



# LOTUSEATER

ISSUE 12

# LOTUSEATER

lotus-eatermagazine.com  
lotus-eatermagazine@hotmail.com

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Editors: Diana Mastrodomenico, Marco Costantini

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# Prose



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# BENJAMIN DAVIS

## *Oonglefubblejimp*

I don't know what happened. Y walked into the apartment one day after work and said, 'Thimbleduckery flig bup.'

'What?' I asked.

She frowned at me and said, 'Tref-flewiggle.'

It might have been a question, so I shrugged. We went to bed.

The next day it continued. Over breakfast she said, 'Lintrufflegup.'

'I don't know what you're saying,' I told her.

'LINTRUFFLEGUP!' she cried. 'LINTRUFFLEGUP! LINTRUFFLEGUP!'

She stormed out.

I chased after her. 'What are you talking about?'

She pointed to herself, to her mouth, to me. She said, 'Yiddlewinterfum.'

I said, 'Please, I don't understand!'

She stormed off. We didn't speak for six days.

She woke me up on the seventh day and brought me to an office building. There was a woman there, a therapist. She was no bigger than a toad but loud, so loud. When Y would speak to her, she'd turn to me and say:

'Humfliggerbumbletimbs?'

'Nothing! That means nothing to me,' I said.

Her throat bulged and Y cried and ripped at her fingernails like she does

when she is stressed.

'Humfliggerbumbletimbs means nothing to me!'

The therapist made a note on her paper.

I buried my face in my hands.

'Himplefudgernickelbin,' she said.

So, I called her a bitch.

Back in the apartment, Y took out her phone and held it between us. She started recording a voice memo and then pointed at me.

'What? What do you want?'

She stopped the recording and hit play.

I heard my own voice and it said, 'Ir-tulliwimbletummy.' I frowned.

Y began to cry. Tears poured down her face and she sobbed and kept talking. 'Flib-berwumbletimber, jim-jum, stopplgint—'

'Stop!' I cried. 'Stop!' And I realized I was crying too.

Y was looking around the room as though she'd lost something important. She ran to the desk and found a pen and paper, but when she put the pen to the page, she just drew squiggly lines all up and down. It looked like a children's drawing of a headless snake. She held it up and pointed at it. 'Linkertinderfug-gle!' she sobbed.

I grabbed the paper and jabbed at the headless snake and told her, 'This doesn't mean anything! Why are you doing this?'

She tore the paper from my hand and threw it down. She didn't pack her things right then and there, but she took Frank. She went and bent down and buried her face in his back and she cried and cried and cried. Then, with a newfound strength, she lifted him. Then she told me, 'Gumble gerffdiggle.' And she took him. And she left.

She texted me many times after and when I opened my phone, I saw things like 'Flitteryumble,'

'Bloogufflestump??'

And, 'Plewphesterwand!'

I'd message back over and over, but god only knows what she saw.

It felt like someone had taken a year of my life out into a field and shot it in the back of the head. I didn't drink anymore, so I became addicted to popcorn. And then I became addicted to oranges. And then I discovered that if you put orange seeds in the microwave, they pop into little popcorn-sized oranges. And so, I became addicted to those.

I tried to call Carl, but he didn't pick up.

I called my mother. She answered, 'Vistlgerbinskididdle?'

I hung up.

I threw my phone out of the window. I decided to move on, to leave my apartment. I packed my suitcase and locked the door.

Out on the street, a young girl with long black hair stopped and watched me. I waved. She gave me a thumbs up. I walked off into the fray.

## *Newthink*

Breakdown as public spectacle. Bypassing any system of queue or vendor, choosing their own seats, they decorated the side of the street as I capitulated in the centre of it.

I fell apart in front of the audience, to great applause. I'm only what they're keeping bottled up. I'm a personal sum of the collective parts: unease, discomfort, agitation, angst. Ordinarily they bubble beneath the surface, only threatening release. I exploded the surface, scattering these parts across the road. I rambled about the end of the world, shouting at whoever would listen.

Later, in a more private setting. One of those moments I was alone but for my own thoughts.

In my head it was simple: I intended to kill him in order to become him. Somewhat. In my head there were parallels with Chapman and Lennon. I'd take his life and in some way add to my own, consuming a part of my Lennon surrogate: a conversely pathetic, insignificant creative mind, equally driven by the delusion that his 'work' would save the human race. This was the job I had been given.

I too would take careful, meticulous steps to do it. Plan it over months,

structure it around a series of encounters. There are no such obstacles as security or protection here, but I had to ensure that I enjoy the process. I need to. Otherwise what's the point.

\*

She wakes up each morning wondering exactly how the world will end. She loses hours of her day listing the different alternatives in her head: exactly when, by whose hand, a result of which mistake, which ignorance, which oversight. She's a five-year-old going on fifty.

This anxiety cripples the Girl, day in and day out, as do those belonging to the 'family' she's so often reminded she's a part of. The Father is desperate to cling onto the last modicum of stability in a world gone to pieces.

*His* anxiety requires a bit of context. It's all since NewThink, the government's illegalisation of public creative expression and abolishment of the industries relying on it: writing, music, film, theatre, television... the list goes on. The Father, a prolific and once successful novelist, had no choice but to carry on writing as part of the illegal underground network for the eight years separating then from now.

Underground, the issues contemporaneous to the world pre-NewThink were still what everyone wanted to write and read about.

The Father couldn't relate to any of them. He is white, straight, male – justifiably, people don't want to hear from people like him at the moment. There are far more important things to talk about, and far more urgency that this conversation be heard now that the volume's been turned down and it's been relegated to below ground. Moralistcally, the Father finds himself in the difficult position of recognising the need for a newer, more diverse palate of voices, but being unable to offer one himself. The powerlessness sickens him. He's also not a very good writer, but he needs to be able to put food on the table.

His son, the Boy, is crippled by an anxiety that could almost be context free and is applicable to many at his point in life: the anxiety of whether or not he suffers from anxiety. Almost two decades on the planet, he still barely knows the person he should best, even if he recognises the face in the mirror. His morning wakeup coincides with the same incongruity each day: 'Is it all in my head?' He would die for the opportunity to spend twenty-four hours in his own company, able to see himself from the outside and realise that there's nothing noticeably wrong with him, be comforted by the knowledge that he looks *fine*.

The Mother's is the most straightforward of the four. The worry that something terrible will happen to her two children will attach itself to her,

burrow deep into her head and refuse to leave it. The chance of this happening is statistically more likely than eight years ago, so she sees the danger in everything: quietness must mean something loud and dangerous is around the corner, good fortune must mean bad is imminent, niceness must be nasty in disguise, etc.

I became the involuntary fifth member of this family on a cold November morning almost two weeks ago.

I blew in with the wind and slotted into arrangement as if I'd always belonged there. My entrance was timely: I staggered in as the Father and the Boy were locked in conversation that had reached boiling point.

'... Stop trying to convince me that he *isn't* me! My friends agree; it's clear as fucking day. Why even bother calling him Hal... it's clearly me.'

'You know I'd never do that. I always separate my life from my work. Have to.'

'You've done it *again*. You've used your book to say what you haven't got the balls to say to me in person.'

'That's ridiculous.'

'I agree. A self-loathing teen too smart for his own good, second guessing his own therapy? The heroic parents there to save him? Do you think I'm stupid?'

'You've got it completely wrong. I know there are similarities, but he's not you.'

'I do know there's something wrong with me, you know. This is M.E. we're talking about. Writing about what's wrong isn't gonna make it right.'

I was watching people watch them-

selves. Tired of listening at the doorway, I planned to glide in, contribute something along the lines of ‘But then he’d have nothing to write about.’ A segue into joining this rich debate, this relationship-destroyer that I find perversely fascinating.

I only managed an inelegant stumble, followed by an attempt to clear my throat, which devolved into a coughing fit.

‘Who are you? What are you doing here?’

I finished clearing my throat before I responded. The Boy looked pleased that there’s finally a new voice, a deflection from the Father’s.

‘I was just passing by. I’m not from round here. I’ve nowhere to stay and was wondering if I could stay the night. I have money.’

I was Joseph, a month early and without the pregnant Mary.

‘We don’t do that kind of thing. You could try further up the street, but it’s unlikely.’

