

METRIC



MRS. MCILWAIN
CAROL MOUNTAIN

AURA AGONISTES
PLATONIC RIGIDITY
PEN AND PAPER

KETAMINE AND
HEXAGONS

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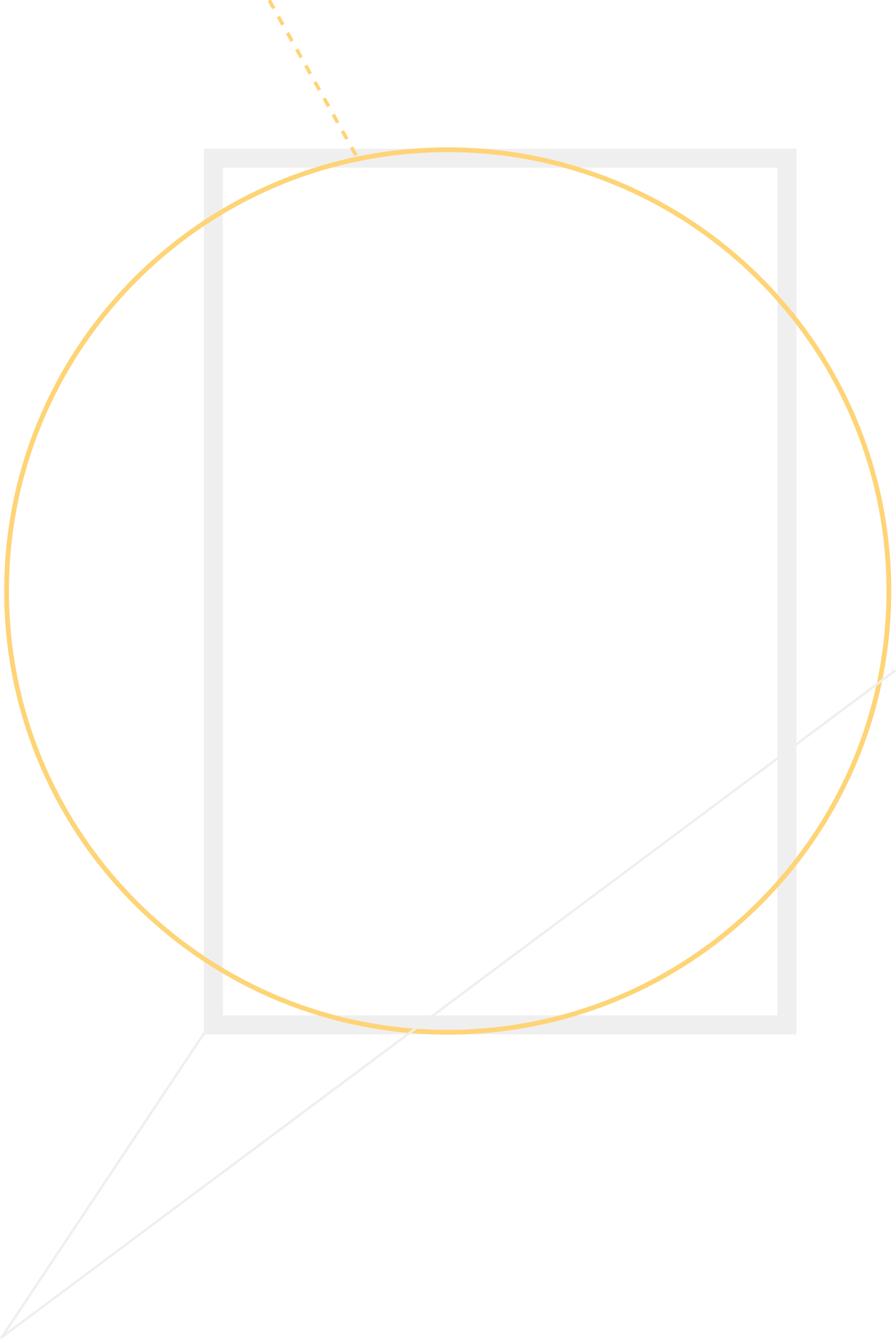
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PROSE

THE WEARY TRAVELER

BY ANONYMOUS

CHARACTERS

Weary Traveler-

Middle-aged male; a knight for the Holy Roman Empire. He is dressed in a traditional knight's garb, evoking the likeness of Max Von Sydow from *The Seventh Seal*.

God-

Omnipotent creator of all things.

SETTING

Small, white, non-descript and empty room with a single door built into the back wall.

ACT

(The Weary Traveler stumbles into frame, visually exhausted. He staggers over to a large door and falls in front of it, clasping his hands in prayer.)

WEARY TRAVELER:

Oh God, I, a humble and weary traveler, have survived the most arduous Journey. My companions have suffered the cold hand of death and I have befallen every hardship imaginable, barely escaping that cold grip myself to make it here, where I fall in worship before you... but oh, rejoice for I have made it! Candide be damned!

(BEAT)

My sweet Lord... please, grace me with your omnipotent congress. I implore you: flood my soul with your holy, just and infallible light of love, knowledge and utopian, eternal paradise.

(Our traveler waits, but there is no response.)

WEARY TRAVELER:

God, are you there?

(Our traveler puts his ear to the door and we hear a toilet flush, a belt jingling and some matches being lit. Suddenly a bright white light floods the area, the door swings open and we see the silhouette of a man, the music swells and God steps into the room. He's wearing a slick suit, a big flower on his lapel and a strangely grotesque tragedy mask. Our traveler is, at first sight, taken aback but soon enough, falls onto his palms in worship.)

WEARY TRAVELER:

O' dear Lord, holy and perfect master, how unworthy I am to even kneel before you!

GOD:

(mumbles) Goddamn right...

WEARY TRAVELER:

What? I'm sorry Lord I could not hear you.

GOD:

(God speaks like a used car salesman, an infomercial narrator, etc.)

No worry my child, what is it I can do you for?

WEARY TRAVELER:

Well, Lord as I said, I've traveled long and far, I have undergone the most excruciating by God.

GOD:

I know, I'm God!

WEARY TRAVELER:

Of course, (stammering, weak laugh) of course... how insolent and naive of me. Well, In any event, I do have many questions for You.

(BEAT)

GOD:

Yeah... so?

WEARY TRAVELER:

Oh, yes, I'm sorry I thought you would already know them and just start firing off answers.

GOD:

(Annoyed) Are you trying to be smart? Look, I could do that, but just for the hell of it why don't you amuse me and 'ask' anyway? As far as answers, (scoff) obviously you're not too familiar with my MO.

WEARY TRAVELER:

Of course. Well, um, God... I must confess, sometimes my faith wanes and I feel a weakness in my constitution. I sometimes lose the feeling of your love and it frightens me. When I see the way the world is; the abject poverty, endless warmongering, starvation, slavery, disease, corruption, pollution, well sometimes—it is very hard to keep faith.

(As our Weary Traveler speaks the line "When I see the way the world is" there are photographs and video projected onto the backdrop: Scenes of War, Death, Destruction, etc.)

GOD:

(Condescendingly) Hah! Well... (God 'straightens' up, clears his throat in preparation and takes on an affected voice as if he's delivering professional slogans, he proceeds to liberally use exaggerated gestures to punctuate his words; a dramatic and theatrical recitation) for I so loved the world that I sacrificed myself to myself to appease my own anger at my own creation.

(Our traveler has a very confused look upon hearing this.)

GOD:

(Sighs) Look, my theory is this: If you love someone, threaten to burn them in hell for all eternity. If that doesn't make you keep your faith, well then, maybe your name just won't appear in my magical book!

WEARY TRAVELER:

Oh Lord, no. Please, do not forsake me, I meant no reproach. I am a loyal servant who only admits out of honest desire for understanding, that his fragile and, compared to you, infantile reasoning, sometimes cannot grasp the larger implications of your grand, intelligent design. I'm only trying, in my limited way, to express- (Again, cut off by God.)

GOD:

Look! Worship me or I'll torture you forever! Pretty fucking simple! There's no need for all this confusion, just trust it will all be okay, obey and believe without questioning, don't think about it. Just feel it! I invented logic and reason for my-sakes, so why try and use them to understand me? It just won't work!

WEARY TRAVELER:

(Shocked and confused.) I... I... well...

GOD:

I know I made Satan and I made the serpent, but what the hell, I'm going to continue to blame you anyway... Lesson: I do what I want! You like, just totally can't understand. Infinite wisdom and all that, your mind is sooo tiny! (Giggles).

WEARY TRAVELER:

Yes, I know O' Holiest of Lords. But, may I ask, why did you endow men with the ability to kill, steal and murder? Why not just make all men holy and good? Why free will?"

GOD:

Hey, I let you choose, I give you some options. You're going to complain about that?

WEARY TRAVELER:

Well, no, please don't think I'm complaining, only inquiring. I'm only curious as to why you let us choose. What's the point? Why not just make all men inherently good? Innocents would not have to suffer, the planet would not continue to be raped and poisoned. So much could change for the better of all things. And Lord, if you are omniscient and possess total knowledge, then you knew before you even created man that many good and caring people would be condemned to hell simply for not believing Jesus was your son.

GOD:

And... what's your point? (Glances at his watch)

WEARY TRAVELER:

Well, if you knew so many, otherwise innocent, people would be eternally tortured, and you could simply forgive them, yet choose not to due to semantics, it seems to refute the claim that you are benevolent. You

could forgive all sinners, but don't. Isn't that just needlessly cruel? If you knew, before you even created man, each and every person that would be saved and those which would be condemned, then why not just condemn or save them from the beginning, why allow the acts to physically take place? (Silence from God) In other words, if it is all predetermined by your omnipotence then free will seems insincere; you already know what everyone will do, you imbued them with a pre-arranged destiny... therefore, really, you've decided for us and there is no true "free will"... no?

