FEATURED ARTIST:
GLENN BUGGOON

When is the best time to do each thing?
MY PROCESS ISN’T ALWAYS COGNITIVE, SOMETIMES IT’S AS EASY AS TURNING BACK IN BLACK TO 10.

Who are the most important people to work with?
I WORK ALONE IN MY HEAD, WHERE THE MUMBLING PSYCHOPOMPS ARE PLAYING WHISPER DOWN THE LANE.

What is the most important thing to do at all times?
REACHING A SATISFYING COMPROMISE WITH MY SUBCONSCIOUS AND THE FINISHED ART.
ISSUE #2a
THE MONSTERS ISSUE

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Monsters are on the rise. People can’t seem to get enough of vampires lately, the giant monsters (Kaiju) are resurfacing, and zombies have a new lease on life. The reasons for this increased monster culture are hard to pin down. Maybe it’s social anxiety in the post-9/11 decade, or the conflict in Iraq—some think there’s an uptick in such fare during wartime. Perhaps it’s the economic downturn. The monster proliferation can be explained, in part, by exploring the meaning of monsters.

The uses of monsters vary widely. In our liberal culture, we dramatize the rage of the monstrous creature—and Frankenstein’s is a good example—then scold ourselves and our “intolerant society” for alienating the outcast in the first place. The liberal lesson of monsters is one of tolerance: We must overcome our innate scapegoating, our xenophobic tendencies. Of course, this is by no means the only interpretation of monster stories.

The medieval mind saw giants and mythical creatures as God’s punishments for the sin of pride. For the Greeks and Romans, monsters were prodigies—warnings of impending calamity.

After Freud, monster stories were considered cathartic journeys into our unconscious—everybody contains a Mr. Hyde, and these stories give us a chance to “walk on the wild side.” But in the denouement of most stories, the monster is killed and the psyche restored to civilized order. We can have our fun with the “torture porn” of Leatherface and Freddy Krueger or the erotic vampires, but this “vacation” to where the wild things are ultimately helps us return to our lives of quiet repression.

Any careful reading of Bram Stoker’s Dracula, for example, will reveal not only a highly sexualized description of blood drinking, but an erotic characterization of the count himself. Even John
Polidori’s original 1819 vampire tale *The Vampyre* describes the monster as a sexually attractive force. According to the critic Christopher Craft, Gothic monster tales—*Frankenstein*, *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, *Dracula*, Anne Rice’s *Vampire Chronicles*—rehearse a similar story structure. “Each of these texts first invites or admits a monster, then entertains and is entertained by monstrosity for some extended duration, until in its closing pages it expels or repudiates the monster and all the disruption that he/she/it brings,” he writes.

A crucial but often-ignored aspect of monsterology is the role those beasties play in our moral imaginations. Recent experimental moral psychology has given us useful tools for looking at the way people actually do their moral thinking. Brain imaging, together with hypothetical ethical dilemmas about runaway trolley cars, can teach us a lot about our real value systems and actions. But another way to get at this subterranean territory is by looking at our imaginative lives.

Monsters can stand as symbols of human vulnerability and crisis, and as such they play imaginative foils for thinking about our own responses to menace. Part of our fascination with serial-killer monsters is that we (and our loved ones) are potentially vulnerable to sadistic violence—never mind that statistical probability renders such an attack almost laughable. Irrational fears are decidedly unfunny. We are vulnerable to both the inner and the outer forces. Monster stories and films only draw us in when we identify with the persons who are being chased, and we tacitly ask ourselves: Would I board up the windows to keep the zombies out or seek the open water? Would I go down to the basement after I hear the thump, and if so, would I bring the butcher knife or the fireplace poker? What will I do when I am vulnerable?

The writer Max Brooks understands that dimension of monster stories very well. In books like *The Zombie Survival Guide* and *World War Z*, Brooks gives us painstaking, haunting, and hilarious advice about how best to meet our undead foes. For its April Fools’ edition, the otherwise serious journal *Archaeology* interviewed Brooks, asking him (tongue firmly in cheek): “Does the archaeological record hold any zombie-related lessons for us today? What can our ancestors teach us about meeting and, ultimately, defeating the undead menace?” Brooks replied: “The greatest lesson our ancestors have to teach us is to remain both vigilant and unafraid. We must endeavor to emulate the ancient Romans; calm, efficient, treating zombies as just one more item on a rather mundane checklist. Panic is the undead’s greatest ally, doing far more damage, in some cases, than the creatures themselves. The goal is to be prepared, not scared, to use our heads, and cut off theirs.” Brooks is unparalleled in parodying a well-worn monster tradition, but he wouldn’t be so funny if we weren’t already using monster stories to imagine strategies for facing enemies. The monster is a

You can’t know for sure how you will face a headless zombie, an alien face-hugger, an approaching sea monster, or a chainsaw-wielding psycho.

virtual sparring partner for our imagination. How will I avoid, assuage, or defeat my enemy? Will I have grace under pressure? Will I help others who are injured? Or will I be that guy who selfishly goes it alone and usually meets an especially painful demise?

In a significant sense, monsters are a part of our attempt to envision the good life or at least the secure life. Our ethical convictions do not spring fully-grown from our heads but must be developed in the context of real and imagined challenges. In order to discover our values, we
have to face trials and tribulation, and monsters help us imaginatively rehearse. Imagining how we will face an unstoppable, powerful, and inhuman threat is an illuminating exercise in hypothetical reasoning and hypothetical feeling.

You can’t know for sure how you will face a headless zombie, an alien face-hugger, an approaching sea monster, or a chainsaw-wielding psycho. Fortunately, you’re unlikely to be put to the test. But you might face similarly terrifying trials. You might be assaulted, be put on the front lines of some war, or be robbed, raped, or otherwise harassed and assailed. We live in the era of global terrorism. We may be lucky enough to have had no real acquaintance with such horrors, but we have all nonetheless played them out in our mind’s eye. And though we can’t know for sure how we’ll face an enemy soldier or a rapist, it doesn’t stop us from imaginatively formulating responses. We use the imagination in order to establish our own agency in chaotic and uncontrollable situations.

People frequently underestimate the role of art and imagery in their own moral convictions. Through art (e.g., Shelley’s Frankenstein, Hitchcock’s Psycho, King’s and Kubrick’s The Shining), artists convey moral visions. Audiences can reflect on them, reject or embrace them, take inspiration from them, and otherwise be enriched beyond the entertainment aspect. Good monster stories can transmit moral truths to us by showing us examples of dignity and depravity without preaching or proselytizing.

But imagining monsters is not just the stuff of fiction. Picture yourself in the following scenario. On the evening of August 7, 1994, Bruce Shapiro entered a coffee bar in New Haven, Connecticut. Shapiro and his friends had entered the cafe and were relaxing at a table near the front door. Approximately 15 other people were scattered around the bar, enjoying the evening. One of Shapiro’s friends went up to the bar to get drinks. “Suddenly there was chaos,” Shapiro explained in The Nation the next year, “as if a mortar shell had landed.” He looked up to see a flash of metal and people leaping away from a thin, bearded man with a ponytail. Chairs and tables were knocked over, and Shapiro protected one of his friends by pulling her to the ground.

In a matter of minutes, the thin man, Daniel Silva, had managed to stab and seriously injure seven people in the coffee shop. Using a six-inch hunting knife, Silva jumped around the room and attacked with lightning speed. Two of Shapiro’s friends were stabbed. After helping some others, Shapiro finally escaped the cafe. “I had gone no more than a few steps,” he recalled, “when I felt a hard punch in my back followed instantly by the unforgettable sensation of skin and muscle tissue parting. Silva had stabbed me about six inches above my waist, just beneath my rib cage.” Shapiro fell to the pavement and cried out, “Why are you doing this?” Standing over him, Silva plunged the knife into Shapiro’s chest, beneath his left shoulder. “You killed my mother” was the incoherent response that Silva offered his victim. Silva then pulled the knife out of Shapiro and rode off on a bicycle. He was soon apprehended and jailed.

Was Silva a monster? Not exactly. He was a mentally ill man who snapped and seemed to think that his mother had been wronged and felt some obscure need to avenge her. (She was, in fact, in a nearby hospital at the time, being treated for diabetes.) But from the perspective of

When fear is at a fever pitch, they always move on to the hero phase. Hercules slays the Hydra, George slays the dragon, medicine slays the alien virus, the stake and crucifix slay the vampire.
raw experience, this horrifying event shares many qualities with the imagined monster attack. Shapiro and his unfortunate company were suddenly presented with a deadly, irrational, powerful force that sent them reeling for mere survival. And yet the victims demonstrated an impressive ability to reach out and help each other. While the victims were leaping away from Silva’s angry knife blade, I suspect that he was for them, practically speaking, a true monster. I would never presume to correct them on that account. In such circumstances, many of us are sympathetic to the use of the monster epithet.

One of the fascinating aspects of Shapiro’s experience is how people responded to his story after the fact. I have been suggesting that monster stories are encapsulations of the human feeling of vulnerability—the monster stories offer us the “disease” of vulnerability and its possible “cures” (in the form of heroes and coping strategies). Few monster stories remain indefinitely in the “threat phase.” When fear is at a fever pitch, they always move on to the hero phase. Hercules slays the Hydra, George slays the dragon, medicine slays the alien virus, the stake and crucifix slay the vampire. Life and art mutually seek to conquer vulnerability. “Being a victim is a hard idea to accept,” Shapiro explained, “even while lying in a hospital bed with tubes in veins, chest, penis, and abdomen. The spirit rebels against the idea of oneself as fundamentally powerless.”

This natural rebellion may have prompted the most repeated question facing Shapiro when he got out of the hospital. When people learned of Daniel Silva’s attack on seven victims, they asked, “Why didn’t anyone try to stop him?” Shapiro always tried to explain how fast and confusing the attack was, but people failed to accept this. Shapiro, who was offended by the question, says, “The question carries not empathy but an implicit burden of blame; it really asks ‘Why didn’t you stop him?’ It is asked because no one likes to imagine oneself a victim.” We like to see ourselves as victors against every threat, but of course that’s not reality.

Believers in human progress, from the Enlightenment to the present, think that monsters are disappearing. Rationality will pour its light into the dark corners and reveal the monsters to be merely chimeric. A familiar upshot of the liberal interpretation of monsters is to suggest that when we properly embrace difference, the monsters will vanish. According to this view, the monster concept is no longer useful in the modern world. If it hangs on, it does so like an appendix—useful once but hazardous now.

I disagree. The monster concept is still extremely useful, and it’s a permanent player in the moral imagination because human vulnerability is permanent. The monster is a beneficial foe, helping us to virtually represent the obstacles that real life will surely send our way. As long as there are real enemies in the world, there will be useful dramatic versions of them in our heads.

In 2006, four armed men in Kandahar, Afghanistan, broke into the home of an Afghan headmaster and teacher named Malim Abdul Habib. The four men held Habib as they gathered his wife and children together, forcing them to watch as they stabbed Habib eight times and then decapitated him. Habib was the headmaster at Shaikh Mathi Baba high school, where he educated girls along with boys. The Taliban militants of the region, who are suspected in the beheading, see the education of girls as a violation of Islam (a view that is obviously not shared by the vast majority of Muslims). My point is simply this: If you can gather a man’s family together at gunpoint and force them to watch as you cut off his head, then you are a monster. You don’t just seem like one; you are one.

A relativist might counter by pointing out that American soldiers at Abu Ghraib tortured some innocent people, too. That, I agree, is true and astoundingly shameful, but it doesn’t prove there are no real monsters. It only widens the category...
and recognizes monsters on both sides of an issue. Two sides calling each other monsters doesn’t prove that monsters don’t exist. In the case of the American torturer at Abu Ghraib and the Taliban beheader in Afghanistan, both epithets sound entirely accurate.

My own view is that the concept of monster cannot be erased from our language and thinking. It cannot be replaced by other more polite terms and concepts, because it still refers to something that has no satisfactory semantic substitute or refinement. The term’s imprecision, within parameters, is part of its usefulness. Terms like “monster” and “evil” have a lot of metaphysical residue on them, left over from the Western traditions. But even if we neuter the term from obscure theological questions about Cain, or metaphysical questions about demons, the language still successfully expresses a radical frustration over the inhumanity of some enemy. The meaning of “monster” is found in its context, in its use.

As we consume an endless parade of monster movies and TV shows, and playfully celebrate Halloween, let us, by all means, enjoy our fright fest, but let’s not forget to take monsters seriously, too. I’ll be checking under my bed, as usual. But remember, things don’t strike fear in our hearts unless our hearts are already seriously committed to something (e.g. life, limb, children, ideologies, whatever). Ironically then, inhuman threats are great reminders of our own humanity. And for that we can all thank our zombies, vampires, ghosts, and goblins.
THIS WAS THE DAY THAT ENGULFED THE WORLD IN TERROR!

THE DEADLY MANTIS

STARRING
CRAIG STEVENS · ALIX TALTON · WILLIAM HOPPER
with FLORENZ AMES · DONALD RANDOLPH DIRECTED BY NATHAN JURAN
SCREENPLAY BY MARTIN BERKELEY · PRODUCED BY WILLIAM ALLAND
A UNIVERSAL-INTERNATIONAL PICTURE
setting the scene

Gloom, gallows. A taste for gothic. Perhaps a butler is creeping behind a hidden wall. The bare branches are spiderwebbed, an eerie light refracted from a dusty looking-glass. This is the hiss in the cellar, the mad mutter in the attic. What soft organ pulses beneath that antique carpet? Graffiti, grist. You find demonic symbols inked on the undersides of dinner plates. This is the beginning.

doomsday device

What hum? It's not the goggles that define the wickedness of his science, the imbalance of his equations. You might have tried to charm him away from that blinking switch, to breathe and breathe with the rhythm of firing pistons. He tells you this is the only way, that his measurements are exact, his methods precise as perfect nuclei. You hear the whir of mechanical wings, notice the pulleys are screaming.

a question of sanity

It's possible that you are the unreliable narrator. That you are a sociopath and a poisoner and you don’t even know it. This is evidenced by the thallium in a hidden teacup, by the scratches in the woodwork that say “bodies in the hog yard.” There was that day you tried to boil your pocketbook for supper, that day you bit the baby just to see how she’d taste. You’re feeling quite well, really. Later it will be revealed you are an epileptic, or a phantom.
the pretty, pretty monster

Really, this is about the erotic span of leathery wings against the satin sheets. About the lamia, the imp, the cute goblin girl in knee socks that buys you a chocolate milkshake. You’ve never cared for kisses, except when fanged women promise you eternity even though you know it’s all misdirection, that afterwards your heart will be roasted on the gas grill in the backyard, eaten with salt and pepper and a side of jasmine rice. You think she’d look pretty sexy with your blood smeared across her cheek.

the ambiguous ending

The music swells. You might hear a fetal heartbeat inside the villain’s burned-out shell, or realize the whole thing took place inside a hermetic bubble, that the gory bones were merely a dream symbol, or the imaginings of a coma patient. The meat changes at every meal, but the costumes remain the same. None of the dinner guests seem to notice.

Wait. There is something the protagonist doesn’t see: a shiver that appears in a waterglass or the blur of a swinging hatchet. This means something. This means he is wolf, or a little girl in canine skins. This means the monster isn’t the monster. This means there’s more to the archetype than we imagined.

My favorite monster must be Godzilla. Strangely, I think part of the reason he's my favorite is because that cheap rubber suit was so shitty. Even as a child I don't think I ever feared Godzilla was real, not even when I saw the American version with Raymond Burr droning on with his overwrought dialogue. I loved Godzilla because he always seemed both monstrous and utterly right. I understand he was a representation of America's atomic bomb drop, but that didn't mean much to me as a kid in Queens in the early eighties. Instead, Godzilla struck me as a giant child throwing one hellacious tantrum after another because motherfuckers had woken him up too early. I loved him, obviously, because he didn't seem all that different from me. And if I could have I would've burned down entire cities with my electric fire breath.

-Victor Lavalle (Author of THE DEVIL IN SILVER & BIG MACHINE)
They found the first one behind an abandoned barn. He was tangled up in a mess of barbed wire and leaking opaque purple liquid from holes in his stomach. Tim tried to call Tracy, but couldn’t get reception. Byrd hit him in the face with a stick. Charlotte screamed and snapped a few photos. All the man could do was moan, moan, moan. Then his jaw got unhinged from Byrd’s stick.

“Hoorar? Ooorhar?” he said.

They left it there and went back to the house to get Tracy. Tim kept looking over his shoulder, but nothing burst through the leaves.

It was a really spectacular July day in the country, so hot that even breathing seemed to burn your insides. Clouds of nearly-invisible insects hovered everywhere. The four friends were taking a two-week summer vacation in Charlotte’s family’s winter cabin. Three months earlier, Charlotte had peed on a stick to confirm she was pregnant. They’d all cleared up time to celebrate before real life really took over.

The reports of the disease were just starting when they’d driven out of the city, but each time one came on they’d hit scan until they got music again.

“Tracy, we found one of those moaning dead guys!” Tim shouted.

“He means undead guys,” Byrd said.

Tracy was tanning on the roof. She looked down at the upturned faces of her friends.

“I thought he was just sick at first and tried to help him and he clawed my shoulder like an asshole!” Charlotte said.
“That’s awful,” Tracy said. “We need to lock the doors and search for weapons!”

“I wouldn’t worry about it,” Byrd said. “He was pretty trapped in that barbed wire.”

“Well, let’s get Charlotte to the hospital before she turns.”

“Don’t be dramatic, Tracy. It was a scratch, not a bite. Plus, I have this amazing balm made with aloe and goji berries that can, no joke, cure anything.”

Tracy climbed down the ladder and went inside. Byrd was rubbing sunscreen up and down his arms.

“Tim and I can take care of him later. It will be a bonding experience.” Byrd swung an arm around Tim’s neck and gave him a noogie.

Charlotte came out of the bathroom in a neon green bikini with Band-Aids on her shoulder.

“I thought we could take a dip in the lake. It’s more like a pond, I guess, but it has a zipline my dad strung up when we were kids. I know, I know. Hashtag-tomboy hashtag-redneck. It’s fun though!”

“That does sound nice,” Tracy said uneasily.

“I was hoping to get some work done,” Tim said. Tim was insisting on working on his novel, or pretending to as far as Tracy could tell, even on vacation.

“Work in the shade, dummy,” Byrd said.

Charlotte picked at her shoulder. “That asshole’s fingers were disgusting. I’d like to think that even if I was undead, I’d practice some basic hygiene.”

“Why not do it?” Tracy said. “I’m glad my parents raised me around trees and animals.”

Charlotte sat up. “Oh, I meant, like rhetorically. I’m not raising my kid to be cultureless hillbillies. No offense.”

Across the pond Byrd and Tim were tossing a football around. Back in high school, Byrd had been the star quarterback, Charlotte was a cheerleader, and Tim had been the second-string punter—at least until he injured his knee junior year. Tracy didn’t join the group until Tim started dating her in college and she still felt like something of an outsider.

Charlotte drummed her belly and hummed a Beyoncé song. Tracy closed her eyes and tried to imagine the warmth of the sun sinking through her skin and cooking her evenly all the way through.

“I think the goal of life is more life,” Charlotte said suddenly and philosophically. “When are you and Tim going to get started on that?”

“We haven’t really talked about it.”

Tracy had always been told you would see anything you were thinking about in the clouds, but none of them looked like babies just then.

“When our mothers were girls, you could just pop them out whenever. But with the cost of help and private schools, you really have to plan these days.”

Charlotte rolled over on her stomach. Her scratched-up shoulder was a few inches from Tracy’s face. Most of the Band-Aids had fallen off in the water. There was a shiny yellow sheen
developing over the wound. A small dragonfly alighted on it and Tracy shooed it away.

“Ah, listen to me,” Charlotte said. “If I turn into one of those mothers who always blabbers mindlessly about her kid, promise me that you’ll shoot me in the face.”

“Should I bring a knife or something?”

“This baby ought to do her,” Byrd said, patting the shotgun.

They waved goodbye to Tracy and Charlotte, who were sipping margaritas—one virgin, one double tequila—out of jam jars on the porch.

“You boys be careful,” Charlotte said.

“If that tequila’s gone when we get back, I’m going to be pissed,” Byrd said with a smile.

The road to the cabin was made of dusty gravel and their feet crunched as they walked along. The sun was dipping behind the blue mountains and nighttime creatures were awaking with chirps and growls. It was a little chilly and Tim wished he had brought a jacket.

“This reminds me of the first time my dad took me hunting,” Byrd said. “He didn’t even tell me ahead of time, just woke up at night and handed me face paint. I think I was eight years old. It was goose season. When we fired on them, hundreds flew into the air, and their wings and squawks were so loud I was too scared to be excited. In fact, I think I peed a little in my camo pants.”

Byrd swung the shotgun around in front of him.

“Still, there is something about that first kill.”

“I never went hunting.” Tim said.

“Oh, right. I always forget your mother is a vegetarian.”

“Vegan. But sometimes at the beach my father would secretly give me a crab hook. I tried to cook one with a lighter and threw up all over the pier. I guess that’s pretty similar.”

“Not at all, bro. Crabs don’t scream.”

They were coming around the bend near the old barn. Tim could hear a resigned groan above the crickets and hoots of owls. Byrd placed the shotgun gently into Tim’s hands.

“Here,” Byrd said in a fatherly tone. “I want you to do it.”

Tim’s father had managed a hedge fund and never understood Tim’s love of sports. “Son,” he’d said once, “you are in your prime education-maximizing period. What’s your ROI if you get injured?” When Tim did get injured, snapping his ACL like an old rubber band, his father brought a stack of investment guides to the hospital.

Byrd and Tim walked off the road and onto the dirt path that led around the barn. Only the very last curve of the sun was left above the hills. Tim was surprised at how heavy a shotgun could be. He saw a pale bluish head rocking back and forth beyond the bushes. The man was standing in a pile of rotted firewood and barbed wire that he must have wrapped himself in trying to escape. His eyes were so sunken you could barely see them.

As they came closer the man started shaking. His jaw was unhinged and a frothy yellow liquid dripped down his chin. He stretched one arm out toward them. Flaps of skin were hanging off of it and shaking slightly in the wind.

“He looks kind of sad,” Tim said. “Maybe we should try to help him?”

“You can’t help anyone who doesn’t want to help themselves, especially when their brain has been eaten away by an undead plague.”
As they came closer the man started shaking. His jaw was unhinged and a frothy, yellow liquid dripped down his chin. He stretched one arm out toward them. Flaps of skin were hanging off of it and shaking slightly in the wind.

“You have the safety on.” Byrd reached over and pushed a button on the side of the gun.

The only time Tim had ever used a gun was at summer camp and that was a .22 and soda cans. He pushed the butt into his shoulder like his counselor had taught him and squeezed the trigger.

The dead man’s hand transformed into red confetti and a large hole appeared in his upper chest. The shotgun popped out of Tim’s hands.

“The brain!” Byrd yelled. Flecks of blood and blue skin covered his whole body. “You were supposed to shoot him in the fucking brain!”

The man was spinning now, digging himself deeper into the wires, one arm flapping around like a tetherball.

“Sorry, I told you I’ve never done this before.”

Byrd bent down and picked the shotgun up.

“Hey,” Byrd said. “Sorry I yelled. It’s just that Charlotte bought me this polo for my birthday and she already complains I don’t wear it enough.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Nah, forget it. I’m just tense with the baby and everything.” Byrd took the gun and fired the other shell into the head, which erupted backwards against the barn. “Let’s go wash up and watch a movie with the gals.”

Byrd and Charlotte were getting married in November, a few months before the baby was due. Byrd had borrowed enough money from his parents to buy a ring with two silver dolphins twirling around a giant diamond. Charlotte had always loved dolphins, and had two of them leaping over a heart tattooed on her left thigh. Everyone knew Byrd and Charlotte were bound to tie the knot one of these days; the baby only sped things up.

Tim wondered what it meant that he and Tracy were out here celebrating Charlotte and Byrd’s baby and wedding. Did Byrd and Charlotte think they should get married too? Tim and Tracy had been dating for three years, but somehow marriage seemed like a stopping point. Tracy was still in law school and Tim was draining his trust fund trying to finish his novel.

And what did Tracy think? Tim never knew anymore. They still had fun in public, but when their apartment door closed it was nothing but fights or silence. Sometimes he got so angry he just wanted to scream at her. It felt like the two of them were just stumbling along, unsure of where they were going or why.

“Well, shit. Would you look at that?”

The four friends were eating penne arrabiata on the porch. They all looked where Byrd was pointing. Out beyond the small vegetable garden, they saw a hunched-over man. He knocked over the chicken wire fence and trudged through the small garden slowly, emerging with tomato vines wrapped around his right leg.

“What the hell?” Byrd said with a mouth half-full of noodles. “Those were heirloom.”

“Get inside!” Tracy yelled, jumping out of her seat.

“Hold on a second,” Byrd said. “We shouldn’t have to have our meal ruined just because he failed to stay alive.”

The man didn’t seem to be paying any attention to his surroundings. He was moving in a general direction, but constantly bumping into the sides of trees, chairs, and other objects in the yard. He gave a loud groan, righted himself, and moved onwards.
“Look, he’s not even coming at us.”

Indeed, the man’s trajectory was past the house on the other side from the porch. The sight of him made Tracy shudder. His skin was purple in the evening light. There were small red marks all over his legs as if he had been nipped by squirrels.

“Do you need any help?” Tracy called out.

The man didn’t seem to register her words and stumbled out of view in his slow, sad gait.

The friends sat quietly for a bit, then resumed eating their food. Merle Haggard was playing on the portable speakers. Byrd screwed open another bottle of wine.

“I’d like to propose a toast,” Byrd said. “To good friends, good eating, and no clients boring us with all their problems.”

“Amen to that,” Tracy said.

“And to the two of you,” Tim said. “Soon to be three!”