Since the world changed irrevocably those eight years ago, the archaic culture of welcoming in the weary traveller had not exactly seen a comeback. People were even more cautious these days. So, I tried a different approach:

‘I couldn’t help but overhear you. I love the Hal saga. *Glad* was my late-twenties bible. *Adult Undergarment* is seminal. I’ve read them all and I’m a big fan. Is there a new book on the way?’

‘How did you know where I lived? People aren’t supposed to know that.’

The worry was palpable. The safety of his family is an anxiety he shares with

the Mother. Or, it’s his own safety that worries him.

‘I know people. Your kind of people. I’m a writer myself.’

The underground writing community survived entirely on internal trust. It was self-sustaining because it cautiously welcomed in new writers, no matter how dangerous this got as civilisation continued to crumble. The generations of writers pre-NewThink ‘made it’ the same way I intended to; or so goes the story I was fabricating. They were unforgettably associated with or indebted to their contemporaries: Joyce and Beckett, Tolkien and Lewis, Eliot and Pound, Fitzgerald and Hemingway. Once canonised and now outlawed.

‘Son, get our guest a drink.’

To me: ‘Please, take a seat. You must be tired, wandering the street at this time of night.’

‘You’re very kind.’

The Boy returned with a scotch and placed it on the table in front of me.

‘Thank you.’

‘Where did you say you were from?’

I hadn’t, so did. I then proceeded to feed the narcissistic writerly ego for the next two weeks. It didn’t take long to win him over and gain his trust. I had successfully established the lie necessary to complete the task I’d been sent here to do.

\*

I dream of fireworks tearing apart the sky and a plane crash of which I am pilot, killing hundreds. The idea, desirable

compared with the reality I wake up to, ruins my day before it's allowed to begin. Here I'm one of the passengers.

The long winter hours pass with little progress as to why I'm here. I receive precisely zero further details to fill my notebook with: no more names of writers, publishers or editors; no new secret hideouts or meeting points; no additional threads to the narrative I have woven in the two weeks so far. A fantastical tale of brotherhood, painting the picture of this network of criminal activity, of active creative thought, of passionate originality, of dream making. All the things I have been trained to despise. A school of blasphemous thought. A melting pot of deception. Of artifice. The very things that destroyed the old world and must take responsibility for the division and polarity that characterise the new one.

#### FREE THINKING EQUALS DANGEROUS THINKING.

The mantra hardwired into my head for over a decade. Five words that go through my head on at least an hourly basis.

NewThink needed to happen long before it did. I'd not be here today, cleaning up the mess from the fallout. I'd not be out on this suicide mission, sustaining the lie that I'm a writer just like the Father. The one-man show is tiresome. And the fate I feared inexorable has already begun to systematically unfold, as predictable as if I were the character in a story: I'm becoming *attached*.

The most discernible point of attachment is between me and the Boy. This December afternoon I devote to observing him, allowing my notebook to spiral into distraction and irrelevance.

His resemblance to the Father is striking; or perhaps this is my brain giving the distraction an excuse. But it is.

The transition from childhood to adulthood is an entirely transformative one, passage between the only two disparate selves that are ever part of the life cycle. When you enter the latter, the former becomes a distant memory, a past life you might not forget yet can never reconcile. The situation in front of me is curious: it is as if the Boy's adult self has transgressed the rules of time and cheated its way into co-existing alongside himself during childhood. The Father symbolises the final image of what the Boy is experiencing in medias res: the wrong decisions, the missed opportunities, the wasted potential.

If adulthood is coming to terms with the fact that you are empirically alone, childhood is the progressive introduction of the idea. The Boy wears it on his sleeve: the terror of being prisoner of his own internal space, the resistance of this fate. He sees the ramifications of loneliness in his Father, he sees the cracks in the illusion of structure created by the job, the marriage, the children. And I can see him seeing it.

Mood is contagious, projected outward from the individual and onto the external landscape, where others collide with it whether they wanted to or not. I see the thoughts splattered out in front

of him as he thinks them. The fixation on dying, without the active *desire* to die. The feeling of helplessness in the age of inaction. The position amongst a generation joining the adult world too late to be able to fix its problems.

I used to be passive too, someone who would combat injustice with something as inane as a piece of writing. You know, rather than actually doing something about it. I too would pretend my opinion had meaning and hide it behind innovation for convenience.

But then I found the NewThink Fighters (N.T.F.) I'd say I was coaxed into joining the movement, but it wouldn't be true. I chose it.

NewThink had been declared law and people were still ignoring it, not allowing the government to deliver on their promise. Broken democracy... people were thinking outside the box and getting it published. Disrupting the world as God wishes to see it by shooting it from an angle or in artificial light. Rejecting everything authentic about the way we live by paying actors to change their walk, or speak in accent, or wear a fucking wig. People were taking the precious sounds of the natural world and distorting them, adding effects, declaring the resulting product 'art' as if it's a justification for how fake it all is.

It must stop. That's why I'm here.

The Girl enters my periphery, humming a nursery rhyme, interrupting my thinking. It almost makes me sad to think about how alone she'll feel within two more weeks. I'm going to take away

everything she looks up to as she navigates the mess she was born into. *She* didn't ask for any of this. She doesn't commit the sins of her Father.

'I can hear you thinking', she declares on approach, precociously.

'So what am I thinking?' I beam, playing her game.

'You wish you were my Daddy instead of Daddy.'

Irrationally defensive, I respond: 'No I don't. You know, not everybody wants to be a Daddy.'

'But... why?'

'Some people have other things to do with the rest of their life.'

'But... why?'

Later that day, I find myself in the company of the Boy *and* the Girl.

'These stories are ours. They're private. He shouldn't be sharing all this with anyone but me.'

I scribble notes – nodding vaguely, willing him to go on.

'What's it like out there? What do people think of him? Who's reading this stuff?'

Realising I've been promoted to specific addressee, I fumble to return my notebook to my pocket before the Boy really notices it. There's nothing worse than knowing you're being written.

'Far more people than he thinks', I lie.

'Is he one of *those* writers now?'

'Meaning?'

'The ones that people begin to worship. The ones people can't leave alone. You know what happens to those kinds of people.'

'What happens to those kinds of people?'

'They fart and it causes a frenzy. They can't leave the house alone. They get no peace.'

'At least they feel wanted.'

The Boy sighs, but the bitterness is palpable. He'll never get over this. He'll never forgive the Father.

'Daddy loves you.'

I'm unsure if the Girl directs this at her brother, or if it's intended for nobody in particular. Merely a statement. A general, optimistic proclamation for a world that needs such things.

'... Daddy loves people who do the dishes when they're told.'

The Mother wears an unflinching expression that communicates 'do what I say or risk getting on the wrong side of me'. Her children may be at different stages of invincibility, but the outfit shakes *me* to the core. As they barely gratify her entrance with their attention, I step in:

'I can help with the dishes.'

She is unsurprised at this addition to my persistent offers of help around the house.

'Thank you, but you've done too much. You're a guest. We should be the ones looking after you.'

'I'm just happy to be here.'

'We're happy to have you.'

\*

Two more weeks pass. My conclusions are scattered but coherent. Conclusive. I'd become less interested

in the bigger picture and more invested in this family narrative: irreparable damage to a father-son relationship, an almost non-existent husband-wife one; patriarchal protection from the world around the family, but no protection from the patriarch himself. And most unforgivably: a general prioritisation of art over living.

The Father mines his own dissatisfaction for creative gain. Rather than try and fix anything, he presents the individual fragments of his life in a new arrangement, no more complete. Calls it 'fiction'. It's a sum of the conversations he doesn't have but should, the thoughts he keeps in rather than express, the artificial drama he could avoid or even resolve if he wasn't so fucking preoccupied by the idea of creating something.

His great mistake was not doing the same soul-destroying, meaningless work as the rest of us. Delivering the post, scanning barcodes, opening and closing a cash register, staring at a computer, watching the paint dry on the four walls of an office. *This* was his grand misfire. The career ender. The big-budget flop.

I experience these confirmatory, Final Act thoughts as I navigate the setting to this denouement: the family library, a space I've occupied on more than one occasion over these four weeks. The family library that exists solely to escape *from* the family. This is where the Father can be alone, where he can live. I walk in his footsteps, allowing my eyes to scan over the bookshelves, the names

of the ghosts he idolises and will soon join: Ballard, Beckett, Borges, Bukowski, Burroughs... the rows and names go on and on and on, tediously 'countercultural', self-importantly 'boundary-pushing', predictably white male.

