

METRIC

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NORTH CAROLINA
I WILL TELL HER
CULTIVATION

LIQUID THOUGHTS
BOTTOM SHELF WHISKEY
WALK

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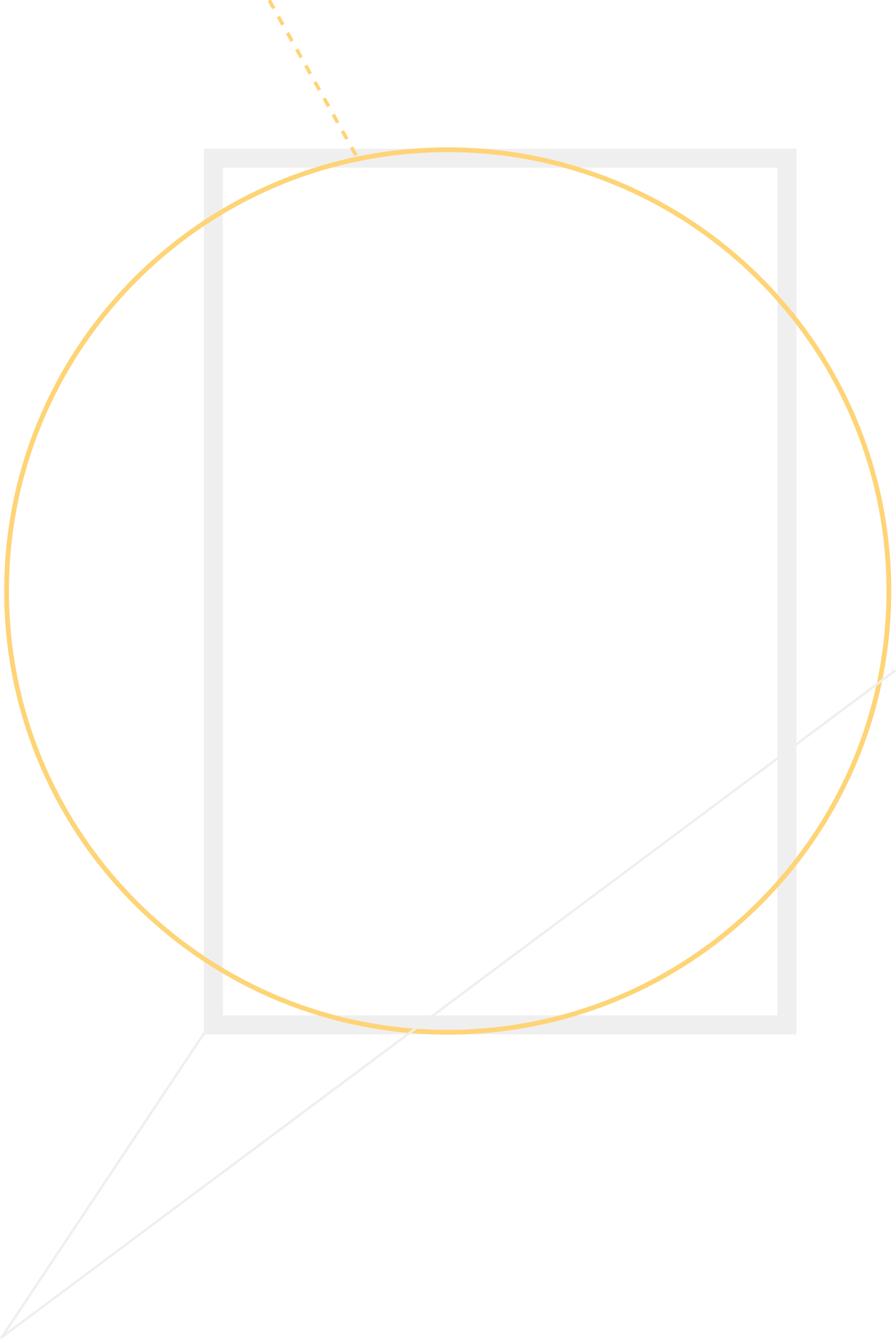
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PROSE

NORTH CAROLINA

No one ever gets used to weather. Fifteen years in humid dying Louisiana heat and the dry red clay of this place still makes me sweat. Everyone from somewhere else calls it Carolina but the 'North' is important. We don't have bars on our flag. We don't execute teenagers. Our schools are free of toxic air and rank higher than 50 out of 51. The little alamedas I pass everyday are called so because we don't mind foreign influences. Everyone brown is Mexican no matter where they're originally from but we memorize a few words and roll our 'r's as best we can. Everything distinguishing us from everywhere else are the things we don't mind.

The things we learn to live with in our polite tolerance. Where nice is not just a perfectly all right way to be but the only way anyone knows how to get by.

It was here I became an alcoholic, and the pitying glances are better by far than the slaps on the back I might have felt in Louisiana. Most people fall down drunk there and a little shame never did anybody any harm. I've learned to live with it like everybody else who loves me. The only branch of the family not born up here, they had to accept outsiders and any faults they carried with them. And I don't blame them for allowing me this vice draining out

the light in my eyes. It wouldn't be proper to speak of it. What if we were embarrassed, right there in front of each other?

I wonder how different everything might have been if I'd stayed an hour away from New Orleans my whole life. Or if maybe this neat little curse would have followed me anywhere. The yards and yards of family drunkenness crumpled inside me like a map you can't refold to its neat little square. It might be my fault, anyway.

I knew all along what I was born into. Isn't it me who hasn't found the grace, the decency to hide it? My uncles stashing flasks in glove compartment, my aunts emptying perfume bottles.

Drinking alone, that's when you know you've done it, right?

Maybe. Everywhere except here. Everywhere except this family. If no one sees, nothing matters. I don't blame them.

So I'll sweat and complain about this windless heat, throw back a few shots and watch all the nice people live from my apartment window. No enemy but the weather and that wet, bloody place under my heart shaped like the state of North Carolina. The one I don't remember exists except in those passing moments of sobriety I struggle through after I open my eyes each morning. The one that beats the message like a waltz in half time: you could have been so much more without that glass in your hand.

THE MIRRORS

The Monroe family is doing it again. They're pointing mirrors toward the windows that happen to line up with theirs. In Amy's bedroom, in the bathroom, in the kitchen, my reflection stares back at me in a tirade of exhausted colors. The kitchen's view is especially violent. Which part of the world said this was fair? It wasn't my fault the house design happened to be this way.

I suppose staring at myself isn't a terrible thing. My tall body makes it so I have to move around to see its entirety. The view reminds me when I need to shave, mostly. It also reminds me that I drink too much coffee.