Charlotte didn’t say anything. She was slouched in her chair with sweat staining the upper half of her yellow blouse. Tracy thought she looked drunk even though she hadn’t had any wine.

“Do you need some water, Charlotte?” Tracy said.

Charlotte leaned forward and vomited blood across the picnic table.

Over the next few days they saw five more of them. They seemed like they had been normal people before the disease. Some had glasses and sun hats on. One was only a little kid who kept bumping into the sliding glass doors of the porch. Tracy swatted at his face with a broom until he moved off through the woods. Another got her hand stuck in the crook of a split tree trunk and stayed there all evening, groaning. In the morning, Tim found a torn-off hand covered in ants.

Other than that, the undead just slowly walked on through. They didn’t seem to have any place in particular to get to, but they were getting there nonetheless.

“We have to call a hospital, Byrd!” Tracy said. She was standing outside of Byrd and Charlotte’s room. Tim was sitting on the couch, Googling info on zombism. He found a long list of symptoms on WebMD, but the treatments were all unsubstantiated or involved decapitation.

“Goddamnit, I said I’m taking care of it.”

Loud thumps came from the room. Tracy frowned at Tim. The disease was spreading exponentially and the whole state was overwhelmed. Even if the police came, Tim thought they’d probably just shoot Charlotte from the passenger window and drive off again.

A few minutes later, Byrd slid out of the bedroom door. He locked it behind him.

“Okay, under control,” Byrd said. He gave Tracy and Tim a thin smile. His clothes were disheveled and his hair was matted with gray goo. “Hey, what do you guys want to do? Take a hike or a swim maybe?”

“I think we need to deal with this situation,” Tracy said.

“I’m not going to be micromanaged on this, Tracy.”

“Well, I think we should have a vote. Right, Tim?”

Byrd punched the wall, leaving a large hole.

“God fucking Christ shit!” he said. “She is tied up to the damn support beam! She isn’t going anywhere. We are not taking a vote on whether Charlotte’s head gets blown off or not!”

Tim was worried about Tracy. Byrd marched
around the house like nothing was going on, but Tracy barely left the guest room. When she did, it was with a kitchen knife and wild eyes. At night, they could hear moans from the room next door. Tracy would cry and Tim did not know what to do. She would grab him and kiss him and force him quickly inside her before he was even hard, crying the whole time.

Tracy tiptoed back into the room.

“Grab your bag and let's go!” she whispered.

“Huh?” Tim said, slowly opening his eyes. “I thought we were leaving on Saturday?”

“I stole Byrd's car keys. Do you want to get out of this death trap or not?”

Tim was sitting up now. He scratched his head and walked into the bathroom to urinate.

“How will we get Charlotte in the car?” he said.

“That thing isn’t Charlotte and we aren’t bringing it.”

“But she's your BFF.”

Tracy had to keep shushing Tim as they walked through the house.

“Huffington Post said it was safer in remote locations.”

“Not if your remote location already has one growling in the bedroom next to yours!”

Tracy drove slowly up the road, hoping not to wake Byrd.

Tim reached over and fiddled with the radio. The only station that came on had a Christian preacher singing a hymn about the end times. Tracy pushed the rubber power button off.

The top of the driveway was blocked by a car crash.

“There's got to be a way around it,” Tracy said.

Tracy turned on the high beams to get a better look. That's when she noticed the bodies in the car. She turned the headlights off. She started to cry and after a minute Tim put a hand on her neck and rubbed the soft hairs there. He stopped when he heard a dog barking.

“Oh my God, there's a dog trapped in there.”

“Can dogs be zombies?” Tim said. He started to open the passenger door, but the dog's barks got louder. They heard the sound of an oncoming car and loud whoops.

“What the hell is going on anymore?” Tracy said.

There were two loud blasts of sawed-off-shotguns as a group of screaming men in hunting gear drove by. The bodies in the car started to thrash around. They seemed to be trapped in their seatbelts.

“One more pass, boys!”

The tires screeched and roared by as three men braced in the back of a pick-up truck let loose another volley of gunfire. All of the windows of the crashed cars erupted and something soft and wet landed on the windshield of Byrd's car.

“Holy shit!” Tim said.

That’s when she noticed the bodies in the car. She turned the headlights off. She started to cry and after a minute Tim put a hand on her neck and rubbed the soft hairs there.

Tracy watched as the right side of the dog's face slid down the windshield, one large eye seeming to scan the length of her body.

She put the car in reverse and backed down the driveway.
The internet connection went down and three days later the TV. The landline had been giving them nothing but a monotone beep for over a week. Tracy took the radio into her and Tim's room and listened to it every night for news. Mostly they got static, but every two hours the hiss would dry up for one of two pre-recorded announcements. The first urged calm and recommended various home treatments if licensed medical practitioners could not be reached. The second message urged calm and two bullets from no further than twenty feet away to any victim's cerebral cortex.

Tim stumbled upon Byrd in the hammock by the woodshed. He was swinging sadly with one foot on the ground.

“I thought there might be some canned goods in the shed.”

“This was the first place.” Byrd sniffled. He moved his legs for Tim to sit down.

“What?” Tim said.

“Sophomore year, when we all came up here for spring break instead of going to Florida with everyone else. When you guys were watching old slash movies with her parents, Charlotte and I snuck out here and drank a bottle of Ketel One. When she pulled her shirt off, her breasts looked like . . . Christ. What the fuck are we going to do, man?”

They sat there swinging. Even though he was a writer, or trying to be, Tim didn't know what to say. He tried to think about what his coach would tell them after a big loss.

“Sometimes things look bad, and they might even be bad, but the important thing is to pick yourself up and get ready for the next play that life throws at you,” he said.

Byrd cocked his head at Tim. The wind was warm and rattled the ripe leaves above their heads. In the distance, something moaned.

“What in the shit fuck does that mean?”

“Hi, Tracy.”

“Oh, God!” Tracy jumped back against the laundry machine. She had been searching for a flashlight since the power had blinked off that morning.

“Do you ever wonder what love is?” Byrd said. He had dark bags under his eyes and his clothes were dirty and filled with tears and holes.

“I have a knife,” Tracy said.

“Is love doing whatever you can do to synergize with someone? Is it giving up your own self to be what they need you to be?” Byrd was looking past Tracy at the rows of chemicals and tools. His shoulders were slumped and he scratched at his neck with one long fingernail. “Coach always said love was sacrifice. He was talking about football, but is it the same thing with people?”

Tracy felt the terrible sadness that had been living in her for weeks rise up into her face.

“I don’t know, Byrd,” she said. “I don’t know anything anymore.”

Byrd jiggled the door knob and shouted, “Hey, the door is locked!”

Tim opened the door, then sat back on the bed with Tracy.

Byrd was wearing a dress shirt and a tie and his blond hair was greased up and combed back. He looked like he hadn't slept in days. His skin was covered in scabs.

Tracy held onto Tim's hand so hard her nails cut little semi-circles into his palm.

“Guys, I just want you to know what amazing friends you have been and how much I have
treasured life’s journey with you, even though the journey turned onto a burning road of shit. I always thought of you like a little brother, Tim. Tracy, I know Charlotte was going to surprise you later by asking you to be maid of honor. Isn’t it crazy we have known each other for twelve years?”

He stayed at the door and gulped in his throat. Tim and Tracy didn’t say anything.

“Tim, buddy, I’m sorry I broke the bro code and slept with Tracy. You two are welcome to stay here as long as you can. Maybe you can even build a life together while everything else is falling apart. Just remember that love is the key.”

Byrd surveyed them for one last time, sniffled, and closed the door.

“What?” Tim shouted.

“Oh my God,” Tracy said. “What is he going to do?”

“You slept with Byrd?”

“Tim, we have to stop him.” Tracy jumped up and headed for the door.

They could hear thumping and sporadic moans from the room next door.

“When did this happen?”

“I don’t know. He was so sad. It just happened.”

“Jesus Christ,” Tim said. He lay back on the bed. “My best fucking friend.”

“This isn’t the time, Tim!”

But Tim stayed there on the bed, moaning. Tracy stayed with him. They listened to a door opening and the sounds of two people shuffling down the hall and out into the lush woods.

The undead continued to come and go. Some stumbled to the North and others ambled towards the South. Tracy thought they were different ones each time until she saw the man who’d ripped up their garden crawling across the back yard. He was missing a foot, part of his rib cage, and both eyes, but the dried-up vines were still wrapped around his leg.

Tim came into the living room holding a dusty box.

“Hey, I found this jigsaw puzzle.”

Tracy was sitting on one of the only chairs that hadn’t been used to reinforce the doors. She had the shotgun between the chair legs.

“That’s great, Tim.”

“Look you don’t have to be sarcastic,” Tim said. “I’m just trying to be proactive.”

Tracy saw something at the edge of the woods and jumped for the gun, but it was only a baby deer. She sat back down and looked at Tim. He looked so angry and sad, but she didn’t know what to say. They had no electricity, no home they could return to, and only half a grocery bag of food left. She hadn’t done anything she’d wanted to do in life. She hadn’t lived in Venice, she hadn’t gotten her J.D., she hadn’t even finished War and Peace yet for Christ’s sake. For all she knew, Venice didn’t even exist anymore.

“Fuck it,” Tim said after a while. “I’m going to go root through the storage room in the basement.”

“No, wait,” she said, forcing a smile. “I’ll come with you. Maybe we can find a flare gun or something.”

A week later, while searching the forest’s edge for kindling, Tim was injured when Byrd, Charlotte, and a crawling, half-formed blue fetus leapt out from behind a sycamore tree, grappled him to the ground, and sunk in their teeth.
Tracy found Tim crawling toward the front porch, bleeding and moaning. She screamed and locked the door. Tim heaved his body against the wood. Tracy watched through the peephole and cried for a long time.

She poured a glass of wine she had distilled out of wild blackberries and turned on the TV, even though it was just static. She could still hear Tim’s muffled thumps. Her hands were shaking and some of the wine in her glass spilled down her arm. It dried there in dark red streaks.

Tracy thought about her life with Tim. They had met, drunk, at a party on her first weekend as a college freshman. He had fallen asleep on top of her two minutes into sex and she could barely breathe. His warm body was comforting though. Second semester they had the same Sociology class and he asked her out and she thought he seemed sweet and things snowballed along in the way they do. She had even thought they might get married since they’d been together for so long and she didn’t know what else to do.

Tim had always been nice to her, always buying her little bundles of flowers that died in a day or two. She felt she had never been as nice to him. She liked to spend her time by herself and he always seemed angry about how often she couldn’t fit him into her schedule.

If she ignored Tim, maybe he would crawl away and go where all the other undead people were going. Maybe that would be the place where he could be happy.

For the next five mornings, Tracy awoke to the thumps of Tim. She realized that he was never going to go away. He was going to keep thumping against the wood, compelled by some brainless inertia, until he turned into mush on the doorstep.

The sun was shining angrily through a hole in the curtain. After eating the last of the oatmeal, she snuck out the side door and went to the shed. She grabbed the largest weapon she could lift and walked back to the front porch.

Tim felt pain. Saw Tracy and Tracy was sad. Tracy was sad and causing pain to Tim. Causing pain with sharp metal thing.

Tim held up hand. Tracy brought down metal thing and hand fell off. Held up other hand. Same thing.

Tim didn’t understand. Tim didn’t understand the pain or the sadness. Never understood whole life. Tim thought the pain and sadness would never stop. Hurt all over and wanting to hurt other things. Always like this. Every day he remember. Why? Angry at sad and pain. On and on.

Theodora Goss

Theodora Goss was born in Hungary and spent her childhood in various European countries before her family moved to the United States. Although she grew up on the classics of English literature, her writing has been influenced by an Eastern European literary tradition in which the boundaries between realism and the fantastic are often ambiguous. Goss has published numerous books, most recently The Thorn and the Blossom (2012), a novella in a two-sided accordion format, and the poetry collection Songs for Ophelia (2014). She has been a finalist for the Nebula, Locus, Crawford, Selun, and Mythopoeic Awards, as well as on the Tiptree Award Honor List, and her short story “Singing of Mount Abora” won the World Fantasy Award.

The Fin-de-Siècle Monster

London is a time-machine. As you walk through the city, you move through different eras: there is the house where Dickens lived, the hospital where Keats received his medical training, Shakespeare's theater. You experience all the Londons that have existed, superimposed as in a palimpsest.

I was in London to research a particular time: the fin-de-siècle, that transitional period between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries with the suspiciously French name. It was the time before everything changed, but change was already in the sooty London air. Women were adopting rational dress and agitating for the vote. Omnibuses were being replaced by electric trams, and London's streets would soon be free of the horse-dung that had clogged them for centuries. The Kodak was starting to capture reality as it had never been captured before, to fix the moment on film. In Austria, Freud was discovering the unconscious, and in England itself, Hardy and Wilde were inventing what would become literary modernism. I wanted to write a novel set in that era—a novel about monsters. The fin-de-siècle was a great era of monsters: Mr. Hyde slinking through the Soho streets, Dracula stalking his prey in Piccadilly Circus. (Could he have used the first tube line? It was already built by the time he arrived in London.) Dr. Moreau, hounded from London by anti-vivisectionists, sailed to a distant island to create his Beast Men shortly before Wells's Martians arrived to feed on humanity. This was the era in which mummies such as Stoker's Queen Tera or Conan Doyle's nameless Lot No. 249 came to life—no wonder, since it was also the age of archaeological digs in Egypt. Even Sherlock Holmes battled the Sussex Vampire.
It makes sense that monsters were prominent at the fin-de-siècle. The era inherited two important but countervailing nineteenth-century tendencies: the tendency to classify, and also to resist classification. The first of these tendencies was embodied in the Great Exhibition of 1851. In London, I saw traces of the Great Exhibition everywhere. In letters Prince Albert had written about the construction of the Crystal Palace, which housed its exhibits. In paintings of the exhibition halls filled with visitors, six million of whom came to see what was, despite its international character, a monument to British industrial superiority. Even in the geography of Hyde Park, where the Crystal Palace had stood. The Victoria and Albert Museum is filled with items that were displayed there. The Great Exhibition haunts London, like a ghost.

It was, at its metal and glass heart, one of the great classificatory enterprises, like Diderot's and d'Alembert's Encyclopédie a century earlier. The Great Exhibition aimed to be both comprehensive and systematic: the exhibits were divided into four categories, each containing numerous subcategories, a classificatory system embodied in a three-volume Official Descriptive and Illustrated Catalogue. We can think of this ambitious task, the systematization of all knowledge, as the great nineteenth-century enterprise. George Eliot mocked it in Middlemarch: Edward Casaubon's attempt to create a Key to All Mythologies is a pedantic exercise that threatens to destroy her heroine, Dorothea Brooke. However, it was the basis for Herbert Spencer's tomes on philosophy, sociology, and ethics, as well as Lyell's Geological Evidences of the Antiquity of Man and Darwin's On the Origin of Species. Walking through the Great Exhibition, visitors would see a world that was ordered, logical, comprehensive—and under British imperial rule. Darwin's theory of evolution was particularly helpful to the classificatory enterprise: after the publication of On the Origin of Species, evolutionary status became the classificatory standard par excellence. The Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso hypothesized that criminals could be identified by their physical characteristics because, like the troglodytic Mr. Hyde, they were evolutionarily closer to apes.

Around the same time, another sort of exhibition was becoming increasingly popular in London and throughout the English countryside: the freak show. Freak shows have existed since the medieval period, when congenital abnormalities were regarded as omens—signs from God that required interpretation. By the nineteenth century, they had lost that significance: monsters, whether two-headed calves or Joseph Merrick, the Elephant Man, had become objects of scientific curiosity, studied by researchers into teratology, the science of congenital abnormalities. They had also become popular entertainment. The transportation systems that brought a third of the British population to the Crystal Palace also allowed freak show performers to travel throughout the countryside. If the Crystal Palace represented order, logic, and imperial rule, the freak show represented what did not fit comfortably within categories—what was taxonomically problematic. Freak show performers broke through nineteenth-century categorical boundaries: like Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy and the numerous bearded ladies of the circus sideshows, they were both human and animal, male and female—even, in the case of Chang and Eng, the Siamese Twins, both one and two. The freak show also had an imperial component, since some performers, rather than having congenital abnormalities, were simply from different cultures: crowds flocked to see the Aztec Children, the Small-Footed Chinese Lady and Family, and the Zulu Kafirs. The foreigner was also identified with the freak.

Although I saw traces of the Great Exhibition everywhere I went in London, to see the remnants of the freak shows, I had to go to the Royal College of Surgeons. There, on the second floor, you can still see a medical collection assembled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that
contains examples of congenital abnormalities: a two-headed chick, a four-tailed lizard. Such examples were used to demonstrate problems in development to medical students. However, the collection also contains the brain of the mathematician Charles Babbage, as well as the skeletons of the criminal Jonathan Wild and Charles Byrne, known as the Irish Giant, who worked on the freak show circuit. The genius, the criminal, and the freak were linked in the nineteenth-century imagination: they were outside the ordinary, the classifiable—and therefore monstrous. Taxonomic instability was part of the freak show’s appeal. Freaks such as Joseph Merrick and Julia Pastrana, who was advertised as the Bear Woman because her body was covered with hair, crossed taxonomic boundaries, including the boundary between human and animal that had already been problematized by Darwinian evolutionary theory. Monsters, whether mythological creatures or nineteenth-century freak show performers, have always been boundary-crossers and disruptors of categories. Freak show advertisements emphasized this volatility. One of the terms most frequently used for freaks was “nondescript,” a term implying that the freak could not be adequately defined or categorized.

However, the impulse to categorize the monstrous is as old as the monster itself. Freak show advertising could also be used to contain the freak within a classificatory system. One of the most interesting and popular performers on the freak show circuit was Krao, the “Original Missing Link.” I came across her story while researching my novel, which takes place in London at the fin-de-siècle. The novel is about female monsters, including Mr. Hyde’s daughter and a Beast Woman created by Dr. Moreau. In her cultural context, Krao was a female monster: she was first exhibited in 1883, when she was only seven, at the Westminster Aquarium, a show space in London that featured theatrical performances, concerts, and freak show acts. She had been brought to London from what was then known as Siam. Like Julia Pastrana, she was one of the hairy women; her distinguishing characteristic was the fine, dark hair that covered her body. The showman G.A. Farini claimed that she was “Living Proof of Darwin’s Theory of the Descent of Man.”

By placing Krao within an evolutionary narrative, Farini could both categorize her and emphasize categorical instability. She was a modern atavism, an evolutionary throwback who demonstrated the validity of Darwinian evolution while reinforcing the evolutionary superiority of her English viewers. However, she also functioned as a source of frisson, reminding them of the scandalous Mr. Darwin and their own primate ancestry. Freak shows were so fascinating precisely because they provided a combination of discomfort and reassurance, calibrated to the audience’s cultural expectations. Krao was presented and advertised in different ways depending on what the audience expected to see. In England, she was often dressed as a middle-class girl, in a dress and boots, although her arms and legs were left exposed to show their hairiness. Contemporary newspapers noted her good manners and command of English, stating that since she had come to England and realized the benefits of civilization, she no longer wished to return to

If the Crystal Palace represented order, logic, and imperial rule, the freak show represented what did not fit comfortably within categories—what was taxonomically problematic.
her own country. In France, she was more likely
to be shown as an exotic and sexualized woman: 
more of her body was exposed and her primitiv-
ism was emphasized. The Darwinian narrative 
was less important than an image of savage life 
harking back to Rousseau. Krao spent her life on 
the freak show circuit, eventually marrying Farini 
and appearing with both Barnum and Bailey and 
the Ringling Brothers. To the end of her life, she 
claimed to be the “Original Missing Link,” 
presumably to distinguish herself from subsequent 
imitators.

There is one thing missing from Krao’s story: her 
voice. The monster is rarely allowed to speak. We 
are sometimes given glimpses of the monster’s point 
of view: from the perspective of Le Fanu’s vampire 
Carmilla, her desire to feed on Laura is an expression 
of love. But the narrative remains firmly in Laura’s 
voice. Before the twentieth century, it is only in Mary 
Shelley’s Frankenstein that the monster is given his 
own narrative—which causes us to wonder whether 
he is a monster at all, and whether his creator, Fran-
kenstein, is the more monstrous of the two. Speech-
lessness is an aspect of the monstrous because 
monsters are expected to signify: they exist so we can 
read meaning into them. They exist for us, as Krao 
exists for her nineteenth-century audience. What 
did that little girl brought so far from home think and 
feel? What did she see when she looked into a mir-
ror? Why did she marry Farini? Was she upset when 
other performers claimed to be the missing link? It 
marks a fundamental change in human culture that, 
after two world wars, as in John Gardner’s Grendel or 
the movie Shrek, we let the monster speak.

Since Julia Kristeva formulated her theory of 
abjection, it has been used as a theoretical frame-
work to think about the monster: it implies that we 
produce the monster out of what is abjected, what 
we reject in the process of defining the human. 
Monsters are a way of policing our own boundar-
ies. No wonder they became so popular during 
the fin-de-siècle, when those boundaries were be-
ing called into question. However, this framework 
does not account for the full complexity of how 
the monster signifies. As we see in Mr. Hyde, 
the Beast Men, and Krao, the monster is always 
hybrid: it is both human and inhuman, both other 
and us. That hybridity is what makes the monster 
fearsome and fascinating at once—we desire it 
(remember that Krao was presented as sexual in 
France, that Mina Harker does not want to resist 
Dracula) and recognize that it is never entirely out 
there, but also in here, like Ridley Scott’s aliens. 
When Edward Prendick returns to England after 
his stay on Dr. Moreau’s island, he sees English-
men as Beast Men. We may use monsters to 
reinforce boundaries, but by their very nature, 
monsters threaten boundaries, showing us they 
can be crossed.

Each era creates the monsters that most signi-
fy—that mean in terms of its central practical and 
philosophical concerns. Frankenstein’s monster 
responds to Locke and the French Revolution. 
Dracula invades England during a time when the 
British Empire seemed strongest, but was already 
starting to crumble. Dr. Moreau’s Beast Men 
reflect, almost too obviously, contemporary con-
cerns with theories of evolutionary change. What 
about the monsters of our fin-de-siècle, since we 
are living at our own turn of the century? They 
are not different in kind—we are inundated with 
vampires, mummies, and werewolves (literary 
versions of Jo-Jo the Dog-Faced Boy, a Russian 
named Fedor Jeftichew who was born with hyper-
trichosis and performed as a freak for Barnum 
and Bailey). But we treat them differently. Our 
vampires are both eternally attractive rock stars 
. . . and counting Muppets. We both identify 
with and tame the monster, while simultaneously 
creating a new narrative of the monstrous—serial 
killers and terrorists are our villains. They are not 
monsters, although we sometimes use that term 
for them: they are human, not hybrids. Perhaps 
they indicate that what we now fear, more than an 
other out there, is ourselves and our own capac-
ity for evil. Two world wars have certainly taught 
us that. It makes sense, culturally, that Hellboy
would join forces with the Americans to battle Nazis: in a battle against the worse of our own species, the monsters are on our side.

Our willingness to listen when the monster speaks indicates an openness to hybridity and ambiguity, to voices that tell us what we may not want to hear. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, we have problems that did not exist at the end of the nineteenth, when environmental degradation did not threaten global life. But our culture is also open to alternative discourses, to ways of being that used to be identified as monstrous when Wilde was compared in *Punch* to an animalistic Mr. Wild of Borneo. Although London is haunted by the Great Exhibition, it has become a monstrous city. As I walked down its streets, what I saw and heard was not just hybrid but polyvalent: a continual mixture of languages and cultures. If the Crystal Palace is indicative of its past, its future is presided over by Norman Foster’s skyscraper, a giant egg that looks as though it is about to crack open and release the sorts of aliens imagined by Wells and Scott. In that future, at once frightening and exhilarating, we will have to acknowledge that the boundary between self and other has always been something we create. How we perceive and present monsters will continue to change in response to our cultural needs—but monsters will always signify. They will always function as cultural barometers that allow us to gauge who we think we are, what we do or do not wish to become. Because monsters are always, finally, about us.

Author’s note: In this essay, I deliberately use the word “monster” to describe performers on the freak show circuit. The appropriate scholarly term for a professional freak show performer is “freak,” a word that acknowledges the extent to which performers were social outsiders, as well as the agency they often had in creating and directing their own careers. However, the late nineteenth-century medical term for a person born with congenital abnormalities was “monster.” I use the word to emphasize how freak show performers were perceived and their connection with contemporary literary monsters. If you would like to learn more about freak shows, and Krao specifically, please consult Nadja Durbach’s *Spectacle of Deformity: Freak Shows and Modern British Culture*, which first introduced me to Krao and her story.
He knows his wife will never be able to tell lies again.

All night long, the weary sound of water dripping from the air conditioner, slowly eroding into coral dreams. He awoke from the sleep which had borne him like an ocean, and saw the buildings outside, packed cheek to cheek. People squeeze breathlessly through the cracks in the city, eager to find a Christmas tree in the shopping mall, though it was only August. One of the bulbs on its plastic branches has a burnt-out filament, a blind eye amid brilliant illuminations.

Outside the mall, the stagnant air had lain beached too long—it felt as if all things had come to an end. People looked up and the tight-shut, overcast sky opened its toothless mouth, spattering their faces with rain. He opened his umbrella and the raindrops pelted down on it like deafening bullets. He sealed himself inside his house—the thrumming of the downpour extending to every pane of glass.

“It doesn't matter how much I wash my eyes, things still get twisted out of shape until I can't tell what they are.” “I can feel my brain shrinking like a dried-out sponge.” “Faraway things are too small to make out.”

His wife's complaints had been fragments of countless lies floating around in his head—fragments he hadn't been able to reassemble into a complete picture.