Variety and accessibility are entirely absent. The children's books gather dust in the furthest shelves most difficult to reach – neglected, rarely used, visual evidence of an untaken opportunity to give the Boy and the Girl a more normal upbringing under the circumstances. One even I might be able to detect logic in. Rebellion against NewThink that would at least make a little sense.

The most damning evidence of how crazy this man is stared me in the face as soon as I entered, but I only notice it now: the section of his *own* titles. Paperbacks, hardbacks, first editions, re-issues, signed copies, framed manuscript drafts. Everything imaginable, and then some. His own shrine. How utterly vain.

I scan the collection for any new notes to editors or messages from publishers, any form of indication of who exactly is sanctioning this, who is complicit.

I find everything. Enough ammunition to take down this circle. The first step of a complete takedown of what's left of the writing community. A grand-scale operation to wipe out every last one of them.

I'd achieved it in a different way than originally intended. When complete, my mission will have been one long encounter, rather than a series. I could've left and come back, presented my N.T.F. contact with findings periodically, rather

than all in one go; but I didn't. It won't matter in the long run. Soon, I'll be able to sleep again.

On cue, the Father enters the library. Presumably to escape, as usual.

'Ahh... so you've found my not-so-secret hideout.'

I cut straight to it, diffusing any potential tension, disappointing my viewers at home – who, by this point feverish, reposition themselves at the edge of their seats for this Mexican standoff. Something is finally, actually happening:

'It's probably time I told you why I'm really here.'

'Umm, okay. Shoot.'

'I'm here to shoot you in the face.'

Predictably, he doesn't take this seriously. Smiles instead.

'I'm being serious.'

'This isn't funny.'

'It's not supposed to be. I'm tired of being funny. Do you know what else isn't funny? Politicians fighting over things that aren't even real. Stories, films, songs... a facsimile of living, instead of the real thing. Do you know what isn't funny? The children starving on the streets because of people like YOU, exhausting government funds and turning attention away from the compliant citizens of the world. Thanks to people like you, people like me are necessary.'

I'm shaking. The Father, meanwhile, is impossibly still. A statue of stupefaction.

'... I... I... I don't know what to say.'

'Well now's the chance. Say your piece. Have your moment. Everyone's waiting.'

‘...’

‘Why the self-mythology? Your stories – what’s the point of them? The thinly veiled disguise of writing about somebody other than yourself isn’t smart, it’s gratuitous. You’re not the first to do it.’

This time the Father’s mouth moves and noises come out, not quite forming words. It’s progress.

‘There’s something intensely annoying about your work. There’s a reason I chose you, you know. They gave me a whole list and I chose you.’

‘I feel so special.’

I’m impressed he’s responded so soon into my diatribe; this wasn’t how it played out in my head. Simultaneously impressed and excited, I step back and give him the floor for a short while.

‘... Do you think I don’t know that none of this matters?’

He grabs the nearest handful of books and throws them across the room. The drama is electrifying.

‘I know it’s all bullshit. Of course it is. It always has been. You know what though? Some of us have to do it. Some of us are no good at anything else. Who’s supposed to provide for my family? Who’s gonna put food in their mouths? Who’s gonna make sure there’s a roof over their head? This is my duty, man.’

The whole thing’s exhilarating.

‘I’m no good at anything else – this writing thing is all I’ve got. That’s got to mean something. Some people deliver the post, some scan barcodes, some sit in an office; I’m just like them. It’s nature. Otherwise, one day the world stops turning.’

‘It already did’, I point out.

‘Exactly. I’ve been trying to fix it for the past eight years. What have *you* done?’

Internally, I give in. *I’ve* never been trying to ‘fix’ anything. My mind answers ‘Relishing every second of the collapse. Adding kindling to the fire, grinning ear-to-ear like a Cheshire fucking cat; but my mouth doesn’t produce anything.

Instead, I offer a digression: ‘Let’s backtrack a second. That’s nonsense – why is it only your prerogative? Your wife has something to give to the world too. You’re not holding up the roof on your own. That kind of mindset is antiquated. You’re gathering dust.’

‘Don’t go off script.’

‘I’m not. It’s not all about the Father – you’re just self-entitled privilege, personified. Your conversation’s stale. The counterculture is *dead*... have some goddamn sincerity.’

‘Is this something your character would say?’

‘What’s that supposed to mean?’

‘You hate people like me, the stories we tell, the worlds we create, the characters we make; but you’re a character yourself.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘Yes you are.’

‘No I’m not.’

‘You are. I know you’re not really a writer. I know who you work for – I can see through the N.T.F. rhetoric. I want to know your real name, not the fake one you’ve given me. I want to know what the real YOU thinks, not the hours of rehearsals. Not the pamphlets.’

'I –'

‘– You lot think you’re a secret when you’re not. The Resistance know everything.’

'I... I...'

'Come on man, you’re stuttering. You’ve lost. I’ve got a Colt AR-15 semi-automatic hidden behind that bookshelf just there.'

He nods to the 'K-O' section of his collection, beginning with Kafka and ending at Orwell. It's the one shelf I've never properly examined. Typical.

'It can do a lot more damage than the 9mm Glock G19 in your left shoe. Trust me, I've done the research. The AR-15 is unnecessarily powerful. But I've got to protect myself – the world's a dangerous place these days.'

He gives me plenty of time to process this information, generate my own thoughts, formulate a response, package, present. A goddamn eternity. It feels longer than the ten years of training.

Post-eternity, something peculiar happens. Right at the death, just as the curtain fall is imminent.

The Girl, humming the same nursery rhyme, enters the doorway of the library. Ordinarily, the Father would lock himself away here, but today isn't ordinary. The Girl takes full advantage of the lapse in concentration and newfound freedom, her eyes lighting up as she explores this entirely new world, full of playtime potential and toy stash possibilities.

The Father looks horrified. He's correct: he's won. But both he and I know that I haven't come all this way and

done all this work to give up without a fight. So, he *will* have to use the AR-15. The Girl will see this and not be able to unsee it for the rest of her life.

She won't realise the gravity of it until she's much older, screaming her way out the front door at eighteen, her parents and brother pleading with her to come back. To be rational. To not make a decision she'll regret.

She'll realise it when she's shivering under cardboard on a street corner, still homeless at twenty-four, nihilistically embracing a hopeless future in a world that's fucked beyond repair anyway.

She'll realise it at fifty-one, attending the funeral of a Father she'd forgotten, beside a Mother that doesn't remember her name.

She'll realise it at seventy-nine, dying in a hospital bed, with her first and last visitor at her side: her brother, determined to at least pretend to 'forgive and forget' before they no longer can. She'll realise it then, when the pair can't get the words out nor see one another through the floods of tears of a lifetime, condensed into one cathartic five-minute conversation.

This, of course, being the projected narrative trajectory of only the *likely* outcome of what's playing out here in the present. My gift to the Father. It's been anything but predictable so far, so who knows, there could be a surprise in store. To reach the gift, you have to get past the wrapping paper.

No matter which way it goes, books will fly, shelves will topple, and the Father's library will be in a right state by the end of everything. It'll be a spectacle.

# TONY MASTROIANNI

## *The Porn Writer*

Upon graduating from the New York Film Academy, Hopp-Dirkins returned to his family's home in New Jersey where he would spend the next two years cleaning an art warehouse and working on a project he called "The Ex". After having several scripts rejected and after his ex-film school peers stopped returning his calls and after many nights fatiguing himself over his opus, writing and revising between bliss and tears, he accidentally wrote a porn film. "Love Me Hard Again" which sounds like a sequel, calls us back to his earliest attempts at filmmaking, revolving around his ex-girlfriend. After a short time in the business of porn writing, legendary porn author, J. Bofant told Hopp-Dirkins he had a knack for porn writing, but to gain relatively major success, he needed to get weirder. His seminal works include: Love Me Hard Again; Love Me Hard Again II; Bees on Their Knees: an insexual love story; and Mary Me, Joseph You (OhOhOh Godddd). In 2006, he penned an autobiography called *The Porn Writer*. Despite not even receiving bad reviews, he published his *Porn Inspiration Diary* which Billow Books was kind enough to let us excerpt:

Inspiration diary explained. Part #4

I was reading Stefan Zweig's book about chess and there was a part about the character who went crazy on account of the game and in his dreams, he dreamed of people who only moved in the way chessmen move. The night of the day I read that I dreamt of chess pieces fully intergraded into society. I saluted a rook at the grocery store. I asked a bishop for a ride in his taxi. I went on a date with a queen and she caught me looking at a pawn. I wrote it all down in the morning. I made an extra-large cup of coffee anticipating how much material I would have to write down. This is how I got the idea for *Mate with the Queen*. I'm very proud of this film as the visuals evoke a young Stanley Kubrick, and being an adult film, I was able to write about the royal game without it being a metaphor for anything.