Since they despise me so much, I wonder what I'd look like in a dazzling glass coffin when I happen to stare too long.

When I first moved in, my presence wasn't an issue. I was a regular old neighbor who occasionally talked when spoken to. Until I saw Amy out on the roof, everything was normal. I remember asking her what she was doing up there, and I remember her saying she was watching the sunset because there was nothing better to do. I asked if I could join her. Why not, she said.

This became a daily routine. I watched the clock and counted down the minutes until I could become entranced and trapped by the amber of her eye, the concentration of her attention. Soon I wanted to see her more than just once a day. I feigned interest in the rest of the family to see her, sometimes going to ring the bell to ask for some coffee because I'd forgotten to pick it up at the store that day. Her father, the one who usually showed up, obliged, but my enthusiasm at the sight of Amy must have been too much for them. Her father told me in a gruff, stern voice to stop coming, and to stay off of his roof before I caused any damage.

"I won't put a hole in your roof, I promise," I said.

"That's not what I'm worried about."

"Well. You know why I like my coffee black? There's a Turkish proverb that says coffee should be as black as hell, as strong as death, and as sweet as love."

It was a poor excuse. He scowled and closed the door in my face.

I had to watch from afar, now. It was easy to see into her bedroom, easy to tell what times she would be changing, and at night I looked for any unwanted visitors and vowed to pro-

tect her if I had to. How old was she, anyway? At least sixteen. My birthday was coming up soon. I owed this to myself, my mind said.

Someone eventually noticed, maybe her mother. She—someone else?—put a large, oval mirror in front of Amy's window as if to tell me to look at my foul hands and wandering eyes instead. I did just that, hoping I would be around at the mirror's removal. Once in a while, I dared to venture to look into their kitchen or bathroom, but the result was the same: she had been removed from my world before she had been properly introduced to it.

This went on for five weeks. When I was sleeping one night, the mirrors must have been removed, because my daily adventure was met with the view of her mother cooking scrambled eggs and Amy talking on the phone, walking back and forth between rooms. Knowing her, she was getting ready to leave the house. Obviously this was my chance to confront her and tell her what was really on my mind. I halfheartedly peered into my own mirror only to make sure I wasn't in pajamas or in one of my shirts with holes, and then made my way to her front porch to wait.

While I was waiting, I vaguely wondered why the Monroe family had so many mirrors to begin with. Was there excess happiness to be found during the act of gazing at one's own reflection? Their reaction to me had done nothing but cause days of boredom and anger. But if they were happy, did this mean they could be balanced out by my apparent sadness? Of course, of course, that's why I was here. That's why I was their neighbor and not anyone else's. (There was the Campos family on the other side, but they weren't nearly as interesting.) The Monroe family needed to come to this realization before it was too late.

Soon, I see her walking out the front door. The moment she sees me, I know I'm not wanted, but I'm staying anyway.

"What are you doing here?" she asks. I detect no disdain in her voice, only surprise.

I decide to get straight to the point and say, "You always used to let me watch the sunset with you, but sunsets are not romantic. When they signal the end of an oversweet, close hell, I would rather stand at the very beginning with you and watch that all again instead."

"Look, Josh, you're nice and all, but I'm not—"

"Just listen," I interrupt, "and see if you change your mind. Romance to me is not sunsets that keep shadowing our lives or mirrors that can obnoxiously drown my final words of declaration. Romance to me is not a heart that refuses to warn me about incoming savages or candy that makes me smile only once." I sigh, make sure she is listening. The sun hung overhead, in between us, balanced by her happiness and my sadness. "Romance to me is an endless stream of suffering and work and sweet, of crying and the constant turning of lug wrenches—and all for what? When romance is done right, there should be nothing used as a euphemism for what we have experienced. There should be nothing that tells me we are done in the most relaxing sense. The only end should be us lasting forever, always, and a feeling that does not fade so easily...Won't you tell your family to reconsider when I come over for coffee?"

I told her that, and now they're doing it again.

THIRD RED DEBT PT II.

His legs had chafed badly from the ride; there wasn't a comfortable position to be found in the saddle. Every jarring step up the rocky riverbank left him in a blacker sort of mood. A sharp edge of silver trim on his rifle poked painfully at his back, and his forehead was going raw from constantly wiping sweat from his brow. Cohen's nose was full of the awful musk of the river, and the grit of twelve stinking men who rode at his back.

Hauf della Hastings' place sat just northward up the river, where the canyon started to widen out. He'd been told Crough had been seen in the area, and was assumed to be

dealing with Hauf. To what end, the Clerics hadn't offered and Cohen didn't care.

"We're settled for this, one hundred percent, Warren?" A thick man nudged his horse up beside Cohen and spoke. It was a question, Cohen noticed, but he tried his hardest to push it as a fact.

"You'll get fifty-fifty if he's not here, Jogh, full if we collect." Jogh eyed Cohen as if he'd changed the deal.

"That's not what we agreed on, Warren." He ground the words out slowly, frustration showing plain in his face.

“You’ll agree on whatever I want, or you’ll be restored to the plantation.” He replied with annoyance, “I can’t pay you full price for something that doesn’t get done. Think of it this way—you’ll either go back with half of your sentence or none of it.”

“Hmm.” Jogh breathed and gave a stiff nod before falling back with the rest. Soon enough, the land flattened and turned downward.

Cohen’s bought men crested the hill and rode like thirteen devils down on the Hastings place; thundering hooves echoed like charging cavalry a thousand strong from the bottom of the canyon. Each of them rode for their debts; called to work to clear their iron-laden names. When the Warrens called, as they did, such tended to be the distasteful, black sort of work. But an alternative for a man to buying his life back would rarely go unconsidered. To that end, Cohen had rode hard with twelve purchased men at his back. They had seen Crough on the riverbank when they came over the rocks—a great bear of a man there was no mistaking—wearing not but his trousers. He trudged back up to the house and had to stoop underneath the roof of the porch just to squeeze up to the crooked door.

He had eyed them all with disgust and simply stepped back inside, sliding the door closed carefully as if it would help protect him. Somehow, something had. Hastings himself sidled out onto the porch shortly after, hands in the air, shouting something Cohen didn’t bother to hear. Hastings tore off away from the house, down toward the river to safety—relinquishing his cottage to the will of the Warren.