One morning, he realized his wife's sleek, pale head was completely without hair. Her mouth was huge, protruding like a ship cleaving the still waters of the sea. Her eyes had slipped to the sides of her face. Her breasts were two melting glaciers, slowly sinking into her body. When she walked naked towards him, all that was left...
of the woman were her smooth, muscular legs. Apart from that, she had transformed completely into a fish.

He used to wake from watery dreams to the whitish, otherworldly light from the computer screen. She would be there—sitting at the keyboard, joyfully making collages of photographs for some popular magazine to publish with the news stories she concocted from his strange, early-morning reveries. He knew then why he could always smell the odor of dreams in the grave faces of the television newscasters, in the front-page banner headlines.

It doesn’t matter how much I wash my eyes, things still get twisted out of shape until I can’t tell what they are.

Every morning, as she gulped down a can of viscous green fluid, a slimming shake, his wife used to say with a shrug, “It’s just a pack of lies.” But he kept searching her photographs for the river of his dreams: a river of surreal blue that enveloped all that had disappeared on land. He was looking for his dead mother, her white hair spread across her shoulders, walking with the dog which died when he was thirteen years old. The dog’s pale-gold eyes narrowed to slits, then opened again, round as walnuts. A popsicle in red, green, and blue was wedged in the coral reef, and a shoal of fish swam over a floor tiled in a diamond pattern. The broken clock tower, which once stood on the jetty, floated in the river, shattering the water into innumerable wavelets as it rocked and swayed.

But the rivers in his wife’s collages were often murky: a figure squatting at the water’s edge, looking around, eyes bulging like a frog, pulling a fishing net—a mesh of eyes—from the unfathomable depths and shaking out discarded tires, dead phones, dirty needles, lumpy unravelling sweaters, the maimed limbs of some animal with four fingers (possibly human)…all ready for recycling into a rainstorm to drench the earth with a fantastic whispering, re-entering the world’s flesh through the trees, the beasts, and human skin.

Some sounds are lost forever. He will never hear his wife tapping at the computer again. She never sits on the sofa, looking down at her fingernails as she slowly paints on layer after layer of scarlet varnish, looking up to tell him some invented story about a helicopter or a cat. Now his wife’s rounded shadow rarely slants across the window pane; outside the city is gradually getting colder. Her ice-cold hands have shrunk to little fins that, it seems, will never again touch things on dry land.

Sometimes she soaks herself in the bathtub, lying back to reveal her pasty fish’s belly. He sees long, slender legs stretching from her belly, muscles running up her thighs towards spiraling genitalia. Sometimes they make love. His wife’s huge mouth opens and shuts, sending out bubbles with a fishy smell that fills the room. He shuts his eyes—he can no longer distinguish ecstasy from anguish in his wife’s shrill gasps.

Hidden eyes in the corridor open slowly to reveal a razor-sharp gaze. One narrow evening he notices them on a dried-out city street, making ripples on his wife’s skin. They walk into their usual Japanese restaurant and the chef takes a quick look at his wife, then silently takes a slab of dark red flesh from a glass shelf covered with gutted fish. The chef throws the chunk down on to the white counter. His eyes fix on the gleaming silver knife in his hand, then flick towards her. He presses the blade down into flesh. There is an odd, sharp hiss as he slits it open. Her lips part, but no sound comes out from between her sharply-pointed teeth. Her round eyes pop wide, revealing black centers buried in the silver surround.
He imagines waking from a nightmare to find his wife has gone out through the unlocked door alone, losing herself in the city's lawless back streets, ending up auctioned off in an underground seafood restaurant. Or maybe she'll be spotted by pimps and installed as a diversion in a brothel. He sees his wife flattened out, studded with glinting light bulbs on an enormous poster. But one bulb has blown and the filament sticks in his head, the scene before him gradually fading into darkness.

His wife has stopped eating. He fills a huge fish tank for her and sets it up in the middle of the sitting room. When she puts her head into it, he hears a gurgling sound and a stream of bubbles rises to the surface. But most of the time she sits motionless on a chair in front of the picture of a river that hangs on the wall. In her eyes a torrent of ambiguous color surges past, gradually narrowing until it vanishes into transparency.

All night long he can hear the waters pulling back. He tries making another map of the city in his head and tracing the course of the river. Driving around the outskirts they can't find where it starts. A river flows in blue paint on the wooden hoardings that enclose the city's waterways. Behind the boards he can hear machines dumping silt.

The car shoots across a collapsing bridge. Distant factory chimneys belch thick smoke like fiery, inverted rockets. The ground splits and cracks into fissures as enigmatic as oracle bones. His lungs swell silently until they almost burst. He does not know if they have arrived at the river, but he can smell an appalling stench. The humidity keeps rising and his wife, overcome with excitement, beats her body against the car door, making a slapping sound on the glass.

Translation by Nicky Harman

Nicky Harman lives in the United Kingdom. She taught translation at Imperial College in London before becoming a full-time translator of Chinese literary works. She focuses on fiction, poetry and occasionally literary non-fiction. In addition to Dorothy Tse, she has translated works by Chen Xiwo, Han Dong, Hong Ying, Xinran, Yan Geling, Zhang Ling and Chan Koon-chung. She is a regular contributor to the literary magazines Chutzpah and Words Without Borders, and also organizes translation-focused events, mentors new translators and was one of the judges for the Harvill Secker Young Translators Prize 2012.
Dear Lon Chaney, Jr.

Maybe I’m the only one who sees the pelt across your bare face. I know a quiet man like you, a man who’s quick with a laugh and a fist, the first to break a vase across his rival’s head. You lean and smile and hold yourself in amiable check. I see your hands around a throat. I see the wreckage floating in your wake. Though you prefer autumn’s glassed night skies, a single cloud burnishing the moon, and though it’s spring now, and daylight, and the yard is sprouting daffodils and dandelions fur the grass, I’m afraid you still make me afraid, even in the light. You make me smaller than I am. I’m the one who sees, the one who knows you wear your costume inside-out, who knows about your hidden skin, knows you let the huddled animal out, let the howling begin.
Dear Lon Chaney

I, too, grew up among the deaf. I learned to use my hands for understanding, to change my face to exaggerate emotions.

Sometimes I used glue or wires. Sometimes I used putty.
I moved from silence into speech. I changed my name to something shorter. I pretended to curse my house, pretended to haunt the catacombs. I darkened my eyes.

I took on the rictus of a monster exposed as I sat at a keyboard, pretending to play. I cannot say I did this for you. Still, I knew you, recognized the impulse to loose a chandelier upon a crowd or pull a rival down below a river.

I have had to pretend I never wanted to be unmasked, grown known for my talent for makeup, for wild-eyed invention.
Dear Colin Clive

The remedy: anesthesia at the back of the throat, numbness spreading up and out, down and in as your grip on the stem of the glass grows loose like your consonants. The difficulty:

to keep a human heart beating, the seeming-simplicity of lifting a creature toward the flashing sky with the turn of a crank, with pulleys. With ropes. The electric crack of ice in the shaker, the lurching fade of promises. We lie about our need for a second skin. Each time you’re asked again to cry out, It's alive! another bolt slides home against another oak-plank door. Each time the Tesla coil snaps its synapse whip across the cold stone, your surgical gown tightens across your chest—and mad or playing mad matters less and less.
Dear Ingénue

Be plucky, foolish, drawn to underwater caverns and other damp lairs. Cry attractively, one hand against your mouth. Wear something diaphanous,

and you will probably survive the night, although your lover's best friend will almost certainly die. Pace, sigh, practice your scream. Raise the alarm

when he floats to the surface or lies crumpled on the cold stone. Be transported by a monster or the mystery of a man, the camera at your gently

bent back. Your task is to scream when you are taken down a long candelit staircase. Batter, bat, flail ineffectively—whatever lurks beyond

the garden cannot escape for long. Come morning, a man who claims to love you will grant you something that seems like freedom. So rest while you can,

interchangeable stranger. Don't trust yourself to guard a captured beast or keep yourself safe. Trust the man who nails the purple wolf's bane

over your window, not the garlic reddening your bloodless throat. Be carried off to church bells in the daylight. Marry your second choice.
Dear James Whale

I must have peace and this is the only way

—suicide note

A question of creation: your discovery
   was ours and ours
to despise. Its cries were ours, its fear
   of burning. You understood

how ugly we think we are. If you recognized
   eternal life could hold
eternal pain, I cannot blame you for
   covering your eyes

or leaving them open, looking up toward
   a watery sun
while everything blurred and reverted
   to black and white.

In a pitched cemetery, we topple stones
   and trees. We secret
ourselves among our criminal dead. Truth is,
   we prefer the ground.
One person’s monster is another person’s hairdresser. Edward Scissorhands is a variation on the Frankenstein story, only here both creator and subject have benevolent goals. Magnanimous, leather clad Edward uses the ‘deformity’ that alienates him to create beautiful objects—a dinosaur-shaped hedge, an asymmetrical bob, a meaningful ice sculpture. This challenges the convention of what disability is, and monsters that challenge convention while delivering a societal shearing are my favorite. As is normally the case, society turns out to be the true monster—the candy-colored, conformist one Edward lives near yanks him out of solitude, uses him for his barbering talents, and ultimately turns on him when his friendship becomes inconvenient.

-Marie-Helene Bertino (Author of 2A.M. AT THE CAT'S PAJAMAS & SAFE AS HOUSES)
Dracula’s Pants

Say what you will about hipsters and the 21st century epidemic of skinny jeans, but as a teenager growing up in the 90s, I was glad to get a reprieve from the super baggy can’t-touch-this pants options of the previous decade. Though to be honest, when I started buying and wearing pants that were a little tighter, it probably had less to do with being a hipster, and had more to do with trying to be like Dracula1.

In the 1931 film adaptation of Dracula, Bela Lugosi’s history-making turn as the famous vampire finds the character with superpowers coming out of his ears: he can transform into bats and wolves (the latter, off screen), he can fly, he can be invisible (also off screen, for obvious reasons) he can suck your blood, control your mind, and make an impressive real estate negation in which he swaps a castle in Transylvania for one in England. But his most lasting superpower is easily his sense of style. No one else in this movie looks near as suave as Lugosi’s Dracula, and in a contest between who has the better pants—Dracula vs. the movie’s “good guy,” John Harker—Dracula’s pants totally win.

Monster-guru John Landis2 told me once that he thought because of the “exchange of bodily fluids,” vampires were always about sex. He also said that Lugosi’s portrayal of character redefined how we thought about Dracula: “[I]n the book he’s not sexy,” Landis said, “…but Bela Lugosi was this hot matinee idol in Budapest. What is considered stilted acting now was quite dashing then.”

1 Who is probably a hipster, too.
2 John Landis has directed a lot of great horror flicks, but people like me really only know him as the guy who directed Michael Jackson’s “Thriller.” The chances of you being a person like me on this particular thing are probably higher than anything else I’ll claim in my whole life.
And because vampires are connected with sex since forever, Lugosi’s decision to play Dracula as a slick, overtly sexual, fashion-forward icon isn’t without its literary roots. Predating the 1897 Bram Stoker novel by 78 years, John William Polidori’s 1819 short story “The Vampyre,” featured a smooth operator named Lord Ruthven, a suave, sexy vampire who gives Dorian Grey a foppish and vapid run for his money. Written during a super-famous dark and stormy night while hanging out with Mary and Percy Shelley, this short story is often credited with giving everybody the idea that immortal people who drink your blood will also be people you’ll want to sleep with.

Considerably less sexy than Lord Ruthven is James Malcom Rymer’s 1845 vampire, Varney, who stars in the serialized “novel” Varney the Vampire: The Feast of Blood. This multi-part thingamabob was part of those penny dreadfuls you’ve probably heard about: cheap publications in Victorian England which were designed to elicit thrills from the reader and to get them coming back for the next installment. If you were to time-travel back to the 1840s and try to simulate bad television through prose, Varney the Vampire would probably be what you came up with, and you’d be a genius for doing it. It’s thin on characters and consistency, but it is heavy on engaging the reader with exclamation marks and weird, bizarrely direct questions. From asking “What is that—a strange, pattering noise, as of a million of fairy feet?” or “Was that lightning?” the sentences themselves do almost everything short of saying “Do you see the Vampire?” Calling the writing clunky would be too easy and a tad cruel, but there does seem to be something of the proto-Choose Your Own Adventure book imbedded in penny dreadfuls, plus there’s a lot of other cool vampire-firsts in Varney. The whole look-into-my-eyes mind control thing originates here, as do the fangs which leave the telltale two-pronged vamp-nip on the neck. Neither Lord Ruthven or Varney had to be invited in your house to start terrorizing people, but Varney is decidedly grosser in appearance than Lord Ruthven, meaning Varney took some sexy points away from vampires for awhile.

A few decades later, things heat up again. 26 years before the novel Dracula, in 1871, Irishman Joseph Thomas Sheridan Le Fanu drops his novella “Carmilla,” which gives us the first lesbian vampires. More adept at seduction than Varney, even the reader isn’t totally sure who or what Carmilla is at first. Most importantly, and unlike those dumb male vampires before her, she becomes the first vampire who really has to be invited inside your house\(^3\) in order to bite you. In 1897, Bram Stoker’s Dracula also has to be invited in, and Stoker borrows even more from “Carmilla,” than just that! Stoker has Dracula turning into a dog in the novel, and Carmilla turns into a black cat. They also both have a propensity to only strike at nighttime, plus, there’s even a vampire-hunting expert named Baron Vordenburg who’s name doesn’t sound at all like Dracula’s nemesis, Dr. Van Helsing\(^4\). Both Vonderburg and Van Helsing are Dutch persons, and yet, the American phrase “going Dutch,” for some reason never caught on to mean “outing and killing vampires.” We live in a screwed up world.

So, what’s the deal? Is this Bram Stoker guy’s novel Dracula a big giant rip-off of a bunch of other vampire stuff that came before it? Kind of, but Dracula also had some loose historical basis, too. Most people who dig this stuff agree that Stoker based Dracula’s background on a 15\(^{th}\) century Romanian folk

\(^3\) There’s some debate on this qualifying as the first printed “vampire invitation,” but because “Carmilla” directly influenced Stoker’s Dracula, I say it counts.

\(^4\) This character has been played by a lot of actors over the years, including Laurence Olivier, Anthony Hopkins, and Peter Fonda. Peter Cushing, who is probably most famous for being Darth Vader’s friend –Grand Moff Tarkin—in the original Star Wars, practically made his whole career with this role, starring opposite of Christopher Lee’s Dracula. Christopher Plummer and David Warner have also played Van Helsing and both of those dudes were Klingons in the same Star Trek movie, 1991’s The Undiscovered Country. In the 1931 Dracula, Van Helsing was played by a guy named Edward Van Sloan, who was also in 1931’s Frankenstein and 1932’s The Mummy where he basically played the exact same character: older concerned man with all the answers. But really, truly, never forget Van Helsing was played by HUGH JACKMAN in the 2004 crapfest movie Van Helsing. Still, with all these famous people having played this character I just can’t picture any actor saying “wow, what a great character.”
hero named Vlad the Impaler, sometimes called Vlad Dracula, but never Vlad “the Butch.” The novel also sports cool narrative flips, and was widely praised by Stoker’s contemporaries, including Sherlock Holmes-creator Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. It was more loved than any other vampire thing before, maybe because it just happened to be a full-blown whole novel. So, rip-off or skilled literary mash-up, Dracula brought vampires into the 20th century, and the character himself became the vampire to beat.

This isn’t to say he’ll always be that way. To put it in perspective, if you were to ask somebody twenty years ago to name the “most famous” fictional novel about wizards, people would probably say J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings. Today, I’m sure Tolkien would get mentioned for sure, but I bet more people would mention J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter books. And then you’d suddenly realize only 42 years passed between J.R.R. Tolkien publishing The Return of the King in 1955 and J.K. Rowling putting out the first Harry Potter novel in 1997. In just four decades, Rowling’s wizards are arguably way more recognizable in the pop zeitgeist than Tolkien’s wizards. On the vampire front: it was 52 years between Varney and Dracula, and Stoker pretty much permanently took over vampire fiction until Anne Rice started up. The average person probably thinks of Dracula as being the “original” vampire, even though he isn’t, and even he’s hanging on by a thread these days. So, it’s not inconceivable that in 100 years Harry Potter or Dumbledore could be considered the “original” wizards, not Merlin or Gandalf. Who knows who the 22nd century’s big vampire will be? Maybe Edward Cullen?

But why do we still care? When we consider the very real fact that at least half of people who claim to like vampires have never even read Dracula, how do we account for everyone’s total and complete familiarity with him? Not only has everyone heard of Dracula, they can literally hear his voice in their brains, just like the “real” Dracula if he were controlling your mind. I’m talking of course about the “I vant to suck your blouud” Transylvania accent.

A few Octobers ago, I went to one of these haunted corn-mazes the week before Halloween. It was in Sleepy Hollow, New York, and after watching a little nifty Headless Horseman show, my girlfriend and I lined up for the entrance to the maze. Suddenly, a faux-Transylvanian accent came booming out of the loudspeakers; “Gouood Evening…and welcome to the horrors that await you in the maze beyond…”

I looked around and quickly found on a raised platform, the master-of-ceremonies, a teenage kid in half-assed Beetlejuice makeup wearing a mic that was part of a headset like she was Shakira or a telemarketer. Playing this “character,” was probably going to help her get her equity card. I was so pissed, and not just because the accent was bad, but because it was so out of place with the Sleepy Hollow stuff. “It’s not even period specific,” I hissed under my breath. My girlfriend rolled her eyes. It’s a wonder why anyone hangs out with me at all.

Still, it’s weird that some poor struggling actor working a crummy haunted-maze in upstate New York inherently just knows to put on the Dracula voice if she needs a bargain-basement “Halloween voice.” It’s not like this kid did an impression of Kristen Stewart as Bella Swan or David Boreanaz from Buffy the Vampire Slayer. Most people still associate the word “vampire” with “Dracula.” And even though Sesame Street’s “the Count,” has a lot to do with that, I’m not convinced that’s the only reason. What I’m saying is this: even if people don’t

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5 In Ghostbusters II, the main antagonist is the spirit of a 16th century sorcerer named Vigo the Carpathian. He’s given a lot of names including Vigo the Unholy, Vigo the Despised. Bill Murray adds “Vigo the Butch.” Vigo’s backstory is totally a Dracula homage.
think of Bela Lugosi specifically when they hear that “scary voice,” it’s still the go-to scary voice because it started out not as a scary-voice, but instead, as an I’m-trying-to-seduce-you, voice.

If it's possible to get blasphemous about the unholy, I’m going to go ahead and say what I’ve been dancing around: Dracula the literary character is not super interesting—but Dracula the cinematic character as played by Bela Lugosi, is. This sexed-up-over-the-top performance from Bela Lugosi is what saved the whole thing from obscurity. The character in the book spoke with perfect English, but that doesn't really work in a movie. So, the approximation of the thing, the simulacrum of Dracula becomes the “real Dracula”.

You’ll also probably freak out right now if you're a film snob and assert that the 1922 German film Nosferatu is a more important vampire movie than 1931’s Dracula, but I call arty bullshit on that. Nosferatu was an unauthorized “re-telling” of the Stoker novel, and it's not funny, and it's certainly not sexy. It might take vampires more seriously than the Lugosi film, and might be true to the creepy-spirit of the novel, but to me, all of that doesn't make it legit. Actually, to get rowdy for a second, Nosferatu is what a hipster idea of what a vampire movie should be: obscure, hard-to-watch, off-putting. I admit that it might legitimately be a better piece of art than the 1931 Dracula, but it’s not a movie I’d rather watch. Lugosi is just cooler.

In the movie, when Dracula moves from Transylvania to London, the first thing he does is crash the opera, and starts making the moves on the ladies. In particular he's interested in Miss Mina (Helen Chandler), though Mina's friend Miss Lucy (Frances Dade) has the hots for Dracula just a little bit more. Soon after Dracula chats them up, the women are combing their hair and gossiping about how great Dracula is. Mina mentions she wants someone more “normal” to which Lucy dismissively says, “Like John?” As I eluded to before, John Harker(David Manners), is practically swimming in his giant I-go-to-the-country-club pants, and plays the white-bread-boy character with unintentional irony. John isn’t nearly as cool or interesting as Dracula. This guy is a bro of the same ilk as Jack from King Kong, and I love imagining a spin-off movie where the two of them just get their own movie where they play flip-cup and argue about fantasy football. If John were absent in Dracula, it would free-up the movie from having to be saddled with a traditional hero, and then maybe Dracula would win! There’s a great scene towards the end when Mina—partially under Dracula’s power—tells John that “it’s all over.” The finality of her tone has the shadow of a real break-up, and for a second you get the notion that Mina actually wants to be with Dracula, and this isn’t mind control at all.

If you’re wondering why monsters like Dracula have such power over us in general, it’s right here in this movie. Both Mina and Lucy were into Dracula arguably before he started using mind-powers, and even if they weren’t, we—the audience—totally were. Dracula is the taboo bad boy we might want to date if we weren’t so concerned with being careful. Bela Lugosi embodied the best taboo aspects of vampires, which started with Lord Ruthven and, of course, Carmilla. If the vampire is the biter, then—post-“Carmilla” and the cinematic 1931 Dracula—the bitee becomes complicit in the whole thing. We’re literally rooting for Dracula to win. These jokers he's hanging out with aren't ready for his sense of style and his crazy ideas about relationships. Lugosi’s Dracula is the sexy monster, the thing we wish we could either possess or become, if regular boring life wasn’t standing in the way.

Other non-vampire monster movies almost all take their cues from Dracula, specifically King Kong. We’re told by that movie’s meta-fictional-filmmaker Carl Denham that we’re watching a “Beauty and the Beast,” story, but that's too simple. Fay Wray's Ann Darrow in King Kong has way less agency than Miss Mina in Dracula, but Denham calling the whole thing a “Beauty and the Beast,” story is because he's a
flim-flam man, trying sell everyone on the idea that Ann Darrow might have learned to love Kong. And unlike Dracula, she doesn’t really. And could you blame her? What could they have in common?

The wider the gulf between a monster looking like a monster, the more the metaphor becomes uninteresting (and usually just about how terrible various kinds of men are). In 1954’s The Creature from the Black Lagoon, there are two men—not counting the titular creature—who are vying for the affections of the leading lady, Kay. One is the supposed nice guy David, and the other, Mark, who is a big time asshole. In these kinds of movies, we can often tell which guy is a huge jerk because he’ll be the one more willing to use violence against whoever the monster in the movie happens to be. Because we’re already kind of rooting for the monster in these situations (you get ‘em Dracula/King Kong/Gill-man!), siding against the monstrous human male who is foaming at the mouth for bloodshed becomes easy.

Even the original Godzilla (Gojira in Japan) wasn’t immune to this formula. Never, never forget: a major plot point in the classic first ever Godzilla is the fact that young handsome boat-captain Hideto Ogata and his girlfriend Emiko, jointly decide to put their engagement announcement on hold because, duh, Godzilla is attacking! If monsters existed in real life, psychologists would probably see a pattern in people trying to weasel out of committed relationships because they’re afraid of “Dracula,” or “King Kong,” or “Godzilla.” In the newest 2014 incarnation of Godzilla, the screenwriters are either totally aware of this monster-as-home-wrecker theme, or are creepily unaware. Either way, the effect is the same. The new Godzilla doesn’t threaten the romances of any of the movie’s human characters, really, but instead, we’re told is only put upon this Earth to stop other monsters from having sex. Godzilla, in the 21st century, is a thing that monster-blocks his fellow monsters.

If your relationship can survive monsters, I suppose it’s a strong one, and that, maybe more than anything, is why we love monsters so much. We go on dates to scary movies or to haunted houses, in order to grab onto each other and test the ability that we can get through something as frightening as a vampire, or huge monkey. Dating someone who doesn’t like scary movies or haunted houses is fine, but you should still probably watch one with someone you love anyway, just to make sure you can both survive it. Part of why jerky-guys like John in Dracula are so lame, is their total disbelief in the existence of this far-out stuff in the first place. The idea there could even be a vampire, another way of living your life, another place to buy your pants, is just totally out of the possibilities of this character’s mental and emotional universe. Which is why, while watching the movie (or reading the book) we hate those characters and we want them to get what is coming to them. They’re boring. Dracula is exciting.

One of the smartest monster movies of all time, and one of the few of the classics that doesn’t pit boring nice-guys against sexy exciting monsters is the excellent 1941 flick, The Wolf Man. Instead of monster versus boring guy, both things are made into the same character. Lon Cheney Jr. plays John Talbot, a dough-faced, totally likable not-conventionally handsome guy-next-door. Early on in the movie Talbot is bitten by a gypsy named Bela, who—wait for it—is played by Bela Lugosi. That's right: Dracula himself passes the monster fangs to the new monster in this movie. This is kind of like when Richard Roundtree shows up in the 2002 remake of Shaft to give Samuel L. Jackson’s new Shaft advice about being Shaft.

In terms of its relationship to source material, 1941’s The Wolf Man doesn’t have quite the same literary lineage as 1931’s Dracula. Though there was Alexander Dumas’s 1857 story “The Wolf Leader,” and an earlier 1831 story “The Man-Wolf,” by Leitch Ritchie, neither is a canonical work that really defines how werewolves behave in future pop-werewolf narratives. In fact, there’s really one true Victorian novel about werewolves, released one year before Dracula, 1896’s The Were-Wolf, written by suffrage legend Clemence
Annie Housman. Like “Carmilla,” *The Were-Wolf* can be seen as an early-feminist work, featuring female werewolves devouring men who mean to destroy them. Unlike “Carmilla,” it was thankfully written by a woman, and influenced horror writers like H.P. Lovecraft probably more so than the novel *Dracula*. (The fact both books were published within a year of each other is a little suspicious to me. Come on, maybe there were real vampires and werewolves back then, right?)