Inspiration diary explained. Part #12

I was babysitting my little cousin. We watched A Bug's Life which gave me the urge to watch Antz with Woody Allen and the one about bees by Jerry Seinfeld and a thought came into my head. Strangely enough, I hadn't ever consciously realized it before, but porn is the most flexible type of genre writing

there is. You can write porn about anything. It works as long as there's people boning. People love people boning and even at its weirdest or most sick, there will be someone sick and weird enough to watch it and want something even more weird and sick. That's how I decided to follow in the great Jewish-comic tradition, faith and heritage excluded, and make *Bees on Their Knees: an incestuous love story*.

#### Inspiration diary explained. Part #15

One night, I was daydreaming (if you can say that) about World War Two and the various pre- and aftermaths that didn't happen. I was trying to decide on some concrete what-ifs. Would Philip K. Dick's or Philip Roth's imagined what-if-America-became-a-nazi-state-book be closer to a reality? and I tangented for a while upon the realization that PKD and Roth were both Philips which led me to thinking about different writers and filmmakers who share something on top of a first name. I was well into categorizing popular and important artists by given name (I mean popular as one category and important as another, which really breaks my categories down into almost infinite categories, for example, I have a rule about not reading books by guys named Chuck which was a very popular name for writers in the early 2000's, though authors named Chuck will never be considered important) when I caught myself tangenting my tangent that could have easily kept

me up through the smallest hours. So I went back to WWII what-ifs. I was trying to imagine storm troopers all over America, in the streets of Manhattan and how long the trend of little mustaches would endure. I was trying to imagine a giant woman with short blond hair, the daughter of a high-ranking member of the Reich, perhaps, who could crush bones with her hands, who would walk the streets of New York a full head taller than the tallest man, who could dunk if the Ministry still permitted basketball and other American pastimes. I realized I was thinking about Bridget Nielsen. That is how I got the idea for *Cum Overlord*.

#### Inspirational diary explained. Part #21

I had a big time Murakami phase. Only when I came out of it did I realize how much we have in common. In fact, it was greatly inspiring to realize that someone who writes so, so much about unchecked erections, prostitutes of the mind, thin, young girls with overdeveloped breasts and handjobs and et cetera can be a perennial Nobel candidate. That's how I got the idea for *Norwegian Wood: a porno*.

#### Inspiration diary explained. Part #34

At the beginning, I had no idea what I was doing. I wrote my first two adult love stories with a fair amount of ease. On the other hand, they were really just

bio-pics tinted with extra penetration. Then I wrote another one. It was more pornish, but I was still relying somewhat on my own experience. I called it *Kats*. It was about a janitor who takes the garbage out one afternoon and finds two beautiful, sexy women dressed as cats, basking by the dumpster. In real life, I only found real cats, but film ones, they're human cats and they're crawling around sexy, on all fours. The protagonist, "Hey, what are you cats doin'?" But they don't respond. Or they do, but in purrs and rubbing up against his legs. Baffled, he throws the garbage and goes back inside. He doesn't say nothing to anyone about the busty cats. Before he leaves work, he goes back out to check. The cats are gone, but he leaves a little bowl of milk by the backdoor. Obviously, they have an anthropomorphic ménage the next day. But that's not important. I was at work one day, years after writing the *Kats* screenplay (I had to keep my job as a janitor, partly as a cover for my identity, and mostly to pay bills) and my boss comes up to me strangely excited, though he is often strangely excited and often comes up to me to recount strange things or complain about his mother-in-law and "her daughter", the kids, kids in general, clients, co-workers, me, traffic, the boss's bosses and so-forth and he tells me all about the weirdest, most excellent, in his own words, "dickin' movie" he watched the night before. He went through *Kats* scene by scene, much more explicitly and descriptively than I recall having even written it. That's how I got the idea to write my autobiography.

## *Sally Greene*

In the early years, before their major achievements in literature, before the divorce, when the Greene family was destitute, at best, there was only one kind of pet the family could afford to keep. A goldfish.

They initially got a dog off the street, but it wasn't long before they arrived at the conclusion that between the amount of food and vaccinations a stray dog requires, the family would have needed to give up, at least, one of their kids. James pretended to be allergic to cats, because he didn't like cats. Birds make too much noise. Reptiles are disgusting. And so they got a goldfish.

The very first was called Louie. It was named after the elderly man who worked behind the deli counter at Sorrento Market on the corner of Capitol and Main St. who had long lips and eyes closer to his temples than his nose. And hence Louie the Fish, the fish being named after Louie the Fish, the human. Though too ashamed to share its name with anyone, the Greenes considered it an ode to local culture rather than an insult or a joke to the fish's namesake. After they had to flush Louie down the toilet, they got Louie II, then Louie III and so on. Sally could watch Louie glide around his castle for hours on end. She adored the way it pushed the pebbles around on his underwater beach and

rammed the glass of his (or her) confines. It wasn't long for Sally before the word goldfish was synonymous with pet.

Upon a big promotion as an important member of the publishing world, Sally bought a house in Scarsdale. It was a modest house for the area with a small backyard and a patio, not so unlike the ranch her ex-husband lived on in Trumbull, Connecticut. But for Sally, any house, let alone a house in Scarsdale, was like owning half the world. In fact, the first thing she did, even before buying silverware or a desk or curtains, was purchase a dozen fish tanks of different shapes and sizes and decorate them as miniature versions of the world's capital cities. The biggest were Paris and New York. Model Triumphal Arches and Statues of Liberty and Eiffel Towers were easiest to find and the most intricate, though her Rio de Janeiro, Rome and Athens and Sydney, Barcelona, Tokyo, Bridgeport and Buenos Aireses weren't such bad a tanks themselves. In place of Beijing or Hong Kong, she created a tank with the Great Wall of China. And for Berlin, she just put up a pre-Hasselhoff wall, dividing the tank in two. And despite having so many cities, the mini-metropolises were home to only two goldfish—Louie and a new goldfish named Sally that she got to

represent her new, single and independent life. Sally could swim anywhere she wanted now. Any city she could think of. Around any castle she wanted. This was Sally's new freedom. Human Sally liked to think Louie preferred to stay in her Bridgeport tank where fish Sally would come visit him every once in a while, but only stay for a couple hours and old time's sake.

But her mania didn't stop. She was buying aquariums and more and more aquariums, and not only re-founding more and more cities, but also re-creating famous scenes from history, film and literature—toy soldiers on opposite sides of a slanted pebble beach representing D-Day, the balcony scene from Romeo and Juliet featuring only Romeo so Sally could be Juliet, John Starks posterizing Michael Jordan, Achilles dragging Hector's lifeless body around the impenetrable walls of Ilium, a floating Death Star in tap water dyed black, until Sally Greene's house effectively became a body of ninety percent water. A home brimming with underwater houses containing all things worldly or special she could think of and everything she ever loved or even liked. Eventually anything she could even think of. Thelonious Monk, the Amazon, La Mancha, Fordham University, volcanoes, the other Amazon, a Venetian carnival, structuralism, equal rights, math, Planet Fitness, et cetera, et cetera, et cetera. And despite her growing obsessiveness, Sally was as diligent as ever when it came to her career. If anything, she was even more energetic. When her kids would

come to visit, she'd take them through all the rooms in the house, showing them all the new additions to her little world, asking them if they'd seen the Congo yet or the Cold War aquarium and the kids huffed and complained and acted indignant the way they used to when she was still a relatively young mother and they were still relatively young and she would lick her thumb and wipe smears off their faces. 'How do you even remember where you put the fish,' one asked, to which she responded by pulling out a calendar with all of Fish Sally's appointments around the world. And that's when the kids began to worry. Because why didn't she just go to those places in real life? She had the money. Or why didn't she even go swimming every now and then? And after they had already been worrying about her sanity for some time, the three now grown kids eventually started worrying about the inevitable—their mother had replaced probably hundreds of Louies, but Sally? What happens when the new Sally dies?

