cocktail dress from the gift shop and I felt like a princess, parading through the crowds of the casino with his hand on the small of my back, his lips grazing my cheek as I passed him dollar after dollar and he said, "Thank you, baby. I'm going to make us millionaires." When the money ran out, we drove back to San Bernardino.

I pull the dress over my head. It fits, but it doesn't cover the crusted blood between my thighs. Specks of it flake off beneath my fingernails.

Some scholars believe that the pyramids were built with vertical tunnels so that the souls of the dead could rise into the sky, the TV murmurs. We invite you to imagine this as you take a ride in the Luxor's unique elevators, which transport guests from the bottom to the top of the pyramid at an amazing 39 degree angle!

I need to clean up the blood. If I can make the bloodstains go away, I can ignore the knots twisting tighter in my stomach, I can dispel the dread crawling in my veins.

I soak a towel in the sink and scrub the spot of blood on the floor until the cloth is red. I go back to the bathroom and grab another and repeat the process, pushing the towel into the carpet, but still the stain stays. I drain a mini bottle of hotel shampoo onto the spot and scrub again, but nothing. The suds are bubblegum pink.

I rub hard between my legs with toilet paper, examining the tissue for an indication of when this will stop. I soak a towel in warm water and wipe myself clean, but I am still bleeding. The blood is different now. It's thicker, darker. The cramps push down. I pat between my legs with the towel and something slides out of me. It looks like a shiny black lemon. I slide on a pair of underwear, the navy blue ones that don't show blood. Rob didn't pack me any tampons or pads so I stuff them with toilet paper from the bathroom. The blood is already seeping through.

I comb my hair with my fingers. I scrub my face with a hot washcloth until it is red and clean.

Celebrate with friends, the TV intones.

I clasp my room key in my hand, stepping over the blood drying on the carpet.

This is normal, I tell myself. *I am okay*.

There's only one thing missing at the Luxor, the TV says. *And that's you!*

The people on the TV screen wave. I look at the lights of the city flickering like a million lightning bugs in the dark. Maybe someone out

there can help me. Maybe even someone inside this shiny blue hotel.

This is normal, I tell myself again, but then there is a pain like rumbling thunder inside of my stomach. My thighs tighten and then my calves, all of the muscles in my legs spasming like I've been struck by lightning. My vision goes blurry and I crumple like a marionette puppet.

* * *

I can't stand. I am cold now, shivering. The icy feeling radiates from somewhere within my bones.

This is how it's supposed to go, I tell myself, but I know that isn't true. I expected cramping and bleeding, but not like this.

The TV shows a golden-skinned woman in a steaming tub.

Relax, the sonorous voice says. *Float away to heaven at our spa.*

I imagine the floor beneath me has turned to water and I am swimming to the door of the hotel room. My legs are limp but I don't need them anymore because I am weightless.

That's right, the TV says. *Float away.*

I pull myself towards the door one inch at a time, the carpet rubbing against my forearms. It isn't water after all, but the exit is getting closer. If I can make it there, if I can reach up and turn the handle, I can make it to the hallway, to the elevator with the big glowing button that says CASINO. The elevator will take me to a place teeming with people amongst the wide green poker tables and spinning roulette wheels. Rob will pause midway through feeding a dollar bill into the waiting mouth of a slot machine and see me. He'll bring me to the hospital.

I see the carpet and the door in lucid flashes punctuated by black

voids, but I crawl.

The Luxor opened in 1993, the TV says, but doesn't it feel timeless? Don't you feel like you can live forever once you step inside?

Panic rises in my chest. I keep going. I reach the door, brushing it with my hands, pawing at the air above me in hopes of grasping the handle. It's so close, but I can't touch it. My mind is going numb and I slip out of my body and hover above myself, looking down at the shadows of the room. The frost beneath my skin spreads. I can't feel my toes. I can't feel my fingertips.

"I need help," I say to the TV.

Planning on visiting our replica of King Tut's tomb? it asks.