Cohen and the rest surrounded the tiny estate for good measure. Thirteen rifles trained on the Hastings house, and Cohen’s cry was lost to the roar of blasting powder and shattering wood. A great cloud of white smoke rose lazily into the air, turning hollering men and crying horses into shifting, grey silhouettes. They fired until no ammunition remained. Cohen coughed himself red in the face with all the smoke burning and scratching at his throat. The murky figures of Cohen’s men trotted up to the ruined porch, and slid through the punctured door only to find Crough’s body entirely absent. Nothing but white smoke and shafts of harsh, dusty sunlight poured in through the splintered timber walls and paper partitions, pocked with hundreds of glowing round holes. They left Hastings with iron coins for the wasted ammunition and headed back to town empty handed.

“And yet the welcoming sight of Grizzly Crough slumped on the floor dead and bleeding eluded me.” Cohen sneered, “The reward for handing you to the Clerics slipped through my hands as ever it does. There wasn’t even a body.”

“I can’t be killed, Warren, you know that.” Crough growled. His voice rasped in his throat and he gulped another oily mouthful from his glass. Cohen shook his head.

“How’d you do it?”

Crough gazed up at Cohen with odd, empty eyes. Cohen felt a chill take his spine; felt the hairs prickle on his neck. For an instant, he was sure Crough was going to leap out of his chair and tear him to pieces. What was more, Cohen couldn’t stop him if he wanted to. He shook a few stray locks from his face and smoothed his hair neatly behind his ears.

“You ever had your faced pressed in a pile of ash and tried not to cough?” Crough barked. Cohen wasn’t sure how to respond. Crough sat back in his chair and chuckled to himself.

“Soon as the rifles lit up, I crawled up into the chimney, clean and simple as that. Walked right out the front door once it was through; covered in shit

and soot, and shaky tired, but nothing that couldn’t be brushed or slept off.” Crough said. Cohen stared.

“The chimney?” He repeated.

“That’s what I said.” He grunted with an approving nod, “Wedged my feet up and put my back to the bricks. Shimmied up in the chimney and waited till my legs gave out.”

“The damn chimney.” Cohen snorted and peered incredulously around the brewery. “You’re just a man after all.”

“Don’t be hasty, s’not as easy as it sounds. Soot and ash everywhere, my chest was slogged full of it, nearly choked to death.” He spat over his shoulder, as if the mention of it tasted like ash between his teeth. “I’m pressed up in the darkness, trembling under my own weight,” he rapped himself in the chest to make the point, “and then, seventeen men was it?” Cohen nodded.

“Seventeen of you boys come traipsing in the house lookin’ to collect a body. If I cough now, I’m dead as dead.” He said, drawing a line across his throat with a meaty thumb. “And you stood around.” He continued, exasperated, “You stood around, poking under furniture and such, like I

might be hiding under the rug, yellin' at those poor boys till you were red in the face. The sun had gone down by the time I walked out." Crough recalled with a weary expression. "I couldn't lift my legs for days." He shook his head and scowled sourly at the countertop.

Crough reached out toward the knife. Cohen stiffened in his chair, eyeing his hand cautiously. Crough paused for a second, then reached past the knife for the black bottle and poured himself another glass. Cohen watched the dark whisky rise up over all six rounds, still sitting ruined amidst the ice in Crough's glass. He relaxed a fraction.

"I'll not be killin' you just yet, Cohen." Crough said, with the hint of a smile flickering about his eyes. "You've got more questions don' you?"

"I shot you in the chest up in the pines. You bled out, dead in the snow." Cohen said.

"The pines—" Crough muttered, staring into his glass.

He swirled his drink, looking to have lost himself for a moment to the memory of the biting cold. After an uncomfortable span he added, "It wasn't me who died, Warren." His voice lingered somewhere between a growl and a whisper.

"I see that plainly." Crough didn't respond. "I shot you in the chest." He repeated simply, with a hint of frustration tickling his voice.

"You shot me in the shoulder—I couldn't have asked for a more superficial wound." He reached into his coat and pulled down the collar of his stained linen shirt revealing a twisted bunch of pale skin where the bullet had struck him just below the shoulder. "And I didn't bleed out, I passed out. That's an important difference if you ever mean to see another man dead."

"Passed out, alone, bleeding, and frosted over, that deep in the pines seems enough to kill anyone of a less than..." he paused, searching for the word. "Mythic stature." Crough snorted.

Another, heavier silence swelled between them. At once, Cohen knew he had gone too far. Crough held his eyes. He felt he had to look away, and scattered his gaze among the dangling box lanterns, hung from drooping strings through the brewery rafters. He knew he had gone too far in the pines as well—but that's what it took to get Crough here now. A Warren had to keep a steady fist, after all. Crough leaned forward; Cohen felt the black alcohol on his breath burn hot through his bared teeth.

“I’m going to gut you with this knife, and walk right out the front door.” He repeated.

Cohen disagreed—yet even still, the Mountain famously paired a brand of grizzled precision with his murderous intents. Regardless, Cohen needed to make more time—the Clerics would be coming soon enough, and he’d make even.

“Why didn’t you die?” Cohen asked, albeit just as curious as he was intent on keeping Crough in the brewery for the moment. Crough ground his teeth with a snarl, and turned to peer through the shoji windows at the blurry shadows out on the porch. Dusty shafts of sunlight crawled longer across the floorboards through gaps in the walls. Crough’s eyes absently traced over the lattice patterns decorating the brewery’s timber columns. He was quiet for a time.

Crough felt the cold biting at his face all too familiar. A man can get used to some sorts of cold, but not the sort that chews and claws with the wind—that cold only set his skin to crawling, and his eyes to watering.

He had stopped dead when he came upon a set of tracks in the snow, leading up from the river and through

the pines. He stared at the unique cloven impression given by the heel of the boot through the light snowfall; a Warren’s boot. He had come through not long ago, not long ago at all. Crough dropped his armful of timber and wiped the ice from the end of his nose with a rough sleeve. He felt the absence of his rifle’s familiar weight on his shoulder and cursed under his breath. The tracks would fill soon with the drifts about as they were.

He followed the lawman’s tracks when they veered off of the trail and moved southwesterly, his pace quickened, and his head had started turning frantic. Grey clouds suffocated the low hanging sun through quivering needles, the snowfall grew heavier, and Crough’s beard turned to frost when he finally broke into a thrashing run.

His boots crunched and sucked at the deepening snow, the tracks had vanished but the Warren’s destination couldn’t be mistaken—there was nothing in the pines for Cohen but stories of Muds and Crough’s lodge. Crough tore through the trees; swatting low branches out of his way and barreled into the clearing atop the hill where his small stone hut was perched. One thick wooden beam arced upward on both ends and supported the thatched roof, beneath which were arranged a

meager pattern of stone walls and rice partitions. He stood a hundred strides from the front door, separated by a length of open white snow. A single box lantern suspended from the nearest eave whipped in the gale.