GOD:

The important thing is just to worship me, not to nit-pick my word with your semantic arguments. I mean, didn't you hear me earlier? 'Worship me or I'll torture you forever.' Well, I meant that. I mean, what else am I going to do for eternity? We all need a hobby. Besides, this is a complicated gig; I'm merciful, but I'm jealous, but I'm wrathful, but I'm all-loving, but I'm vengeful... umm, I hate foreskin... there's a lot more.

WEARY TRAVELER:

So then you claim to be merciful solely because you sometimes choose

to remove the threat you yourself imposed on people? That doesn't seem fair or just.

GOD:

Fair schmair!

WEARY TRAVELER:

Well, what of all the people that truly do believe, yet commit absolutely horrible acts in your name?

GOD:

Horrible schmorrible! It's all perspective, baby.

WEARY TRAVELER:

So if a man who has tortured, raped and killed hundreds of children says on his deathbed that he repents and loves Jesus, then he's saved, absolved of all wrong? Yet, if a man who never hurt another human being in his life, but in fact went out of his way to live justly and serve mankind in positive ways, does not believe in you or The Kingdom then he will go to hell and be forever tortured?

(God yawns and again looks at his watch)

WEARY TRAVELER:

Well then when two armies fight and they both do so in your name, both truly believe, how do you choose which side you guide to victory?

GOD:

I usually just flip a coin—look, kid, this is fun and all. But I’m pretty busy. I’m making a list and checking it twice. Do you have any idea how many people there are? It’s kind of time consuming! So, I’m glad we had this chance to talk, it was real good, but I do need to be going now.

WEARY TRAVELER:

But Lord, please, so much remains unanswered and obscured. Why must I be cursed with this pain? Why is life so cruel and seemingly random? Why can I not have certainty?

GOD:

Look, I had my people write a book, read it, all the answers are in there. Pick it up at your local bookstore! Make sure it’s the right translation though.

WEARY TRAVELER:

But even that book contains nothing but arcane prose and jumbled fables which have proven to do nothing

more than promote illogical, and intolerant ethical and social codes. That book has caused more pain and suffering than anything else! People use it to justify their personal ideals about freedom and behavior. Why would you let your word be so misused? Why allow it to be the source of so much pain and suffering? Why did you make abandoning reason and an obsession for being violently correct so-

(As our Weary Traveler is talking God starts nodding his head “yeah-yeah-yeah” , dismissing, ignoring and being generally annoyed by everything our Weary Traveler is saying. God starts receding back from whence he came as our Weary Traveler tries to squeeze out his remaining thoughts—yet he stops mid-sentence, recognizing the futility of doing so as God disappears completely from view as the door closes completely.)

The Weary Traveler looks bewildered. He waits a bit, silently contemplating, then slowly crosses himself, rises and leaves, continuing on.

END

TRADITION

BY ANONYMOUS

Here is a table set for a feast.

Here are the candles, blazing like midsummer has warmed the hall for just one night. The braziers crackle and spit in each corner of the hall, and the windows reflect the merriment and block out the darkness of the winter solstice.

Here are the revelers, dressed in what finery they can manage. A poor village the rest of the year, tonight they put on a show.

Here is the chieftain, head of the table, but here to his right hand is not his wife. Here instead is the provider

of the feast. Tonight, and for the rest of the year, she is the mother of them all.

Here is the food at last. Stored and saved since the autumn harvest. Roasted root vegetables, potatoes, dried apples, soft warm breads flavoured with the herbs that grow around the village. And here is the meat. Spit-roasted, served on a platter for the chieftain to carve, for the mother to choose the finest cut. This is her offering, and this is her reward.

For the revelers tonight celebrate with the joy that has built up from the very start of winter. They have cel-

ebated this night all their lives, this tradition, this winter feast. They do not remember the reason for the festival, and the feast is so rich that it does not matter to them.

They do not remember the hard, biting winters of old, when as many were lost to the freezing nights as went for lack of food. When the hunters found only frozen dead things, too small for their own stomachs, let alone the rest of their families'. When anything green was long since hidden under the snow.

They do not know of the first chieftain, except for the stories. So they do not know the truth of that first midwinter, when the only sound in the black night was the cry, the infant hungry for milk its mother could not produce. They do not know the silence that ate into the hearts of those who stilled its crying, or the lies told to those who got to eat.

What they know is tradition. What they know is the feast, and the feeling of a full belly and the warmth of the hall for that one night, when the whole village comes together. When the hunters and the farmers and the teachers and the mothers and the young all eat from the same platter, and thank the chieftain and the gods for what they have provided. When

the mother of them all offers her blessings to the young women at the table, and each hopes that she will take that place next year, on the right hand of the chieftain.

Here are the revelers, filling their bellies and smiling, fingers sticky and faces glowing from the heat of the braziers.

And after the feast, when the children are in their beds and the old folk leave the hall with knowing smiles, here will be the young women and their men folk. Here will be the noise, the sweat and the bodies. And here will be the hopes of every young woman in the village, the prayer that she will be the first to show, the one to be named as the mother of next year's feast.

Here is a village in the frozen winter.

Here is a baby just three months old.

Here is a table set for a feast.

MRS. MCILWAIN

BY ANONYMOUS

“One of the reasons why fairy tales can have the same story but be a little bit different is because back then they weren’t always written down. The important parts were easy to remember but sometimes the little parts can get jumbled up because someone can’t remember something and has to change it a little bit. So, everyone get in a circle. James! Put that down. Everyone get in a circle. I’m gonna whisper something into Jessica’s ear and she’s gonna try to repeat it to Robert and we’re gonna go in a circle. When it gets back to me we’ll see how much the story changed. The yellow cat ate a whole pizza with anchovies, went for a walk in the park with a dog, took a nap, chased a mouse and licked its paws.”

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“The yellow cat ate a whole pizza, went for a walk in the park with a dog, took a nap, chased a mouse and licked his paws.”

“The yellow cat went for a walk in the park, took a nap with a dog, chased a mouse and licked his paws.”

(...)

“Ok, so now the story that got back to me is ‘the yellow cat took a nap in the park, ate a mouse with a dog and licked its claws.’ So how did—”

“Darcy—get the kids in the bathroom. There’s someone in the building...”

“I tried to save someone who was hanging once.”

“Seriously?”

“Yep. It was in a psych ward. Guy made a noose with his bed sheet.”

“Where’d he tie it though?”

“Emergency sprinkler system. Right onto those pipes in the ceiling. I was pretty surprised. He weighed about 165. His face was already purple when I got there though. I held his legs and started screaming for someone to get scissors.”

“Fuck.”

“Yeah, psych wards aren’t exactly

packed with sharp objects, obviously. Some tech had a little pocket knife on his keychain. I was still holding the guys legs and he starts sawing away. When they finally got him down I was almost surprised to see the nurse attempt CPR. His tongue was flapping and it sounded kind of like when you let the air out of a balloon filled with spit.”

“Did he make it?”

“I think he was on life support for an hour, but the family had the plug pulled as soon as they found out.”

“Can you imagine? How old do you think that guy is? At least 40. 40 years old and he’s bussing tables for a living.”

“I don’t know. I mean, he’s foreign so maybe his English is really bad.”

“So what? I can’t understand what my calc professor is saying half the time and he’s doing alright.”

“You called 911!?”

“I was freaking out. It hit faster than I thought it would after I ate it. I swear to god I thought I had gotten bit by something in the woods.”

“But, I mean, you couldn’t even taste the coconut?”

“I thought it was nuts. My mom always puts nuts in brownies. I didn’t even know I was allergic to coconut.”

“Why did Smokey poop when he died?”

“Well, honey, sometimes after something dies it still has some food in its stomach and it can’t control whether it goes to the bathroom or not.”

“Oh. How does that happen? How would Smokey poop if he couldn’t push it or his body stopped?”

“Well...his body probably hadn’t stopped all the way yet. It was stopping as he was pooping.”

“Oh.”

“I’ll never be able to take the bookmarks out of his books. I can’t do it. I know he’s gone but it’s impossible. That and he still liked Legos. He left a little White House model of Legos on his copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. I still can’t take it apart.”

“Ok, good, good...still a little bit of skin on the edge there.”

“Seems like he cried more when I put the lidocaine on.”

“In the future it’s good to warm it up first. It works very fast. Oh, he’s fussy again. It’s okay, little man. I know, I know. Oh, we’re almost done with your pee-pee. Okay, okay...”

“I just don’t wanna cut the head.”

“You’re doin’ good.”

“Do you have *Stand By Me*? Me and Will were gonna watch it.”

“You can only borrow it if you watch it unironically.”

“...What?”

“You have to promise you’ll watch it sincerely. You’re not just gonna derisively laugh at the parts where it gets sentimental or tender between Gordie and Chris or Teddy talking about his dad because you lack the mettle to experience the film as it was meant to be viewed—as a coming of age drama about friendship, as a reflection on a period of life where things can still happen for the first time.”

“You’re weird.”

“I’ll take that as a ‘No.’”

“Two days after my grandfather withered away from a decade of fighting Alzheimer’s disease, I was in a labor and delivery unit as a nursing student holding a 16 year old girl’s hand as she gave birth. I didn’t really know what to make of that at the time. I still don’t. I didn’t know that my brother would die the next winter on February 6th. Right now, I don’t know if my cousin’s baby—which is due in the summer—will soon end up playing soccer or prefer to stay indoors reading *The Stinky Cheeseman* like I did when I was 7. I try to take mental notes about these things in the same way I do when I’m trying to learn how a lymph node works or how a red blood cell is made. There are always some clear patterns and things that might appear obvious once they’ve finally been internalized over time. For now, the parts of my notes that I have highlighted in my head say to be thankful for friends and family--they will let you lean on them as you tread through all of the rough patches. And you better be ready to step in as well because if you don’t know anyone who needs you now, just wait a moment longer. These are all,

of course, really obvious sayings and platitudes, but experiences like losing a loved one bring them to life. They teach you to not just recite those basic guidelines, but to know and experience them. Keep going. Keep learning. Keep loving. Those are the best things to do.”