It was an unusually cold morning when human Sally found fish Sally floating above the Taj Mahal. She cried to herself as she buried her in the backyard, offering the prayers she'd memorized as a kid. Flurries of reflexive condolences and words of wisdom whizzed out her mouth and floated in the direction of the shallow fish grave. The only thing that could calm Sally Greene down was resigning herself to imagine fish Sally swimming around goldfish heaven, an image not so unlike her own

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home. When she told the kids about, what she considered Sally's premature death, they all, more or less, said the same thing—that she had trapped herself in this weird version of the world, and now, if anything, she was free to be all that human Sally let fish Sally be.

And so she took their advice. Sally Greene had an eight by eight by eight foot plexiglass pool installed in her yard, filled with brown and grey pebbles and a castle and filtered water in which she swam everyday after work in her sparkly, golden orange bathing suit.

# *Flora Barney*

Despite her name, Flora Barney was no pretty flower. Not to look at. Not to smell. Her most normal features could be called ugly: her flat brown hair and extremely thin lips, the mole on the left side of her nose and the mole on the right side of her chin, on top of being as thin as the broomstick she pushed in the offices of a well-known publishing house in the heart of Manhattan. Then there was the rest of her being. She was a pallid shade of sea foam green and her body was covered in, what looked like, goosebumps regardless of the temperature. Her limbs and neck looked like pickles protruding from her torso. Her nails grew at an astounding rate. Flora not only bit her fingernails, which is no major offense, but is said that she also trimmed her toenails using her teeth—a disgusting feat, but a feat in itself that leads one to believe everything else they say about Flora Barney. She used to pick her teeth with a fishing hook. She kept it in an aluminum pillbox in her bra. She claimed spit shining was more effective than standard cleaning products. She was physically threatened by management before promising to use Pine Sol. She wore no socks under her work boots. Her work boots were galoshes. She smoked Kool cigarettes. Some say she was homeless. Some say she had a penthouse. Others claim they caught her sleeping in the office. She had no official hours. She wasn't officially employed. She chewed on flies she caught with her hands. She had ticks. When mopping, she would drag the mop behind her giving the impression of the trail a slug leaves behind. Much more like a slug than a snail. What are slugs but snails without homes? She was illiterate which gave way to the rumor that she was the inspiration for Philip Roth's illiterate janitor character. She looked like Sarah Jessica Parker in Hocus Pocus', malnourished, broken, uglier, gauntlier, greener stunt double. Especially when she had a broom in her hand. One eye was bigger than the other. One hand was bigger than the other. When her hands were empty, they looked like claws and they twitched like they were squeezing invisible tennis balls. And her claws were as smelly as her feet and sometimes when she breathed, it sounded like she was gargling. But she still got around.

Some people said when she made love, Flora Barney was a poet.

But even then her eyes still pointed in two different directions, were retractable, probably both made of glass and similar to the traditional eye to googly eyes from arts and crafts stores. She still breathed like a gargling bulldog, drooled like a bulldog, had an outie belly button and her upper lip was perpetually wet from her perpetually

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running nose and she'd sniff, sniff, sniff the mucus back up through her sinuses. She ripped chunks of banana peels with her serrated-like teeth and gnaw on them like chewing gum on the premises that it was good for her mouth and glands the same way she claimed facial were masks made from tartar sauce were good for her spores and her mouth and her glands. Had shingles. Had slivers all over her body from scratching herself with a broomstick. Used aloe vera as lube. Confused the words aloe and Guam. Ate capers as a snack without rinsing the salt off.

## *Bhutan*

### Henry Grubbs, 54

By late morning Henry has left the Methodist Church where he is janitor, fix-it-man, and sometime security guard (for two months last year after the church suffered attacks by vandals, including spray-painted graffiti, broken windows, and front lawn disfigured by, most likely, Roundup perpetrated by, a plurality of the congregation believes, jealous Baptists) and is now at his other Methodist jobsite, the cemetery north of town. For clarification, it should be noted that the cemetery is not Methodist exclusively. Hardly. The cemetery is truly ecumenical, embracing in their long sleep not just Methodists but Baptists, Lutherans, Church of Christers, and others of whatever denominations are found in Ruby Spring, except uppity Catholics who bury at the Immaculate Conception cemetery in Corsica, the county seat. Henry shares caretaking duties—righting tombstones (vandals again), cutting grass, and maintaining the chain-link fence surrounding the cemetery—with Mary Ayres (yes, a woman), the Baptist Church custodian. He'll do it one week and Mary the next.

Henry is glad it's his week. He likes working in the cemetery. He prefers being out in the fresh air to being cooped up in a building, even one as big as the

Methodist Church. And there's something about the fact that the cemetery is far enough outside of town that he can't even see Ruby Spring that soothes him. Ruby Spring is small enough that anywhere within the city limits is near his home, and when he thinks of home, he worries. Folks in the cemetery don't have much to worry about.

### Phyllis (Philly) Grubbs, 56

The last time Philly visited her mother at the Green Fields Retirement Center two miles east of town, her mother had surprised her by suddenly reaching out, gently cradling the back of her head in her feeble palm, and saying, 'Phyllis, honey, things just never worked out the way you expected, did they?'

She was somewhat surprised by the 'Phyllis' because she'd been called Philly her entire life, but what really surprised her was the sentiment expressed. How could anyone who knew her—relative, friend, acquaintance, *herself*—have ever thought her life would turn out differently?

What, did her mother think that Philly hadn't expected to be *poor*? She'd been born an Allred and now was a Grubbs, two of the poorest families in Ruby Spring. As a child, once she was old enough to be aware of social and

economic distinctions, she was ashamed of the Allred house, shabby and unkempt on largely shabby and unkempt Glenn Avenue. The only saving grace was that the block she lived on did beat one block, farther east, the 'water-tower block' as many in Ruby Spring thought of it because of the water tower just to the south across, of course, Water Street. It was the shabbiest, most unkempt, poorest block in town—what there was left of it. There had never been more than two houses on the Water Street side of water tower block, and both of these had stood vacant since—what was that old man's name?—had died probably at least ten years ago now. Before that, the house at 105 1<sup>st</sup> Street had been condemned and raised. Philly never did know what the issue was there; nobody bothered to inform the Grubbses, that was for sure.

Yes, Philly had found the only conceivable way of moving downward from the Allreds: she married a Grubbs and moved to 106 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, the poorest currently inhabited house on the poorest block in town.

'Well at least we have enough to eat, and we keep the lawn mowed, and by God we're happy,' her husband, Henry, liked to say. When the kids were still home, he used to say it like the tuneless refrain to a song he couldn't get out of his head. But that was a long time ago. (Henry and Philly were in their fifties now.) Henry eased up on it some after it was just the two of them because Philly never complained much, not like the kids had. But then a few years ago,

their daughter, Misty, and her husband, Bubba Bowman, and their two kids, Tamara and Tommy, moved in with them when Bubba lost his job down in Ft. Smith, Arkansas. Bubba stuck it out only a few weeks and then took off for Las Vegas, pursuing his dream of a career in the casino business, his farewell note informed them. It wasn't even two more weeks before Misty woke Philly up in the middle of the night and said, 'Mama, I just can't live without him. I'm going out to Las Vegas to find Bubba.' Philly had thought it was kind of sweet, Misty not bearing to leave without saying goodbye to her mama—until next morning, that is, when she discovered that what Misty had really been doing in her bedroom was stealing what little cash her mama had from her purse on the nightstand. Left with the cash, left the kids with Philly and Henry. With a teenager and an almost teenager in the house now, Henry has once more taken to saying, frequently, 'Well at least we have enough to eat, and we keep the lawn mowed, and by God we're happy.'

Philly seems to recall that back there all those years ago when their kids were little, it'd been 'at least we're clean.' He'd changed it to 'we keep the lawn mowed' after getting the job as handyman at the church.