"Something isn't right," I say, grasping a moment where I am present in the room. I float up and away, calling down to the TV. "Something is wrong."

The blood has soaked through the toilet paper. It feels thicker now, like mud. On the other side of the door I can hear the bing of the elevator doors opening and closing. I can hear the click-clack of high heeled feet passing by my room. I can smell the perfume of the women, Chanel No. 5 like my mom used to wear. I can hear the shouting of men talking over each other, but they can't hear me.

Call our concierge on your room phone for reservations, the TV says.

The room phone. Of course. I flip over onto my side to crawl back towards the big soft bed, the wooden desk, the phone perched by the lamp. But the muscles in my arms have stopped twitching and my hands have stopped trembling, and it's then that I realize I can't feel them at all anymore.

The city buzzes on the other side of the window.

A full house is three of a kind and a pair, the TV says.

The voice is soft and kind.

A straight flush is five cards in sequential order that are all the same suit.

I imagine the gentle voices from my childhood. The voices of all of the teachers, nurses, babysitters. The voice of my mother. I picture Rob pressing plastic chips into a felt table somewhere, praying for a miracle.

A royal flush is an ace, king, queen, jack and ten, all in the same suit.

The blood on my hands is sticky. The space between my legs feels hollow and I'm not sure, but I think think the flow has stopped. I am almost empty now. I feel stabs of panic when I look at the city and realize that no one can see me, no one can save me, but then I listen to the TV's voice and it soothes me.

If you have a royal flush, you have the best hand at the table. You're very lucky.

"Very lucky," I murmur.

Yes, the TV says. *You're very lucky.*

"I don't feel so lucky right now," I whisper. "Can you call 911?"

I'm so sorry, says the TV, I can't do that. But if you listen to my voice, I promise you'll feel better.

"I believe you," I say. My insides untwist and my muscles relax.

Good. Now would you like to hear the rules of blackjack or should I show you how to play video poker?

"Can you talk about something besides gambling?"

Of course, the TV says, voice warm as melted butter.

I feel my body quiet.

The Luxor originally included its own Nile River, which ferried guests to the front desk. This was later deemed impractical and was discontinued.

My vision is going dark, but I can see the the lights twinkling *hello*. A quiet descends on my body.

I rest my eyes and picture the specks of blood on my underwear that marked my first period. The unfamiliar churning in my stomach. I remember laying my head down on my mother's lap as she stroked my hair and told me that this—yes, this—made me a woman.

The light on top of the Luxor is the strongest beam of light on earth. It emits from a room fifty feet below the top of the pyramid that features thirty-nine 7,000-watt lights.

I think of my first fuck. The way he laid me down on the twin mattress in his bedroom and slid inside me, his body opening mine up. When he was through, we both looked down at the streaks of blood on the sheets, I in wonder and he in horror. I walked home alone in the icy air beneath the white winter sun, his semen and the faint traces of my blood sliding down the inside of my thighs.

When the lights are operating, the room heats up to 300 degrees.

I remember the first time I got pregnant, the way I whispered stories to her as she grew inside me. *You know you can't keep it*, my boyfriend said. When she came out of my body, her little mouth curled into a howl like the mouth of a kitten. The doctor placed her in the hands of the waiting couple. He sewed me up, but I kept bleeding. When the couple said thank you, I didn't cry, but my body wept blood for days.

In 2008, in an effort to save money and energy, the Luxor's light was dimmed.

I remember the second time I found out I was pregnant, just one month ago, the moment the two lines appeared on the stick and Rob told me I had to bleed it out. I remember the four pills he gave me on the way to Las Vegas. *Misoprostol*. I'd asked where he'd gotten them from and he'd said, *Don't worry about it*. He told me to hold the pills inside my cheek and wait for them to dissolve. They burned, turning my saliva bitter. The warning label said, in all capital letters: SERIOUS AND SOMETIMES FATAL INFECTIONS OR BLEEDING.