When God came to announce that He had become tired, He showed up for every single person in whatever way made the most sense to them. Some saw Jesus, some saw Allah, and others saw their deceased pets, friends, parents and grandparents. For Larry Erwin, He appeared as Mrs. McIlwain—his first grade teacher who had patiently taught him how to read 23 years ago. Larry was sitting in his office when Mrs. McIlwain came in. She smiled at him and Larry smiled back and sighed. She was able to say enough with that smile that Larry understood a lot all at once about who he was seeing and why.

“Hi, Mrs. McIlwain.”

“Hi, Larry.”

“How are you?”

“I’m very tired, Larry. I’m coming here to say goodbye. Oh...don’t cry.

Come here.”

“But...how long will you stay?”

“There’s an old woman in a nursing home down the street named June. She’s talked to me every day for many years, but she’s only got a few minutes left and when I go I’ve decided that I want to go with her.”

“How are Jeff and Linda taking this in?”

“Very good. I’m talking with Linda as her dad and to Jeff’s class as Winnie the Pooh. Jeff is asking lots of questions and saying that he’s sorry I’m not feeling well. You and Linda should be very proud.”

“Mrs. McIlwain, if you feel like you have to leave I understand, but do you think everyone is ready for this?”

“I hope so.”

“I hope so too.”

“Oh, Larry. Shh, shh, shhhhh....”

THE 15 TRIALS OF MR. PRITCHARD

BY ANONYMOUS

TRIAL I: FIRST BREATHS ONCE THE
CAUL WAS REMOVED

TRIAL II: WALKING ACROSS THE
BALANCE BEAM WITHOUT HOLD-
ING PAPPY'S HAND, IN FENBURY
PARK, AGED 6

The park was small but well kept and contained all one could want from such an area. A plethora of trees and bushes inhabited the garden and numerous carefully designed flowerbeds displayed splendid sprays of colour in parallel rows. There were small birds that sang without worry and squirrels which scampered around with enviable energy. Every creature in

the garden seemed blissfully oblivious to its ephemeral existence and carried on as if they had always been and always would be. I read somewhere that genes do exist throughout history and every animal and plant and bacterium is merely the 'meat vehicle' they travel in. That's what they had called us and every organic thing that has ever existed, meat vehicles. I think this explains a lot and also explains very little. It's a strange thing to think about. Numerous benches were scattered around the area, all a deeply stained wood with wrought iron frames and the majority bearing some form of memorial plaque. I sat on Nancy's and looked at my list.

TRIAL III: MY SECOND DAY OF SECONDARY SCHOOL

TRIAL IV: LEARNING TO COOK AND CLEAN WITH MAMA, AGED 13-16

My hands looked almost blue against the white paper. The skin was dry and they looked every bit the hands of an old man. I do not say this with mock surprise or comic indignation – my hands have looked old since adolescence. I suffered from some sort of circulatory issue which caused my hands to be a strange purple colour and eternally cold. Nancy would always comment on their temperature when she felt them, it was the first thing she had said to me when I returned from the war. She was crying and smiling and all she could say was that my hands were cold. Yes, they have always been old hands. I've caught them up, as it were.

The handwriting on the sheet was evidently my own, but looked a little strange, like a good impression of me that was almost perfect but not quite. I was making a list of the important times in my life. I'd set myself a few rules to make it a little more cohesive. Firstly, it had to have happened to me, so none of the huge historical events would be included unless they somehow changed my life beyond how they

changed everyone else's too. Secondly, the event had to be of such an importance that I went into it one person and came out another; I had to have changed somehow during the case in point. Thirdly, there must not be any points just to increase the length of the list. Although it's obvious that they cannot all be of equal importance, there is a certain threshold of significance that I will not drop below. Finally, perhaps naturally as it is my list, it is I who decides the articles and I alone. There may be certain things which others would point to as important but I will omit (my wedding day, for example. I went in a young man and came out a husband, you might say, but in reality the change in question occurred well before that day). My list contained only one pun and I was unsure whether or not to include it. I sat and thought about it and decided to keep it. It had some meaning besides a cheap joke and could therefore stay. Maybe it said a lot more than normal words in a list could. I was hoping to get fifteen things in total.

TRIAL V: GETTING NANCY TO THINK SHE WASN'T SELFISH/UNKIND/WEIRD OVER MILKSHAKES IN THE SMITHSTOWN DINER

TRIAL VI: SCALING THE WALL OF
THE OCEAN TO GET INTO A DANCE/
SEE NANCY

We sat on the roof in the summer night and didn't say all that much. Nancy was warm and a little dishevelled from the dance and we sat close to one another in the cool breeze. I gave her my sweater (I really did!) and she smiled with flushed cheeks and stroked my arm. She seemed bowled over by the gesture and all I can remember is a sense of disbelief that such a cheap and obvious action actually worked (it really did!). She had gone to the dance with her friends and me with mine and for reasons I can no longer remember our group was denied access. I remember just catching a glimpse of her entering the building as we reached the men on the door who turned us away. The building was two-storeys with a flat roof that was used by party-goers to get some fresh air or have a peaceful smoke. We fancied we could get up there using the drain pipe and we were right, all five of us scuffing our shoes and wrecking our jackets and falling in a heap at the top. The others went on down into the hall but I stayed to gain my composure for a few minutes and before I knew it Nancy was tapping my shoulder and smiling her shy smile with red lips and dark eyes.

TRIAL VII: WAR

TRIAL VIII: *REDACTED*

TRIAL IX: RETURNING HOME (OR,
THE LACK OF WAR)

I'd had a suspicion when I'd left that she was carrying my child. I thought about a girl and I thought about a boy and I thought about names. I thought of clothes and toys and holidays and how many more God would grace us with. I would open her letters with shaky hands and a tight chest for around six months or so before I decided that she would have told me by now as the pregnancy would have been visible to all who observed her. I was not sure whether I was feeling disappointment or relief but I would now say that it certainly wasn't relief.

It turned out that there was some problem with her that meant that any such intuition was misplaced, and but for the grace of God we would remain without son and daughter both. She took it hard and we almost reached breaking point but luckily we both saw that nothing had ended but a name and that was something we could accept, something we could live with.

TRIAL X: CONVINCING (FORCING)
HER TO GET INTO THE CAR TO SEE
DR KHAN

TRIAL XI: CONVINCING HER THAT IT WAS NOT HER FAULT AND THAT I LOVED HER ALL THE SAME, DESPITE IT TECHNICALLY BEING HER FAULT

I have only started sitting in this park since she passed away but we would sometimes stroll through as part of a much longer walk, maybe on our way to the forest trail with a picnic and the day to spare. I'm sure I could make it to the woods even now, my general health isn't bad and my legs are A-ok. I haven't really seen the point of going up there alone, but maybe I will. Maybe I will go next week. I'd have to go in the right frame of mind of course, with the understanding that we are never really alone. I find that gets me through most things, and I hope it always will. Even in my deepest despair I felt a reluctance to let regret take root. I guess that's a tribute to what we managed. Even the things we didn't manage don't get me down all that much. Sure, it is a worry who will care for me when I'm no longer able but if I am honest I worried more thinking of Nancy in such a position. She died first and the problem went away. I can't say I would change the past if given the chance. It would have meant the both of us being something that we are not, and God knows I never wished for that. What if doing those things altered other things,

good things? Next week I shall see what the weather is like and go to the forest. Meat vehicles.

TRIAL XII: CONVINCING (FORCING) HER TO GET INTO THE CAR TO SEE DR KHAN (FOR THE SECOND AND FINAL TIME)

TRIAL XIII: MY FIRST VISIT AFTER THE PROGNOSIS

I didn't know what to expect – how would she look and feel and act? I parked the car with undue care and sat with the engine off for a few minutes, waiting for something. I walked the halls and stairs like a man climbing to the gallows, my guts slowing imploding, each step laboured with some invisible weight. I was shivering and sweating and wanting to run away, to run home to her.

She was sitting upright in bed when I entered the ward and she was (thankfully) talking to the woman opposite so she did not have to watch me traipse across the room to meet her. The woman cut off mid-sentence and sobbed, pulling the sheets up to her nose. Nancy met my gaze with a weak smile, a smile that still held that same sparkle as on the roof of The Ocean, a smile clearly intended to make me feel a little less alone. I pulled the curtains

around the bed and sat by her side. She looked clean and fresh; her skin somehow smoother, her hair brushed and loose over her shoulders. Her eyes had become the main feature of her face, aqueous portholes to some deep meaning I could not know. I tried to speak but failed and we wept.

TRIAL XIV: BURYING NANCY

TRIAL XV: LEARNING TO COOK AND CLEAN AGAIN, THIS TIME WITHOUT MAMA

I guess the fifteenth trial should be death. It's strange to even consider, that there is nothing left in life but for it to cease and I admit I still cannot truly feel this way. I'm not sure anyone ever does, not really. Life is always ahead of us and we know no different. Maybe, when we have minutes remaining, something changes in our brains and some physiological reaction kicks in that helps us cope and makes our eyes go like Nancy's did. Maybe nothing changes and seconds become hours and minutes become days and there still seems a long road ahead. Who knows? I sure don't. Still, I don't want the list to be an ongoing thing that will keep me up at night so, for the sake of completion, death should be last. I scanned through the list to see what could be removed to

make way for it and decide to leave out the second learning to cook one. It wasn't that difficult. It changed my daily routine but didn't change me. I think I can allow myself to write about one future and currently fictitious trial, as long as I don't try and describe it in any way. It is inevitable after all. I'll keep it simple though, no speculation. We cannot know and must not guess. We should wait and see.