Philly knew that the church job was mostly an act of charity. There wasn't enough to do for forty hours a week, not really, and Henry's salary reflected it. Still, officially it was full-time, and almost all the many jobs Henry had had prior to that had been part-time, some-

times only ten or fifteen hours a week so that he'd have to scrounge up two or three such jobs, if they could be found, just to make ends meet. Which they always had a miserable time doing, even now with the full-time job. If they always had enough to eat, it was only because of food stamps and periodic bags of food-stuffs from Reverend Robinson, who'd tell Henry they'd been donated to the church, which already had more than could be given away so Henry would be doing him a favor to take it off his hands. Always the same excuse, always, 'You'd be doing me a favor to take it off my hands,' and Henry always believed him, grinning when he handed the bag over to Philly like it was something he and the reverend were putting over on the folks who kept donating food.

It wasn't that Henry had had trouble holding a regular job because he was lazy or dishonest or unreliable. He was a hard worker who'd slog to the job in a snow storm or with a fever or, once, with broken ribs from rolling off the roof of a house he'd been repairing the guttering on. His only shortcoming as a worker was that, well, with the best will in the world Philly couldn't say that her husband was too bright. None of the Grubbses were.

She hadn't quite realized what she was getting into when she first started dating him. Let's face it, the Allreds weren't anything to brag about, either, and Philly was flattered that this older man was attracted to her, just out of ninth grade and he already graduated high school although he hadn't gone to

classes much that last year. What would have been the point? None, but no point in not letting him graduate, either. It wasn't like he was going to college or anything. So they let him walk with the other kids graduation night. And in fact the diploma did help him get jobs, at first, but not to hold them.

The Methodist Church full-time job was the highpoint of Henry's life. Of Philly's, too. Why would anybody think she'd ever expected more? She wasn't that dumb.

Once the previous winter they'd been watching TV and hit the Travel Channel by mistake. There was some program on some little godforsaken dirt-poor country Philly had never heard of, Bhutan, and they kept watching, appalled and fascinated. 'You know, Henry, our house would be a palace over there,' Philly had said, and Henry had sat up on the sofa. What country was that, what was its name, he wanted to know. And Philly had printed it for him in big block letters on the back of the electric bill.

#### BHUTAN

Henry, who could just about write his name, squinted at the letters, working his mouth, and then said, 'Button. Button. I want to move to Button. Oh yeah, we'd be *kings* in Button.'

It was late morning, almost 11:00 o'clock now. Philly wondered what time it was in Bhutan.

#### Tommy Bowman, 12

Tommy kept his eye on the clock as Mrs. Carpenter, leaning back against the blackboard with her hands gripping

the chalk tray, droned on and on about history or geography or something.

It was almost 11:00. He had to tell Courtney Bale by no later than 11:00 if he wanted to trade sandwiches for lunch. If he didn't tell him by 11:00, no deal. 'I have to get my teeth set for it,' Courtney would say by way of explanation. It was one of many funny expressions Courtney had, most of which he had to explain to Tommy. That was because Tommy had lived most of his life in Ft. Smith, almost as big as Springfield, and therefore was a city boy while Courtney, who lived on Highway 121 north of town, was a country boy. Tommy had been to his house several times. It was set back from the blacktop on a gravel lot and had once been an old-timey gas station. You could still see the little concrete island where the gas pumps had been. Even though it was in the country, the house wasn't connected to a farm. Courtney's dad didn't farm. Tommy wasn't sure what he did, and he kind of suspected Courtney didn't, either. They didn't talk much about their dads or their moms, either.

Courtney was his best friend. They'd been friends ever since Tommy moved to Ruby Spring three years ago, and they had had only one fight in all that time, when Tommy told him he thought Courtney was a girl's name. The fight didn't last long—neither one was a good or enthusiastic fighter—before they agreed to a truce after which Courtney told him all about the perfectly good men's names that were being taken over by 'females.' The next time

he was out to Courtney's house, Courtney showed him the list he was compiling of such names—Sydney, Alex, Tommy couldn't remember too many—and Tommy shook his head and said he never dreamed such a thing was going on. Courtney had put his hand on his shoulder, given him a little shake and a piercing look and said, 'You have to keep your powder dry, my friend. You *have* to keep your powder dry.' And Tommy had said, 'Oh, believe me, Courtney my friend, I will,' although he really hadn't known what Courtney meant.

Courtney had a bologna sandwich every day for lunch and Tommy had a peanut butter sandwich. Tommy's grandma had a big round tin can of peanut butter she got 'from the government' and made sandwiches every day on bread she bought on the day-old bread rack at Ketchem's Grocery. He'd never thought about asking for any other kind of sandwich although when he'd lived in Ft. Smith with his parents he'd eaten in the school cafeteria and had something different every day. That seemed like a long time ago. He didn't eat in the school cafeteria in Ruby Spring because his sister, Tamara, had thrown a fit there last year and gone after Dawn Crisp with a fork, although Tommy never did find out why, and his grandma said no Grubb (or Bowman) would ever set foot in that cafeteria again. He didn't know why Courtney always brought his lunch. Courtney didn't have a sister.

One day Courtney asked him if he wanted to trade sandwiches, and Tommy said, 'Sure.' When they finished, Tom-

my asked him how he liked the peanut butter, and Courtney said it was damn good; how about the bologna? Tommy said it was good stuff. Was it government bologna? 'Sure,' Courtney said. So now they trade sandwiches two or three times a week. Tommy has to tell him whether he wants to trade by 11:00, though, so Courtney can get his teeth set for whatever kind of sandwich he's going to eat.

It's good to have a best friend, good to have a bologna sandwich sometimes, too. Now Tommy hardly ever thinks about the times in Ft. Smith his mama and daddy would take him and Tamara to McDonald's or Wendy's for a hamburger. Now he hardly ever thinks about his mama and daddy.

Tamara Bowman, 13

Mary Ellen Kirksey had been Tamara's best friend when the Bowmans were still living in Ft. Smith. That was three years ago when the girls were in the fourth grade. They haven't seen each other since, but they still write several times a year. In her latest letter, which Tamara received yesterday, Mary Ellen said that she was in 'junior cotillion.' Tamara sort of remembered the term, but even when she was living in Ft. Smith she hadn't been too clear on what junior cotillion was. Still, when she showed the letter to her Ruby Spring best friend, Shanni Gary, before school this morning, she acted like she knew all about it.

'They dress up in these fancy clothes and go to dances,' she said with a toss of her head that managed to indicate

it was a big deal but at the same time something to sneer at, a balancing act thirteen-year-olds are good at. 'I'd be in junior cotillion, too, if I still lived in Ft. Smith.'

'Yeah, well, you're not living in Ft. Smith anymore,' Shanni said, getting the sneer part down pat.

Coach Ford, who also taught seventh-grade science, was at the blackboard trying to draw something, and everyone was laughing at him. He was laughing, too. Tamara joined in the laughter although she hadn't been paying attention. She'd been thinking about the letter, about Mary Ellen and Ft. Smith. Then she felt a tap on her shoulder followed by a note fluttering over her shoulder and dropping into her lap. It was from Shanni, of course, who sat right behind her in science, an accident of the alphabet.

Coach Ford was still trying to draw whatever it was, so Tamara opened the note.

#### WILL YOU?

She looked at the clock. 10:52. She supposed she'd have to decide soon, at least if the answer was yes. If it was yes, she'd tell Shanni at lunch, and then Shanni would tell Bo Waters, and then after school while Bo's sister, Lynn, a junior, was playing softball, she and Bo would go to his sister's pickup, and she'd let Bo do her. Shanni and Bo had worked it all out because Bo was too shy to say anything to Tamara himself. He definitely wanted to do her, though.

Tamara didn't want to do it, not really, but she supposed it was her own

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fault because she'd bragged to Shanni that she used to do it all the time when she lived in Ft. Smith even though she'd only been ten at the time, and Shanni, a sweet kid but not the sharpest knife in the drawer, had believed her.

Tamara was a virgin. She didn't mind losing her virginity, couldn't care less about that. But she didn't want to get knocked up. Last Christmas her mom had sent her a Christmas card on which she'd written, 'Dear Tamara, you're a teenager now getting to be a big girl now a young woman so you will be having sex. Just don't get knocked up, that is the important thing don't get knocked up. You don't want to have a baby or your future will not be too bright. Mary Christmas and Happy New Year, Your Mother.'