I am on my back, listening to the hum of the hotel and all of the people moving inside the pyramid.

Is that better? The TV asks.

"Yes," I say, starting to cry. "Keep talking."

POETRY & PROSE

Andrew Brown is a full-time freelance writer based in Richmond, Va. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Aperion Review*, *Bacopa Literary Review*, *Jet Fuel Review*, *New Orleans Review*, *Blue Lake Review* and others. He earned an MFA at George Mason University and lives online at www.poetrymode.com.

Krista Diamond's fiction has appeared in *Spry Literary Journal*, *Dark Ink Magazine* and *Adelaide Literary Magazine*, for which she was a finalist for the 2017 Short Story Award. She also writes about dining, drinking and offbeat Mojave Desert destinations for publications including *Eater Vegas* and *Desert Companion*. She lives in Las Vegas, Nevada.

Colin Dodds grew up in Massachusetts and completed his education in New York City. He is the author of several novels, including *WATERSHED* and *The Last Bad Job*, which the late Norman Mailer touted as showing “something that very few writers have; a species of inner talent that owes very little to other people.” His poetry has appeared in roughly three hundred publications, and has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize and the Best of the Net Anthology. The poet and songwriter David Berman (Silver Jews, Actual Air) said of Dodds’ poetry: “These are very good poems. For moments I could even feel the old feelings when I read them.” His book-length poem *That Happy Captive* was named a finalist in both the Trio House Press Louise Bogan Award and the 42 Miles Press Poetry Award. And his screenplay, *Refreshment*, was named a semi-finalist in the 2010 American Zoetrope Contest. Colin lives in Brooklyn, New York, with his wife and daughter. You can find more of his work at thecolindodds.com.

Marc Frazier has widely published poetry in journals including *The Spoon River Poetry Review*, *ACM*, *Good Men Project*, *f(r)iction*, *The Gay and Lesbian Review*, *Slant*, *Permafrost*, *Plainsongs*, and *Poet Lore*. He has had memoirs from his book *WITHOUT: A MEMOIR* published in *Gravel*, *The Good Men Project*, *decomp*, *Autre*, *Cobalt Magazine*, *Evening Street Review*, and *Punctuate*. He is the recipient of an Illinois Arts Council Award for poetry, has been featured on Verse Daily, and has been nominated for a Pushcart Prize and a “best of the net.” His book *The Way Here* and his two chapbooks are available on Amazon as well as his second full-length collection titled *Each Thing Touches* (Glass Lyre Press). His website is www.marcfrazier.org

Katherine Gaffney is currently in her first year of her MFA in poetry at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. She hails from Hollywood, Florida, but has no plans of returning. Her work has previously appeared in the *Lullwater Review*, *Fairfield Review*, *Figroot Press* and *HCE Review*.

Shane Griffin is a graduate student at Iowa State University’s Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing and the Environment. He is a firefighter/paramedic in Des Moines, Iowa and an Iraq War veteran. His poetry and prose has appeared in the *Baltimore Review*, *Heroes’ Voices*, *Hippocampus Magazine*, *Sky Island Journal* and the *Wapsipinicon Almanac*.

Grant Gerald Miller was born in Memphis, Tennessee. He is currently an MFA candidate at the University of Alabama and an assistant editor at *Black Warrior Review*. His work has appeared or is set to appear in various journals including *Hobart*, *Entropy*, *Qu Magazine*, *Bartleby Snopes*, *Necessary Fiction*, and *Nimrod*.

Remi Recchia holds an MFA in Poetry from Bowling Green State University, where he served as Assistant Poetry Editor for the *Mid-American Review* and taught Creative Writing. He will begin his Ph.D. candidacy in Creative Writing-Poetry at Oklahoma State University in Fall 2018. His work has appeared in or will soon appear in *Barzakh Magazine*, *Pittsburgh Poetry Review*, *Front Porch*, *Gravel*, *Glass: A Journal of Poetry*, and *Haverthorn Press*, among others.