~~TRIAL XV: LEARNING TO COOK AND CLEAN WITHOUT MAMA~~

TRIAL XV: THE DEATH OF WILLIAM PRITCHARD

CAROL MOUNTAIN

BY ANONYMOUS

Like all slightly mad ideas, it was the product of a hazy, easily-forgotten deductive leap; boredom at work also came into it. Hendricks had drifted into working as a night-watchman at a midsize plastics factory. Such places, society was given to understand, could be the target of mischievous arsonists who couldn't know the horrors they would unleash: those jet-black clouds could linger for weeks and have rough consequences for years. Hendricks' nerve-centre was a terrible old portakabin with a phone, a kettle, an example of the first wave of portable TVs (black and white, loop aerial, a dial to change channels), and not much else. After two days he was sick of the

sight of the place. Now he'd been there eighteen months.

The deductive leap involved the phone. The thought was that, once long ago, in the evening, his phone at home would ring with the clamour of social engagements and arrangements. Sometimes women rang him and wanted him to go and see them. He had occasionally been prone, he freely admitted, to ringing friends late on, very late on, if he had emotional pressure to relieve. Nowadays there was less of that aspect of life. He was single again, had been for a couple of years after the last shouting match, wasn't a million miles away from turning forty,

and he had arrived at the point where he believed it a feminist lie that a man needed to change his socks every day: one pair, let it be said, could last the week.

So all this was a jumble, floating through, bits of it sticking a little, when Hendricks picked up the phone around twelve on a late-spring night, and rang his own home number.

Self-consciousness would've set in before long, crowding out the strangely pleasing image of a drunken passer-by hearing a faint ringing from an empty house, and getting chills over what kind of news this could be. He expected to reach six rings before stopping.

"Thank God," said a woman's voice, picking up after the fifth ring.

"Fuck, sorry – wrong number, sorry to've bothered you," Hendricks gabbled.

"No, don't – I'm glad you rang," he heard the voice say as he took the phone from his ear. He put it back. There was something about the voice, above and beyond it being a woman's and possibly a blonde woman's, that held him. How often was it you heard naked, pleading desperation in another person's voice? You had to

go back to schooldays for that. Also, something was insistent that he'd dialled carefully to avoid just this kind of mishap.

"Can you help me?" she asked.

"Who ... Hold on, hold on," he said.

"Can you help, please, I need help."

"Wait, just wait. Listen. There might've been a mistake."

"It doesn't matter, can you – ?"

"What number is that?" he cut in, using his authoritative voice. "I know I called you, but I was expecting someone else to answer. So what number is that?"

"I don't know," she said.

"Well whose house are you in?"

"I think it must be yours. Isn't it?"

"Are you ... okay, listen." His thoughts threatened to whip away. "Okay, right. What picture's above the fire place?" At some unknown point he'd stood up.

"A picture of Elvis," she said. "Young Elvis, looking nice."

He left a pause. Then he asked,

“Who is this? What’re you doing there?”

“There isn’t time for all that,” she told him.

“I fucking think there is. What are you doing in my, in my fucking gaff?” He had no clue what he’d been watching on TV to come out with a word like ‘gaff.’

“They’re coming to get me,” she said. “I thought I’d be safe here, but I don’t think I am. You have to help me.”

“Fuck off. This is a joke,” he said. He was shaking his head, as though she could see him and would snap back to reality.

“You’re someone who can help – “

“Listen, listen, I’m coming over now and I’m calling the police. I’m going to have a fucking race with the police to get there. So you better get going right, fucking, now.” He hung up. He didn’t move.

He didn’t drive, he hadn’t enough money for a taxi, the buses had stopped about half an hour before, and his house was an hour’s walk away. Still, he would’ve gone and flailed away if the person he’d spoken to had been a man. Since it wasn’t, he paced around for a

while, then sat back down. He considered ringing his next-door neighbour, to see if they wouldn’t mind glancing through the window to make sure everything was ticking along nicely, but he didn’t know his next-door neighbour’s number, or for that matter their name. He wondered how elaborate an arsonist’s ploy this could be, and decided – though it was already hard to think straight – that there was no way it was.

After a couple of minutes, he picked up the phone again. He was extremely particular in pressing the right buttons. It was picked up again after the fifth ring.

“I hoped you’d call back,” she said. “I wanted to say sorry, but I didn’t know what else to do, I had to go somewhere. I’m sorry.”

“Let’s just ... let me go through this.” He forced a calm tone. “Is that all right?”

“I don’t know how much time I’ve got.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see, won’t we?” It would’ve helped if his voice hadn’t been shaking. “What are you doing in my house, is the first big question.”

“I thought it looked safe.”

“You said that before. What does that mean?”

“I thought it would be a safe haven,” she said, in a tone that suggested she’d been wrong. “I passed it a few times in the night, and knew it was the one. It’s empty at night. Not many houses are. So I thought I should hide away here. Otherwise they’d have taken me already.”

“Now, wait, just, wait a second. You can’t just ... is this the first night you’ve been in there?”

“It’s the third.”

“The fucking third? How can it be the fucking third?” Hendricks knew he was unobservant when not on duty, the same way the cobbler’s children ran barefoot, but surely not to that extent, and definitely not with a woman in the house.

“I’m sorry. But it’s true.”

“Jesus Christ ... why are – who are they, why are you hiding?”

“They’re reducers.”

“They’re what?”

“They’re reducers.”

“What ... what does that mean?”

“I don’t know for certain. It won’t be good, though.”

“Why don’t you call the police?”

“The police?” She laughed joylessly. “The police won’t last two minutes against this lot. They’ll knock them into scarecrows. They’ll scare the crows away.”

Hendricks sat forward, one hand rubbing his shaved head, which felt very hot and very cramped and engaged in an act of overt betrayal. “Just ... explain. I can’t ask any more questions. Just explain what I need to know.”

“I don’t know much myself yet.”

“Why are they after you? I’m presuming it’s drugs, is it?”

“No. No, it’s not. It’s the old story. They don’t want us to live like we do.”

“But what are they going to do? What does ‘reducers’ mean? I mean, are they going to ... hurt you, or ...?”

“It’ll be worse than just hurting me. I don’t want to think about that.”

He was up and pacing again now. He even looked out of the window.

“You said before I was someone who could help. Didn’t you say that?”

“Yes.”

“How, then? How can I help?”

There was a pause. It was more than enough for Hendricks to know what she was going to say.

“I thought you’d know that,” she said, her voice a wave.

“How can I know? How the fuck am I supposed to know?”

“I thought that was the way it works. I’m sorry.”

“You have to tell me what I can do.”

“I don’t know either. This has never happened to me before. But there should be someone who can help, who can stop them. I thought it might be you.”

“How can – ?”

“Oh ... no,” she moaned. “No.”

He could hear her moving, presumably towards the window. “What? What?”

“Oh Jesus,” she said, the air stranding the words. “They’re outside al-

ready. They’re in the garden.”

“Just – tell them you’ve got a gun,” Hendricks said, his voice rising. “Shout you’ve got a gun.”

“They’ll laugh at that,” she said, her voice low and rushed.

“There’s knives in the kitchen. Get one, hold it up so they can see it.”

“They’re smoking in the garden. Getting ready, I suppose. Getting it out of the van. They’ll be –”

The line went dead.

As they only ever did in movies, Hendricks stared at the phone before putting it down. He tried ringing again, but this time it wasn’t answered. He thought of the passing drunk again.

He was by now the least fit he’d ever been, in a life without much exercise, but he supposed it was adrenaline that allowed him to run in even the short bursts that he did. He saw not a single soul on the way there, and couldn’t work out if that was something askance or not.

When it got too tough to run, he walked as quickly as he could. He tripped a lot, took less notice of kerbs

and so on. At one point he spat, but the spit had bubbling phlegm in it that made it more resilient, and it didn't fly from him but down him. That was the first time he got angry about all this, though it didn't last long. Mainly it was anxiety, similar to that of approaching women in bars or clubs, and he didn't want to think what that meant. He couldn't think of a time when he'd been more alert.

Eventually he rounded a corner and saw his house. It was still there, not a blackened husk, and he could see from a distance that the windows were intact and the door at least closed. Even the gate was closed, as he'd left it, though this did little to drop his anxiety levels. He gave an eye to the garden, on his haunches. The streetlight was close enough for him to tell there were no cigarette butts, no footprints in soil. He considered it cowardly to look through the window before entering his own fucking gaff, so he unlocked the door and went in.

It was quiet, dark. He stopped himself calling out "Hello?" There was the sense that the house was empty, undisturbed. The front room, where he had the phone, was in good order, and his Elvis picture hadn't been moved. He checked the phone, and the last number that'd called it was the porta-ka-

bin. He supposed this shouldn't have given him a chill, but it did.

In the kitchen, the knives were in their drawer. He gave a quick glance around upstairs, then swore and started back to work, running a lot less than he had. It was still deep in the night time, still no one around. All sorts of catastrophes played themselves out in his head, but everything was fine, the horizon remained unlit. He'd forgotten to change his splattered shirt, though.

Hendricks didn't know how he managed it, but the next evening he waited until rainy midnight before ringing again. He was nervous, blushing, double-checking that no-one was looking in through the black windows. He didn't think it would happen this time, that it was maybe some atmospheric folly that had opened up in that time period on that one night of the year. On the fifth ring she was there.

"They're in," was the first thing she said. She seemed to know it was him. Her voice was low. "They're in here. I can hear them."