Don't get knocked up. That meant use a rubber. If she got to his sister's pickup with Bo and asked him if he had a rubber and he said no, what would she do? He'd probably still want to do it. What would she do?

She started to think about her future, but she realized Coach Ford had stopped clowning around at the blackboard and was telling them to look at something in their textbooks. So she hurriedly wrote SURE on the note and folded it into a tight square and dropped it on the floor behind her desk. She heard Shanni drop her pencil, then pick it and the note up. So that was that.

# Poetry



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# *David Harrison Horton*

## MODEL ANSWER (SEASON)

April is the cruelest April. There can be no doubt about it. You can't live without it. The pollen, the hay fever, learning that Ted Hughes beat his suicidal wife. Where does it stop? May. That's where. The anniversary of the Hay Market Massacre. But back to our April sheep. Pineapples and Vidalia onions cost too much at this time. You can see I am a foodie, and possibly a Marxist, although I haven't been baptized yet in that church: Our Lady of the Miserable Punch Clock Bastards. I have, however, met the parish priests. He drinks at my local.

# Holly Day

## POETRY

My husband storms angrily into the kitchen and tells me he's had another nightmare that I've been writing poetry that I was sending off stacks and stacks of envelopes spending excessive amounts on postage and mailing supplies to pursue my worthless ambitions. "You seem to think

you're going to live forever," he tells me at the end of his story "that you can keep taking these little steps towards nothing while people out there are working themselves to death. It seems like a smart person would have figured things out given up by now." But I'm still stuck on this nightmare he's had

of me writing poetry—and not of me stabbing him in his sleep, or running away with another man, or forgetting to feed or even completely abandoning our children all things my subconscious has terrified me with all the things that send me running to my desk in the middle of the night to exorcise with poetry, this terrible thing I do.

## ECHOES OF MY DOG

The first thing we need to do is dig a large hole  
one wide enough to fit everything from the past into it  
deep enough to be able to cover everything completely once  
the deed is done, deep and wide enough that once the hole is refilled  
the ground can be stomped flat without exposing  
the errant kitchen utensil, a dusty, furred teddy bear leg.

Afterwards, seeds must be spread over the ground  
something that grows quickly so that in just a few days  
no one would ever guess the wreckage beneath the new shoots.  
beans, perhaps, some verdant and vigorous writhing vine  
looking for a tree or twig to whirl tendrils around  
or perhaps just grass, some mixed-seed blend  
guaranteed to sprout at the first hint of water.

Years later, when people stumble over this site, they'll find  
only jungle, or prairie, or even just hard, packed dirt  
nothing to hint that our lives together ended here.

## A REFRACTION OF LIGHT

After consoling him through several bouts of timidity, a correspondent for the *Manchester Sporting Chronicle*, having decided against the other way round, brought an oculist to his horse.

The problem was found quick enough, and the two men set about constructing a solution.

At first, the horse was a little surprised, backing up, staring straight ahead, very slowly swiveling his muzzle left and right, stopping at intervals between. After a pause, the sound he emitted was as close to a gasp as a horse has ever come. The concave spectacles fitted over the eyes allowed him to see anything and everything, short-sightedness corrected and all the world alight.

For the rest of the day, the horse cantered and jumped, traversing previously troublesome spaces with ease, each blink of the eye evaporating his timidity until it was gone, replaced with a bold adventurousness, yearning to explore.

That night, when the spectacles were removed and placed in a special box for safe-keeping, lest they get bent out of shape while the horse rested -- horses only nap when standing up, deep sleep requires lying down -- the horse dreamt about his day in sharp focus. No longer a blur of faded colors and frightening shapes, shifting and melding into slashing claws and gnashing teeth, it became a knowable place, every flower, blade of grass, criss-crossed slice of hay separate and unique, its own identifiable entity.

In his dream, the horse's jaw worked back and forth as he nibbled on stalks of alfalfa, now distinguishable from the clover that often made his belly hurt, the sun a fiery thing in a deep endless blue of sky. Soon he saw the ghostly image of stampeding horses over great waves of white in the cumulonimbus clouds warning of incoming rain and thunder. He was back to the stable before any of the people, the fire of the sun snuffed out, blue sky blackened, and stood for hours, following the heartbeats of rain as they dropped, lub-dub lub-dub into forming puddles, rippling like stars exploded.

In the morning, the horse opened his eyes, stretched his knobby legs and stood, after a long moment remembering all the boundless beauty he'd witnessed, both inside and outside his head.

Looking over the half-door of the stable, he gave a soft, sad whinny at the world, reverted back to blurs and shadows, holding phantoms and monsters and danger and now, a moving thing, shifting closer and closer, the sink of boots

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over squelches of mud. Suddenly, a hand slides through his forelock, a whisper drifts past his ear, a pleasant tightness closes around his eyes and his master is there, mouth upended in a smile. The horse's whinny transforms into a snort of joy as he brings his feet up and down - one-two-three-four - one-two-three-four - and the master's voice is laughing and a fresh batch of hay is in front of him and all is right and good again.

That morning and every morning from then on, when it was time for pasturing, five, ten, twenty minutes after their first daily greeting, the correspondent for the *Manchester Sporting Chronicle* would find his horse, fixed in a state of unhurried happiness, gazing out at the whole wide world, never tiring of the sight.

## THE MORNING HATE

The machine-gunner watched his gun-crew fall. Then he dove headfirst into a shallow shell hole and, rolling over on his back, snow-angeled his body until his boots were at the bottom of the dirt, his helmet at the top, four inches from the open air and enemy fire, legs underneath him, bayonet on his left, two half-full metal ammunition boxes on either side of his head, only their squared front sides visible over his hiding place.

The machine-gunner lay very still, waiting.

Then, very slowly, he began to slide the bayonet through the dirt, so he could move down and further away from whatever lay ahead —

a crack as a bullet broke the sound barrier followed by the thump of the round being fired and again, and again, and again, not in the chaotic rhythm of a Karabiner or Mauser but the mechanical regularity of a Bergmann 15, comparable to his own Lewis machine gun, lost with his crew, somewhere close by that might as well be a million miles.

The machine-gunner could see the Jerry in his mind, prone, looking through the sight, holding the handles of the Bergmann, tap-tap-tapping so it played across the crown of the dirt four inches from the machine-gunner's head, then, turning the wheel to lower the barrel and tap-tap-tapping the other way. He felt pieces of earth pop around him, drop on his shoulders, his chest, right over his heart, beating out of time with the tap-tap-tapping. An ammo box burst, then the other, bits blowing up up up into the air; falling down, down, down, pinging off his helmet, his bayonet.

The machine-gunner's eyes watched and his ears listened for a very long time.

tap-tap-tap-  
up-up-up-  
fall-  
fall-  
fall-  
tap-tap-tap-  
up-up-up-  
fall-  
fall-  
fall

---

until he almost admired the other man, his tenacity, his single-mindedness, set on a goal he meant to accomplish. The machine-gunner almost began to imagine the man was aiming at somebody else, and he was looking down from a balcony, viewing a one-reeler in a cinema, as disappointed as his fellow machine gunner when he just couldn't get that trajectory low enough.

Fourteen hours later, the machine gunner's internal clock hazarding a guess in tandem with the cool of the air and the night creeping up, the sky getting darker in increments until it became black, all at once. He raised his head, looking at the field behind him upside down, like the way he used to lie on his bed when he was a little boy, viewing the world from a different angle until it became something magical, something enchanted and new, where people walked on the ceiling and water fell up and your blood was always in your head so the rest of you tingled. The machine-gunner rolled over, the world dropping with a boom, and scanned left and right over the lightless expanse of nothing. His fellow-machine-gunner was gone, along with everything else.