He glanced wildly around for any sign of the Warren, but found the clearing empty and silent save for the howling wind. The ice stung his cheeks.

Crough sighed, panting heavily, and stooped over to rest his hands on his knees and catch his breath. He set off, relieved, and strode into the clearing. Just then, the door flung open and a man dressed in a worn blue uniform stumbled back out onto the porch, fumbling with something at his hip. Crough stared vacantly. He tried to run, but he couldn't lift his feet. He tried to shout, but his lips were frozen shut. In an instant the Warren pulled his revolver and a thunderous crack snapped sharply at Crough's ears, setting them to ringing with the wind. He blinked.

The figure of a woman fell out from the doorway and tumbled crookedly down the stairs past the Warren, coming to rest in a crumpled heap in the deepening snow. Cohen smoothed his dress blues and glanced across the clearing at Crough. He appeared startled.

Crough loosed a mad, blood-curdling roar; a howl that split birds from the pines and shook the snow from trembling branches. Tears froze on his cheek, thick veins in his neck bulged over tensed muscles. Flecks of sour spit flew from his teeth; his nails cut the palms of his hands by clenched fists, drawing bubbling blood thick like sap in the cold. Crough charged Cohen, tearing through the snow and all the while bellowing like a mad man. Cohen fumbled with his revolver for a moment, and cocked the hammer back. He stepped down from the bottom step into the drift and drew a shaky bead on Crough.

Crough saw Cohen raise his gun. In his frenzy, he reached stupidly for haft of his axe beneath his flying coat, as if it would do him any good. He had only tightened his fingers about the grip and loosed it from his sash when the second shot clapped the clearing. Crough's shoulder snapped back under the force of the bullet, he stumbled, and lost his footing. A thin trail of blood streamed from his chest, slithering red and oily through the air. He tumbled over his feet and felt a wide, hot line strike the small of his back where he had fallen on his own axe. Cold snow ground into his mouth and mixed with salty blood.

He was forty strides from her, maybe fifty—Crough’s head was oddly empty but for a faint notion of the distance.

He felt someone dig carelessly through his coat pockets for a short while and then listened to the sound of footsteps crunching away in the snow grow softer.

Crough struggled to keep from slipping out of mindfulness. He forced his eyes open against the cold, and started to crawl against the piercing sting in his back, leaving a streaky crimson trail in the snow. Warm blood pooled under his shirt and stuck the linen to his back. He felt his strength ebbing away all too quickly with far fright. For how long he crawled, he didn’t know.

“Beatrice—“ the name shivered in his chest, his cheeks were splotchy red, and his hands trembled fiercely as he fought to grab a fistful of her dress. She lay motionless in a smear of red snow and soil at the foot of the stairs. He clawed helplessly at her russet skin; buried his nose in the crook of her arm, his blood and spit mixed with dirt and sleet.

Crough rolled over onto his back and squinted up through the clouds, sucking shallow breath through clenched teeth.

The cold air ripped at his chest. He cast his glance languidly around and caught the silhouette of an odd, thin man leaning on a tall staff a hundred strides away at the edge of the trees.

“Beatrice—“

His numb fingers found a small iron coin trapped in the folds of her dress. Crough closed his fist around the coin, and yielded unwillingly to the cold.

“How’d you do it?” Cohen repeated.

“You collected my bounty, didn’t you?” Crough replied, tilting slightly forward. Cohen started, and then frowned. His pockets felt heavy. Crough chuckled. “It was old man Bower saved my skin, would you believe it?”

“Bower?” Cohen sneered incredulously.

“Aye. Acquaintance of mine, Bower was. The way he tells it, ever since the Clerics came through town way back when, office of the elected official has stagnated. You’ve made the Minister about as useful as a caged chicken.” Crough growled.

“You can eat those.” Cohen corrected. Crough paused open mouthed for a moment, then grinned.

“These people are all scared of you, Warren.”

“So? Half of them probably want me dead, but that won’t happen—not while the office of Warren is protected by the Clerics.” Cohen hawked. “We should all have a healthy fear of them.” He tugged the hem of his fitted blue coat straight at the waist, and added, “Even you.”

“More’n half I expect.” Crough corrected, ignoring Cohen’s warning. He swirled the small bit of black whiskey left around in the bottle, and dripped the last of it into his glass. “And you’re right, this little shit town has far too much to loose to risk not cooperating with you.” He peered over the rim of the glass at Cohen. “But I don’t.” Cohen’s spine went cold; his eyes slid from Crough to the knife in the table, and over to the door—the Clerics were damn sure taking their time.

“Matter of fact,” Crough continued, his voice dropping low over the polished countertop, “I might even stand to gain from it.” He flashed his rotten smile.

Crough had woken in a bleary stupor; his arms and legs had felt full of mud. A well-furnished room swam into view around him along with the nasty ache in his shoulder and a wide pain in

his back. Crough’s sluggish eyes found a pale candle flickering next to his head and a single, dull iron coin quivered in its light. Crough tried to reach for it, but the pain passed him back to sleep.

He had come and gone for a number of days, sleeping heavily between sparse moments of cloudy wakefulness. At some point he had spoke with Bower and gathered that it was his wife’s family estate on a far edge of the pines—northward up the river and deep in the canyon—where he recovered.

After a good week the throbbing in his left side had receded back to just the majority of his shoulder, and he tottered to his feet to meet Bower at a table in the main room.

“You’re stretching the hospitality a bit, aren’t you?” Crough muttered, ambling carefully out of the cozy hall and into the living space. A warm fire crackled beneath stone chimney; the sight of which gave Crough to a reflexive fit of coughing. Above the chimney, an impressively sized speckled pelt was hung beneath a beautiful, silver trimmed rifle. Opposite that wall, over a low counter of bundled timber and polished wood were neatly organized all manner of iron pots and pans, kitchen instruments and accouterments. A squat older woman stood petrified, ladle in hand,

staring fixedly at Crough. Her eyes slid to Bower.

He craned his neck up from a stack of papers and scratched at his short, kempt beard, then nodded for her to let them alone. She puffed her chest out and scurried back down the hall without another word. Bower was one of those men that aged well, he was. Hadn't lost any hair though it all had gone smoky white. The only wrinkles that had yet started to deepen his face were about the corners of his eyes—gave him the impression of a constant friendly smile. He poked at a set of wiry spectacles and peeled them away from his ears.

“I suppose I am.” He resigned. Bower motioned for Crough to join him.

“What do you need from me?” Grizzly Crough was many things, but he wasn't a fool. He owed his life to Bower, and that score was not to be taken lightly. Bower peered at him searchingly.