"Where are you?"

"I'm under the, under the bed."

He wondered – but not excessively

– how that could be working, since he had no extension up there, and the phone wasn't cordless. "What are they doing?"

"They're moving around down there. Setting up the reducer, probably."

"Can't you get out? Jump out of the window, even?"

"Some of them are out there again. Smoking."

"Have they got guns?"

"They're ... kind of guns, by the look of them."

"You have to try something."

"I've tried running. That's it now."

"But you shouldn't be on your – it's not just you they're after."

"No, no. There were more of us. We didn't last long. They've got us scattered now. That's how it works for them. They get you separated, isolated. Now they just pick us off."

He could almost feel parts of his brain stretching to accommodate this. "Where are they from? Whose fucking authority is this?"

"They have a group authority. They're ... they're just the new way of things."

"Could I speak to them?"

"No." Her voice snapped into that.

"I could try, though."

"They wouldn't entertain you for a second. Sorry, that's no reflection on you."

"They're in my fucking house!"

"It's not your house while they're in it, that's the thing. They're doing a job. They're ... they're a focused bunch."

"I'll focus them on something," Hendricks said. That phrase hung absurdly in whatever kind of particled air there was between them. When he spoke again his voice was gentler. "What's your name? I don't even know your name."

"Carol. Carol Mountain."

"That's ... it's a great name."

"It looks good on their reports, anyway. What's yours?"

"Hendricks," he said. "Not with an X, though. Frank Hendricks."

“Well, Frank, nice to speak to you. Shame it couldn’t have been in different circumstances.”

“I know, I know. It’s raining here. Is it raining there?”

“No.”

“Right.” That was something else to think about later, futilely, he knew. “Listen ... I came last night. No one was there. Nothing had been happening, it looked like.”

She was quiet for a while. When she spoke again, her voice was also gentle, though in the sense of explaining something to a child. “You spoke to me, though, remember? And you’re speaking to me now.”

“Sorry,” he nodded. He was blushing afresh.

“Oh no,” she said. “Oh no.”

“What? What is it?”

“Someone’s coming up the stairs. Listen.”

There was a rustle as she held the phone out. He could faintly hear someone, a man, calling, “Come on ... come down, love ... see what we’ve got for you.”

Then another rustle and she was back, her voice little more than a hiss. “Hear that?”

“I heard it, I heard.”

“Oh fucking God, they’re at the door.”

“Fight them. You fucking fight them. Hurt them all you can.”

“There’s too many, they’re too big.”

“Claw them. Go for the eyes.”

He jumped himself at the sound of his bedroom door being kicked open. It was a distorted, tearing crack. The voice was still calling for her, come on, come out now. Then the line went dead.

Hendricks stayed where he was that night, but he had himself a stormy few hours.

The next evening, he got up and rang in sick. His boss was unhappy about it, but he had to understand that these things happen to the best of us.

He opted to get drunk that night – to sit up all night and drink until it came to a stop. He had nothing in the house, so he went down to the corner shop and got a litre of whisky and a litre of vodka. He ate a large meal.

He'd stopped keeping up with music, or even giving much time to the collection he'd already amassed, a few years earlier (it seemed to be the sort of interest you had when women were around), so he sat and watched the TV all night while he drank. It felt stupid, but he paid close attention to the news, both local and national; it felt just as stupid afterwards as well. He wished he knew another woman; he could get her round, and she could try talking to Carol Mountain, maybe she would know how to help.

The drinking picked up intensity at around 8 o' clock, when he seemed stuck in the midst of soap opera relays. Midnight seemed a bleak continent away, and he took his glass out to the back garden for a while, paced out there. It was the kind of evening older people called 'brisk', so he was back inside before long. No other reason than that.

He couldn't settle, which made him think of himself as a fractious child. He'd never known there to be absolutely nothing on the TV to hold his attention for a second. He wasn't usually bothered what his unknown neighbours thought of him, but he found himself sensitive that evening, wondering if they could hear him pacing, if they'd seen him bringing

the drink in, if they noticed the rapid change of TV channels. He thought he was developing a phobia of being thought insane. Probably there was a term for that. He went to the toilet a hell of a lot.

At 11 o' clock, he stood at the back door for a pitifully long time with the key in his hand. He managed to decide against locking it, but only after that pitifully long time was over. He turned on every light in the place, and opened wide every interior door. The TV was turned off at about half past. A little after that, and despite the briskness, the front room windows were opened. Midnight was cloudless, and the moon was half-full. No doubt it had seen worse things.

He drained his glass, took out his mobile, fully charged for the occasion, and rang his number. He stared at the phone as it rang, standing not two metres away from it. In his other hand, the kitchen knife he'd had in mind during earlier conversations.

She answered on the third ring this time, giving his heart a quiver. He wished, suddenly, completely, almost ashamedly, that he hadn't had a single sip of booze all night.

Her voice was different – thickened, slurred, though whether from drugs or violence he couldn't tell. He got the impression that the phone was being held to her head this time.

"I'm glad you rang," she said. "This is to say goodbye."

"Which room are you in?" he asked.

"They've got me in the kitchen," she said.

"I'm here. I'm in the house."

"I can't see now, hardly."

"I'm coming through to the kitchen now," he said.

"Just be careful," she said. "I can't help you. You should see the state of me."

"I'm in the kitchen. Where are you?"

"They've got me in front of the sink, but you shouldn't, you should get out."

He stood with his back against the sink, and made slow, almost contemplative swipes with the knife; he covered most angles. "Is that doing anything?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she said. "They're just laughing at you."

He could hear them: a cruel laughter, as at a child making a fool of itself. He slashed harder, wider. "Am I getting any of them?"

"It doesn't hurt them. Just stop." Her voice was even more of a withered thing. "Please stop. This is goodbye."

Hendricks dropped the knife on the floor then kicked it across the room. It vibrated under the washing machine.

"No, they've got me now," she said. "I'm on the fade now. It doesn't hurt much."

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Thank you, Frank. It's done now. You tried, that's what matters. Thank you. And good luck."

"I'm sorry," he kept repeating, until the line went dead. Then he wandered about the place, drinking until the lights in his head winked out one by one.

His boss was upset when Frank rang him to say he was quitting, so upset he didn't bother to ask for a reason, just choked out the insults and the threat of withheld pay until Frank hung up

on him. He didn't like using the phone so much these days.

There were attempts at epic sleeps to get himself over the upside-down life he'd been living, but that took longer than he expected or liked, and was more arduous. He forced himself to be at the local café for breakfast, even though his appetite was holed and he felt pale and ready to flinch, sitting by the window and watching the first-thing strugglers. The woman behind the counter spoke to him, but he never knew what to say. The urge to go back home for the rest of the day, lounge around, couldn't be mastered. He tried to feel like an aged campaigner, grizzled and worn and full of stoic heartache, but you really needed someone else with you to feel that way, someone young and naïve with a high boredom threshold.

One midnight later in the week, lying upstairs on the bed, he picked up his mobile and held it lightly, airily. He dialled with the rubber end of a pencil he'd found earlier. He wasn't thinking about what he could possibly hear on the other end. Now it went for eight rings – though he wasn't close to giving up – before it was answered.

It was Carol Mountain's voice, but he only just recognised it. It was

stronger than before, played on chords rather than single notes. "Yes? Can I help?"

"Is that Carol, Carol Mountain?"

"Yes it is, yes."

"It's ... it's Frank, Frank Hendricks."

"Ah ... yes, hello, Frank," she said, as though the name was familiar but the associations were taking the long way round.

"How are you?" he asked.

"Very well. Yes, very well."

"Last night ..." He swallowed that. "Where are you now?"

"Well, at this hour, I'm indoors. It's too cold to be anywhere else, don't you think?"

"I ... suppose it is."

"Yes. How are you?"

"I'm okay. I had a drink last night, with all the ..."

"Oh, nonsense. Forget all that. Ancient history now, all that."

His eyes were wide. "So you're all right?"

“Well, Frank, why wouldn’t I be? A bit of snow at midnight never did anyone any harm.”

“Good, good.” He said, for something to say.

“Do you wish to come and visit? Is that why you’re ringing?”

“Would ... whatever you think.” He nodded, urging her on.

“Is it all right for you?”

“I ... think so.”

“We have it estimated as a five day journey. At this time of year, dress extremely warmly. You’ll need to look out for the wolves, but try not to shoot any of them – fire over them, they can be quite craven. And get your skis from Dugworth’s – not, repeat, not, Willowson’s. The ravines are treacherous at this time of year, and the rope bridges ... well, you’ll see the rope bridges for yourself. There are convenient stops along the way. Lonely places, but they’ll do. The torches here will all be lit – even during the day, we have the torches lit. Saving a blizzard, you should see us from quite a distance. At the gates, give Scrimshaw your name. I’ll prepare him, so don’t be put off by anything he does or says. I think that’s all ... yes. Well, Frank Hendricks, I

look forward to seeing you before the week’s out.”

The line went dead.

He had the best night’s sleep he’d had in weeks. Within a fortnight he had a job as a doorman at the local nightclub.



A stylized sun with golden rays radiating from a central circle. The central circle is filled with golden musical notation, including notes and clefs. The sun is set against a white background.

POETRY

11/28/12 3:16pm

i'm not serious about finding a job
because i aspire to be a writer,
but i barely write and, truthfully,
i know i am no good

AURA AGONISTES

The children sewed me a dress
And deemed me beautiful,
Likening themselves to me.

When they found I couldn't
Handle a 'Nagant, they took
Both rifle and dress.
They did my deeds for me;

I have shot millions. But
I have since walked in jeans—
They still praise the dress.