The year 1933 saw the publication of the Guy Endore novel *A Werewolf of Paris*, which—though a *New York Times* number one bestseller that year—was not at all associated with the first two black and white Universal Pictures werewolf movies. Prior to 1941’s *The Wolf Man*, Universal had put out a movie called *A Werewolf of London*, which you’d think would be *A Werewolf of Paris*, only in London, but it’s not. Instead, *Werewolf of London* is more like a remake of *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*, a Robert Louis Stevenson novel you might have heard of, which if you squint, is a quasi-werewolf story, too. The notion of a split-personality, of being one thing one moment, and being something else another moment, is, at least in most versions, part of what werewolf stories are all about. With its mad scientist and potions, *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* is bonafide science fiction; what if chemistry and not magic could turn a person into a monster? Sir Arthur Conan Doyle plays with this exact same idea in the 1923 Sherlock Holmes story “The Adventure of the Creeping Man,” in which an old geezer named Professor Presbury injects himself with monkey testosterone in order to become younger, but accidentally just starts acting like a monkey.

For me, a weekend, full-moon monster is markedly different than an I’m-a-monster-all-the-time thing like *Dracula*. The biggest difference between Dr. Jekyll and *The Wolf Man*, is the Wolf Man—as represented by Lon Cheney Jr.’s Larry Talbot—didn’t ask to be bitten. Instead, this sort of monster is a regular person who becomes a monster; and through biting, the conversion from a regular person to a monster is shared by both vampire fiction and werewolf fiction. The difference with the latter is that werewolves seem to contain the monsters inside of them, which, instead of having a deranged outsized reason for your relationship not working out, actually turns that monster home-wrecker thing back on you. See, it’s not the monster’s fault you can’t commit to a date: it’s yours.

Larry Talbot wants to have a nice relationship with Gwen in *The Wolf Man*, but unlike King Kong snatching Ann Darrow away from Jack, or Dracula brainwashing Miss Mina to screw-over John, Larry has only himself to blame when his particular relationship doesn’t work out. If we have sympathy for Larry as he’s beaten to death by his dad in the final scene of *The Wolf Man*, it makes sense, but what we’re rooting for in this movie is a little more confusing than with *Dracula*. The Wolf Man isn’t cool, nor is he suave. In human form, Larry mumbles and embarrasses himself while flirting with Gwen. And as the Wolf Man, he’s not hypnotizing anyone with his ghoulish charm—he’s just a fucking really scary wolf. And unlike Bela Lugosi, his pants are baggy and lame.

Lugosi gave us cool monsters in the 30s when he told us to listen to “the children of the night” and took them away in the 40s when he bit poor Larry Talbot. He changed the way we think about monsters, twice, in a blink of a cultural eye. First, he made monsters dashing and something we wanted to root for, and perhaps go to bed with. And then, when passing monsters to a new generation, he turned them into our worst fears: outrageously hairy people who can’t control themselves, can’t commit to a relationship, and have no sense of style whatsoever. Real monsters.
Back to Thrill and Chill you!

DRACULA
THE VAMPIRE BAT THAT LIVES ON HUMAN BLOOD!

SCARY!

HORRIFIC!

SCREAMY!

TERRIFYING!

STARRING
BELA LUGOSI

IMITATED
BUT NEVER DUPLICATED!
Lincoln Michel

Bone Didion
Slay It As It Lays

Raymond The Carver
Where I'm Cutting From

Roboto Bolaño
2.6666666666666666

Golem McCann
Let The Great Mud Splat

J.K. Growling
Hairy Potter

Michel Hellbecq
The Elementary Purgatories

Sheila Yeti
How Should A Cryptid Be?

Ben Oak Tree
The Famished Grove

Deborah Eyesenberg
Twilight Of The Pupilheroes
FEATURED ARTIST:
WAYNE WHITE

When is the best time to do each thing?
WHEN YOU LEAST WANT TO DO IT.

Who are the most important people to work with?
PEOPLE WHO RESPECT YOUR DECISIONS.

What is the most important thing to do at all times?
TELL YOURSELF YOU WILL TRIUMPH.
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When I was a child, there was a monster under my bed. It was there when I was born, and when I was old enough to move from my mom’s bedroom to my own it moved in with me. I thought sometimes that together we took up too much room, but neither of us wanted to bother anyone about it.

When I was older, I felt a helium balloon pressing against the inside top of my forehead, lifting me up off the ground, the knuckles bumping scraping our sidewalk for a minute and then taking away. Not psychosis, or delusion; a new line drawn, a barely deviant perception of the world, everyone else’s universe running just alongside mine and almost close enough to touch. But I can’t lock on somehow, like a camera lens stuttering for focus. Everyone else around you is in agreement about their world. They share it. I thought about the motivational posters in middle school classrooms with a stick figure or maybe tree in a vast, barren landscape—It’s okay to be different. Stand up for what you believe in, even if you’re standing alone. Shoot for the moon. I suppose the text pulls focus, but it’s an empty brown planet, and it goes on forever. Nobody lives there except you.

I could go, at first, longer stretches without thinking about it all. But gradually it found me, set me down on the ground in its paws. I’m too big a house to live in alone. And so I panicked. In my room, because it would be unfair to bother anyone about it. I’d sit in the panic and follow wherever it took me and wait for it to dissipate, and it always does, so in some ways I’m not deeply hurt. But it never really leaves me. I don’t have anywhere to put it—even in your own room, people can still hear you. How could you ever be sure no one was listening? They would be so uncomfortable. And so I keep it, and it snags in my chest and festers until I have to excuse myself. Like being alone in absolute darkness, hearing all around you the noises of what’s about to attack you from an unknowable direction, paralyzed from your lungs to the ends of your hair.

I was in my twenties when the talk turned to mental illness. The diagnosis was vague, or it then mutated, or multiplied, and after I lost my health insurance I couldn’t ask any more people to decide what it was. But I took the medications, and soon they changed and multiplied too. I thought maybe they made things worse, though it was hard to tell sometimes. I had a lot of optimism, and I wondered why I had never tried to get help before. I could never remember. But I was fine, and I had always known I would be fine. I was not being destroyed for good.

I eventually stopped feeling but I remember first the intensified awareness of pain, mine or anyone’s, felt it physically like gravity, a downward tugging on my skin when I walked. How
had I never noticed it before? The wrinkles were pulling me into the ground. I couldn’t bear the responsibility of anyone becoming bothered by it, and I saved us from discomfort and we tried to get along fine. When people walked too slowly in front of me I wanted them to die in a fire.

A few blocks from the house I grew up in, I had been walking in the middle of the street and there was a parade. I looked sideways through the crowd, the cacophony of people and pants, and there were so many of them and they were all so tall and all feeling and needing and being so many, so close, that I forgot which one was me. Was I over there? Or was I supposed to meet myself by the post office after I got apple cider. I stopped walking, and I looked down at my shoes, and I saw the feet they were attached to. I followed them up to my legs and my knees and that was the one that was me. I made a mental note of the process and memorized the flowers on my socks but for the rest of the day there was a man crying in the parking lot of the bank, and it didn’t seem fair that I couldn’t help be him, too. I cried for the monster that was there.

It’s an episodic pain, but explosive, amplified at its own discretion. It feeds on anything. I lose every bearing, like my body and soul have no edges. I blur into everything around me and there’s no stopping or starting; we’ve always been everywhere at the same time with no dam to keep me from spilling out into the rest of the world, like a person born without skin, uncontained, all tissues and fluids, vivid dreams and pressured thoughts, pooling out into the air and the parking lots and the neighbors and knowing that as long as somewhere someone has been in a car crash, or a dog is being kicked, that my ribs are breaking, too.

I saved descriptions I found of people stricken open—from Shakespeare, and Dante, and The Library Epitome. Men cleft, unseamed, ripped along the middle, and they all made sense, being as they were the outcome of a violent allegory, the kind of formula we’re attracted to in storytell- ing. None of the characters were ever children who grew up to find that their skin did not grow with them, only to reach adulthood half-naked, unfinished and raw, an exposed map of burning nerves that couldn’t bear to be touched. We don’t stop to ponder the unseamed Mohammed. There’s a reason he is the way he is, and so he has a place in the universe of the majority. He isn’t alone.

I need my reason, a point of logic from which to make my stand, to remember that as a child, there had never been anything under my bed. There was no monster waiting when I was born. It had come later, and it found all the gaps in my skin and burrowed into me like a parasite, and then it wrote itself into my history. It interrupts without warning, summoned by something trivial and small, to show me that all the trees have cancer and that no one will ever recognize the blistering on my chest. In the absence of grimmer weather, I can replay the afternoon I found my shoes in the parade and remember that no one actually cried in that story, and the parking lot was probably empty. I had gathered myself back in and memo- rized the flowers on my socks and nothing like it happened again for years.
‘People are actually scared of this movie? I’ll grant that that’s a big dog. Sure. But it’s not like he’s bulletproof. I don’t get what’s so horrific about this.’

‘The horror has more to do with the like existential betrayal of the situation. The way a pet can turn on you. What can and can’t be tamed.’

‘Man’s best…friend?’

‘I mean it either scares you or it doesn’t. Listen. I knew a kid once who was afraid of dogs.’

‘How old are we talking about?’

‘Back in grade school. MacDougall Lewis. Spindly kid, pale, Prince Valiant bowl cut. He for one would hate this movie. And it had nothing to do with the size of the dog, either, I can tell you that. His fear. Couldn’t even come to a sleepover without the dog locked up. And I’m talking your typical family dog: black lab, basset hound, Boston terrier. Even a little rat dog like that, the parents knew to keep it in back. “Is MacDougall coming?” That sort of thing.’

‘What exactly was he afraid of? Did they ever bite him?’

‘They never had time to bite him. MacDougall burst into tears at the very sight of them. Big blubbery tears. The kid just had a lifelong deathly fear of domesticated dogs.’

‘“Domesticated.”’

‘I’m coming back to that. But note that that’s what’s so crucial about Cujo. What Dougall would hate and find horrific about the movie. Cujo’s not just some wild hound—he’s someone’s pet. Look, he’s about to get himself bitten. Nosing around in the barn like that.’

‘The bat’s rabid, obviously.’

‘Yeah. Oof.’

‘So Dougall thought the dogs were rabid?’

‘No one knew what MacDougall thought. We just learned to keep the dogs locked up. Because if we didn’t—say someone left the door open, oops, or the parents forgot MacDougall was coming over—there’d be that dreadful moment when we first entered the house. I remember once it actually was a Boston terrier. A little handbag of a dog. Mark Carlin’s place. We were all coming in through the front door, and the terrier rushed from out back to greet us. Scrabbling across the floor our way. Yipping excitedly. MacDougall froze. Everyone saw it coming.’

‘It jumps him.’

‘Thing zeroes right in. Who knows what’s going through his head, what it is he thinks he sees, when he sees it rushing at him: a werewolf, you’d guess, judging from the waterworks. And of course it leaps up on his thighs to try to lick his face, which just gets him weeping harder.’

‘Christ.’

‘The worst part about the weeping, of course, for MacDougall, was that it only confused the dog. And the little dog—sensing his distress and fear—tried you know to ingratiate itself and prove its friendliness by leaping up higher on his thighs and taking heartier hungrier licks at his face. Completely humiliating. MacDougall began to whimper and then sob and then hysterically scream for someone to get it off him, get it off him.’
‘And? What do you do?’

‘What can you do? Carlin there’s calling the dog’s name, but the dog just ignores him. Finally someone has to rush in and yank its collar, still shouting its name. This, by the way, was the very thing that horrified MacDougall above all, I was to find out later.’

‘The name?’

‘How it could ignore its own name. Anyway, that’s more or less the way it would always play out. Before kids eventually learned to keep their dogs locked.’

‘Yours too, I take it.’

‘Didn’t have a dog, growing up. But one time MacDougall did come over to spend the night, and my dad scarred him for life, inadvertently.’

‘Hard to imagine you having a scary dad.’

‘Yeah, well. He was a big guy. Burly. A construction worker, you know, a plumber. But built like a barbican and with these fat strong fingers that could unscrew screws and his sheer physical presence had impressed upon us all terribly, as children, my friends and me. MacDougall most of all. He was the kind of big that he got an ironical nickname: Cookie. “Mister Cookie,” to MacDougall. We can watch something else, you know.’

‘No, come on. It took us half an hour to settle on this. We go back to Netflix, we’ll browse, bicker, it’ll be another half hour before we’ve agreed on anything. This is fine. Just let it play.’

‘All right, you’re right.’

‘So your dad and Dougall.’

‘The thing about my dad was that he loved jokes and knew a lot of jokes and got a kick out of goofing my friends whenever they came over. But there was one joke in particular he loved to play. Practical joke. It starts out as just a story he’s telling you, a memory he’s remembering, this long and rambling anecdote concerning a road trip he supposedly took to New Orleans in his twenties. While there, he tells you, a group of his friends talked him into having his palm read by one of those street-corner chiromancers, a wizened old woman decked out in gaudy jewelry and a flowing gown and a purple turban and heavy eyeliner, who my dad says he’s immediately skeptical of but decides to humor anyway, for his friends.’

‘This is a real memory?’

‘Hold on. So he says that he sat on a folding chair at this woman’s picnic table and paid her and let her take his hand in hers—and here, while telling the story, he likes to take your hand in his, and begin idly tracing your palm with one of his big fingers, a hypnotic massage such as he is supposedly receiving in the diegesis of the joke—but when the woman took his hand, he says, she squinted down at his palm and gasped, telling him that his was a soul rich in reincarnations. That his past lives were many and vivid and preserved with uncommon clarity in his lines. The whole spiel. He says he was expecting her to flatter his pride, tell him he’d been a Napoleon or an Alexander. And when she started to trace a curve—and his own finger is imitating hers by circling your palm like—she told him that this was a mark made on his soul in ancient Rome.

‘“No respect.”’

‘Right. Exactly. Then he says that the woman began tracing in another direction—he’s still holding your palm this whole time, remember—and that she told him here was a second mark, etched into him in ancient China, where he had worked under similar conditions on the Great Wall. Which my dad obviously milks, mugging at you and slapping his thigh with his free hand, like, “Damn!”’

‘I’m confused. Are you supposed to know this is a joke?’

‘No, he’s telling it like an actual story, like what actually happened to him.’

‘So he goes on with the story.’

‘Right. True story. The woman started to trace a final line in his hand, he tells you, this one leading down to his wrist—his own finger meanwhile tracing down to your wrist—and she gasped even louder this time. Said she’d never encountered
such an eloquent line. In this past life, she told him, he says, he’d been a guard dog, a ferocious cur kept right there in New Orleans, on one of those antebellum cotton plantations, where he had been tied to a sturdy live oak by a choke chain around his throat and left out all night to bark, alerting the master of burglars or runaway slaves. And so ferocious and terrible a dog was he, she told him, he says—and here he’s like subtly and maybe even subconsciously squeezing your hand—that he would pass each night leaping against the choke chain, snapping it again and again to its full length and gnashing his terrible, ferocious jaws at the darkness.

‘A regular ol’ Cujo, your dad.’

‘Just about. He says he smirked and asked the woman how she could tell so much from one measly line in his palm, and she smiled too, and replied that it wasn’t his palm she’d been looking at—it was the collar of lines around his throat.’

‘Spooky.’

‘And he tells you that she leaned forward to touch two fingers to his neck—now he’s actually palpating his own thick neck, with his free hand, while still holding on tight and squeezing you with his other hand—and she said it was just as she suspected. That his throat’s deeply rutted lines were a leftover soul impression, engrained in him from this past life’s nights of ceaseless straining against the choke chain. And she claimed that she could even feel where the collar had left a ring of scar tissue embedded under the muscle, mystically unhealed and metempsychotically preserved across his various intervening reincarnations. Here, while telling the story, my dad will stop palpating his throat a moment and chuckle. It’s funny, he’ll muse, but he really can feel the so-called scar tissue, right where she said it was. Probably it was just stress knots in the muscle, from work, and as for the cock-and-bull about his canine life, that was obviously an act: no doubt something she’d scripted to deliver to all of her customers.’

‘And yet…’

‘Right: and yet, nevertheless, he says, it was impressive about the neck. At this point he invites you to go ahead and feel, right here, and he thrusts out his throat to you and takes your hand in his and gently guides it to his jugular, letting you run your fingertips over the leathery flesh there, kneading deep to try to feel the stuff yourself, leaning in closer and closer until—’

‘I think I see where this is going.’

‘Until without warning, when you’re least expecting it, my dad springs forward like a mastiff from his kennel, eyes gone white and his mouth roaring RAR RAR RAR with rabid passion, the spittle flying in your face, gnashing his teeth at you point-blank.’

‘Tell me he didn’t do this to Dougall.’

‘Well that’s the thing. This was my dad’s favorite joke. Pounced on any opportunity. If someone made an unwitting reference to reincarnation, palmistry, voodoo, or even New Orleans, he’d slide into the conversation sly as anything and announce, you know, has he got a story about reincarnation, palmistry, voodoo, or New Orleans. My whole life, growing up—at all my parents’ football parties, when the adults were gathered around the coffee table eating chips and dip and drinking beer and laughing—I would keep one eye on my dad. Because no matter what conversation he and the other adults were having, I could tell—I could just tell—that the bastard was sitting there biding his time. Lying in wait and listening for the least mention of reincarnation, palmistry, voodoo, or New Orleans. Assuming he wasn’t insidiously steering the conversation in that direction himself. It could be like watching a cat hunt birds, at times—his grace and patience. It got to where you started to wince anytime you heard a newcomer say, some uninitiated friend, “I’ve been reading about reincarnation lately.” You just knew it was coming. My dad didn’t miss it. He’d been waiting for it the whole night. The gleam in his eye.’

‘So, what? MacDougall comes over one weekend and says, “Mister Cookie, Mister Cookie, do you believe in reincarnation?”’

‘Close enough. My dad and MacDougall are talking, and MacDougall says something that leaves him wide open, and I see the gleam. And from behind MacDougall I’m shaking my head like Noooo! in slow-motion, the way you do when someone strikes a match near gas. But how’s Dad supposed to know? We don’t have a dog. He’s never seen MacDougall burst into tears. And it’s not as if I’ve given him any prior warning.’

‘You let it happen.’

‘I was transfixed.’

‘You did nothing.’
‘The second my dad took MacDougall’s hand in his hand, it was over for me: I could only stand there, helpless and paralyzed, and watch with nightmare dread as the joke unfolded.’

‘MacDougall falls for it.’

‘Because of course he does. He's twelve, thirteen.’

‘He leans in to feel the neck.’

‘My dad hasn’t barked for half a second before he’s blubbering, “Mister Cookie, Mister Cookie!”’

‘“Get him off me, get him off me.”’

‘Exactly. I don’t need to tell you that my dad was mortified. He made it up to MacDougall, and we never talked about it.’

‘Only MacDougall’s secretly traumatized.’

‘Never does come back to my house. Always an excuse, a scheduling conflict, so that whenever we hang out it has to be at his place. But his face darkens over at any mention of my dad, and I can tell he’s getting real introspective and troubled. Stuck in a thought rut. Like the memory of my house—like my house itself—is something to avoid.’

‘The shame of it.’

‘The scene of some crime. Years later, we’re in high school, I finally ask him—you know, “Doogie, what’s the deal with dogs?”’

‘He’s still afraid of them?’

‘I mean he’s not bursting into tears anymore, no. He’s got a little more grip on himself, and he’s even more or less a normal kid, by this point. But if we’re in the neighborhood, someone’s walking their dog, he’ll still freeze in this kind of barely disguised terror until the dog’s gone. Trying to pass it off like he’s checking the time or tying his shoes, but you watch his eyes, he’s always got one eye on the dog. Not blinking. Pulse jackhammering in his throat. Which one day I finally ask him, like—what, were you bitten as a kid? Is there some root to all this? No, he says, nothing like that. Not that he can remember. And I say come on, there has to be something—you have to have suffered some traumatic childhood bite, right? Maybe even in infancy. Like a repressed snap or nip or snarl. Anything. No, no, he’s quite sure. He even asked his parents, and they couldn’t remember anything. It really was an irrational phobia, causeless, just something he was born with. So I say well tell me what it is you’re afraid of. Walk me through your worst case. Say we’re in the neighborhood, a lady with a dog comes by, you freeze—what is passing through your head?’

‘What does he say?’

‘He says it’s a fantasy. All his life, when he sees a dog, he can’t help playing this one fantasy in his mind’s eye. A kind of recurring daydream or waking nightmare. The fantasy is a big what-if scenario involving the dog. What if it spots him. What if it can tell he’s afraid. So when MacDougall freezes stone cold on the sidewalk and stares at the dog from across the street, he says, what’s passing through his head is that all these gears are turning; he’s imagining the worst that could happen. He takes my example for an illustration. Say MacDougall sees a lady with a dog. An older woman, white tennis outfit and sun visor, walking a golden retriever on the opposite sidewalk. The retriever is trotting happily alongside its owner, tongue hanging out. But internally, MacDougall is already asking himself: what if? What if the retriever spots him? He imagines that it stops trotting and pauses on the sidewalk. In the fantasy, its body goes rigid with tension the second it sees MacDougall. The lady, oblivious, stops walking as well. Thinking the dog just needs to pee. And maybe it makes a show of nosing the monkey grass, as if it’s interested in some scent there. But in truth it’s merely buying time to eye MacDougall. Even as it snuffles the grass, it keeps raising its liquid eyes to peer clear across the street at him, meeting his own eyes with a prison-yard stare. What would I do if this actually happened, is what MacDougall’s asking himself. And the answer is that he’d have to will himself to remain perfectly still. The last thing he wants to do, in the fantasy as in real life, is break into a run or any other sudden movement that will provoke the dog. Nor can he leave until the dog does, obviously. Whenever it lowers its snout to the grass, it keeps its wet dark eyes rolled upward slightly, to let him know it’s watching.’

‘You’re right. He would hate this movie.’

‘Too much grist for his mill—his fantasy’s sinister enough as it is. Because no matter how long he stands there, the retriever just keeps sniffing the grass. As for the woman, she remains completely duped by this little ruse of its. She has no idea what psychic transactions are passing between her dog and MacDougall. Maybe she bends down to murmur something into the creature’s flappy ear, urging it to hurry up and “do its business.” But MacDougall is its only business. It has no other business in mind. Something about MacDougall has set it off, he can tell. A mistake or misunderstanding has taken place inside the dog, and it thinks that he means some harm to the woman.’

‘The woman being essential.’

‘As in?’

‘As in an intrinsic component of the horror of the fantasy. It’s never with loose or wild dogs, the fantasy.’
‘I ask him that. Claims to have zero fear of wild dogs. If he sees a loose dog in the street, no owner in sight, or even if there’s a pack of them, his what-if scenario is over in seconds. Just reaches its logical conclusion. Oh, there’s something I forgot to mention.’

‘That “MacDougall Lewis” is an anagram for “Sic a dog: maul well.”’

‘…’

‘…’

‘How long have you been working on that?’

‘Pretty much all night.’

‘It’s that by this time in high school, MacDougall’s started doing Tae Kwon Do: a blue-belt already, real little bad-ass in training. I mean he spends every afternoon after school in his backyard, punching posts for the numbness—got these knuckles like bamboo shoots—and doing flexibility stretches for his high kicks.’

‘Great. Got it. Jean-Claude van Dougall.’

‘Well the point is that, with wild dogs, the what-if scenario doesn’t terrify him. Even if they attack him all at once, he figures he gets some bites, some blood loss, flesh wounds at worst. But he’s sparred with multiple assailants down at the dojo. He knows that he can roundhouse kick the dogs or karate chop their spines or pry their jaws apart until they snap or snap their necks, if he has to, in the fantasy. It’s an action movie for him. He loves it. Dogs are flying off him, he may as well have nunchuks. But with domesticated dogs it’s different. That’s how he explains it to me. He says that his fear is more emotional or even philosophical in nature than strictly speaking physical. He’s afraid of being attacked not because of the injuries he might sustain, but because of all of the emotional and even philosophical implications that that attack would entail.’

‘So in the case of the retriever.’

‘In the case of the retriever, it’s integral that the owner remain oblivious. If she notices the dog’s agitation at all, she has to misinterpret it, scanning the street for a squirrel or cat or something. Because another intrinsic component of the horror of the fantasy is how alone MacDougall and the dog are in their standoff. The owner can’t have the slightest idea that this dog, her pet, has just turned on a primal or an atavistic dime, metamorphosing itself into a man-eater on its master’s behalf. That’s why she keeps such a flimsy grip on its leash.’

‘Naturally.’

‘Because the next what-if in the fantasy is obvious: what if the dog—maintaining spine-chilling eye contact with MacDougall at this point—lunges forward in one sudden, terrible motion, tearing the leash outright from the old woman’s hand? That’s what fills MacDougall with dread. What does he do? All it seems he can do is remain standing stock-still on the sidewalk, watching in terror as the dog—sprinting toward him now and barking—churns the ground with its galloping legs. There would be no point in running, MacDougall knows, for the retriever would retrieve him in seconds. His flight would only provoke the animal, frenzying it to a keener bloodlust. He says he’s conducted this fantasy countless times with countless breeds of dogs—anytime one passes him in the street, his mind automatically executes the thought experiment—and that of all the different versions of the fantasy, for him the absolute worst and most nightmarish version, the only time the fantasy ever left him cold with sweat, was when he decided to go ahead and try to flee. Says he’s never even bothered budging a foot since then. Doesn’t even let himself consider it.’

‘Clearly you wouldn’t want to flee in a situation like this one here: trapped in a station wagon, St. Bernard under the car.’

‘Well what happened with Dougall was that he was walking his bike home from school one day and he saw a greyhound about a block off. A lean, ash-colored animal, being led on an extendable leash by a jogger. The dog didn’t notice him, but the mere sight of it was enough to set off the gears of his fantasy. So MacDougall paused there on the sidewalk while his mind did its thing, working its way methodically through all the familiar steps. He imagined the greyhound spotting him, stopping short. There was the nosing around in the monkey grass and the periodic sidelong glances at MacDougall. The ratcheting tension. Then at last the lunge that breaks the leash, the bark like clockwork. Except now what was different?’