“All right. I need your help, Crough.” He said plainly. There was a pleading note to his voice that he covered quite well, but Crough had heard men plead before—it was a sound he could well pick out. It has a very specific touch

on the ears, it does. Bower searched his vest pocket for a moment, and then held his hand out to Crough; in his palm sat a plain, iron coin illuminated by the cabin's wooden light.

“Saul della Cohen has made trouble for you.” Bower started. Crough's jaw clenched. He saw Beatrice tumble down the steps smearing a scarlet swath in the snow; felt her clammy skin lay cold in his hands. He ground his teeth, and reached for the coin.

It had a favorable weight to it, just bigger than a bottle cap, with a square hole punched through the center. Etched into its face on both sides was Bower's House coat of arms; wealthier types could afford such an official flourish. It had been a while since Crough had held a formal debt in his hands—typically a man would hack his own shabby name over the surface to remind others of what he was owed. This was the kind of score that a Bookkeeper would be present to recognize under the law, provided the deal is of a legal nature, of course.

“He has.” Crough snarled. He set the coin to tumbling over his knuckles, back and forth, back and forth.

“Hmm.” Bower grunted. Crough snatched the iron up in his palm and

seated himself across from Bower, who leaned forward conspiratorially.

“You realize the pile of gold that just slipped through your fingers, that you would’ve had by calling the Warren up here while I was cold, don’t you?” Crough said.

“You save the Mountain and he insults you for it. You might really be as black as they say, Crough.” Bower replied, shaking his head.

“Meant no disrespect—“

“I need your help.” He repeated; his eyes shone beneath his greying, wispy brow. “Even your jewel encrusted hide couldn’t buy back the standing of my office alongside Cohen.”

“What to do?” Crough prompted, twiddling the coin in his fingers.

“You know the copper mines on the south face?” Bower asked with a sigh, flicking through the sheaf of papers and pulling a particular sheet to the table between them.

“Aye.” Crough nodded. He’d condemned his fair share of souls to the southern mountain when it was he keeping the ledgers.

“Cohen drives the prices higher and

higher for exporting copper to our neighbors. Montesperro only has one industry, and the ledger men work for the Warren.”

“Is that so?”

Bower pressed on. “Elected officials’ pay comes out of that sale, Crough. The ledger men do what he says because they’re all getting paid for it. But now our neighbors have stopped buying.” He slid the papers over to Crough, who neglected to offer the numbers his consideration—he wasn’t much for them anyway.

“For a while, he stood to make quite a bit of money for the act. But now less of them are buying—they can’t afford it. Jobs are dwindling, but we all need resources.” Bower explained.

“Point being?” Crough growled.

“Sooner or later, our neighbors will come round the mountain and start mining themselves. Competing industry will choke the town, set workers to each others throats—those mines are our livelihood.” He pulled the document back across the table, resigning to Crough’s lack of interest in the details.

Part III in the next issue of The Metric.

I WILL TELL HER

SekaBuhle gulped and looked at the brown bottle as if to say: “How can I replenish you. How can I repay you for your sweet cascading into my belly?”

The cocktail bar was abuzz with revellers and ladies of the night. Some immersed in a bingo game, others in chats that passed for shouts.

He had made up his mind and this is what he imagined:

I will tell her in the face that there is only one bull to bellow in that house. Me! That’s it! Full stop! It has to stop, this business of whim-

pering: SekaBuhle, where have you been? Can’t you see it’s midnight? You’re as drunk as a *makorokoza*, an illegal gold digger, who has struck gold. Why behave in an unsuitable fashion like an illegal gold panner? This is unacceptable. Reprehensible. I mean, your behaviour leaves a lot to be desired. Behave in a dignified way, please! You’re an accountant for God’s sake.

How dare she. The one I paid handsome *lobola*, the bride price, for. I will remind her that in the twinkling of an eye I can demand the return of all those ten fat cattle

from *babazala*, father-in law. After all, she has born me one child; Just one and Buhle is seven years now. All she does is swallow. She keeps on swallowing up those maggot-like things from the clinic. And when I tell her: Thola, I want another child. Can't you see that Buhle is lonely and old?

She has the nerve to tell me: Muzi, I'm on the pill. I'm no childbearing machine. Buhle has many companions in the neighbourhood. She has good playmates. Worry, instead about your hopeless drinking sprees and chronic late-coming. Don't worry about my daughter, don't call her a granny either!

The other day I threatened Thola with a rough slap and before I could even lift my hand she was behaving the cry-baby way: "I will sue you for emotional and physical abuse. I will tell my parents or my lawyers or the police or the women's organisations about your abusive antics. *Wathinta umfazi wathinta imbokodo*; you touch a woman, you touch a boulder. Don't dare press the wrong button. The law will give you a black eye in the twinkle of an eye. (She did not even excuse the pun) Try it and you will rue the moment you slapped me!"

Mthwakaz'omuhle! People! That day she sobbed histrionically. I saw with my naked eyes a tornado of tears roll down her cheeks like I'd drown in them. I did not touch her (one can never be sure). And later she complained that I was good at kissing the mouth of a beer mug or other women. Lo! She said she was sleeping fitfully because I was not giving her enough attention and affection. I told her to shut up because her cries were not my lullaby. She cried more loudly, lol! One who has seen the antics of actors and actresses knows what I am talking about.

To think she is an executive secretary by virtue of my generosity. Her father paid her school fees up to grade seven and that was as far as the old fellow deemed fit. At our wedding people danced till toes literally peeped through shoes. That day her mouth crackled with love, wit and humour. My parents were aglow with joviality. But now she accuses my mother of witchcraft and gossiping and malevolence and competing with her as if she is my wife too, lol! She maligns my mother!

She was very understanding and respectful then. She always knelt

down while serving me with food. She referred to me as baba. She was at my back and call, doing laundry and keeping the house clean. She was not hooked to the crazy networking sites. Now I feel she is plagued by a Facebook syndrome. People, there must be some Facebook rehabilitation centre in this one, and the moment I locate the place I would drag her there without hesitation.

She never complained when I came home late... I did it every day. There was no issue. I think her so-called friends on these sites are to up some mischief. Possibly these people are telling her all the tricks about being rebellious and raw. I walk into the dining room in the middle of the night only to see her facebooking, twitting or browsing the Internet. What is she looking for or chatting about in the middle of the night? And who is she chatting with? What relationships! This crazy technology must be banned. Fullstop. Clear. No debate.

During those good olden days she would say: "*Utshonile baba*, Afternoon, dad", with a beaming face. A kiss was never an issue. She never questioned why I sent her to stay a few months in my rural home with my parents. She obliged and worked in the fields and fetched firewood and

water like all good wives. Now she sees too much eh... In my mother she sees a witch! In her absence she sees small houses, mistresses...