PLATONIC RIGIDITY

Back straight, straight, we can
be beautiful together. What are
the sociological ramifications
of teenagers who drink amnesia
in deserted parks? I chewed sidewalk
for you. I tell people my acne
is sunspots.

I stand with crooked vertebrae
and think (stars are track marks,
freckles on the back of
my neck) of everything but how
the sun bends me like
a shadow-puppet, and I am
trapped in this shifting cave of a person
and I fell in love with
a streetlight because it
didn't love me back and
I want to itch my skin off
sometimes, because depression is
a kind of fire too. But all I do is
pick these chunks of gravel
out of my mouth and
fling them at moonbeams,
and ride the subway because
I love to shake, I want to hollow
out my cheeks and stuff them
with everything, everything, everything.

WAKE

Rest now. We do not know
At which point the dandelion took root,
But the buds have shot forth and out
Of your ear.

The cobweb has descended
Into your breast, entangled,
And a host has grown out
Of your mouth.

Though we cannot remove the roots,
The flowers have not grown in knots;
In the morning we'll have a wreath
For your wake.

For Raymond Carver

PEN AND PAPER

I.

They ask me to define where I live.
An easy enough task.
I turn from my screen
(and it feels like the first time),
And call upon old tools.
With things in order I begin
And a blank face greets me.

curious,
(and he seems so himself)

I declare my intentions.

only for the illiterates
who are betrayed at every turn
theyd approach with ease

(he grows in both confidence and stature)
I ask: And what of genuine men?

i cannot speak of them
for a wretched mask
and the fathers of the masks that came before.
your hair is crooked he scoffs
and your diction terrible.

But
It is not mine, only borrowed
from the makers of your teeth and the gardener of your smile.

what has she to do with this?

She? Hollow she?
Of beckoning smiles and burning cheeks?
Or the one who gave us our insolence?

the former my friend
dont waste time answering questions with questions
youre lost in a puddle of unoriginal thought
and cant swim your way out.

His words are spitting embers
And for a moment I flinch.
His face, once blank,
Now scarred with ink.
We continue.

look at what you create
and cry at your lack of recognition of the importance of
silence

The importance of mice? The rotted mouse?

epistemology is dead
its carcass washed away
into puddles
and what now do you believe in
the extremities of hedonism?
anything else?

(he seems desperate.)
I begin to tread carefully, for he might fly away.
Neither of us would notice.
wouldnt that be pointless?

II.

Incisive again, he and his regards
I see slipping away
Like flakes.
Outstretched hand asks:
Why serve me?

i neither serve nor enquire
i cant recede or retire
im here for you
and her
and all the rest
to release you from your cushions and embosomed
smiles.

To the real world, as real as I might find it?
Or somewhere even darker?

youre making progress of the kind youd hesitate against
ordinarily
keep up
you don't look at me and see brickwork
or the multicoloured toys of children
you see potential for self-pleasure.

(I stutter and withdraw.
His stained face collapses,
Our argument renewed.)

you yearn for status you cant fathom
the complex eludes you.

I admit to crave the feelings of none
Lest I inhibit my resizing self.
I aim, I guess,
(I reconsider.)
To the unfixed and wavering,
Comfortable existence

Where words said and heard
Speak and listen alike.

my impression grows
of the noise you create and live in.
constant as constants
damaging to the souls of future children.

That I want away with.
I recognise, I think,
The importance
But not the silence.

Persevere
but never prosper
advise
but never advocate
if it wasnt for deflated balloons
you'd have choked on the smoke back in your infancy

She wouldn't damage
With intention, I'm sure.
Blame is misplaced if we yearn for purity.
Unreachable like air.

abstraction hinders us
we delve beyond the point
and must move swiftly toward sleep.

(I want to question his notion of finality.)

III.

His shape pleases me,
The mould beyond mould.
With taut fingers I ask:
What of the impresarios,
And their distractionary practice?

all i know of them you know
i cant speak further than your boundaries.
why ask questions already answered?
why think i can provide what you already know and love?

I pause.

His disfigurements appear masculine
And I step aside.
(Through the window hollers birdcall and ecstatic vibes.
Four walls hem and I read words scattered at the ceiling's rim.)

creation is as tricky as you make it
unleash the unlocked and unloved
twist them into shapes pleasing to your eye and your eye only.
she hollow she
in all her irrelevant wonder
was not made to be muse.

His mistake ignites fires behind the eyes
Of myself and all those who render 'irrelevant wonder'.
I refrain from mocking and watch the bubbling at his throat.

the prerequisites of success beckon.
the glorified next big thing.
idolise yourself to these and say goodbye to every sensibility.

(I recline in my chair.
His struggling is pitiable.)

what of the bettered self?
the self-sacrificing exemplar?
he resides far from this satanic book
youve learnt nothing
and will gain close to everything resented from the beginning.

(The doubts he attempts to coerce stay buried.
His speech unruly and fickle.
I lose my trust, and in a moment feel lonesome.
Tears drip into ink puddles.)

my aside will everlast
inversely unwritten and therefore eternal.
judgment shall be tallied and told from these pages
fortitudinal masks wont hide lines of cowardice
hear me see me read me
read me.

I ask: What of genuine men?

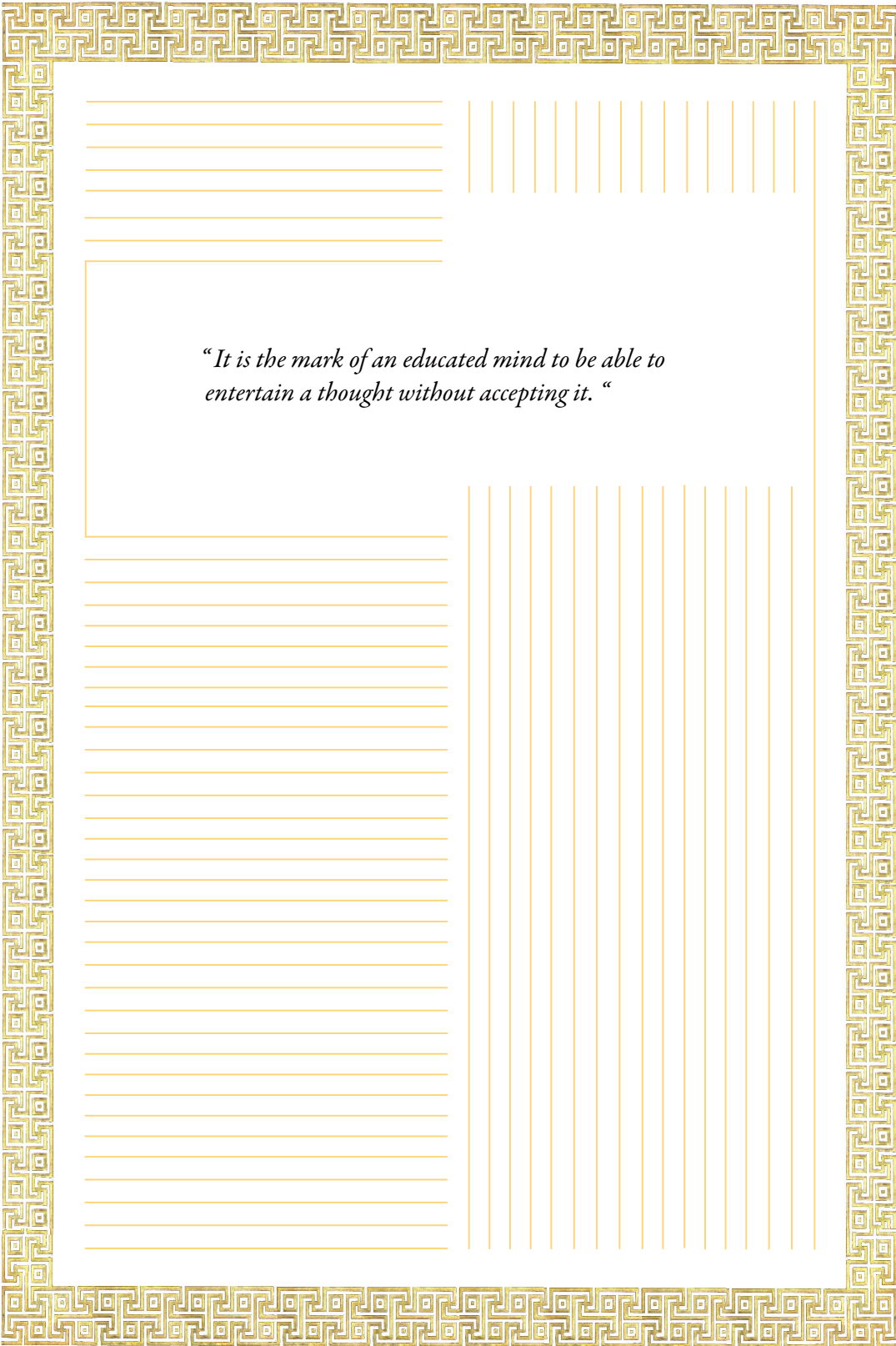
(Crawled infantile into a hole. Beyond mask and faceless facetiousness.)

The impresarios? She?

Concepts undone from self-destruction

While I (and they) live on.