He lay very still, waiting. And waiting. And waiting. The machine-gunner waited until his just woken legs fell asleep again. Then, after digging the heels of his boots into the earth that had so far protected him, calf muscles straining against the pump of blood coursing from his beating heart, all around and through his body and back again, forty-five seconds in all, the machine gunner slung his bayonet over his left shoulder, crawled his left hand forward, his right knee forward, his right hand forward, his left knee forward, again and again, crawling, crawling, crawling and then, as suddenly as the night that hid him had burst into being, the machine gunner propelled his entire self forward, left arm pumping, right arm pumping, legs ricocheting back and forth, back and forth, back and forth over the black grass, the black earth, pounding into dust and dirt and all the millions things that live there, pumping, pumping, pumping, blood sparking, popping, again, again, again—

The machine-gunner ran and ran and ran, until a laugh like an artillery shell exploded from deep inside him, erupting into the air, the first sound he'd made in fourteen hours, the machine gunner running, running, running, not a scratch on him

# Michael Minassian

## To LIVE FOREVER

Jack and I are sweeping out the old barn  
my cousin used as an art studio:  
brushes stiff with dried paint  
and clotted palettes sit on an old table  
next to an easel leaning to the left  
like an old man being pushed by the wind.

Behind some half-finished canvases  
stacked up in a corner of the barn  
I find dozens of dead bees—  
*They look like black and yellow thumbtacks*  
I say, pushing them with a straw broom  
and I wonder how long they've been there.

I tell Jack to be careful,  
you can still be stung by a dead bee,  
but he waves me off:

In ancient Persia, he says,  
bees were cultivated without stingers,  
Kings used honey to reward  
servants and the nobility.

Learning to listen  
to the tongues of the bees  
Kings believed death  
was only a rumor,  
expecting to live forever.

Outside, dark clouds piled up  
like a wreck on the turnpike  
and thunder rattled  
the windows of the barn—  
I sweep up the bees  
and ask them to speak one last time.

# *Zebulon Huset*

## EASY ANSWERS FOR HARD QUESTIONS

Run into a wall headfirst, arms at your sides. Once the bleeding stops, stand up. Retrace your steps. Close your eyes. Run the same path. Keep your eyes closed even after you hit the wall. Don't cry. If it didn't hurt as much this time, why? If it hurt more, why? Did an invisible force protect you? Did you run at a different speed, or lean differently, hit the same spot, or a new one? Stand up. Retrace your steps. Open your eyes. Start running.

However, if it hurts too much, maybe, you think, you shouldn't ask why. Know your mother was right. Why? Because.

Stay on the ground. Keep your eyes closed. Try not to move.

# *Tyler Vaughn*

## THIS IS AN ORANGE, ROUND TABLET

Autumn starts when the trees give up drinking.  
An appointment is made  
in the ditch of Lake Mead  
and the hairy hands,  
tent on mahogany,  
speak calmly,  
which can only augur hell:  
“You’re a snail who fears salt too well. Liquefy.  
And don’t ignite  
if you exercise.”  
So I eat the whole box of tissues  
and wrap piles of bramble  
and wish you’d wish us  
neither wood nor label.  
Kiss me I’m sick!  
But who kisses the roots  
under the hydrant?  
Text Jesus,  
you contradict the good doctor;  
the script reads clear: there’s no shortage of water.

## COUPLED FOR ONE LAST WALK, WE THIEVE THE BEACH

at the end of the ship  
it's dusk I ask

you bend and pick  
a coddled shell

what's ours now

is it this

then the tide hits

and it digs

# *Nenad Jovanović*

## SEAGULLS

After forty, one shouldn't use the words  
“carousel,” “meaning,” “Yugoslavia.”

Right on! reply the seagulls. The purpose of the absolute  
whiteness of the mentioned birds' down evades even  
the absolute. The seagulls

circle. Like the carousel, like meaning,  
like Austria-Hungary and the Ottoman Empire.

After forty, one should be prepared for the circle's

transformation into a line, as spoke

my father, who – like his own

father and his father's father –

had shot up brine. It's known

that salt will redeem the world,

but – what amount of the substance?

After forty, the seagulls become so hungry that  
their shrieking bleaches chlorophyll.

Color is color is color. Right on! resounds the echo  
of the seagulls, the unacknowledged kin of ourobori,  
the metal-cold piercers of the human skin.

The seagulls are the eternal recurrence of the same,

a Nietzschean concept, that is. It's also

the other way around, but who will admit that in

a world infected with orderliness, a disease

transmitted by these relatively white creatures?

Salt crystals sparkle in the future. Will sweat  
break out on the forehead before the homeland  
breaks out to the sea?



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## Contributors

**BENJAMIN DAVIS** is a columnist for *Russia Beyond*, author of *The King of FU*, and managing editor of *Sexography*. His work can be found in *\*82 Review*, *Defenestration*, *Cease*, *Cows*, and others. Learn more about him here: [benjamindaviswriter.com](http://benjamindaviswriter.com)

**HOLLY DAY** ([hollyday.blogspot.com](http://hollyday.blogspot.com)) has been a writing instructor at the Loft Literary Center in Minneapolis since 2000. Her poetry has recently appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction*, *Grain*, and *Harvard Review*, and her newest poetry collections are *Into the Cracks* (Golden Antelope Press), *Cross Referencing a Book of Summer* (Silver Bow Publishing), *The Tooth is the Largest Organ in the Human Body* (Anaphora Literary Press), and *Book of Beasts* (Weasel Press).

**DAVID HARRISON HORTON** is a Beijing-based writer, artist, editor and curator. He is author of the chapbooks *Pete Hoffman Days* (Pinball) and *BeiHai* (Nanjing Poetry). His work has recently appeared in *In Parentheses*, *Otoliths*, *swifts & slows*, and *Spittoon*, among others.

**ZEBULON HUSET** is a teacher, writer and photographer living in San Diego. His writing has recently appeared in *Meridian*, *The Southern Review*, *Louisville Review*, *Fence*, *Rosebud*, *Atlanta Review*, *Texas Review*, and *Fjords Review* among others. He publishes a writing prompt blog Notebooking Daily and is the editor of the journal *Coastal Shelf*.

**NENAD JOVANOVIC** is the author of *Brechtian Cinemas: Montage and Theatricality in Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, Peter Watkins and Lars von Trier* (SUNY Press, 2017) and fourteen books of poetry, fiction, and plays in Serbo-Croat. He teaches cinema at Wright State University.

**KATE LADEW** is a graduate from the University of North Carolina at Greensboro with a BA in Studio Art. She resides in Graham, NC with her cats Charlie Chaplin and Janis Joplin.

**TONY MASTROIANNI** is a Brazilian dancer. Available for birthdays, baptisms, gender reveal parties and the like.

**MICHAEL MINASSIAN**'s poems and short stories have appeared recently in such journals as *Comstock Review*, *Main Street Rag*, *Poet Lore*, and *Third Wednesday*. He is also a Contributing Editor for *Verse-Virtual*, an online magazine. His chapbooks

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include poetry (*The Arboriculturist*, 2010) and photography (*Around the Bend*, 2017). In 2020 he published the poetry collection *Time is Not a River*. For more information: [michaelminassian.com](http://michaelminassian.com)

**DANIEL O'REILLY** is an independent author, philosopher, publisher and media artist living in rural Catalonia, Spain with his wife, daughter and sausage dog Dexter. His current project is [archipelago] - an independent small press producing avant-garde fiction. Daniel has published short fiction in the *Bengaluru Review*, *Defunkt Magazine*, *Everything in Aspic Magazine*, *Chachalaca Review*, *The Room Journal of African Surrealism*, and *Black Flowers Literary Magazine*, plus poetry and theory in the *Cutbank Literary Magazine*, *Roots-Routes Magazine*, and *The Darentreader Literary Journal*. He is co-creator of The Unstitute, an online art lab and artists' co-operative, and has screened original video art in competitions and exhibitions in over 20 different countries worldwide.

**GEORGE OLIVER** is a PhD candidate at King's College London and freelance film writer. He has been writing short fiction since 2018 and his most recent publications include *Sweet Tree Review*, *Quail Bell Magazine*, *Tales from the Moonlit Path*. He was also shortlisted for Ouen Press' 2019 Short Story Competition; his work appears in their print collection *Zawadi & Other Short Stories* (ed. P. Comley, 2020).

**DENNIS VANNATTA** is a Pushcart and Porter Prize winner, with stories published in many magazines and anthologies, including *River Styx*, *Chariton Review*, *Boulevard*, and *Antioch Review*. His sixth collection of stories, *The Only World You Get*, was recently published by Et Alia Press.

**TYLER VAUGHN** is a poet and writer living and learning in central Kentucky. His work has appeared in *Thimble Magazine*, *Ponder Review*, and elsewhere. His habits include hiking, running, and shaming his friends for their smartphone use, but words are his whole world.