She won't visit my rustic parents. Of kisses she ransoms me to them in the mornings and afternoons with a hungry seriousness that can huddle me to the Hague for crimes against humanity! Abdication of the kissing game is no option.

My friend once warned me: He said I was buying myself an axe that would be used on me by helping her further her studies. Right, he was... Dead right. She is recalcitrant and arrogant. She forgets I paid through the nose for her. I ask her to make me some tea after work and what does she say? She says I forget that she was at work too!

She says I'm a lazy egotist who after work comes home only to rot in the sofa with crossed legs while reading the paper till amen and amen. She has the audacity to remind me of the presence and responsibilities of our domestic worker!

She declares: "If you want loyalty please buy a dog..." People, what has come over to her, lol!

How can a woman, and a wife for that matter say that to her man? I am

not supposed to be her king? The other day I asked her that. And she said: First treat me like your queen, then I will crown you my king. If you treat me like a little rag, I will treat you like crap as well.

Mthwakazi, people! If these insects called equal rights are like this, then I don't want them in my home. Let the politicians who give these women these so called rights keep them! Here... Nope! No, please, Mr Politician. In my house I am supposed to be the king. Full stop. Rule your country and I rule my household. That politician who gives women these rights must be told, he has gone too far in his search for elusive votes. Next time, he would be telling us how to love them and so forth, if he is not stopped now. These so called rights drive the womenfolk crazy and wild! I have never seen a single sane woman who listens to what politicians say.

SekaBuhle ploughed his hands onto the middle bottom of the bottle. For a while he admired the structure and contents of the container as if it held the centre of his very existence. Gleefully the man mumbled: "The world would be dead hell without

you! Dead and dull. Women of all colours, sizes and shapes—though they light up the world in one way or the other—would not mean a thing, zilch! Waters you swim me in bliss and triumph. I live and thrive yet other people just exist!

And his chubby mouth proudly dug deep into the bubbly depths of cock-tail waters. Not once, neither twice, but thrice. Thoroughly and religiously executed in style by any definition or standard. The mouthfuls seem to rejuvenate him into a reverie of acrobatic jiving and diving like his bones are truly elastic. One lady on a mission does a calculated get-down with him—like they share a placental affinity which cannot be broken—while pampering him with flirtatious winks and strong body whiffs and whispers.

But... a hand towed him from the back. He screams: "Whose bloody hands are these? Is it a bloody sin or crime to enjoy one's bloody money in this bloody country? Son of..." then he discovers who the party-popper is.

It's Thulani, his bulging stomach obscured by the crimson double breasted suit that he is flaunting today. This man must have stolen that suit. His body must be in a state of shock!

“Nice suit, my man”, SekaBuhle observes.

He fidgets rather clumsily on the cozy chair like as if any time from now he would be heading for the restroom. “Even nicer is this queen who’s keeping me company. I’m sorry to say I had to wrench you off that female with stunning looks. You were certainly socking it out with a woman who can curse every innocent child in the world with a series of nightmares after slapping their innocent eyes on her”.

“SekaBuhle, it is my singular honour and privilege to proclaim: “Meet the queen who treats me with brimming care eh ... and love like no other in a world teeming with rough and rogue partners.”

SekaBuhle gazes at his friend’s girlfriend and utters,

“Hi Queen of his eyes”. Their hands clasp together and boy oh boy, SekaBuhle feels the amazing crudeness of her hands. And he is almost tempted to ask: how many houses have you plastered so far?

He looks at the bums...For him, there is nothing to write home about. Lol, they look like a little boulder precariously stuck on a hilly place. People, please hold them, let them not

tumble, he thinks. They seek to escape from the firm grip of that tiny skirt or what.

She smiles with the mischief and pride of an innocent school girl who has just been told by her flattering and fooling boyfriend that she is the best thing to have happened to him since he landed on mother earth.

“Hi. Miss Hlahla is the name to watch. And she will bring you a lady almost beautiful as the one you’re fixing or rather feasting your eyes on. Yeah. Stay close to this beauty for more” So brags the mini-skirted slim lady, resting her equally tiny if not somehow lifeless right hand on the left expansive shoulder of her lover.

Together they down the bottles with an appetite that can surely rival that of three thirsty camels in a desert. But if SekaBuhle were to give away a “camel’s trophy” to one of the three-some, beyond a shadow of a doubt—his friend’s girlfriend would easily be the medalist. She beats both at their game. Indeed there is something SekaBuhle is not comfortable with. Fancy somebody taking gulps with a determination that defies description.

That’s none other than Miss Hlahla. Just a single swig and the aftermath

drives SekaBuhle wild. She drowns in the waters and when she does so, her mind seems to experience some short circuit.

Like an electrical challenge in a house, the drinking times usually see mental fault running supreme in her head. Fine, the noise she makes reminds him of some furious water running down some smallish canal in his dry rural area or a downpour hitting forcefully on some dry and squashed land.

And the nagging thing is her belching and frothing mouth! Sorry times ten, but all this behaviour puts SekaBuhle off.

SekaBuhle says to himself: "All this makes beer-drinking feel like a pain, rather than a pleasure. This bloody plasterer gives beer-drinking a bad name. Her hands, Lord of Lords! They almost lacerated my fingers! At her back or on her hands words like: You shake hands with me at your own peril should be inscribed boldly and clearly. She reminds me of a jagged water lizard called *Uxamu!*"

Her giggling does not make things any better either. The three discuss this and that. SekaBuhle dwells on how ill-mannered and peevish and

mulish his wife has become over the years. SekaBuhle tells them: "She is damn stubborn like a black milipede. Henry Ward Beecher (1813 – 1887) a prominent clergyman, social reformer, an abolitionist and a speaker once said: The difference between perseverance and obstinacy is that one comes from a strong will, and the other from a strong won't."

She basically won't accept that I am the head because culture and the Bible decreed that she should be submissive to me full stop! I don't like her aunt. And what does my wife say? That's emotional abuse! You can't separate me from my relatives. I say tonight is the night. And what does she say? No, not tonight. I don't feel like playing ball. Then my question becomes: Haven't you played ball already? And hence you are not in the mood?

"It's my body and I know how I feel. You don't want to be jailed for marital rape! That's her lame excuse. Oh my goodness! That's taboo! She queries what's taboo? To take her and her body for granted!"

Miss Hlahla says he should worry no more on that front. She will definitely arrange something for him to sedate his feelings and thoughts. She goes on to tell them about her

stay overseas, "Life has not been rosy for me out there in the UK. For example, one evening whilst I was just strolling on the streets for fun some overzealous police pounced on me. And accused me of soliciting sexually. The next thing I was handed down a deportation order. Do I look like a street walker, gentlemen?"