‘The bike.’

‘Right. This time MacDougall had his bike with him, in the fantasy as in real life. And so he wondered: what if I got on this bike? What would happen if I just mounted it and pedaled away? The answer, of course, is that the greyhound chased him. Even as he was looking straight ahead, zooming away on his bike in the fantasy, MacDougall could somehow still tell—as in a dream—that the
dog was racing right behind him. He could feel it sprinting on its skeletal legs, keeping perfect pace with the bike. He could even hear the greyhound's horrible huffing, a choked salivary sound as its whole body heaved to keep up with his machine.'

'This is miserable.'

'And remember that back in real life MacDougall was standing frozen on the sidewalk, fantasizing all this. Meanwhile, in the fantasy itself, he was biking away, hightailing it down the middle of the road, which, like a road in a nightmare, was completely empty except for him and his pursuer. So MacDougall knuckled down in the fantasy, leaning into the bike’s handlebars and pedaling harder, waiting for the greyhound to give up the chase.'

'Why didn't he just bike home? In the fantasy?'

'Then what? He'd still have to get off the bike to get inside, and the greyhound would be right there, at his front door. No, all he could do was keep biking and hope that it quit. Note too that stopping the fantasy is not a real option, for him: he can't simply open his eyes and wake up. The way MacDougall's mind works, he's in a kind of trance, an almost obsessive-compulsive trance. Has to answer every branch of the what-if for himself. Every decision entails a consequence, so he's stuck standing there until he's ramified the scenario to its likeliest conclusion.'

'He's made his bed, mentally, so to speak.'

' Pretty much. And in this particular case, he had cast his lot with biking off. So what if? What would happen? What he decided to do was keep pedaling, zooming blocks and blocks beyond his neighborhood, miles, with the greyhound chasing the whole way. He tells me that the fantasy became explicitly surreal and dreamlike, at this point. In no time at all he had biked out of city limits altogether. He entered some deserted Hitchcockian countryside, pedaling down a narrow dirt road in the middle of vast cornfields, all while the indefatigable greyhound—which he still couldn’t see but could hear the horrible huffing of—heaved its body behind him. And here a terrible realization struck MacDougall, he tells me. For at last he understood: the greyhound was never going to give up the chase. Any other dog, any other breed, and he might have been fine. But all MacDougall had accomplished by mounting the bike was transforming himself into a racetrack rabbit, a robotic bait zooming away on a tantalizing circuit, which the greyhound was happy to chase for dozens and dozens of miles, at top speed, if it had to. Because this and nothing else was what it—the dog, down to its very DNA—had been bred for centuries if not millennia to do. MacDougall says that the logic of his dread was vertiginous. The fantasy was infinite now, he realized—it never could reach a conclusion. He would be stuck in his own head, being chased by the greyhound, forever. For the harder that he pedaled, the more determined the greyhound would be to catch him; and the more determined the greyhound was to catch him, the harder he would have to pedal. His terror of the dog spurred him to flee, which spurred the dog, which spurred his terror, ad infinitum, until MacDougall became mired in this morbid Möbius strip almost, self-perpetuating and impossible to stop. Even as his fear of being fed on fed into his flight, his flight was feeding into the dog’s desire to feed on him, which fed right back into his fear, creating this like literal feedback loop of—'

'All right all right I get it.'

'He says that in the fantasy he kept biking farther and farther through the Hitchcockian cornfields until finally the fantasy self-aborted. When his mind couldn’t compute the feedback loop, he was suddenly transported back to where the fantasy started—plop, right on the street in his neighborhood, where the jogger was still standing on the sidewalk with the greyhound. And when MacDougall saw that the fantasy was about to start all over again, he snapped his eyes open: the street was empty. In real life, the guy and his greyhound were long gone. But MacDougall’s heart was pounding and his palms were slicked with sweat, and he had to stand there another ten minutes before he’d calmed down. That was when he realized that fleeing the dilemma would always be worse than facing the dilemma.'

'The dilemma?'

'Okay, recall the thought experiment from earlier. The old lady in the white tennis outfit and sun visor with the golden retriever. The retriever is still sprinting toward him and MacDougall’s still standing there standing his ground, because he knows—from his unspeakable experience with the greyhound—never to try running in the fantasy. So the dog is about to attack MacDougall while its owner watches, and the dilemma is that he has two options. One, he can spare the dog. Instead of killing this woman’s pet before her very eyes, he can be manly and self-sacrificing: just shield himself as best he can and bravely let the retriever have at him until the woman calls it off. Figures the worst-case scenario is a bite wound or two. Maybe the woman doesn’t call it off, and MacDougall has to wait for some bystander on the street to intervene.’

'Or option two.'

'Two is that he can defend himself. As with the feral-dog fantasy, he can dish out Tae Kwon Do with extreme prejudice, roundhousing the retriever or else grabbing its skull in his hands and twisting
its neck. The only problem is that if he does this, then he's left standing there with a limp ragdoll in his hands, holding this dead dog, and when he looks up across the street, whom should he see but the little old lady in the tennis outfit and sun visor? Watching on in horror. The tears streaming down her grief-reddened face. Even worse in this respect would be if he didn't kill the dog, at least not cleanly. If instead it somehow managed to sink its teeth into his forearm, such that MacDougall had to kneel down over the beast on the sidewalk and pound its head into the ground with his fist, the way UFC dudes do on TV, trying to pry its jaws apart. And the whole time the little old lady watching on and weeping, calling out her dying dog's name while he brains it.

'The name!'

'Exactly—this is what horrifies MacDougall above all. The fact that as this mankiller is trying to rip into his throat, some old woman is calling, “Scooter! Scooter!” Its name is Scooter! It wants to tear him apart, and its name is Scooter. Or its name was Scooter—that's precisely what's so horrible. The little old lady thinks that this is still her dog, that she can call out “Scooter” and that it will answer. But in reality Scooter has left “Scooter” far behind: it has already gone feral, retreated into some nameless part of itself. The woman can shout “Scooter!” all day long and receive no response. It doesn't know Scooter from Adam. MacDougall and the dog are alone now, stranded on the nameless side of its mind.'

'This being the philosophical dimension of his fear in the fantasy.'

'There is something pre-symbolic inside the dog. Some primordial core. Like a little black tailbone, Tefloned against interpellation: the name rolls right off it. You can domesticate your dog, train it as a puppy and give it a name, but somewhere deep inside there will always be this wild residuum. The part of your dog that's not your dog. Hence the horror of rabies: rabies is that namelessness.'

'Cujo stops being Cujo the moment the bat bites him.'

'This detail would not have escaped MacDougall's attention, no. He would invite us to consider the prominence of the dog's name in the movie. How people keep calling “Cujo!” How the movie's even called Cujo. The whole point is that the dog has a name. It's not a wild dog that's terrorizing people, it's somebody's pet that's gone and betrayed its name. Which is a thousand times more frightening, from MacDougall's point of view. Now other monsters, they don't even need names. If it's a shark movie, the title's just the most salient body part: jaws—what's going to bite you. If it's subterranean sandworms, the title's just their calling card, their like signature seismological tocsin: tremors—what warns you they're coming. Naturally we refer to the shark as Jaws and the worms as Tremors, colloquially, but these aren't names the way Cujo's a name. What's terrifying about Cujo is precisely that he's called Cujo. Or that he used to be. Or so MacDougall would say, if he were sitting here with us tonight.'

'And so that's the philosophical component of his fear. Whereas the emotional component...'

'Sure. The emotional component is this very discrepancy. All the guilt he'd feel. That the woman, standing there and weeping over the retriever, thinks MacDougall is killing Scooter. Good old Scooter: Scooter who licks her grandkids, Scooter who brings her her slippers in his mouth, Scooter who can roll over and writhe like in a Western when you make a finger-and-thumb gun at him. She thinks poor Scooter has attacked MacDougall, inexplicably, and that MacDougall is killing him. Whereas actually Scooter stopped being Scooter the moment he attacked. The state this retriever is in, he's not going to be fetching slippers or playing dead, to say the least. He's forgotten all that. So MacDougall is technically killing everything that isn't Scooter: he's being attacked by what's-not-Scooter inside Scooter. And the heartbreaking part is that the woman can't know this, she just can't know. Watching and weeping like that, in the fantasy.'

'Presumably wild dogs dodge these philosophical and emotional complications by dint of—what?—they don't have owners or names?'

'There's no dilemma there.'

'But with a dog on a leash, every time MacDougall sees one, this is what's going through his head.'

'Well he's weighing it. What his mind is doing when it executes the thought experiment is deciding. Could I fend off this dog awhile? Or is this a dog I would have to beat to death immediately? Is there a tree nearby I could climb? Or is this a dog that could outrun me to the tree?'

'Could I hide in the station wagon with my kid, like this mom here, or would Cujo just stalk around the car slobbering all over the windows?'

'Right. And the owner, too. She's part of the fantasy's what-if algorithm as well. Is this owner a person who would understand? If I killed her dog, would she know why I had to do what I was doing? Or would I break her heart by doing it? In short, he's asking himself what the worst that could happen is. The thing you have to remember, it's the dilemma that frightens him. Its twin horns. More I
mean than any physical danger posed by the dog itself. That's why a yapping Chihuahua freezes him up just as much as some foaming Doberman type.'

'Even as a kid, this fantasy.'

'His whole life! I couldn’t believe it. But when I ask him about it in high school, he tells me that for as long as he can remember he's been conducting the fantasy. All those times in grade school, at all our sleepovers, that was what was scaring him. When the Boston terrier barreled at him and he burst into tears, and when he yelled out for someone to get it off him, get it off him, it wasn’t being bitten that he was afraid of.'

'He was afraid—'

'He was afraid of what he might do to it! Afraid he might snap the little rat's neck, right in front of all of us. Even as its owner was standing there, yelling its useless, unavailing name.'

'And your dad.'

'Good call. MacDougall brings that up himself. He admits to me that he had been completely caught off guard by my dad's joke but that hands down the most terrifying part of it was when he had had to shout “Mister Cookie, Mister Cookie” to try to get my dad to stop. Because there was a second there when my dad didn't hear him. And didn't stop. And for the first time in his life MacDougall was brought face to face with what was nameless in man. He tells me that he had never conducted the fantasy with a human being before but that in that split second of fear he compressed the entire what-if scenario down to one instant, to one eidetic flash, and in the unfolding of the flash he saw that if my dad actually were to attack him—if my dad had some primordial core in him, which wouldn't respond to a name and couldn’t be caged in a name, some past-life kernel left over in him from his canicular preexistence—MacDougall knew what he was prepared to do. He saw in the fantasy’s flash, in all awfulness, what he was capable of.'

'Obviously not planning to wring your dad's neck. Twelve, thirteen years old.'

'No, but he admits to me—he tells me this—that out of the corner of his eye he noticed a steak knife nearby, lying on the dinner table. And for that whole second, he says, he was worried he’d have to stab my dad. Right in the throat, where the dog scars were. The thought sickened him, but he knew he’d do it. He’d carried this murderous memory around with him for years afterward, he said. Too ashamed to share it.'

'Wherefore the face-darkening.'

'Right.'

'Jesus.'

'Oh you just know he’s the kind of guy now, goes around poisoning neighbors’ dogs. There isn’t really even any question.'

'You keep up with him?'

'Lost touch in college. I looked for him on Facebook recently. I think he’s working admin at the old alma mater.'

'What about your dad? You ever tell him about you and Dougall's talk?’

'No. No, I never did.'

'Hey now. Now your face is darkening.’

'I just remembered something, is all.’

'Come on, man. Don’t hold out on me. Did Dougall poison your dad's dog or something?’

'No, nothing like that. I just never made the connection before now. Between this particular memory and MacDougall. I must have forgotten all about him by the time it happened. But talking about him tonight, it's funny. How I didn’t see it.’

Walking in Wal-Mart got him winded, so you’d see him in those little electric wheelchairs they have, puttering down the grocery aisles.

'Let’s hear it.’

'The thing is, after my mom died, Dad actually did end up getting a dog. A little mixed-breed beagle. He lived alone with it awhile, over a decade, and around sixty he retired. He’d been doing construction for forty-something years, and the work had taken its toll on his body: overweight, bad back, heart attack. He was pretty run-down. Big guy—'

'“Barbican.”'

'Obese. Had to stay sprawled out on the floor or the couch for his back half the day. Walking in Wal-Mart got him winded, so you’d see him in those little electric wheelchairs they have, puttering down the grocery aisles. Long story short he was not throwing Frisbees and sticks around in the backyard anymore for the beagle. But it kept him company, and besides, it was no spring chicken itself—probably a septuagenarian or something, in dog years. They fell apart together. The dog was in even sorrier shape, in the end. Stone blind for one thing, with
these gaseous white eyeballs. Had to navigate the living room by memory, and was constantly being flabbergasted by the furniture. Staggering into sofas, nightstands, et cetera. Sometimes my dad’d find it trapped under a chair, penned in between the legs, walking back and forth and bumping off the railings. Just the most depressing thing. Incontinent, too. There was a while there it could still smell where outside was—the greenness of grass, sunshine—and it would hobble on its decrepit legs to the doggy door. Stagger out, do its business, stagger back in. But at some point the effort got to be too great and it just started going wherever: living room, bedroom, kitchen, it didn’t care. My dad, with the weight and the back, he was in no shape to follow the dog around all day and watch when it needed to go and pick it up and carry it outside himself. He took pity on it and let it have the run of the house. Nor were his efforts to sweep up its messes especially Herculean. Which after only say a weekend of neglect they’d need to be: to go find all the blind dog’s crap and piss puddles around the house, and then to mop them. It really was an Augean job, for someone in my dad’s condition. So he lay on the carpet, stretching his spine, surrounded by all the droppings that the dog in its blindness had left, and he dreaded the day when it would finally die. For my part, I was ambivalent about the dog’s death. On the one hand, it was my dad’s only companion; on the other, I didn’t exactly relish the thought of him lying around in a sea of its filth. Every now and then I’d ask him whether he’d considered the needle. Just putting it to sleep and giving it the dignified end.’

‘What did he say?’

‘Like it was his wife or something.’

‘In sickness and in health.’

‘I can’t give up on her!’ “So she’s an old dog!” “She wouldn’t put me to sleep!”’

‘Not like this mom here. Look at her. Beating on Cujo with a baseball bat. Cold-blooded.’

‘If the beagle’d gone rabid my dad would have been absolutely defenseless, no question.’

‘Old Cooge. Battered to death by his own neighbor.’

‘I wouldn’t count Cujo out just yet. He may look dead, but I bet he’s got some gas left in the tank.’

‘What was her name anyway? The beagle?’

‘Clarabelle. As I said, I was ambivalent about her dying, I knew it was only a matter of time. Whenever I called my dad to check up, I braced myself to hear him say she’d passed. Preparing myself to console him and so on. Well finally I call one day, we’ve been talking an hour, and after a pregnant pause he says, “And there’s some sad news about little Clarabelle.”’

‘Oh geez.’

‘Found her under his bed, died in her sleep. He’s getting choked up as he tells me this. Eventually he just says, “And I think that’s all I’m going to say about that.”’

‘Poor guy. Natural causes, though, right? This isn’t where Dougall comes in?’

‘No, listen. We’re on the phone, and I ask him, you know, did he bury her? And there’s this long silence at the other end of the line. And in that silence I realize what a grotesque question this is. Of course he didn’t bury her. How could he have buried her? My dad, can’t walk ten feet in a Wal-Mart to pick up a loaf of bread, is supposed to go out in the backyard with a shovel and dig down in the dirt to bury his dead dog? But when he finally responds, what he says is, “Yep,” in this quick, clipped voice. And I don’t ask him any follow-up questions. Because I don’t have to. In that moment I know—I know exactly what he did with Clarabelle. In my mind’s eye I can see it. It unfolds in a vivid flash, the entire scene. I see my dad putting Clarabelle’s body into a black trash bag. It breaks his heart, but what else is he going to do? I see him toting her down the driveway to the garbage can, wheezing, the whole way—hobbling, from the pain in his back and from the weight of the bag—and sling the corpse unceremoniously into the plastic dumpster.’

‘You don’t think—’

‘What else? He just couldn’t bring himself to admit it to me. Too ashamed. Broken up over it. That he couldn’t give his own dog a proper burial. A little stake in the ground with her name on it.’

‘Her name.’

‘In retrospect, in a weird way, it feels as if MacDougall won or something. Got his revenge. As if this was my dad’s punishment for springing the joke on him, all those years ago. I can’t explain it.’

‘Karma.’

‘Not that MacDougall could have even known about Clarabelle. Or remembered me or my dad, for that matter—it’d been years. But I still can’t shake the image of him rubbing his hands together somewhere, grinning at the news.’

‘Working that MacDougall voodoo.’

‘The ironic twist of fate. The cosmic comeuppance. Just as my dad had pretended to be a dog, and ignored the sound of his own name, so he had to lose his dog to namelessness. And not by way of rabies—not by a bite from a barnyard bat. But by his own hand. That’s the tragic aspect. His punishment was that he had to throw her away himself, like some common greasy pizza box. He who had loved her so much and refused to euthanize her
and treated her with human dignity was the very same one who, in the end, had to reduce her to this primordial core. Because by depriving her of a dignified burial, he was depriving her too of her name—she wasn’t Clarabelle in that trash can, just some cold dead animal, which is what she would have to remain for all eternity, decomposing up on the landfill. And he was the one who had done it. He and no one else had cast her out, back into that dark part of herself, and for the rest of his life he’d have to live with that.’

‘Almost like a mother burying her baby, before baptizing it, is what you’re saying.’

‘Something like that. Anyway, that’s what was going through my head, when you asked me.’

‘Heavy.’

‘I mean I think Dad got over it pretty quick. He bought a basset hound about a year later. Hey—look at that. What’d I tell you?’

‘Come on. You’ve seen this before. How’d you know Cujo’d come crashing through the window like that? One last attack.’

‘I called it.’

‘You’ve seen this before.’

‘I called it.’

‘Turn this shit off.’

‘Yeah. Let’s check if Netflix is streaming Jaws.’

‘MacDougall afraid of sharks too?’

‘Now have I got a story about sharks.’

‘Oh yeah?’

‘Yeah. Here. Here. Feel my neck.’

‘Aw fuck you.’

‘That’s right.’

‘Yeah.’
Before | June 2013

Matthew Clay-Robison: You said to me recently that many of your artist friends wish they were musicians and many of the musicians you know wish they were artists. Whose career would you rather have: Art Spiegelman or Earl Scruggs?

Wayne White: Art Spiegelman. Drawing is something that I knew before I wanted to play music. I love music, but drawing definitely wins.

MCR: Considering your love of landscapes, maybe the choice should have been Spiegelman versus Thomas Eakins.

WW: Now there I have to call a draw. My whole philosophy is that I don’t want to have to exclude one. I’d like to meld them together.

MCR: Considering your love of landscapes, maybe the choice should have been Spiegelman versus Thomas Eakins.

WW: Most of the time they are found, but I have done a series on canvas against romantic skies. They are about the lyrical school of landscape painting. It is one of the oldest games in town. It is really, really hard to find a fresh way to do it, so I respect the genre and I would put it right up there with any other form of art, but of course the art world is about fashion and that kind of thing is way out of fashion. Still, when it is done well it is undeniable. I love pastoral landscapes. I really haven’t changed much from that kid doing the watercolors. Your core feelings don’t change much and childhood is a very important resource for artists. It is tricky to use it because it can curdle instantly. It is delicate stuff, but there is real stuff there. I choose to not deny that kid that loved to do the watercolors. I still am like that and there is no reason to be embarrassed.

1. Check out Wayne White’s word paintings online: waynewhiteart.com/project/word-paintings
by it, but we are often embarrassed to admit what we find beautiful for various reasons: it's not in style so you're out of fashion; it reveals this vulnerable side of you, or a masculine or feminine side of you. We all have secret ideas about beauty and guilty pleasures and they're embarrassing but we find them beautiful anyways.

**MCR:** The way that you deal with the found landscapes demonstrates a level of respect. Even though you are having fun with them, the text works so well with the composition and color palette of the original painting that it is seamless and you are clearly very in tune with what is happening in the original. There is a communion between what you are doing and what the original artist did.

**WW:** Definitely. I am living in that space and painting with the painter almost in a collaborative way rather than defacing it. I am carefully locked into the structure so there is a respect for the artist. I would never paint on an original. I always paint on reproductions because there are millions of them. They are just empty stages really and I'm sure the artist who painted it would agree with me. It is just a commodity. It is not really the object anymore. The fact that I rescue them one step away from the garbage can is an act of redemption in a weird kind of way. It's a metaphor that I really like; it's never too low to be understood or found meaning in. I thought of this the other day. I was doing a radio show about music and I did a song from *Mary Poppins* because the idea of drawing a landscape and jumping into it has been a favorite fantasy of mine since the second grade. I was hypnotized by the masters, and I wanted to jump into those paintings. The idea of total absorption in a landscape or a scene is a huge emotional trigger for me. With the word paintings, I am jumping into these pictures and building a sculpture within them when I paint. There is a visceral sense of literally jumping into a picture. That is part of the thrill of painting those works and those landscapes. I am reliving that fantasy of jumping into a chalk drawing on the sidewalk with Mary Poppins, a cute girl.

**MCR:** You are often very straightforward about identifying artists like Red Grooms who have had a profound influence on your direction as an artist, but I have also heard you caution young artists not to have heroes they are too beholden to. How do you strike that balance?

**WW:** Well it is important to check out the whole game, all of the players, all of the painters, all of the artists. To look at as many of them as you can, at least for a period of time because you can't be ignorant about it, you've entered into this thing. You are not a folk artist. You are not naïve, you are entering into the art world and the culture of art so you should know what has happened and what is happening now to some extent. You have to know historically who is who and even imitate and copy when you are learning. Don't be afraid to steal from the best. That is an important part of the education that really never ends. We are always doing that, but what I caution against is falling under the shadow of someone or flagitiously imitating somebody and not being able to find your own voice. The ultimate goal, of course, is to find your voice and that is the trickiest thing you are going to do because all of the voices have been tried. But the miracle of miracles is that you can squeak it and your little squeaking suddenly develops into a sound that is right up there with everybody else. It can happen. The thrill of art is that even after all this time and all these possibilities, you can still find some new way to do it or some fresh way to do it at least.

**MCR:** I have also heard you advise young artists to surround themselves with people that are better than them. You illustrated that point by sharing the humbling experience you had of going into Art Spiegelman's class and seeing people who were drawing circles around you and how that made you a better artist. That strikes me as a great piece of advice for students, because there is no point in pursuing an education in art if you're not willing to give everything to it and challenge yourself and your ego.

**WW:** I endorse the college experience for young people who are ready to go into a society filled with fellow seekers and survivors for four years. Your fellow students are your fellow survivors and you are all looking for the same kind of answers and you all have the same level of ambition and it's a concentrated society. It's not diffused like the real world, so you get a real good look at your generation and what their dreams are and what your possibilities are. On a business level you make your contacts, which is a good thing to do if you really have a dream. It can be a waste of time for some people who don't know what they want to do and spend all of their time partying and being coddled. That happens a lot. College can be used as an escape from the real world. There are abuses of the opportunity but that's true with anything, so I think if you have a vision and a dream, college is the best place in the world from 19 to 23 years old. It is incredibly nurturing, especially for the arts. Another thing that I want young people to understand is that there was no “golden age.” Don’t listen to old fogies and old farts tell you there was a golden age and that you've missed out on the best of times and that you should have been here in the 50s, 60s, 70s or whatever. That's just a closed mind and fear of death creeping in. Every generation should see that they have possibilities and it's their world, not that old fart's world.

**MCR:** Your work is playful and also very funny. In the film [*Beauty Is Embarrassing*] you mention that, “people
don’t trust laughter or humor in art,” and you challenged that attitude by saying that laughter is a very deep thing and we shouldn’t overlook the importance of it. It is deeper than we sometimes give it credit for.

WW: Yes, but the paradox of it is that when you start treating it like that, it’s not funny anymore. It is a very curious phenomenon. Humor is deep and important but it has to be handled lightly, which is often misinterpreted to mean that it is light, but it’s not. There is a lot going on, and it’s heavy, holds tons of emotions and gives important insight into human behavior. Humor is one of our most important insights if it is done well at its best. It is a deep and essential thing, but I do find myself thinking that I sound absurd when I start preaching about the sacredness of humor, because the old saying is, “humor finds nothing sacred.” It is a paradox but there are many great artists who have used it in one form or another. Not all of my stuff is going for the laughs. I am interested in expressing other things too, but most of my work does deal with humor, and I think that is something that people need.

MCR: When I look at your word paintings, some of the wordplay makes me think about an idea or consider a narrative, while others just instantly lead to laughter. Do you crack yourself up as you are thinking of these things? Literally laugh out loud?

WW: Yes, because it is just so pure and exciting and surprising, which is the thrill of humor, to be surprised, and that’s how laughter starts. You are caught unaware, and it’s such an absurd feeling that you spontaneously make this sound, and to make someone else do that is one of the greatest human tricks there is. It is really hard to do actually. None of this stuff I am talking about is original to me; these are ideas that I picked up that have been around forever. I am just passing them on.

MCR: Who are some of your favorites artists that have inspired your work?