Ephraim Sommers has appeared or is forthcoming in *Beloit Poetry Journal*, *Copper Nickel*, *Cream City Review*, *Harpur Palate*, *The Journal*, *Prairie Schooner*, *TriQuarterly*, *Verse Daily*, *Word Riot*, and elsewhere. His book of poems, *The Night We Set the Dead Kid on Fire*, recently won the 2016 Patricia Bibby First Book Prize from Tebot Bach Press and was published February of this year. Currently, he is an Assistant Professor of English at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, South Carolina.

Sarah Wetzel is the author of *River Electric with Light*, which won the AROHO Poetry Publication Prize and was published by Red Hen Press in 2015, and *Bathsheba Transatlantic*, which won the Philip Levine Prize for Poetry and was published by Anhinga Press in 2010. When not shuttling between my three geographic loves—Rome, Tel Aviv, and New York City—she teaches creative writing at The American University of Rome. She holds an engineering degree from Georgia Tech, an MBA from Berkeley, and an MFA in Creative Writing from Bennington College. You can see some more at www.sarahwetzels.com.

Inga Lea Schmidt has an MFA from Hollins University, where she worked as Assistant Editor of *The Hollins Critic*. She was a 2013 AWP Intro Journals Project Winner in Poetry and the 2015 Winner of the Enoch Pratt Poetry Prize. Her poems have been published or are forthcoming in *Black Warrior Review*, *Puerto del Sol*, *Hobart*, *Gigantic Sequins*, and elsewhere. She currently lives and writes in Pittsburgh.

VISUAL ART

Janelle Victoria Cordero's expressionist portraits are distinguished by dominating contour lines and sparse watercolor highlighting. Her subjects are often disjointed and unfinished, missing a neck or a limb or a torso, which emphasizes the disconnected nature of the human condition. Her work has been featured in galleries from Washington to West Virginia, as well as published in numerous journals and anthologies. Janelle's artistic priority is to collaborate with other creatives to push for social and political change. Stay connected with Janelle's work at www.janellecordero.com.

Patricia Hannaway graduated from Smith College in 1984 with a BA in Art History and a Minor in Economics. Working on Wall Street as a Corporate Analyst, she decided to further her education in Fine Art and Computer Graphics, earning two Master's degrees from the NY Academy in Traditional Painting and the School of Visual Arts in Computer Graphics. Recruited by Walt Disney Feature Animation, she trained as a Computer Character Animator and also worked for Dreamworks, Industrial Light & Magic and Weta Digital, New Zealand. Some of her film credits include: "Mulan", "Pocahontas", "Lilo and Stitch", "Star Wars", "Antz", "Shrek" and "Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers", where she was Senior Animator for the character "Gollum". Currently, Patricia is doing development work on a new film project at Aardman Animations in the UK, and was appointed Adjunct Professor of Digital Arts in Computer Science at Dartmouth College in Hanover, NH. She splits her time between teaching and fine art, in order to prepare work for upcoming exhibitions. A featured artist for *American Artist Magazine*, she was interviewed for Winter 2008, and will be in the upcoming Spring 2014 edition discussing composition for painting.

Michelle Nguyen is a colorpencil artist and started drawing about two years ago while going through a difficult period and turned to art to express those feelings. She found solace and comfort in creating portraits, and sees them as a self reflection of who she is.

David Rodríguez is 39 years old and from Spain. From an early age, he had always been attracted to the art world, but his love for photography didn't start until 2013, the year he bought his first reflex camera and began to explore his attraction to art.

Aadityakrishna Sathish is a student at College of the Atlantic, Bar Harbor, ME pursuing a Bachelor of Human Ecology. Human Ecology is an inter-disciplinary, self-designed major. His studies are located in the intersections of anthropology, philosophy, theatre, and literature. He explores some of these questions through film photography. He is from Hong Kong and India. His work has appeared on *3 Elements Review* and *aglimpseof*, and is forthcoming in *The Albion Review* and *GASHER*.