The rhetoric question gets SekaBuhle taking a slow swallow while swinging his head back and forth and saying to himself: Cut the crap, street walkers are not identified by words or some uniform they wear but by their actions. On that score, all credit goes to the British police for arresting a law-breaking dull-looking wanderer who was not going to give her clients value for their money anyway! Where did my friend get this fake but dry-as-a-desert woman?

She continues: "I came back home. Then a year later I flew out and landed in Canada. I landed myself a somehow lucrative job as a personal secretary, but my boss would enter my office and say funny things like: you know that each time I look at you my biological clock ticks madly and I feel like winging away with you to Africa for good! And one day he pleaded with me to massage him because of sciatica. He was a good man. I couldn't rebuff

his request just like that. And so I set out on rubbing him. The man started wheezing and screaming." SekaBuhle, making a wincing gesture, quizzes, "Was this because of pain?"

Thulani seems to gnash his teeth: "Nonsense, of course he was moaning with pleasure".

Miss Hlahla downs another bottle, sends out a gust of groaning oral air before disclosing: "I was fired on the spot by the jealous wife!"

SekaBuhle now drunk and clear-cut like a disc jockey on a horse back "For having clawed away some of the poor man's skin..."

Thulani blurts out, "Don't be ridiculous, my girl is the most romantic soul alive!"

SekaBuhle asks, "Are you a builder or what by profession?" Ignoring the question Miss Hlahla continues: "In Canada I also worked in the bushes hacking off tree branches. The severe cold and the hazardous snakes and malaria eventually forced me to bid my workmates farewell".

In Hungary one of my major tasks was to catch bats and rear bees for university researchers. But one researcher constantly made disingenu-

ous derogatory remarks about the audacity of some people who fail to snitch out the sting of worn-out war criminals in the very backyards of their country and think they could somehow successfully and magically catch slippery bats in foreign lands”.

SekaBuhle invites the trio to gyrate and leave bat-catchers to do what they know best. He says: “Sorry guys but this bat-catching thing does not look like a nice holidaying excursion even in front of my closed eyes. I think the people who were saying you should leave foreign bats alone were not wrong or mischievous. They meant to help a hapless bat-catcher. Let’s dance and be blind to our problems as bats!”

But their dancing was short-lived...

It’s Thulani’s wife. “Loose woman, let me teach you a lesson you won’t forget!” She grabs Miss Hlahla by her chin, and bangs her three times against the yellow-painted wall.

The poor girl collapses on the floor, her world flighty. Her blood and vomit cascade on the floor, but the man’s wife is not through with her mission. She seizes the girl’s skirt and in a matter of seconds it is screaming, “Creee! Creee! Creee!”, as it tears apart.

Once done, she grabs her man by his very manhood, and hauls him out, much to the shock of the other revellers.

One drunkard remarks, “I hope his manhood was not uprooted!”

CULTIVATION

Fresh from her nap, she decided to prepare lunch.

“I want butter chicken”, he said nonchalantly, pacing back and forth. His face was expressionless.

“ Butter chicken eh? On \$300 a week benefit? You Fool... you idiot!” screamed Kaila choking back tears, “What about the baby, eh? Get out of my sight or, I’ll kill you....you.....”.

Untonian cowered in terror. “Cool it, cool it...”

He backed out, slamming the door behind him, and raced out into the street.

The last few days had been an absolute nightmare. There were endless quarrels, tantrums, shouting, screaming, always about money. There wasn’t enough money. She was on the domestic purposes benefit. He was living with her, but that had been kept a tight secret from social welfare. Otherwise even that money would have dried up.

The job market was tight. All his desperate efforts to get a job had failed. He was willing to take any job. Anything. Even a cleaning or laboring job. He had worked briefly as a carpenter’s assistant. But the build-

ers wanted qualified and experienced carpenters at building sites, given the new regulations introduced by the government.

His clothes were shabby; he had not shaved for days. He could not afford a razor nor blade.

He was a loner. He had no friends. His family lived in Australia. They couldn't, and wouldn't send him money, because they lived from hand to mouth.

He shuffled slowly down the street, hands deep in his pockets, head held low like a tired pack-horse. He mumbled incoherently to himself.

He didn't see the boy coming quickly round the bend, and accidentally shouldered him to the ground.

"My bunny! My bunny is running away...catch him", shrieked the boy frantically.

Untonian saw, from the corner of his eye, a small, brown animal hopping away, and instinctively gave chase. The boy and he ran as fast as they could, along streets and gardens till they managed to catch the tiny creature. The boy cuddled it fondly, and said gratefully: "Hey... thanks"

The bunny was light-brown, with large ears, and a delicate mouth.

"What's your name?" Untonian asked the boy. The bunny closed its eyes, happy in its master's hands.

"Jamie" he answered readily. He was lean, with a face sprinkled with freckles, a bulbous nose, black hair, and wore glasses. "What's yours?"

"Untonian".

"Un...what?"

"You deaf, eh? Didn't you hear what I said?"

"Ok, ok... no need for that. My bunny's name is Brownie. Want to hold him?"

Untonian took it hesitatingly in his rough hands. It felt soft and furry. He tapped its quivering, little, black nose, and it turned its face away timidly.

"I'll show you where I live", said Jamie, "You can come over and play with Brownie whenever you like".

Jamie lived in an ancient, brick-and-tile, two-bedroom house in a run-down locality, with his drunkard father, his over-bearing, fat, loud-mouthed mother, and his three young brothers and two sisters.

There was no paint on the walls, not much furniture, just one bathroom and one toilet which was for ever getting blocked. The noise level in the house was at most times intolerable. The two, fierce-looking, pit-bull terriers in the enclosed backyard growled, snarled, and barked. Strangers kept a safe distance from the house.

The bunny sat in a comfortable hutch on the front lawn.

“Hey mate” asked Untonian “What does your father do?”

“Drink” replied Jamie, spitting viciously.

“Not working?”

“Nah!”

“What about you, mate? What do you do?” asked Untonian.

“On a course”.

“What course, mate? What course, eh?”

“Ah, just forget it, will you! Let’s just leave it, eh?”

They became friends, and met regularly in the park, where many bored fifteen and sixteen-year-olds hung around all day, laughing mindlessly,

and making fun of people walking past.

“Hey Unty,” said Jamie casually, “You wanna make money?”

“What d’you mean?”

“See that big man there? He has a business. He wants people help him”.

“Yeh?”