WW: I started off deep into cartoons and Mad Magazine and comic books, so the first artists that I really admired or even recognized as artists were cartoonists. I idolized Charles Schulz, the creator of Peanuts. I loved the way he drew and the humor and the storytelling. I also loved the Mad magazine artists like Jack Davis, Mort Drucker, and Al Jaffee. The list goes on and on. They each had their own distinct style. They were masters of cartooning and illustration, and I would copy them. The satirical humor of the 60s Mad magazine combined with beautiful drawing was a big influence, and so I always had a cartoonist kind of eye like so many American kids do. A lot of our first ideas about drawing come from comic books. As I grew older I became more sophisticated with the cartoonists I was looking at. People like George Herriman, Krazy Kat, and Robert Crumb, the underground cartoonist, were huge influences. All of the underground cartoonists, like S. Clay Wilson, Kim Deitch, Art Spiegelman, Bill Griffith, Spain Rodriguez, Justin Green, were influential. When I really got into art, Red Grooms was a very big influence on me. Grooms was from Tennessee so I really identified with him. He was able to take that cartoon energy and turn it into paintings and sculptures in a way that was really unique. The work I am doing now, traveling to different museums and spaces and building on-site installations that are environments, is in the tradition of Red and the work he did, like “Ruckus Manhattan” and his “City of Chicago” show of the 60s. I can’t say enough about him. The list goes on and on. I love abstract expressionists like Willem de Kooning and Arshile Gorky. I love Philip Guston and the way he changed and became this cartoonist expressionist. I love artists who are not afraid to change and make about-faces. I love pop art, of course. Ed Ruscha. I couldn’t be doing what I’m doing without what he did. I love James Rosenquist, all the pop artists.

MCR: You mentioned earlier how influential cartoonists have been on your work, and it’s interesting that you even married a cartoonist/graphic novelist. What has it been like being married to another artist [cartoonist Mimi Pond], whose interests are similar to your own and has major career aspirations of her own? Also, you have two children who are both artists. How do you balance all of that?

WW: Wow. I wish I could say I knew how we did it. It is an ongoing process. I know that much. There is always a new wrinkle or a new problem with artist egos, but I would only want to be married to another artist. This is a very difficult question to answer because we simply did it. We respect and care about each other’s work. We are both very hard workers and we never gave up.

MCR: It seems that your career peaks and valleys have coincided in a way that has allowed each to carry the weight for a period of time, and both to keep moving forward.

WW: Well, fortunately, yes, that is true. It has worked out economically. Let’s face it, that is the bottom line. When Mimi started raising the kids, I started making money, so that helped. Money is important and that’s all there is to it. Also, I was lucky enough to have the kind of jobs that enabled me to help raise the kids. As far as the emotional peaks and valleys, oh my God, don’t get me started. There were so many, most of them mine. Mimi has been an incredible support for me in Hollywood, because that place will drive anybody around the bend, and she worked there too. She wrote the first full-length episode of The Simpsons. She knows what it
is like, and having a partner that understands helps you get along.

**MCR:** Hollywood seems to stay with your work no matter where you go. The large-scale installations you’ve done at Rice University, the Taubman Museum, and the Oklahoma City Museum all have an element of performance and spectacle that reminds me of the work you have done for television. When you enter a space like Marketview Arts in York and begin envisioning how you might use it, does your mind go back to building sets for *Pee Wee’s Playhouse*?

**WW:** Definitely. I have been doing museum installations for four years, which I am really excited about, and I am very happy and lucky to have this new phase. They are very much related to my years of set building in Hollywood, hiring a crew of artists that I can trust and know will do the job, managing a crew of seven to eight odd artists as they build this thing on-site in the room, just like on the sound stage in Hollywood. It is definitely like set building. It also relates to my first year at a natural history museum building exhibits and how to manage that. It is everything else too: painting, sculpture, storytelling and satire, which relates back to the cartooning. Everything is there, and because of my years as a set designer I am not intimidated by the space when I walk into the room. I understand scale and how to make it work. It is about projecting into the space. Sound stages are gigantic, so you get used to working on them and just yelling louder. Rather than whispering you are yelling and you are singing full throated. It is opera as opposed to a singer/songwriter in a cafe. The thing I always find is I should always build it a quarter bigger than I thought it should be, because space can gobble up stuff so fast. You’ve got to dominate. That is really the one word that comes to me whenever I am faced with a large space like Marketview Arts. Dominate.

**MCR:** So when you walked in there and looked at the space, you thought, “How will I dominate this place?”

**WW:** Yes, and there are two main modes of domination. You either go monumental with one big thing or you break it down into several complex things. That seems to be the two major modes. There are degrees between the two, but on one polar side is making one big ass thing and the other is several complex things. I keep them both in mind. It is challenging, especially when you are dealing with the one big thing: it has got huge engineering problems, because it is so damn big. And then the complex thing is really a challenge because you’ve got to make so much stuff. The texture has to get to a certain level, and that just means literally making a lot of things.

**MCR:** When you first walked into this exhibition space at Marketview Arts, did that space immediately suggest to you the ideal form of domination?

**WW:** It’s rarely ever an immediate response. It takes a little bit of sifting to understand, but my first thought was to have one major horizontal when you first walk in that space, to counterbalance the long horizontal thrust of the room. I imagined something really huge starting at the door that draws your eye to the back of the room and then begins to get more complex. That was my initial response, but that can change.

**MCR:** If we had flipped the exhibitions and shown the word paintings at Marketview and the installation in the campus gallery, would that have completely altered what you have in mind?

**WW:** Of course, because it is a whole other space. The campus gallery would be a good fit for the complex idea of things that are more textural and smaller and you can go from one to the next, whereas with a huge open space like Marketview, you’ve got to go for the “baseball field effect.” When you first walk into the stands at a really great baseball park the scale hits you. That is what you’ve got to go for, the big hit of scale when you first walk in. And then you start looking at the players and the fans.

**MCR:** Growing up I would go to Fenway Park in Boston to watch the Red Sox, and it was always such a magical moment to walk through the gate and catch a glimpse of the field.

**WW:** For an artist to capture that feeling with an installation would really be something. It is that first look, the big reveal that is so important. That is my showmanship talking, but I suppose the relative importance of that moment could be debated.

**MCR:** No, I get that. Every time I install a show I always keep walking back to the point where a person, upon entering, will become aware of the space and have their first impression. I scan the room from that

I love history and history is the greatest storytelling there is, and I like going to the new place and reacting to its stories.
vantage point and make adjustments accordingly, because I want that first moment of getting a glimpse to be impressive.

**WW:** Yes, that makes a lot of sense. There are other ideas about installation, but for me the first few seconds are so crucial. It has got to hit you right away.

**MCR:** Speaking of making an impression, we have discussed the way a space makes an impression on you, but how about the way a town or city makes an impression on you? How does your early impression of the area where you'll be installing a big show influence the content of the show?

**WW:** Well, that is how I am in the tradition of Red Grooms, because his installations reflected the city he was in. He went to Chicago and New York at the Whitney Museum and he did several other smaller scale things and they were all about the regional history and environment that he was working in and reacting to it, and I have done the same. George Jones got started in Houston, Texas, so that became the subject of the show at Rice University. The Taubman Museum installation was about the boomtown of Roanoke, Virginia, when it was called Big Lick and became Roanoke overnight with industry from the railroads. At the Oklahoma City Museum of Art I made “Halo Amok,” a cubist cowboy rodeo. I even used the color palette of the reds and browns of the local dirt and landscape. The installation in York will tell a narrative about York. I love history and history is the greatest storytelling there is, and I like going to the new place and reacting to its stories. That is such a natural thing. Again, this is the influence of Red Grooms. Also, I just love the history of any place. I definitely want to have a York story in there, and I will do a lot of reading and research about York to give balance to my visceral impression of the place. That is important too. I wouldn’t do it any other way.

After | March 2014

**MCR:** When you left York last June, after your first visit, you had a few ideas in mind. Some of the ideas you were considering involved the Pennsylvania landscape painting tradition and telling a story using large letterforms. How did you arrive at the concept for **FOE**?

**WW:** My first idea when I visited York was to create some giant letters, but to tell you the truth, I was getting a little tired of letterforms. They just weren’t inspiring me because I had reached a saturation point with them. I couldn’t get inspired. I naturally became interested in the history of York because I always tell something about the history of the place in my installations. I had thought I would tell a story of York’s history using the letterforms, but I just didn’t feel a spark. It didn’t seem like it would really tell the history of the place. I gravitated toward the Civil War history of York because I am naturally interested in that subject. Civil War history was a big part of my childhood growing up in Chattanooga. As I have said several times, I associate a sense of the past and the romance of history with art-making. The two are linked for me, and went hand in hand in my childhood as an artist drawing pictures of the Civil War, of soldiers, Cherokee Indians, cowboys. So, it was natural that I became interested in the Civil War history of York, and it also gave me a chance to make giant figurative sculptures and puppets. I also saw the opportunity to use this as a metaphor for myself as a Southerner coming to York doing an exhibition about Southerners coming to York. History, puppets, sculpture, painting—these are the things I always come back to.

**MCR:** How did you arrive at the gestures of the figures? One is pulling on a pair of boots, another is stealing a pig, and the articulation of these figures is very expressive. How did those figures emerge from your sketchbook?

**WW:** I was naturally drawn to the story of how the soldiers plundered the town and were so overwhelmed by the material richness of the place and the fact that there were factory goods everywhere. It was a culture shock to enter this place of riches and material abundance. I want to capture the joy and revelry of the experience and the looting. That is kind of what art is. It is like reveling in material stuff and enjoying cool objects. Art is very material in that sense and it can get very decadent in a way. I am making a comment on the fact that art is a decadent indulgence just like these soldiers are having a decadent good time pulling on new shoes, and I wanted a gesture that would work as a puppet. I thought of the act of pulling on a shoe and what a universal gesture and motion that is. Everyone does this every morning of their lives, whether they’re pulling on socks or shoes. Everyone everywhere across the world does this, so it is this big universal gesture, just like waving or holding a baby or brushing your teeth. What is more human than pulling on a shoe? Having a big symbol of humanity pulling on a shoe just seemed right to me, and I wanted a puppet that would be interactive. There will be other interactive puppets as well. There will be some marionettes that dance when you pull on a rope. Then there is the guy stealing a pig and a pie. He is like a mobile that moves on his own. He is balanced in space and his head bobs and his body bobs. It is also a sly reference to the football culture that is so important to both Pennsylvania and the South. He has this pig tucked under
his arm and he is running like a football player, except he has an actual pig instead of just the skin. Then there is the welcome gesture of General Jubal Early with his hand extended out as if to say, “Give me the money.” You have to enter through his legs to come in. I love the idea of a “Colossus of Rhodes, Jolly Green Giant” type of figure standing astride the world. I love that gesture. Sometimes I don’t even know what I’m going to do ahead of time. These kinds of ideas and gestures blossom in the space. They’re not fully formed conceptually until I get started, and then the meaning emerges from the materials. We’re using a lot of corrugated cardboard and York has a big corrugated container industry. It is an industrial town. Everything we are doing here uses materials that link to the town in a very material, visceral kind of way.

**MCR:** The Jubal figure’s head just about touches the ceiling, so it is a huge structure but it appears even larger because of the use of three-point perspective. Is that how you sketched him out or is that an example of something evolving in the space?

**WW:** I made a small model of him. I love using illusions to make things appear bigger. It is somewhat inspired by Disneyland, where the main street is scaled down ever so slightly and the second floors are scaled down ever so slightly so it makes the buildings seem bigger than they really are. They use really subtle changes in scale and it is all an illusion. That is a trick that architects use also. I love playing with scale. I like making really big things, but I also love tiny things that you can peak into like a little peep show. I love pushing scale to the extreme. It is such a human impulse to respond to scale: Is it bigger than me? Is it smaller than me? Can I climb on it? Can I overpower it? We’re always relating things to our bodies. That is very much what art does. It relates to the body and to the mind. I personally just love the spectacle of big things. I always say, “Who doesn’t love a big puppet? It’s fun. It makes you feel like a kid again.” When you’re a kid everything towers over you and it feels like magic.
Detail of completed FOE installation
Detail of completed FOE installation
The best thing about planning to kill everybody in America is you can begin with anybody in America. We’d been becoming all our lives. Always our fathers had dementia whose fathers had had dementia and made our fathers with our fathers’ mothers loved our fathers and saw our fathers meet our mothers in transitory ecstasy and our mother loved our fathers and made us in their image so that we too would do fuck and make more also. To have a mind now requires one to forget so hard even inside the perpetual familial forgetting that it now took so little crime for no crime to be distinct from all the rest, even a crime as fine as everybody in America at last at once dying, which is why it had to happen and is why I felt I had been given hands. Each object created in our image prior was a gun aimed at our forehead. Each word a hair on the finger that pulled the trigger. Each song baked into our heads so small to make room for the bigger song the band beat the shit out of with the instruments in the rooms around me, as I hawked up the liquid in which our arms and legs would be coated so that we could begin to leak the killing procedure into the cities in infestation, using every person’s arms instead of just the boys’ and mine. It would not take long to wake in where it already had been implanted. The faith that people have in people would be the very skin of the bag in which we buried our husks inside the bags of flesh we walk around in before the sun and wind and residue of all that speaking at last found us all in our eternal lack of motion there together, giving firm horizon to all this memory language and videotape, from off which we refract back into the refraction from which we’d come, beyond the edge of all possible communication, beyond reproduction.

We did not need the breath of keys or codes to slit the windows or the doors to allow our entrance. They already believed in us as much as anything could ever, without the necessity of will. All walls are permeable by simply wishing back against them hard enough to stir inside it the wish to be parted. Like this me and the boys came through the brick of any home, and found there the same objects of belonging, like a library full of shit. Once in, the boys at once dispersed into the house in shafts of their own need, bleating their organs on the peace. The gristle of their mind clung to keep their innards from wanting so hard they burst out through their holes as they overturned the furniture and air, sniffing for the remainders of historical calamity we could fuse to right now.
Our shapeless song began to splay and flub out of the holes the ceiling owned, turning sudden sense of present tense of coming killing into the night of what had always been the past. The fourth mother had yet to emerge. She had not completed her unknowable, unmanageable mother preparation in skin and nails and hair in the bedroom of her last night with her children in their rooms asleep. The phantom presence of the father in her mind provided us a breathtaking Trojan horse; she lived as if he'd never died, as if he'd been there in the house like any other husband every day since and past, part of Our Country, which is our world. We felt nothing beyond whatever natural border in our minds existed. This was painless to abuse; in passage it became true of every house surrounding: a nation of no father while the mother waits to die: the true nature of adultery. In the house becoming ours the mother wore her whitest gown. She appeared before we even found her. Her name was all over everything, in the sound of her sexlife and want for future, food in the fridge waiting to become more of her. The house clearly wanted her dead, too; it wanted to eat the food itself, to live for itself alone, to be itself and no one's box; its cells were taking shape in full cooperation for the translation we would provide for what desperately everyday hope she'd tried to smush into the home's walls to reftortify what was not there. Everything had already happened and yet I had to play the part as had been promised. I walked along the long hall lined with pictures of the mother in different bodies than she had now and could never have again, alongside what other bodies the mother had met in nearby rooms and made time with, alongside the kids she'd pushed out of her hole, each of them as well in bodies that no longer fit them. I could hear the mother quiver through the house's circuits, burning like star meat. She had a few more thoughts to think through unto the becoming zero. Her god was off duty tonight, just like Disney. My teeth were greasy with intent to do exactly what I was doing. I had a boner and a cough. I heard Darrel in me getting stoned on our blood bowling open like locked darkrooms, black cabinets full of speaker coils. I was so ready to be. The smoke raised through my shoulder blades and made me scream in places where my own cells were turning square shaped like STOP symbols on VCRs. I stopped along the wall and groaned our song some out of my mouth, holding my breath. I could hear this mother on the far side of the dry-wall. She was reading romance. I pressed my palm flat on the paint and said each word aloud as it crossed across her eye. She looked up at where I wasn't yet. This turned me imminently blacker with the fury. The grain of the glass made reflective over the pictures shifting past from each new angle showed secret films of every hour in the house as this family had lived it, filled with great pus and totally false senses of inhibition. It was in me too, so it was in her. It was in the babies we had not had yet and for whom the future had to end. The house's present children were asleep, dreaming of tunnels. Along the hall as if to match this vision in reverse my boys come coasting forward with the mother bore between them in another Christ pose. They'd given her a pretend choice between sex and death and she'd said nothing. They covered her mouth so the song would come out of her nostrils. I raised my arms and said Hello, pointing in every direction I could think of. Her head shook swoopy with her looking as she followed me with her face trying to understand anything. The book she'd read tonight had made her dreamlike. I had a new book. I bent down and said Hello again. She had another belly on her, someone else's trimester. Her curvature was silly and elaborate. It kept begging me to kiss it. As I did, I heard her other children in the bedroom getting snuffed inside their dreams as one word from my lips sent through the wires in their new brother sent wide black swords into their sleep, and then their sleep went on forever. Each of their last cries was better entertainment than anything I'd ever rented. I moved to press my own belly against the mother's so we'd match, my own gut full of the rite of fast food, hers the pustule of the future baby and diet shakes. My laughing gave her a massage until she was warm enough to pry apart in all the places her creator had designed for me to do so. I used my fists first, then my forehead, then my teeth, and then my eyes. I used the edge of her own camera to slice the best bits. I used the glass that housed the photographs and then the photographs themselves. I used the edges of the money she'd been saving to give to cancer research, I used her own nails, I used her own teeth, I used her. Every color that came out of what she had to be turned into was exactly like mine. They laid the mother on the floor. With my chest against the ground I drank the blood out of her womb with my whole mouth. I drank the blood from her vagina until she didn't have a vagina really anymore, as far as god could tell. I drank and ate of her forever. The boys were clawing at my hands. I fed the boys in turns with each of my ring fingers as they sucked the way I
told them. I made them wash their faces in it, their arms and hands. They took the blood and heard me speaking, clearing each word of the mother’s from the remainder of her mind. With these words as I translated, the boys began to scribe this book along the wall, rubbing their ring fingers and their dicks in a dot matrix aimed at covering the house, filling in the walls with our scripture around the mother until her bleeding was depleted and then the real writing began.

The fourth mother began giving up her birth. The scroll of wet carried from her organs to the air so we could inhale it quicker. I thanked her by putting my arm inside her. I clenched my groin and touched the center of my skull to her tummy nozzle. The child was in there. I named the child every name but Darrel. I gave him a religion and a cause, selected his sexual preference and sense of humor from the vast array of ugly possibilities. Each fiber of his then became mine; ours in the light that we could all smell him more than anything else. He was risen, in the past tense. The mother was shuddering so fast it was like she was rewinding, pulling her idea of the house in down around her, giving her everything over and over. The power sockets in the house around us began staggering with the hell of what they had to offer light to. Above the house I heard the voice of Darrel utter his commandments full of silence. My chest was cymbals. We’d kissed the crest. Above the house I heard the Eye of Darrel blink and brush the crust off some morning soon to come like any father. The baby coming out of her was dressed in gowns of beautiful lather and packets of acne. It looked so old already. There were so many wrinkles I could hardly see which part was its genitals he’d have tried to use to make another and which were the legs he would have spent years training to use to get to the source with which he’d make. He refused to look at me. He refused my forgiveness. This was all part of the act. The boys around me began singing absolutely nothing as I used my wisdom teeth to take the kid apart, to take equals mouthfuls each of him and her together, pausing only every so often to get a rip on the end of the mother’s tit. What dreamy milk. Layer upon layer, I revised them. I tasted spaghetti, apples, chicken in her character. The mother was shrouded in some sort of defensive mist now and eyes rolled in her head ecstatic. Just as I noted this, she closed her eyes so I could not see her come. There was more of the child in her than ever, then, as I removed the rope between her and him in long shanks, hand over hand, and her wet ran down the walls on all sides. The gift the mother gave the evening was my next jacket. Her breast meat would fortify my eyes. She slipped in glitch somehow now repeating her unborn baby’s name into the space where wet met air, and in her thickest mist of all now overflowing the mother bloomed.

Each fiber of his then became mine; ours in the light that we could all smell him more than anything else.
ours. Sweet reason hulking in my bloodstreams
gorgeous, without doors. I placed the baby’s corpse
back into the mother and patted the skin around
the hole as best it would. The mother’s color was
soaking into the carpet. It could not find the earth
there. We sat together, she and I, beneath a fine
and uneroding skyline in our eternal summer. Every
murder always went like this. With every inch I’d
ever wished etched in my days I waited with her
for her to disappear. I ate some of her sternum, and
of her shoulders. Both tasted the same. There was
very little left to recognize about her, so I had done
my job, though most of me was somewhere. I heard
the bone of me tell me to find the rest of what I
meant and I looked up and found that I could see
straight through the ceiling, yes, and through the
roof, and there I saw the electrifying slush of night
becoming stone above us, the language chiseled in
its stutter shaking more and more silence out of
somewhere harder there above, and thereby rain-
ning it back down on other U.S.A. houses as a bright
bath anywhere another person could be found, un-
til the pulse inside my skull pulled my seeing back
into my face, into my skull, and thereby back into
the putty of me and thereby back into my speech
and through the remainder of the mother and her
child, which there vibrating in me made me hover
and crust over in the center of a spine of someone
in me I had never quite yet fully been, and so most
worshipped. Within this body, in an instant there
above the mother boiling, I grew old and ill and
died inside me and saw that it was good and gave
my word and rose again.

The Kraken. He’s not one of your sexy monsters—he’s not much of a seducer—but he makes
up for it in mystery and raw size, and also weird gravitas: this is a monster with dignity. He’s
got patience (per Tennyson):

There hath he lain for ages and will lie
Battening upon huge sea-worms in his sleep,
Until the latter fire shall heat the deep;
Then once by man and angels to be seen,
In roaring he shall rise and on the surface die.

Not sure it’s canon, but you get the idea. There’s only one of him, and he doesn’t spend his
time working the streets, looking for trouble, or brooding narcissistically in his crumbling
castle. He’s not petty, and he’s not even evil, especially. He’s just a force of nature: you mess
with the Kraken, you get the tentacles.

- Lev Grossman (Author of THE MAGICIAN’S TRILOGY)
This is my rare ceramic Tastoane mask. Instead of a nose, there is a large green lizard. There are two extra, heavily lashed eyes. The face is covered with snakes, worms, a spider, and a frog. Smallpox sores are represented as flowers.

The brown tongue sticks out perfectly straight, as if the Tastoane is a defiant toddler. Indeed, the Tastoane itself has the overall look of an unapologetic two-year-old revving up for a tantrum.

The mask is painted in brilliant colors, including orange, fig, turquoise, crimson, yellow, black, and lime.

The Tastoane’s two mustachio fangs are actual chicken bones. Mysteriously, delightfully, the chicken bone fang on the right has a perfectly fitted pantaloon and is wearing a perky little clog. This shoe is poised as if about to kick someone, anyone, in protest if the Tastoane’s freedom is restricted.
The week after my father died, I suddenly became interested in masks of people with creatures on their faces. These Tastoane masks are worn by men who dance in an annual street parade that occurs in Tonala, Mexico.

According to one legend, in the 1500s, the local Indian queen welcomed invading Spaniards and converted to Catholicism. Yet many of the indigenous people were not so cooperative. They heroically fought the Spaniards—resisting so fiercely that they were described as "demons"—but lost and retreated deep into the hills, where they lived for years in caves.

Scorpions, spiders, lizards, and other cave-loving creeping creatures cover the Tastoane masks—representing what crawled upon the rebels' faces while they hid. Many of the masks have sores from smallpox brought by the Spaniards, and gaping, bleeding wounds. They have unkempt, long hair made of horse tail or sisal to represent how long the rebels' hair grew in confinement.

As centuries passed, the typical Tastoane mask came to look less and less like that of a person. Today's masks have morphed into patchwork monsters with only rudimentary human features, and the human elements that do exist are twisted or mocked in some manner—like my Tastoane's doubled set of eyes or canine teeth overgrown into a chicken bone fang moustache. Many of the masks worn today are surreal, full-blown hybrids with bird beak noses, actual coyote teeth, jaguar ears, real cat whiskers, and such—all painted in psychedelic patterns and colors.

The Tastoane are unrepentant, unrelenting truth-tellers and fighters. Their name is derived from the Nahuatl word for "spokesman" or "lord." For most of the year, the Tastoane warrior masks live in peace, but each spring they revive for the parade to wage one more symbolic, dancing battle against their oppressors.

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My father died of Pick's disease, frontotemporal dementia that made him apathetic as a stone, preserved his memories intact but stole his speech, removed any interest in hygiene, blunted his emotions into viciousness, and amplified his already rabid sexual appetites into landmine territory. Onset can occur as early as age fifty-five, but because my father was so privately and indiscriminately cruel for as long as I knew him, it seemed as if he always had the disease.

The last time I visited my father at the nursing home, he still could form a sentence every now and then. He poked his long fingernail like a hammer into my stomach, fuming that I had gained too much weight—and created miniature red half-moons that made it seem as if I'd been bitten by frowning devil pixies. He leaned over to my sister at lunch and asked if she wore a Genie Bra, and after she replied "No," he kept rubbing a napkin across his mouth, and then chewed the tip rapturously, as if eating. After lunch, I joined him for craft class, during which he stuck adhesive-backed googly eyes all over his face—and then pointed to them and whispered again and again, like a mantra, "Pussies!" I went into the bathroom afterward and was sick, holding so tightly to the bars for the handicapped that my hands shook and cramped.

What heaven for my father—to at last be free to indulge his rapacious sexual appetites, but not to be held accountable because they actually were a symptom of his disease. When he stuck his hand into the nursing home librarian's cleavage, she smiled with forced sympathy and said to me and my sister, "You just have to forgive Larry. He doesn't know what he's doing. It's just the disease." But he does know what he's doing, I thought. He does. Aren't you fortunate that you have no idea what that means.