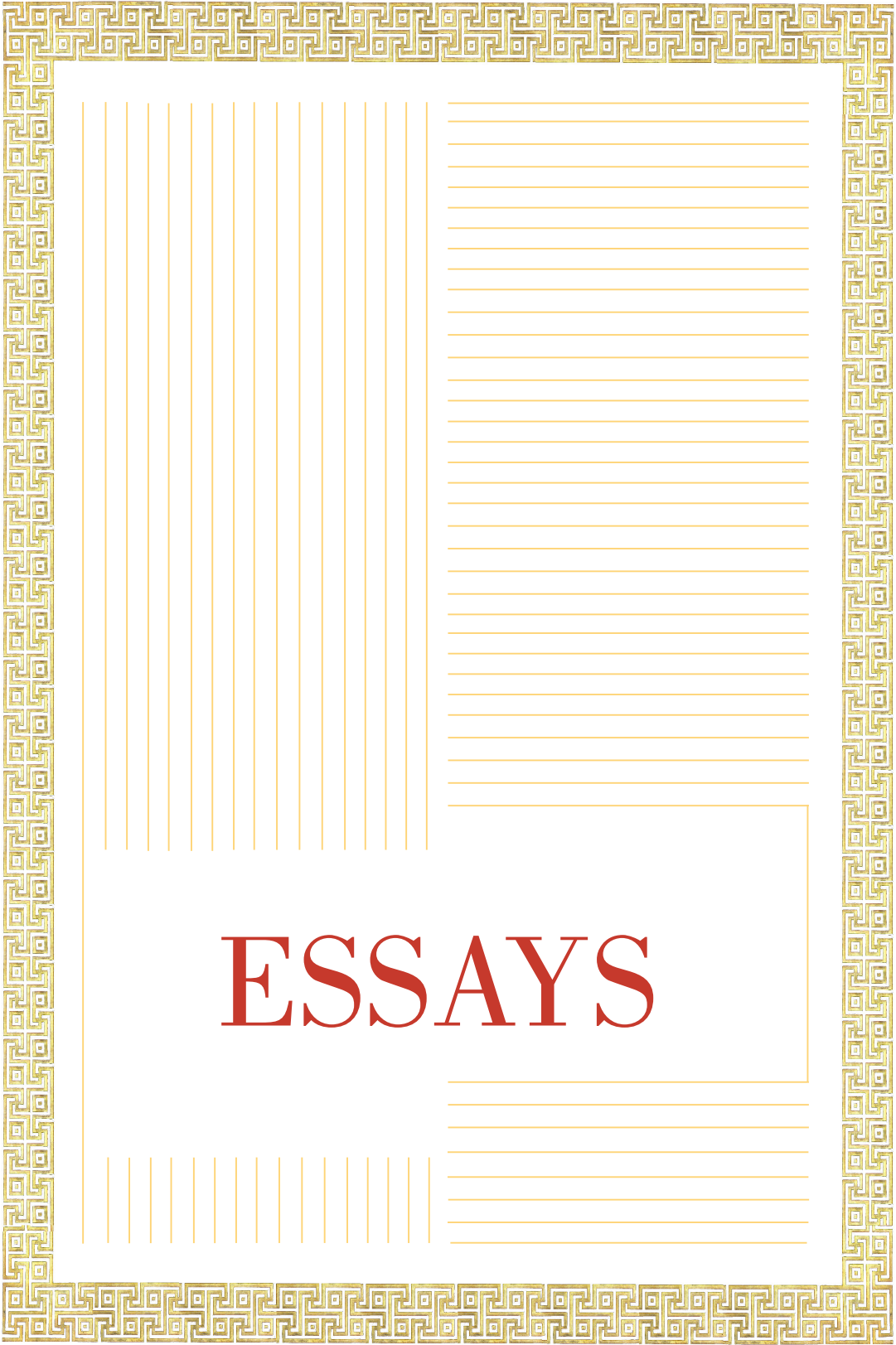
Give me the More.



Handwriting practice lines consisting of horizontal lines on the left and vertical lines on the right.

“It is the mark of an educated mind to be able to entertain a thought without accepting it.”

Handwriting practice lines consisting of horizontal lines on the left and vertical lines on the right.



Vertical lines on the left side of the top section, and horizontal lines on the right side of the top section.

ESSAYS

Horizontal lines on the right side of the bottom section, and vertical lines on the left side of the bottom section.

NON - FICTION

KETAMINE AND HEXAGONS

BY ANONYMOUS

9 AM. The ketamine grabs my head and dunks me under and the room breaks into hexagons. Tiny components both inches from my face and miles away, my perception skewered and splayed and presented incorrectly. The hexagons carry with them parts of the room. Some were offered to me, and some were taken. Others hid gingerly in my peripheral.

They split and slide from their positions, manoeuvring fluently as though part of some complex system. They come forward and draw back as though testing me but I do not flinch. I have no control over my body. Incapable of feelings or opinions. Now a

piece of apparatus, my only purpose to observe.

Then I am in the cold sunlight and the world is distant as though down a tunnel. Segmented buildings loom over me when I tilt my head, swaying disapprovingly with every step. People I know ahead of me in an unsure line. The hexagons moving with more intensity. Assembling algorithmically. Drawing over my legs. Children pass, their laughter distorted like old cassettes. Everyone is getting further away. Some of them specks in the distance. Notice my friend Sugarman beside me and I cling to him as though he were a ski lift. What is going on?

I lean on a wall and it caves inwards under my weight. An abrupt shriek as I stumble in, the bell above the door rupturing under the weight of the chemical. I stumble amongst mirrors casting striking displays of light. Optical instruments arranged systematically over the walls and around pillars in alluring rows of six. Two women in clinical white turn to me. Their eyes widen, processing my entrance. The moment stands still.

I am too dissociated to be controlled by anxiety. Instead something distant tells me to get out. I space-walk backwards into cold sunlight as though I am wading through mud. No panic comes over me. No anxiety. Nothing. Concerned only with my escape. A heavy hand clamps down on my shoulder. The coercive weight of authority. The game is up.

The world shoots past as I turn. Smearing colour and light and shape and sound in a kaleidoscopic soup. Then I am facing him. Sugarman. An angel plucking me from this nightmare. An ally, a brother and a comrade. With our combined strength we break through the hexagons. Drag ourselves towards the correct building. Open the great tomb door. As we ascend the stairs I am vaguely aware our objective is almost complete. Back to the safety

of a dingy flat. Curtains closed. Lights off. Egos flattened.

This was a few weeks ago. A disorientating but not unpleasant experience. Taking ketamine when everyone has been on it for a while isn't a good idea. Just after it hit me, the others emerged from their trips and decided to relocate to another flat. I met all of them bar Sugarman that night so was not around familiar faces. Lucky he found me before I wandered off and was thrown into a police car mumbling about geometric shapes.

Can still picture the hexagons as though it happened yesterday. Noticed a minor obsession with them since. When I encounter a lattice of them they always grab my attention. There is a tiled field of them in the west end that I enjoy walking over. A man with a hexagonal-patterned jumper I have considered speaking to. A hexagon in the centre of the Star of David. Hexagon-shaped pills I arranged into a perfect grid. And I've been considering getting a hexagon rug.

A polygon is a flat shape made up of straight lines joining together to form a closed circuit. The hexagon is a polygon with six edges and six vertices. Patterns of them are prevalent in nature due to their efficiency.

The honeycomb is a mass of hexagonal cells thought to use the least material when creating a lattice within a given volume. The structure of the snowflake is composed of hexagonal prisms when examined under a micrograph. The skeleton formula of most recreational substances contain at least one hexagon representing segments of their chemical makeup. Carbon rings. THC has three, Ketamine has two, MDMA has one.

The Giant's Causeway looks like a congealed moment from my waltz through town. Hexagons jutting from the earth carrying its image with it. According to legend, a Scottish giant took a great line there centuries ago and experienced a trip so unfathomable it changed the land forever. The images it faced as it choked on its own vomit. The horror in its eyes as the very earth turned on it. It's last moments reproduced as a jarring sculpture.

Compound CI-581 was synthesised in 1962 and first tested on volunteers from an American state prison. It was later renamed ketamine and employed by the US army as a field anaesthetic during the Vietnam war. In 1999, the US government declared it illegal. The UK followed suit in January 2006.

Each line of ketamine is a roll of a dice. Sometimes you experience a mild disorientation or different frame of mind. Others you end up wrapped around a stranger babbling shit in a purely platonic sense. A good ice breaker. Generally, with a little ketamine you can still be relatively sociable as long as you aren't the only one in the room doing it. With a lot you can cross into a new mental frontier.

A ten inch line was once presented to me during the final stages of a party. A white horseshoe laid across a DVD case. I witnessed a side of ketamine I'd never before. The world became computative and unequivocal and esoteric. Every second stretched out and presented to me like a mile of fabric woven from existence. Eventually time lost all meaning and forever I remained in the same moment, again an objective watcher. My entire past, present and future fused together and made peace with another. Memories were cast on the wall as though from an old projector. My angels and demons shook hands and laughed and kissed and two of them fucked. My attempts to explain this to those around me fell flat. A stuttering glossolalia for me alone.

One of the deepest experiences I've had on any substance. Notable for its clarity and objectivity. My experiences with salvia are similar in that I observed without feeling, but I was too stunned at the visuals to have any chance at self-analysis.

Managed to teach myself how to write on ketamine. My handwriting can be surprisingly coherent. Mistakes I can sometimes fix afterwards. Other times it's undecipherable. Pages of hieroglyphics from a dissociated hand. I started the ketamine diaries a few weeks back when I was over at Sugarman's. They go something like this:

The room hasn't been tidied for some time and sneezing on ket is incredible. Sugarman says he's had 22 midlife crises in the past five minutes. Comments that the stuff isn't very strong so racks up another massive one. Takes it. Decides he's going to the shop for some Volvic. Is gone before I can stop him.

I am not left in silence long. Moments later he crashes back through the door with tea cakes and jelly babies and water. Puts them down squealing then starts rubbing his torso and looking at me with an eye closed. Starts reeling off lines in a high pitched voice. Sounds like a cartoon charac-

ter going mad. The sound of someone lost to a dissociative.

"Fucking so kitted man."

"Why do I have a bag of jelly babies?"

"FUCKING HELL."