By that point, my father was confined to the facility's locked psychiatric ward—due to his frequent gropings of staff and his escape attempts, which often involved removing the hammer from fire alarm boxes on the walls and smashing the glass. After one of these escapades, he actually was interrogated by the Department of Homeland Security because a congressman had been giving a lecture in the building at the same time my father axed the alarm, resulting in the evacuation of hundreds of audience members, nursing home residents, and office workers (the nursing home was in a West Los Angeles high-rise that also housed other businesses—and resembled the Ritz). "I'd love to have been a fly on the wall during that shakedown," my husband said. "Like Scooby-Doo on steroids. Talk about weird." Not Scooby-Doo, I thought sadly. More like David Lynch meets Dexter. On speed.
My father molested me most often when I was in middle school. Not long after the first incident, I began hiding in caves of a sort, just like the monstrous Tastoanes. I hid for hours every week, always in and around our house—under beds and sofas, in closets and cabinets and the attic, behind bushes and the garage, on tree branches and roofs.

Strangely, although I wanted to escape both my frightening parents, I also desired, more than anything, for them to find me. I sometimes hid for hours. Occasionally, I heard my parents talk to each other and wonder out loud where I was—but only if they needed me to do a chore or eat a meal—dinner, always dinner, because my absence at other meals was never perceived.

The length of my hiding times kept increasing, because I was trying to discover a set point: a magical number of hours that would trigger my parents to search until I was found. I always waited with hope, in faith that they might someday search for me or at least ask where I had been.

Twelve hours was my longest hideaway session, behind parkas in our winter coat closet. I brought two peanut butter and banana sandwiches, a box of Cheerios, and a jug of apple juice. With a flashlight, I read *Little Women* cover to cover and wrote ten pages in my diary. Later, I took a long nap and peed in mason jars.

My parents never arrived. They never tried to find me. They never asked where I had been.

I was painfully unattractive during those years. My cystic acne caused sores so deep and infected that sometimes they spontaneously leaked pus during the day. I used Crazy Glue to stick locks of hair to the side of my face, in an attempt to cover particularly large open acne pits. Repeated attempts to lighten my dishwater blonde hair—using lemon juice, hydrogen peroxide, and chamomile tea—made me smell like an old haystack. The feathered lioness cut I had received over the summer, in a struggle to duplicate Farrah Fawcett’s hairdo like other girls at school, flopped instead of flipped and looked like cocker spaniel ears.

I felt profoundly unattractive inside, too. When I was in sixth grade, my father gave me an STD, probably acquired from one of the many graduate students and prostitutes and hippy street vendors he slept with each week. It was the early seventies, after all, and when my father drove us around Harvard Square to look at the beatniks like they were zoo animals, at least a half-dozen women usually waved and shouted cheerily at him in grateful recognition.

I remember one teenage girl in particular, whose hair hung in furry old braids beneath a phony beaded Native American headband. She was always dressed in a dirt-matted macramé vest and bellbottom jeans worn almost to shreds. The tattered gray men’s undershirt she wore beneath the vest was the same brand my father wore. Whenever she saw us drive by and my father waved out the window, she placed her hands together in prayer and bowed exaggeratedly to him. “I take care of her sometimes,” he said.

The doctors I’ve talked to as an adult are not sure whether my father gave me syphilis or gonorrhea when I was twelve. Huge, suppurating sores broke out all over my labia. I told my mother about the blisters, but she took me to the doctor only after they began to leak so much fluid and blood that it ran out of my underwear, leaving streaks that sometimes reached my knees.

The doctor prescribed antibiotics and interrogated my mother about my sexual activities. She refused to respond, but in the car, on the way home, she slapped my thigh so hard that it left a bruise, a veiny blue-red splotch shaped like her palm and two fingers.

Despite the antibiotics, the sores continued for another week. I asked my mother if I could go back to the doctor. I didn’t tell her my secret goal—because she, in her imperial glacial Swiss fashion, was actually scarier than my father—of asking the doctor for help in preventing my father’s terrifying midnight visits to my room across the hall. My mother refused and said the antibiotics just needed time to work. In the morning, she gave me a clear plastic bag containing pins to pierce the blisters, alcohol swabs, and tissue. “It’s time for you to take care of this yourself,” she said—and then repeated her words angrily, as if voicing a screed.

Tastoane masks used to be made of brightly colored clay, but they frequently broke during dances and simulated battles, so now the facial features are made of painted leather attached to a wooden or leather foundation with temporary glue. The warriors soak the leather face parts in water and pull them off the base after the yearly parade, and then fashion another mask for the next year’s celebration—so there are few Tastoane masks for
The spirit of the Tastoane is said to die when the leather face pieces are torn away, and then another, new spirit is born when the next mask is created. The old ceramic masks are now extremely rare, because most of them were smashed to pieces.

After my father’s death, I bought so many Tastoane masks that some are still stored in grocery bags because I have not figured out where to hang them. They were not easy to find, and I spent countless hours trolling various online art dealers and auctions. Many of the sellers had no idea what the masks represented, or who the Tastoane warriors were. I learned to use ambiguous search phrases, such as “monster mask Mexico” and “mask with animals on face.”

I didn’t realize, until months after I began collecting the masks and learned more about their actual history, that I was drawn to the Tastoanes because I, too, needed to survive and thrive as a monster—as a survivor, writer, and artist, with cobbled together parts painted every color imaginable, coated with cave creatures whose mandate is to protect me without question, with passion. Instinctively. I am the Tastoane, not my father.

Because my favorite Tastoane mask is ceramic, it will never die, its facial features never pulled off so that it can become a different spirit. The mask has four-foot long sisal hair that is coarse and straw blonde, the same color as mine. The psychedelic colors of the decorative creatures change along with the light in our living room, which is filtered by the surrounding strong old oak trees. Visiting children are sometimes afraid of the monster mask, so once I kissed its tiny clog-wearing fang in front of them as a joke, as an offering. The little clay shoe was cool and smooth against my lips. The children laughed and resumed playing.

My mask is the most beautiful face I have ever seen.

You know what I like? Mummys. I always liked Cleopatra and all stories and aspects of the Egyptian myth. You know that my favorite movie is Raiders of the Lost Ark—all of this stuff falls in the same world. I like Mummys too because they are something else under all of that wrapping. Something better—I always imagine, but really it’s a decomposing body. The mystery appeals to me. I think in cartoons they were often portrayed as sad and sweet. They usually moan through the wraps, but I think if you could decipher what they were mumbling—it would be highly intelligent, wise, and poetic.

- Ophira Eisenberg (Host of NPR’s ASK ME ANOTHER, & author of SCREW EVERYONE)
Sarah McCord can’t quite remember when she discovered that PubMed was still calling conjoined twins “monsters.” She does, however, remember being startled.

“It bothered me,” she wrote to me, “because it seemed like there were all kinds of news stories about conjoined twins being surgically separated, and I knew that there would be more searching on the topic than there had been in the past. I wondered how seeing this term might affect a family member looking for information.”

Sarah is Head of Reference & Instructional Services and Associate Professor of Library Resources at the Massachusetts College of Pharmacy and Health Sciences. As a medical librarian, she thinks not just about what healthcare professionals need to find, but also what patients and their families will encounter.

Sarah and I found ourselves in conversation after she wrote to advise me of something she had done, something that startled me far more than the subject term “Monster” had startled her: Sarah was writing to say that, since 2007, she had been steadily nudging the National Library of Medicine (NLM) to stop listing human offspring as monsters, and that she had recently succeeded. The NLM had officially replaced “Monsters” with “Abnormalities, Severe Teratoid” in the official Medical Subject Headings (MeSH) used in PubMed. And Sarah wasn’t done; she was pushing for the for-profit medical databases, including Elsevier’s EMBASE, to do the same, and she was succeeding.

My mouth dropped open when I read her first email describing her efforts. And I thought immediately of three people.

The first was a man named Tom, born with hypospadias (an anomaly of the penis), who appeared in the 1996 homemade activist film, Hermaphrodites Speak! In the film, Tom remembers that, in spite of surgeons subjecting his genitals to “normalizing” surgeries, no one told him the name of his condition. One day, someone inadvertently dropped the word “hypospadias” in reference to him. Young Tom snuck off and looked up “hypospadias” in the encyclopedia, only to find this: “Hypospadias; see Monster.”

The second was Deb Costandine, whom I helped
figure out what her stillborn conjoined twins had looked like thirty years earlier.1 When I had sent Deb a copy of a case report from a 1980 issue of Archives of Gynecology of conjoined twins who resembled her lost sons, I had had to write, “I have to warn you that it includes the obnoxious term ‘monster’ and explain that this was used by physicians until the 1990s as a standard term for a major birth defect. Some still use it, but it is obnoxious because of what it connotes. [...] It is obvious that people are not monsters, and doctors should have stopped using that term a long time ago.”

And the third was George Annas, whose 1987 article in The Hastings Center Report had articulated for me something I had been struggling to explain in my own work on conjoined twins.2 Annas disdainfully called the business of subjecting conjoined twins to a separate (indeed, lethal) kind of medical ethics “monster ethics”—an ethics that says surgeons can do whatever they want up until the point when they make these “monsters” human, even “kill one to save the other.”

When Sarah first got in touch, she explained she was letting me know about the PubMed shift for several reasons: “(1) these changes may affect the way you search for information, and (2) these changes will affect the way (a very small part of) your work is classified and categorized. And, honestly, reason (3) for dropping you this note is that I was delighted to discover a scholar who might actually care that these changes [...] have been/will be made.”

Care, I did. I immediately wrote Sarah back fan mail, telling her there was no doubt in my mind her action would benefit real people, people like Tom and Deb. That graphic horror movie label would no longer be slapped on the marquees of their lives, at least not in PubMed.

Sarah admitted, “I did have a colleague ask if making the changes would be a lot of work for such a small number of articles.” (A case of monster librarianism? Why worry about what happens to those labeled “monsters”?) She said she responded by reminding her colleague about how ADA-required curb cuts have turned out to help far more people than just chair-users. “Big changes come from small changes,” she concluded.

Of course, it seems unlikely that any of the sensible folks at the NLM found her suggestion anything but long overdue. Sarah hastened to point out to me that it was the NLM staff, not she, who came up with the new term. Still, it says something that it took until 2010 for the largest public database of medical literature to shoo out this particular ghost of medical history.

By coincidence, monster ethics came up this past weekend in an email correspondence with my good friend Kiira Triea. When Kiira’s mother had been pregnant with her, doctors gave her mother progestin to try to prevent a miscarriage. Consequently, Kiira, a genetic female, was born with virilized genitalia. As a terribly femme teenage boy, Kiira ended up in the infamous Johns Hopkins clinic of John Money. Money tried to make the boy more manly—Kiira was messing with Money’s theory that gender comes from nurture—but failing that, Money finally “let” Kiira become a girl.3

Lately I’ve been pushing Kiira to do more autobiographical writing. In her last email, Kiira was sharing my frustration with a disciple of Money who keeps getting away with sub-human treatment of sex-atypical children. “They just tell a few monster stories, so the parents will come around to the intervention the clinician wants to do,” she wrote to me about this kind of clinician, “and everyone understands how important their ‘work’ is.”

“Oh,” she added, “there’s the name of my book: Monster Story.”

Like me—like Sarah—Kiira knows that only medicine has enough mojo to make a baby a monster. Or to make her a person, with just a charmed word.

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3. Triea K. Power, Orgasm, and the Psychohormonal Research Unit. In: Dreger AD, ed. Intersex in the Age of Ethics. Hagerstown, Maryland: University Publishing Group; 1999:141-4
RORY KRAFT: A lot of your work in medical history examines people and conditions which are considered by the larger society to be “monstrous” or “freakish.” What do you think it means to “monsterize” these people?

ALICE DREGER: I think humans are fascinated by differences, including extreme differences, and also have a tendency to want to say to themselves (to quote my late great-aunt-in-law), “Thank god I’m pure.” (She said it sarcastically, typically after a load of gossip about someone else’s bad behavior, but I think she named what we’d all like to be able to say about ourselves un-sarcastically.) So people look at strangers who are different in some way and use it both for entertainment and also as a route to self-assurance (“Thank god I’m pure”). Ironically, when people actually get to KNOW people with atypical bodies, they discover they’re just people, and they stop doing the “monsterizing” thing. One reason a lot of conjoined twins have opted to live in small towns is that you get to know everybody and everybody gets over it.

RK: In your process of looking at the conditions, the reader is often left with a better sense of the individuals that have been labeled. Strangely, the best way to put this is that you “humanize” a set of our population by balancing narratives about individuals with background history and data on the labels/diagnosis. Have you thought about this process of “making” these groups “human” again?

AD: Yes, and I think the way to do that is to lump instead of to split. In other words, I’m interested in what makes us alike—which is why my book on conjoined twins is called One of Us.

I have to confess, though, that I think I’m a little abnormal compared to most people. I’m not wowed by celebrity at all, so I have a hard time approaching people with dramatically atypical bodies (or histories of atypical bodies) with the sort of celebrity awe that a lot of other people have. I just see everybody as one more body on the planet, because I just don’t get what other people get out of celebrity. As a consequence, perhaps it’s easier for me to write about these people as people because that’s all I see, since I fail to really get
what other people get out of celebrity auras. For example, when I was on Oprah, I was not that interested in Oprah. My friends were aghast, for example, that I forgot to bother to get a picture of myself with Oprah. The person I was fascinated by that day was the guy who was apparently in charge of one thing and only one thing: the curl of Oprah’s eyelashes. He kept showing up to redo the curl between segments. I wanted to spend about an hour with that guy getting to know him, what motivates him, how he ended up in such an unusual profession. No kidding—if you gave me an hour with him or with Oprah, I’d take him in a heartbeat. He seemed like he probably had an interesting life that would be interesting to hear about.

RK: You have written on conjoined twins, individuals with achondroplasia, and folks with ambiguous genitalia. How do you think your work helps us, the readers, understand the world?

AD: One of the things I try to do in my work is to get people to understand that we all have bodies and that our bodies matter sometimes directly (e.g., I get really sick if I am orally exposed to milk proteins or gluten) and sometimes indirectly, because of social rules (e.g., to decline an offer of food, which I frequently have to do, is read as impolite and even offensive). I try to get people to understand that we very often think the direct effects (our anatomies) are the most limiting, but that in fact it’s the indirect effects (social rules that constrain how we feel and how others feel about us) that have the biggest impact on us most of our days.

Blind people do fine at home, I do fine at home, conjoined twins do fine at home. It’s the social structure that creates difficulty for us.

A good example would be when I gave birth. I opted to birth without pain killers because I didn’t want to introduce any risk to myself or the baby. As a consequence, I knew I had to set up an environment that would allow me to do that kind of labor. That meant engaging a midwife and a doula and also engaging my husband in the decision. That birth hurt a ton! But it wasn’t that big a deal, really, because I had set up a social system in which I could manage my anatomical reality quite well. As a consequence, I had a fantastic birth experience, including by being in so much pain that I temporarily went into a sort of other level of consciousness that I found absolutely fascinating. I loved birth, including the pain, and I’m not normally someone who “enjoys” pain. A lot of women point to their bodies and say, “I can’t handle the pain of birth.” But they don’t understand that pain happens within a social context, and that sometimes that context makes it manageable, and sometimes it makes in unmanageable. The truth is, I get headaches I can’t manage because my social environment won’t give me a break for a headache. In a different social context, I’d need a lot less Tylenol.

I just wish we’d all pay more attention to how we set up environments that make peoples’ bodies into problems.

RK: When you speak of environments, it seems like you are in many ways privileging a social or psychological environment—not necessarily a physical one. Yet it is precisely the physical which fascinates so many: “How do you decide who takes the lead when walking?” “What does it feel like to be like you?” Having done interviews with folks with lots of different types of bodies, have you found a good way to be both non-rude (which I think is different from “sensitive”) and get answers for the physical questions that often provoke the initial interest people have?

AD: To be honest, those are not questions I have, because if you start to dig at all you get the predictable answer—“We work it out same as everybody.” I’m afraid my questions are often more along the lines of “Where did you get that pretty necklace?” and “Where’s a good place to get a bite to eat around here?” Sorry.

My friend (now friend) Ellen Weissbrod made a film about the Schappell twins for A&E and, before A&E ruined the film, it was a stunning piece about the rest of us looking. It was an amazing piece. But A&E wanted instead a film about that—they wanted footage of conjoined twins brushing their teeth and doing their laundry. The Schappell sisters found this as ridiculous as Ellen and I did, because honestly, they do their laundry and brush their teeth the same as all of us do—however we can get it done, we do it.

RK: By looking at the sheer variety of the human phenotype, you seem to be doing something important in terms of examining what it means to be/have a “monstrous body.” At what point, if it is, did this become intentional?

AD: I don’t know. I think I’m fundamentally a lumper so I was always going to approach these issues as someone who saw the commonalities between us all. It’s just a personality thing, not something I really set out to do per se. Another part of my personality is that I have a really low tolerance for systems that are thoughtless or stupid. I like logical, well-reasoned systems. Treating people poorly because they were through a fluke born with something odd is just a thoughtless and stupid system, so I’ve tried to replace it with a logical, well-reasoned system. At the end of the day, it seems obviously just the golden rule, which we know in
practice works really well. So I try to ask—“If that were me, what would I want?” but instead of using the me I am today, I try to use the me I would be if I were born that way, i.e., use the evidence we have from the people who have lived with that condition. When we do that, what we find is that most people with atypical genitalia would not want surgeries to which they did not consent; most people who are conjoined will be fine whether their parents elect separation or not before about the age of 1 year, and after about 1 year of age separation starts to have negative psychological consequences; most people with cleft lip will want the “primary” (basic) repair but don’t want a lot of surgical fussing beyond that. It’s not that radical an approach, but it’s also not the approach used often enough in medicine. If it were, there would be a lot more recognition that people can handle a lot of variety in their own bodies, especially if their “difference” was something they were born with. Most of us grow to be comfortable with the basic body type we came with.

RK: A fair amount of the prevalent “medical documentaries” on cable television seem to serve as a modern-day sideshow by allowing the viewer to see the 500-pound woman, the hairy boy, the attached twins, etc. Is it possible to balance the “freak show” aspect with the educational component?

AD: Probably not. What we know from sociological studies is that knowing someone with a difference—be it a sexual orientation difference, an ethnic difference, a bodily difference of some other kind—tends to be what stops bigotry. Television doesn’t stop bigotry very well because we are not truly interacting with these people, we are not shaking their hands and smelling them (which it appears turns out to be important for social bonding). In most cases, television just adds to the freakish overtones, creates distance, and focuses on how we are different rather than how we are alike, and so it’s not very helpful.

Most of us grow to be comfortable with the basic body type we came with.

RK: Since this is for Story, I was hoping you could briefly share your favorite story you learned from your work.

AD: Ack! That’s like asking me to choose among my children. I think if you want something short, I would say that perhaps the story that drove home what I’ve learned best of all is when I learned from the descendants of Eng Bunker (one of the “Siamese Twins”) that the big secret in the family was their interracial heritage (being descended from an Asian man married to a white woman, in the antebellum South), not that they were descended from a conjoined twin. It’s another good example of how which anatomy will matter depends on the social context.
The project began as research for fiction. At least I think that’s how it started. The father of my protagonist was a carney, maybe. It wasn’t until I stumbled onto some images of Coney Island strongmen from the early 1900s that I realized he would be a strongman. Shortly after, I also realized I was becoming more interested in the actual strongmen than I was the story I was trying—and failing—to write.

I began to stockpile snippets of information about strongmen in Evernote: images of Louis Cyr, short blurbs about Sandow and The Mighty Atom—legends from the days of vaudeville who lifted hundreds of pounds with one hand, hung from airplanes by their hair, moved the unmovable and bent the unbendable. I soon remembered that someone I knew from my hometown was a performing strongman.

I had bumped into Chris “Hairculese” Rider a few years earlier, at a trade show where my daughter’s dance school had performed. He was renting an exhibit booth where he sold wine racks and sculptures he’d bent by hand from 20 foot-long pieces of solid steel. That day we talked for a while, catching up on who ended up where and that sort of thing. I asked about the sculptures and a large box of phonebooks that lay at his feet. He told me how he’d begun to perform old-time strongman feats, and shared stories of the damage he’d caused to his body in the process. Then he tore a 2-inch thick phonebook in half (a feat in which he currently holds a world record).

Most likely the small seed of curiosity was planted that day. I recall thinking the whole thing seemed absurd, but in a way I found really interesting. And I was still wondering similar things years later as I walked through the Weightlifting Hall of Fame with Benjamin Percy, who was Writer-in-Residence at York College of Pennsylvania at that time. What would compel a person to bend steel with his bare hands or break chains by merely expanding his chest? Why? And what kind of dedication and tolerance for pain did that entail? What does it take to be a strongman? What makes a strong man?

“You should do something with that.” Percy said.

It still took another year before I decided to contact Hairculese. By then it had been years since I’d written any new material I thought worth pursuing, compounded by years of questioning my own abilities as writer, father, husband, human. Some people would call this a slump. Others might call it writers block or an existential crisis. I’ve never had the hubris to really call it anything other than fear. The fear of failure was, and still is, so powerful that it’s kept me from even trying.

Slim “The Hammerman” Farman has a saying that goes something like this—I’m paraphrasing: If you try to achieve a task and stop without breaking the machine, you didn’t fail, you quit. Me, I’ve barely even been turning the machine on.

As you’ll see, this project started with an email. I still don’t know where it’s going. It’s some parts biography, some parts ethnography, some parts history, and some parts memoir. Some parts I haven’t found the ways to tell yet because I’m still learning. The story is still being written.

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Vito Grippi is a founding editor of Story. His fiction, essays, and journalism occasionally appear online and in print publications. He watches soccer and writes in York, Pennsylvania with his wife and three children.
Hi Vito,

Let's talk.  

Best regards,
Chris Rider

www.StrongmanChrisRider.com

"Chris Rider...is gifted with a flair for performance." - Mondo Curry, Unseen Films

On Mar 4, 2014, at 11:32 AM, Vito Grippi wrote:

Hi Chris, long time.

I’m not sure if you knew this or not, but aside from teaching at York College and sometimes helping the family with the restaurant, I also do some writing. I write fiction and nonfiction (essays and that sort of thing). I also do some journalism type stuff and edit a literature and culture magazine called Story. Anyway, I’m writing now because I’ve had this idea burning at me for a while about strongmen.

Right now, I’m not even 100% sure what I want to do with it. This could turn out to be some kind of fictional story, or it may be nonfiction. I just know that I’m interested, and that there is a story here somewhere.

Back in May, I visited the York Barbell Museum and became really interested in the Strongman section. Part of this is my curiosity about desire, what makes people want something so bad that they’re willing to struggle, inflict pain on themselves, etc. I also have always had something of an interest in the historical elements of carnival culture and that sort of thing. To me, it seems like the strongman thing is like many art forms, an endeavor that most “rational” people would think is crazy. But like most art forms, I think the people who do it do so because they have to... something drives them to bend a piece of steel, like something drives a painter or sculptor or writer to create something.

I’ve also been following what you’ve been doing and am completely blown away by what you’ve been able to accomplish.

So, for now I think I’d like to just to just immerse myself a little in what it means to be a “Strongman.” I’ve been researching and looking at it from the outside and am realizing now that I can’t really move forward without getting closer. Maybe I could just observe your practice sessions or performances if you have any coming up? Also, we could talk, maybe even connect with others that you know in the Strongman world.

At the very least, I would probably see where things go, then try to pitch the story to a magazine. Or maybe there is something larger here and in that case, I would propose it to a publisher as a book project. For now though, I’m just after the answer to my initial question. What makes someone look at a phonebook and want to tear it in half?

Please let me know if this seems like something you’d be into. Maybe we can grab lunch or something soon and see what happens.

Thanks Chris,
During one of our earlier conversations, Chris mentioned “shutting off the governor.” A saying that comes from Slim the Hammerman, a living legend in the world of Old Time Strongmen. Slim is a protégé of the famous Joe "The Atom" Greenstein. The saying refers to shutting off the part of your brain that tells you to quit. The part of your brain that keeps you from hurting yourself. Shutting off the governor is what enables Chris to push into a piece of steel to the point of either blacking out or breaking the bones in his hands—all things that have happened to him. The point is, even as bones are cracking beneath a metal wrench, or as he can feel himself becoming lightheaded to the point of collapse, he doesn't stop. There's a determination that eliminates any fear of consequence.

Sir Ken Robinson, in his discussions of creativity, talks about how we are actually born creative people. We don't so much as learn to be creative as we are later taught to not be creative, to silence the impulses that push us to more creative endeavors. (He attributes this partly to a shift in education to serve the needs of the industrial revolution.) In turn, we move into our adult lives trying not to unleash how to be creative, but more importantly, the stigmas placed on those creative impulses instill a certain sense of fear in our ability to be creative. In order to be creative, you have to allow yourself the ability to make mistakes. Without the freedom to be wrong, to make mistakes, you can never truly make
something that is original and creative.

Fear is something that has kept me from moving forward for a long time.

While my brain is in a constant state of imagination, ideas for stories, songs, artistic collaboration constantly churning, a wall presents itself the moment if pick up the tools and attempt to get to work. Actually, I rarely make it to the point of grabbing those tools.

One day I ask Rider about his process for how he teaches students. He currently has a handful of students that he mentors, from California to South Africa. We are in his Chevy Silverado, on a wrench run to a small, family-owned hardware store that also sells horseshoes, albeit not the ones that Rider likes. The process of choosing wrenches is both fascinating and somewhat absurd. Fascinating because it reminds me of the countless amounts of time I’ve spent in the past debating the tools of my own trade. Over the years I’ve acquired a basic toolbox of particular kinds of paper or pencils and papers I prefer. The keyboard on a Mac laptop is always preferred to that of most other branded laptops, for example. I realize that all of this is absurd, for the writer like me, these are distractions that keep from the actual act of writing. But bending wrenches and hammers, that’s quite different.

The store sits off the highway in a rural part of Maryland. Rider requests I
don’t mention store names or brands whenever possible. Strongmen are somewhat territorial when it comes to their supply chains. This becomes even more apparent when it comes to acquiring phonebooks, a medium that is becoming harder and harder to come by. Rider has a connection with a national distribution center who saves returned books worthy of tearing in half.
Chris Rider is a professional performing strongman, motivational speaker, strength coach, and entertainer. Since his initial involvement in the strongman world in 2006, Chris’s work has been added to leading strength museums and private collections. He is a multiple world record holder, performs internationally, and has been featured in mainstream print media and on TV. In 2008 he was declared “one of the strongest people on the planet” by strength historians. He costars alongside one of his protégés, Chris “Wonder” Schoeck, in the award-winning feature documentary, Bending Steel. Also know as “Hairculese” for towing trucks and breaking chains with his ponytail, Chris is spearheading the resurgence of the traditions of the Coney Island Strongmen. In 2011, he and his partner, Adam Realman founded the Olde Time Coney Island Strongman Spectacular. Together, with a revolving cast of top strongmen performers, they are touring the country and preserving the strongman tradition for future generations.
then it's go time.

Me— I've gotcha, and not to compare it to an adrenaline rush, but...

Rider— It's like turning on an adrenaline switch, and as soon as you've done the task shutting it back off. Cause there's been times, different things that I've done. The S wrench. The first time that I bent an adjustable wrench into an S shape I was shot for 5 weeks after that. There was nothing there. What I think happened was I think I completely drained out my central nervous system. I just didn't have anything left.

Conflicting modification on October 7, 2014 at 12:00:12 PM:

During one of our earlier conversations, Chris mentioned “shutting off the governor.” A saying that comes from Slim the Hammerman, a living legend in the world of Old Time Strongmen. The saying refers to shutting of the part of your brain that tells you to quit. The part of your brain that keeps you from hurting yourself. Shutting off the governor is what enables Chris to push into the a piece of metal to the point of either blacking out or breaking the bones in your hand—all things that have happened to him. The point is, even as bones are cracking beneath a metal wrench, or as he can feel himself becoming lightheaded to the point of collapse, he doesn't stop. There's a determination that eliminates any fear of consequence.

Sir Ken Robinson, in his discussions of creativity, talks about how we are actually born creative people. We don't so much as learn to be creative as we are later taught to not be creative, to silence the impulses that push us to more creative endeavors. In turn, we move into our adult lives trying not to unlearn how to be creative, but more importantly, the stigmas placed on those creative impulses instill a certain sense of fear in us. A fear of failure, or a fear of being wrong, that is at the very center of creativity. In order to be truly creative, in order to truly create something that is unique and new, you have to let yourself be wrong. You have to let yourself fail.

It is with this sense of doom that the Strongman project began, though I didn't really think about it like that at the time. At the time, I was researching carnival and sideshow acts for a possible piece of fiction. The story was about a girl that, due to certain events, is forced to search for her estranged father, who just so happened to be a carney, maybe. I liked the idea of her father being an Old time strongman, someone larger than life, with maybe a handlebar mustache. Someone maybe of Eastern European descent. That started my long dive into the world of strongmen
culture. The more I dug, the more fascinated I became. These men, characters from all parts of the world, all seemed to be driven by a central desire to achieve an impossibility.

At the time, I imagine there was a glimmer of the connection between what a strongman does and what the artist attempts to achieve. If it was there, though, I was too blind at the time to notice. Instead, my focus came down to the question, why? Why does a human being subject himself/herself to what most people seems like a senseless, even crazy act.

Early on, Louis Cyr, a French Canadian who went on to great fame (more about him here) was known in his village for picking up large boulders. Why? Because he could, and others could not. It was not until a show promoter spotted him that it had even occurred to Cyr that his gift could earn him money and fame. But all of these

Rider—Yeah, One year Mike Bruce came up and I bent a horseshoe across his throat. I think that was 2009. That was, yeah, that was before I did the hammer. Wow that was a story too. I was really concerned about how that was going down. In an effort to look better, I had someone polish some horseshoes, so they're all nice and shiny. When they polished them they tempered them, which makes them harder. They did not want to bend. It made them significantly harder. So I've got this horseshoe jammed into the notch of his throat. Right against his esophagus, and I'm pulling and I feel it flexing and it's not doing anything. It's fighting me.

Me—Are you behind him?

Rider—I'm behind him. He has, he's standing in like a fighters stance, he's got himself all braced. He's got his hands, his fists on his side. As solid as a rock as he can be. With his chin up in the air, I'm behind him, reaching around his neck, holding onto this horseshoe, and I've got the toe of this horseshoe stuck back into his throat. I'm pulling this thing back, using his esophagus as a fault (not sure of the language here) And I'm trying and I'm trying and it's not bending. And I back off and he leans his head (demonstrates Mike Bruce looking back over his shoulder)

"What are you doing? Bend it."

I said dude it's tempered.

"I don't care, just bend it." (he changes his voice to mimic Bruce. Not
unlike a drill sergeant barking an order. A deep growl)

"Just bend it they're all looking."

I said all right dude, cause here it comes. I was so worried I was going to hurt him. And he said he was ready so I let it rip. I got into that horseshoe so hard; Mike at the time was about 200 pounds. I had the man completely off of his feet by a quarter inch wide edge steel horseshoe digging into his esophagus. I'm yanking. I pull him straight up off of his feet by this horseshoe and his throat. And it's still not moving. And I've got him off of his feet for, I don't know 5, 7 seconds before it even starts to go. It finally goes and everybody is just going nuts that we did that.

Me-- That's crazy. It makes no rational sense whatsoever.

Rider-- Yeah, and Mike was not talking well for the next several days.

Me-- I can't imagine.

Rider-- I don't know how I didn't crush his windpipe, cause I know what I had to put into it to do that. I tip my hat to him for taking that. He had to go somewhere else to absorb what was going on, cause it was bad. That would have killed a regular person.

Me-- Sure. Now is this the guy that you bent the bar over his neck. No. I know you showed me a picture of that.

Rider-- There was, the only thing that I've done. I haven't bent any bars. I told Mike that I wouldn't bend a bar around his neck. If he wanted me to do a combo feat with him it had to be a horseshoe. He said "Ok" (again mimicking the voice of Bruce). You may be thinking, there was a video. The chamber of the bizarre, cause he was clowning around at the end. I had a bent bar laying around and he put it around his neck.

Me-- And that was the only time?

(Here I'm referencing an image I'd seen of Chris behind another strongman, presumably bending a steel bar over the guy's neck. The image came from a muscle and fitness magazine in Chris' portfolio)

Rider-- But I didn't do that around his neck. That was a regular guy. There's no way.

Me-- You would have killed him, ripped his head off.
Rider—Yeah, he would have been hurt. That one went around my leg to get its shape, then he just put it around his neck (laughs).

Me—So you said he had to go somewhere else to be able to absorb that. I mean is that. Like, what is that? You have to shut things off? Or go to a, where? A special place?

Rider—(laughs) A very special place. It's hard to describe going there, but when you're there you know it. That's where the special things happen.

Me—Ok, so we're talking in this case, he's absorbing that but even when you're putting everything into a chunk of steel, so what?

Rider—Every thing else just sort of gets blocked out. There's nobody else around and all it is is me and it. And it's gotta go down. (laughs)

Me—So what, I know it's hard to describe it... It's quiet?

Rider—Yeah, it's definitely a quiet place. It's very serene, very calm. Until it's time to crash.

Me—What do you mean by that?

Rider—Um, to give a little Bruce Lee reference. Bruce lee had said, be like water. Water can flow, and water can crash. Be like water. For me, that's not wasting physical or mental energy. Laid back, go with the flow. Don't let stuff get to you, don't let it bother you.

Me—This is just in normal life?

Rider—Anything, yeah.

Me—The reason but, I don't know how this would work. We're trying to capture one of those moments. You always read, or people describe these sort of moments they had. And it's maybe strength, but I've also heard accounts of people who do snake handling in churches where in that moment there is nothing, it's emptiness, until they finally come back and realize what happened. So it's almost like a spiritual thing. This sounds like that.

Rider—It's very spiritual.

Me—Or even moments when people have religious experiences, not just snakes but other religious experiences, where it's like a complete, it's
been described like you're completely emptying yourself, completely giving yourself over into that thing, whatever it may be. That's kind of interesting. It transcends just strength culture. But it's like other people have that experience. It's like a high some people look for.

Rider- No, but it's different. It's not, yeah it's different.

Me- I don't mean high like when you're stoned. What do you? Cause it's got to be a feeling that you're constantly chasing after. Otherwise you wouldn't keep trying more ridiculous stuff. (both laugh) You know what I mean? I don't mean in like a drug sense...

Rider- What I'm thinking is like an adrenaline junky kind of thing. It's not like that, it's different. You're not looking to have that adrenaline.

Me- In the moment it's different.

Rider- Yeah, but then again... that is... that is an interesting process.

Me- I'm thinking about that day when you bent that silly wrench in the coffee shop. And one of the things that occurred to me is that after it, like a few moments later, even something small like that you started sweating. Like that comes after, this sort of... and that was just a little thing. I can't imagine, when you get to that point where it's complete...

Rider- When I'm gearing up to do something that's big, and I never really thought about it like being an adrenaline junky or anything like that. It was more like completing a task then having some kind of feeling afterward. But when I'm getting myself amped up to do it I can feel, what I would guess to be adrenaline running down over my spine. Literally feel like this weird cold, tingling sensation as I'm gearing up to do what I've gotta do. It's like flicking the light switch and turning on the electric. And then it's go time.

Me- I've gotcha, and not to compare it to an adrenaline rush, but...

Rider- It's like turning on an adrenaline switch, and as soon as you've done the task shutting it back off. Cause there's been times, different things that I've done. The S wrench. The first time that I bent an adjustable wrench into an S shape I was shot for 5 weeks after that. There was nothing there. What I think happened was I think I completely drained out my central nervous system. I just didn't have anything left.

So there's a complete emptying of yourself. A complete surrender to the object before you.

You have to put yourself in a place where pain and fear 'no go' and you shut about.
One morning, when Natalie Carver woke from troubled dreams, she found herself transformed in her bed into a Kafka story.

At first she thought perhaps no one would notice. She had noticed instantly upon waking that something was wrong, that the allegories were slithering just under the skin in a way that made it painful even to lift her hands to fasten back her hair, and that the sun through her window looked unbearably like the light in a prison. But her face in the mirror was just the same, and she breathed until she was calm and then went downstairs to breakfast.

But as soon as she sat at the table her mother gave her a look and said, “Well, I suppose you won’t be needing this, you don’t have the taste for it,” and took away the bread and butter that had been waiting for her.

And it was very sad, but it might be true, Natalie thought, for what was the point of eating if her mother could tell something was already horribly wrong. Her mother had a way of knowing these things—she’d taken food away before, whenever she’d looked at Natalie and hadn’t liked what she’d seen—and maybe Natalie had been a Kafka story then, too, and this was the only thing her mother could think of to do.

Natalie thought it over on the whole walk to school, where a young man—his name was Scott—who she’d refused to let carry her books followed close behind her, calling out to all her neighbors that she was something very upsetting now, and not to worry, he was leaving her quite alone.

“Smart thinking,” called one of her neighbors back, and the story inside Natalie tightened around her lungs so that it was a struggle just to breathe.

At school she had to read her history report, and though she’d hoped to avoid it Mr. Smith called on her first (of course he would, he could tell, now, what was running just underneath her, the certain doom with which she was operating).

Her report was on the life of Oney Judge. “Partus sequitur ventrem,” she said, and the words cut her tongue so that before she could go on she closed her mouth, swallowed as if to drain the blood before she explained that a slave mother could only ever bear slave children. There was a diorama element that was worth a full letter grade; Natalie had glued together a spinning wheel of fortune that mapped how Washington had rotated slaves out of Pennsylvania, to prevent them staying there for six months and thus being freed.

As she finished, Mr. Smith said, “Natalie, it sounds as if you’re trying to suggest George Washington’s
contributions to the country were negated by him living by the standards of the time.”

She frowned at her paper. Had her Kafka story twisted her words—had insects fallen from her mouth? But no, they were there just as she had written them.

“These are only facts, these are his actions, there are documents,” Natalie said, the start of something longer, but she thought suddenly that she was late for a trial she hadn’t realized would occur.

“So because of some unfortunate actions, you’re saying Washington shouldn’t have been President.”

“No,” she said, “you’re misunderstanding me.”

Her teacher sighed and said, “Well, it’s hard to understand you when you seem so intent on contradicting yourself, but we’re all here and willing to try,” and Natalie wanted to shake her head and shut up about it, it wasn’t worth it to speak, but she was a Kafka story, and out of her mouth without her permission the words fell out: “If you were willing to try you’d have understood me.”

Of course that was true, but it wasn’t proof, and when Mr. Smith said, “That’s a false argument, Natalie,” the Kafka story knotted tight around her stomach, and she couldn’t speak, couldn’t sit down when he asked her to sit, couldn’t walk to the principal’s office until someone was sent to come get her.

“Papers, please,” said the man who came to get her, and she didn’t know what papers he was asking for; she was only certain she didn’t have the ones that would secure her release.

“I’ll have to take the forfeit,” she said—she didn’t know what it would be, only that she would be doomed to take it and to argue otherwise would mean she’d spend the rest of her life in this office trying to produce something that would satisfy him—and the man sighed as he pulled out a series of blank incident reports and began to write.

It would be a lovely thing, she thought sometimes, if everyone could see the story she was trapped by. She’d stopped talking, out of fear from what the story would make her say, but that just meant it sat at the back of her mouth, dry and heavy and waiting.

She had tried to transfer out of Mr. Smith’s class, but the appropriate form was never in stock in the office and the secretary wouldn’t let her make the request without it unless she spoke to Mr. Smith for his permission. She didn’t dare—she was afraid that if she wanted to speak to him he would touch her elbow (he did that sometimes with the girls in class) and the story would shock him like an electric charge. She wouldn’t mind the trouble if he died; it was him living that worried her. If the whole class could see, then she might risk it, but she didn’t want to ever ever speak to him alone.

Even if there was only one of them conquered—even if it was just Scott, who had taken to walking behind her two or three days a week, assuring the smiling neighbors he wanted nothing to do with her kind of people, and nearly brushing her hand with his hand as he explained to her how cruel she was being, how there was no need to look at him that way, how the neighbors would agree that he was leaving her quite alone.

It would be enough if she could turn around and open her mouth and knock him to the ground with the force of it, where he would think poorly of salesmen and find it so hard to get up that his legs would turn to spindles and she would come home for summer break and need only one good kick to send his flattened body skittering into the neighbors’ yard, under the azalea where no one would find it before it sank into the dirt forever.

She thought about it every day. She thought about it so much that the words pressed up against her skull, they pressed her eyes back into their sockets and made them ache so much that she couldn’t bear to open them all the way, and her mother glanced at her over the breakfast table and moved the bread out of reach and said, “You’re looking marvelously thin, Natalie, but you’ll never make friends in this world with a face as sour as that.”

One day she woke to the light through the prison window of her bedroom, and the story had settled so tightly around her that she couldn’t move.

There was panic at first—of course there was panic, it was horrible to be so still and leaden, horrible not to breathe. But it didn’t last long. When you wake up with something like this, it’s only a matter of time.

It was all right to be silent and still, she thought; to move was to attract attention, and everyone would decide it had been your own fault for moving. It was less of a weight just to lie here. She let it settle, and settle, and settle, until when her mother came to fetch her for breakfast, and was surprised to find her gone.
Beautiful Monstrous Snakes

I am here in the belly of the Amphisbaena, telling you that the two-headed serpent exists. Milton and Pope, Tennyson and A.E. Housman all wrote about this creature, and we know poets do not lie.

But there have been dissenters. Sir Thomas Browne didn’t believe, and he used these grounds for dismissal: “there is no inferior or former part in this animal, for the senses being placed at both extremes, doe make both ends anteriour.” Exactly, Sir Browne. It’s plain tragedy you are not around to see this portfolio, because the hybrid work found here is best described as a collection of living Amphisbaenas. Inside are works of art with two minds but, essentially, one body. They create a new space between image and word, and ask to be experienced with slight divisions of mind but unity of sense.

When I first corresponded with Cole Swenson about contributing to this portfolio she responded, “I always think of the monster as, first, the hybrid. In its earliest appearances, it was simply a mix of two or more animals, and the notion of the frightening comes from our response to unexpected combinations.” Jorge Luis Borges, in his introduction to The Book of Imaginary Beings, echoes Cole’s description: “A monster is nothing but a combination of elements taken from real creatures, and the combinatory possibilities border on the infinite.”

From the ancient Minotaur to Michael J. Fox as Teen-wolf, the monstrous has been a putting together of things. There is a certain amount of nonsense to this hybrid monster that scares because it exists. In existing, it requires us to make some sense of the nonsense. Freud’s idea of the uncanny comes to mind—there is enough of what we know to make us feel uncomfortable about the parts we cannot explain. Like, why did Michael J. Fox’s basketball game improve so much when he was wolf? How do court skills relate at all to innate characteristics of the wolf?

Conveniently, for all seers and experiencers of this work, questions like these do not need answering. Employ your everyday indecision here; let the work be at odds inside you. These disperate experiences can yield a newness, as you reconcile your two heads to the two ends on each page.
Brandon Downing

This was only natural, to deck themselves in the incorruptible material for men, the ring, a fabulous cone.

its peculiar levels of significance each in a milky color.

This casket, this eye-stone – with its claws and linear lines, as insignia before the eyes.

It is as with birds a solar aspect and much else.

his right hand is in his left hand out in ribbons and reserved for the clasps.
CTENOPHOREN
Why not spike his
glass of milk with
vodka and make him
start his day count
over? Thought I'd
be the one saying
goodbye but he beat me
to the punch when I
wheeled him through
rehab's double doors
just to make sure
we'd all get through
the summer, shuttling
his ex from one side
of town to the other
where they used to
live inside a fridge—
kiddie porn affixed
by magnets needing
to be taken down.
I'm holding this incriminating book of my own terrorism...

Feeling extremely low about it all...
Bianca Stone
The Last of the Mohicans

I saw what you wrote about me in a book I found under my seat at the movies. I was ten years old in 1992, watching *The Last of the Mohicans*. Teenagers were necking all around me, swinging awkwardly, their tongues sparred like great pink walruses in the back row. Even my sister was there, drowning in something sweet.

I keep thinking of Dorothy Gale from *The Wizard of Oz*. Isn’t her name another word for Hurricane? In the film, her house looked like my shabby sneakers whenever I had to take them off at someone else’s doorstep. Dorothy Tempest. Dorothy Windstorm. Dorothy Nor’easter. Dorothy Hurricane. Dorothy Twister. Dorothy Destruction. Dorothy WMD…

What if someone tried to fly a house instead of a plane into the Twin Towers? A house smashing against the side of a building so massive and glass—old, grey and falling apart against the blue-black side of a tower—falling on a loop through the time vortex, .gif in the sky. In the film, it opened at random, I stepped through.

I saw that book sitting there on the floor…A list of all my monstrous mistakes. Life Events of quiet masochism. My lists. My drawings. But so many blank pages; something written on the last page I couldn't quite make out.

On the screen they were tearing scalps off. Dinner was left untouched on a table. A young Daniel Day-Lewis ran through the forest with his chest bared and his tomahawk raised.

Can you see Dorothy’s house coming from miles away? They cry out in fear: the small gingham-covered girl with the deadly house! Angel of Death whizzing through the air towards—who? Daniel Day-Lewis or the French Army? It doesn’t matter. She’s God, coming to lay waste to humanity.

I’m holding onto this incriminating book of my own terrorism feeling extremely low about it all. I went back and forth over the name at the front of the book. Maybe it wasn’t you. It makes me unsure who’s even writing this.

All the teenage couples were done kissing. In the light of the film ending I could see the irritated skin around their lips and their ears. Now they’re so wrapped up in the film, I stare and stare with impunity. I can take in all their acne and bright shining eyes full of triumph. I’m feeling a little better. It’s not done yet, whoever you are, writing down my life all this time.
The trophy room is full of men, all my ex's. Stuffed and still so lively. It's a marvel how the taxidermist could get their glassy eyes just right. See how this one holds a napkin folded into the smallest duck. I love that. And this one has a cigarette. Unfortunately, there's no way to get artificial smoke to float up and veil his blue eyes. Art can only go so far, so sometimes I come here and smoke for him.

Notice the setups, how all the bodies arch away from a fake ground where pieces of an apartment or icons of the city where we lived are touchstones for their boots or tennis shoes. The apparel is realistic but nonsensical, not one of them was a rancher or athlete.

I met them in the woods, and we tracked each other. There was always some beauty. A puzzling of light through leaves, all very verdant and hopeful. Then, eventually, it ended. I moved on with the dead weight of them stretched over my shoulders, bleeding, or being drug behind my feet. Each time I left something of myself in the great outdoors.

Now, I keep them as proof—proof of what?—of me living my own mistakes out on the hunt. Me camouflaged in alcohol and shooting—not at anything that moved—but looking at someone specific and then closing my eyes as I pulled the trigger. It is a type of letting go.
A lesson in choreography
a) each step must look effortless
b) the grave is waiting
c) your true partner, even in duet, is first and foremost yourself

A lesson in dogs
a) in a heap of themselves
b) we are trained
c) they dream in color but see only black and white

A lesson in energy
a) created
b) destroyed
c) repeated until neither are true

A lesson in love
a) born with it
b) you experience the lack of it
c) a water tank holds exactly as much as was poured into it
Angela Ball

To Lon Chaney in *The Unknown*

The circus knows that animals are not infants, but laws.

Lon, armless knife thrower, your Spanish hat judges the harsh silence.

Your natural arms not gone, but bound. When Nanon, the inchoate Joan Crawford, said that she felt imperially safe in your non-arms, your fanaticism believed, bribed a surgeon, returned you in triumph to horror, her: subsumed in the Strong Man’s vast, hairy appendages. Your brain a storm of hoops, condemned tents, hushed deaths of the quadripedal. Dear

Lon,
Nanon did not love you for your missing arms, your arms loved you missing.

*The Unknown* needs no arms. Only the blade inside the blade, the sternness.
In August 2014, I was a student at the first-ever John Ashbery Home School, in Hudson, New York, Ashbery's summer home. My workshop leader, Timothy Donnelly, asked the class to bring materials for a collage. During the first days, we composed our collages, then used them to produce poem spinoffs. I knew that I wanted to pay tribute somehow to Todd Browning’s The Unknown, featuring the great Lon Chaney and a very young Joan Crawford. Originally titled Alonzo the Armless, the film appeared in the year of John Ashbery’s birth. I believe that its tragicomic absurdity, a function of Chaney’s deadly accuracy in portraying human need, in some ways prefigures Ashbery’s poetry. The white spike saying “Mother of Thousand” I found on the sidewalk in Hudson, just after touring the downstairs of John Ashbery’s home.
Effect of noon: even the edges; the edges are even, even precise. All water is Necessarily precise. Mistletoe crowding the emptiness of the empty branches Of emptied trees. Slicing evenly the thin light shredding the ribbons of thin Light to strings.

Six or seven buildings and their six or seven bare trees. Beneath a large white House in a hurl of green. In its pillars at a distance, clicking up stillness, the roof Of sky that makes the sky turn slate into suddenly birds, solid birds holding on To the sky.
The long broad river winds off, turns back on itself, copper muscle, lead mirror
That much earlier. Making the water walk over the meadow like a line of bare
Poplars walks over a field. Where a man who walks faster than the trees in the
Grey mist into which the trees recede.

The migratory route of the seed: Small farm painted on a grain. White. Small
Orchard held in flock. Held in strain in lines it counts, gaining force of trees
Walked off, and to what the trees belong. When you looked up the trees had gone.
Allison Campbell studies poetry at the University of Southern Mississippi’s Center for Writers and is associate editor of the *Mississippi Review*. Her work has appeared in *Harpur Palate*, *Witness*, and *Armchair/Shotgun* and is forthcoming in *The Florida Review* and *Drunken Boat*. She collaborates with Alf Dahlman on the art, poetry, and comic blog [http://ddiderot.wordpress.com](http://ddiderot.wordpress.com).


Timothy Liu’s most recent book of poems is *Don’t Go Back To Sleep*, just out from Saturnalia Books. He lives with his husband in Manhattan. Read more at [http://timothyliu.net](http://timothyliu.net).

Chris Arabadjis’ work has been exhibited in and around NYC. His drawings may be seen in the upcoming anthology *Devouring the Green*, to be published by Jaded Ibis Press. Further information is available at [www.chrisarabadjis.com](http://www.chrisarabadjis.com) and [www.facebook.com/arabadjis](http://www.facebook.com/arabadjis).
Bianca Stone is a poet and visual artist. Her books include *Someone Else’s Wedding Vows* (Tin House/Octopus Books 2014) and *Antigonick*, a collaboration with Anne Carson (New Directions 2012). She is co-founder/editor of the press Monk Books, and chairs the Ruth Stone Foundation (ruthstonefoundation.org) from her home in Brooklyn, New York.

Cole Swensen is the author of fifteen volumes of poetry and a book of critical essays. She has been awarded the Iowa Poetry Prize, the SF State Poetry Center Book Award, and a Guggenheim Fellowship. Co-editor of the 2009 Norton anthology *American Hybrid*, she is also founding editor of La Presse Poetry. She teaches at Brown University.

Angela Ball is currently the Moorman Distinguished Professor of English in the Center for Writers at the University of Southern Mississippi. She is the author of five poetry collections, including *The Museum of the Revolution: 58 Exhibits, Possession, Quartet and Night Clerk at the Hotel of Both Worlds* (winner of the Donald Hall award from the Association of Writers and Writing Programs), as well as two chapbooks.

Alf Dahlman is a New York based illustrator and graphic designer. After studying graphic design at Berghs School of communication in Stockholm, Sweden, and Academy of Art University in San Francisco, his main focus has been on traditional illustration techniques and designs for printed media. The techniques, including linoleum stamps, air brush, pen, and scratch board, have been applied to everything from book illustrations to logo designs, posters to business cards.