When he looks at me I know he can't see me. One eye is still closed. The other is aeons away. But he knows where I was and keeps his eye on it given I reappear.

"What the fuck is going on?"

"VOLVIC."

"I'm the cockpit driver."

The techno manipulates his body. He dances as though on strings. A marionette powered by ketamine. I watch him for a moment. This spectacle presented to me. Wonder how many times I've been in a similar state. An exhibit for a room of watchers.

"I'm fucking off my tits."

"The world's going to end next Tuesday."

"FUCK."

I go into my own mind. Leave Sug-

arman to whatever it is that's happening to him. Start writing about how humans have no control over social games. How particles behave differently when being observed, as do people. How capitalism is inherently flawed since it is intrinsically linked to our early social relations. How squashed teacakes aren't as nice as unsquashed ones despite the only thing changing is their shape. At first I decide I am not too affected by the ketamine. Then I am squeezing the skin together on my hand to make it look like it's talking.

I glance around the room. Feels as though I am not in it. Sugarman's nostril has been coated in white since before he left for the shop. We take another dunt. Powder rushes up my nose and galvanises my body. A gentle electric charge throughout my limbs. I catch myself rubbing my face against a pillow like a cat.

Ketamine can take you in many directions. By the hand or via a kick up the arse. Sometimes it can come at you when you least expect it. A line of the stuff masquerading as something else. It's happened to me. Camouflaged as MDMA at a party. I took it and fell backwards and destroyed a table. Woke up on an elevator floor. Luckily I had good friends with me.

One of the darker ketamine moments. A nice-looking girl turns up to a party where we were all wrecked. Another addition to the collective, carrying with her more ingredients for our chemical soup. At one point she mistook a like of ketamine for coke and spent the next hour writhing on the couch, lost in some dark place. Her foot shot out across the room and the next thing I know I was being kicked and rubbed. Think she was trying to play footsie. Eventually she gave up and left me to the diplopic realm the ketamine brought.

Later she came out of nowhere and bit my knee. It was sore so I asked her to not do it again but she did anyway. Her hand went to my leg and started squeezing. When I turned to her she was touching herself through her jeans. Her face in quiet ecstasy. For a moment I only registered her looks, her body, her hand on my leg, and the fact that she was getting herself off. I had to have a word with myself.

Martin.

No.

ESSAY

ON THE ART OF READING

BY ANONYMOUS

To: editors@thetric.co.uk
Subject: Editors Comments

“I suspect when you saw the ominous ‘Editor’s Comments’ subject line you were expecting some mad, rambling thing about how the editor didn’t get it, but I actually want to say the opposite. I appreciate being given feedback from the editors (although reader feedback would be nice too), and especially when they seem to know their shit. They were able to pin down the source inspiration, and point out what the story was aiming for. I’m thankful for their having understood that the story was supposed to evoke, without mentioning it explicitly, a sense

of “the old world,” through prose style and certain other key things. Anyway, thanks and keep up the good work!”

Some e-mail headers make the heart of even the most seasoned editors skip a beat. This e-mail could have been just of that particular kind, luckily it wasn’t. Angry writers are the doom of any respectable publication, so a section where editors comment on their selection will always be a risky gambit. This time, however, The Metric managed to drive the point home.

But this still begs the question: *Why do we publish our interpretations of selected texts?*

Well, we believe strongly in transparency.

The old methods where a closed group, with hush-hush, internal debate and machiavellian diplomacy made all the decisions is not a healthy climate. It paves the way for nepotism, bullying, strict chains of command, and we strive towards something different, hoping that our approach will provide a new way of understanding how literature should be published.

So expect more letters from authors to be published online, even more so if they are the very ones we dread. It is important to realize that editors are not infallible, our words not final, and that we are just as prone to err as any of our writers or readers. Therefore our decisions should be reflected upon and discussed. We might shudder at the thought of unjust criticism and harsh words, but we fear the opposite even more--the silence after a text has been read. So under our roof all opinions are welcome.

Our comments are meant to serve as an instigator for debate. Take the chance to join us in the discussion, your experience of this magazine will ultimately become more rewarding.

And if we would to further expand upon our argument, we must ask ourselves a difficult, much more complex question. Namely, what is it to write and read?

In the post-modern society, it is often said that authorial intent is dead and that the reader reigns supreme. With this in mind, we would like to remind you of the craft's humble origin.

Writing is an innovation and a technology that arose from the need of documenting oral traditions, traditions where conversations and speech were, and still are, a means of communication.

So, we beg to differ. We do not agree with the post-modern outlook on the art of reading. What does it really mean to communicate? Let us have a look.

Communication (from "*communis*", meaning "*that of the common*", implies a notion of sharing) is the activity of conveying information through the exchange of thoughts, messages, or information, as by speech, visuals, signals, writing, or behavior.

Reading and writing, as tools of communication, are defined by sharing to the public. So, does not the

writer have an obligation to fulfill his end of the bargain, as he starts writing? To convey his intent, as carefully and aware as possible, whether it is as “honest” and “true” as Hemingway’s prose or as strange and beautiful as Borges?

Let me quote Nietzsche, who wrote on the art of Philology, the study of literary texts and written records:

“Philology is that venerable art which demands of its votaries one thing above all: to go aside, to take time, to become still, to become slow--it is a goldsmith’s art and connoisseurship of the word which has nothing but delicate, cautious work to do and achieves nothing if it does not achieve it lento. But for precisely this reason it is more necessary than ever today, by precisely this means does it enchant and entice us most, in the midst of an age of ‘work,’ that is to say, of hurry, of indecent and perspiring haste, which wants to get everything done at once, including every old or new book:--this art does not so easily get anything done, it teaches to read well, that is to say, to read slowly, deeply, looking cautiously before and aft, with reservations, with doors left open, with delicate fingers and eyes . . .”

I want to stress those last words ‘delicate fingers and eyes’. We see here a connection, a reasoning of what seems to be a more physical contact indicating that reading is a process, where we first feel with our fingers and then understand with our eyes, according to Nietzsche. Let us continue onwards with the author Owen Barfield from his book *Poetic Diction: A Study In Meaning*:

“Wonder is our reaction to things which we are conscious of not quite understanding, or at any rate of understanding less than we had thought. The element of strangeness in beauty has the contrary effect. It arises from contact with a different kind of consciousness from our own, different yet not so remote that that we cannot partly share it, as indeed, in such a connection, the mere word “contact” implies. Strangeness, in fact, arouses wonder when we do not understand; aesthetic imagination when we do.”

Both mentions that very same process, where contact is made, before “understanding”. And they are both in agreement with the Modernist poet T.S. Eliot who he himself said: *“Great art communicates before it’s understood.”*

What is perhaps most surprising is that these authors all wrote texts of very different natures, but all shared the same approach toward communication, contact leading towards understanding, when it came to reading.

In the spirit of transparency we must admit that the reasoning above come from a Harvard online discussion group, headed by Professor Gregory Nagy, on the subject of Ancient Greece -- credit must be given where credit is due, but in the act of sharing it is only fair to pass these great words on.

The passages tell us that it is in the process leading towards understanding a work, where the beauty and magic of reading is found. This is where we make contact, this is where authors who are dead long ago communicate and share their tales from cultures long since vanished--but only if the reader is willing to meet, able to think, and reads carefully mit zarten Fingern und Augen.

Then what is the responsibility of the reader? Doesn't hers or his opinion matter? Of course it does, but if we are to see reading as a tool of communication, some effort must be taken to understand the authors intent. If we were to be talking, instead of reading,

to an author and yet defiantly refuse to try to and understand what he was communicating, we'd be perceived as stubborn fools by them and anyone close by.

Such a stance is that of the solip-sist, the person whose entire existence serves to cement their own beliefs. And needless to say, a person with such an outlook on life does not make a great conversational partner.

No, the reader's responsibility is simply that of the good listener and the keen conversational partner. One might not agree, but we must at least try to understand.

So we read not only into the text by laying our values, our cultural context, and our opinions upon the work. We need to recognize the importance to read out of the text, trying to understand the author, his values, the values of the world he has created, his characters' motives and the themes from their perspective.

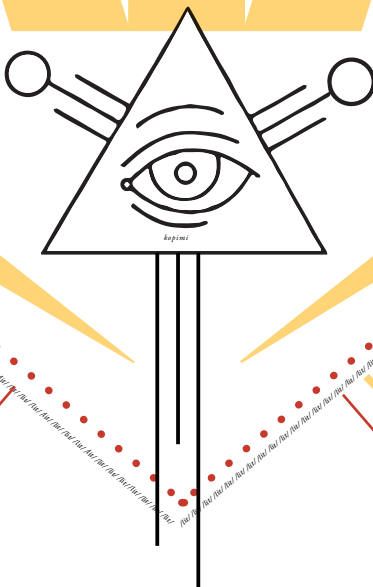
If we approach the art of reading like this, with our senses finely tuned, carefully listening to those around us, meeting the author halfway, together with our accumulated experience of life, then reading is forever.

Every time we dip our toes into the text, we have changed, because our perception have changed us, our new life's experience will remind us of the lessons we've learnt since last. It is only the curious that escape from the empty void of ignorance. This is also a fitting metaphor for the work that brought about this article, *The Eyes of Curious Man*, written by Oscar Varga Lopez and published in the first issue of the *Metric*, where the protagonist, a writer, goes awry on the high seas and stumbles upon an anomaly he simply cannot fathom. A piece where readers, not trying to understand, might find themselves trapped in the very same whirling vortex of blissful ignorance.

We believe that only the curious eyes of man will be able to enjoy reading fully.

So *The Metric* is communication, not a one-way street. We are the Highway, perhaps lacking a few cars, but someday we hope to become congested, polluted and filled with weary ideas and bitter truths.

Welcome.



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