A powerfully-built man, in his forties, with broad shoulders, meaty hands, legs like lamp-posts, long hair to his shoulders, leaning on a gleaming motor-cycle, glowered at them as Jamie coughed discreetly. He realized that they wanted to talk to him, and slowly sidled towards a clump of trees, disappearing out of sight. They took a long loop, and met him there. The local police-station was only metres away, and police cars went in and out all the time. There was a large booze-bus in the compound with the sign ‘Drink driving stops here’.

Untonian’s face was still and thoughtful, when he went home later.

“Did you get a job eh, you lazy dog?” Kaila hissed.

“Um... Kaila! Cool it, mate! We gona be rich”, he said in a low, grave voice.

“What? ...Did you say rich, eh? How? You wanna rob a bank, eh?”

“Nah, nah, not robbing anyone. We gonna do business. You’ll see”, said he. His voice quivered. He took his underlip into his mouth, and looked upon the ground.

“I’ll, I’ll...get out! Get a job, now! You don’t care about me”. Her voice sent a chill down his spine.

Next moment he was gone. He jogged from side to side, and there was something in his face, a look between tears and laughter. It was a dark night, with a few stars low down.

“Hi!” smiled Jamie, “Come on in. How did it go, mate?”

“She’s mad”, he said dully.

“Leave her, mate! Leave her!”

“I can’t... I can’t”.

“Ok. Forget it. Have a bite. Then we’ll smoke”.

They smoked.

Untonian did not go home that night. Nor the next. Or the next.

They bonded. The pipe did that.

Kaila became worried. He had never done that before. They had had numerous fights, but he had always come home in the night.

She wandered the streets, leaving the baby with a neighbor, but couldn’t find him. She thought about going to the police for help, but then decided against it. The police had always been their enemies.

When he did come back, she was shocked. He looked like a ghost.

He had with him a thin boy with a freckled face, dark hair, and wearing glasses.

“Where the hell have you been, eh?... Who is this?” she yelled, though in her heart of hearts she felt quite relieved.

“I’m Jamie”, said Jamie with a big smile, offering his hand. She ignored him, and turned away abruptly.

They entered hesitatingly, and slumped on the floor in a corner of the room. She turned off her bedroom light, and went to sleep.

In the morning when she got up, she smelt a strange, pungent smell in the front room. They had gone in the night.

He came back in the evening with a thick wad of notes, and left it on the table. He then disappeared.

She picked up the money, hesitated, then decided to spend it. She bought a white dress printed with red strawberries. She felt strangely happy. There was food in the house now. She had been to the supermarket, and filled up the trolley with things she had never been able to buy before.

The money kept appearing on the table. She spent it. She bought a bed in good condition for herself. The baby slept soundly the whole night in the new crib.

She was alone in the kitchen, when the whole house shuddered. She screamed, and rushed to the bedroom. The baby was sound asleep. She snatched him, and ran outside. There were people shouting, and rushing around. She remembered the TV message: "Drop, Cover, Hold". But she thought it safer to be out in the open. The neighbours invited her to come over, to be with them. She, however, went back into the house, when things had settled down.

That was the time when she missed him.

Really missed him.

He came after about half an hour, and asked anxiously how she was. "Ok", she grunted, and turned her back on him.

"Like to move to a bigger house?" he asked, almost as an aside.

She froze. "What do you mean?" she snapped.

"A bigger, better house", he said slowly, letting each word sink in.

"Hey... are you serious?"

"Yes".

They boarded a bus to New Haven, where the houses were nice, and people wore clean, smart clothes.

She gasped as she entered the spacious, three-bedroom house with a sleep-out. The kitchen had an oven, and an electric stove. It even had a dishwasher. She walked through in a daze.

The sleep-out was full of green plants. There was an automatic heating and watering system for them.

"Hey, what's this?" she asked.

"Just a private plant nursery", he answered, "It comes with the house." She wasn't interested in plants.

She was stunned by the comfort. She even found a washing machine and a dryer in the separate laundry.

“We rent this from Monday.” he said in a toneless voice, “You ok?”

“Yes” she whispered.

She couldn't wait to move in.

She smiled to herself. This was a dream come true.

The sleep-out had its own entrance, and all sorts of people went in and out. Untonian and Jamie spent most of the time there. They came into the house to eat, shower, and use the toilet. There were couches in the lounge, and they slept there in turns, one always keeping a watch on the street from the black-curtained window.

Posh had lived in the house next door for twenty years. She was old, bent and wise. Her children were in Sydney, and came to visit her only once a year, at Christmas time.

She sat in her easy-chair, and looked out, as she knit a jumper for her three-year old grandchild.

When Marjorie, her only friend, came to visit her every Monday, she

voiced her concern about the type of people coming and going from the sleep-out next door.

“Don't worry, Poshie”, said Marjorie soothingly, “I'll talk to my husband. He'll know what to do”.

Her husband came, and sat patiently for a couple of hours at the window, noting what was happening.

“This is not good!” he said firmly, “something's going on. Something not right. Ah, yes... I know what to do. I saw this on the TV just the other day. They said to ring Crimestoppers. That's the anonymous phonenumber”.

He made the phone-call. The woman at the other end took the address, and assured him that the information would be passed over to the police. She didn't ask for his name, nor where he lived.

Police prepared a search warrant, and the Justice of the Peace signed it.

The knocks on the door were loud and authoritative, but they found only Kaila at home.

She was shocked.

They asked her about others in the house, but she kept her mouth shut.

She didn't want him to get in trouble, though she was furious with him for getting her into this mess.

They arrested her, but gave her police bail, to appear in court later.

They found him moving quickly in the streets, and dumped him in the cells at the Central Police Station. He shivered with fright. There were fierce, rough characters there, who glared viciously at him. He was taken to court the next morning, and the community magistrate granted him court bail.

Social workers took Kaila and the baby to a women's refuge. She never saw Untonian again, except at court, where he was careful to avoid her.

The duty lawyer at court made a legal-aid application for her, and a legal-aid lawyer, Henry Fitzgibbon, was assigned to her.

He asked the prosecutions for disclosure, and after reading it, he advised her to plead guilty, because she was an occupant of the house, and the circumstantial evidence was against her, and she would get credit for an early guilty plea.

But the legal-aid lawyer, Cindy Fancy, assigned to Untonian came

up to Kaila quietly, and told her softly not to plead guilty. She said that she was going to raise the defence of validity of the search warrant, that the police were not entitled to rely on an anonymous phone-call. She convinced her that she would be acquitted.

Kaila was taken in by the assurance, and discarded the advice her lawyer had given her. Her lawyer thus had no alternative, but to go along with the co-defendant.

The case was adjourned several times for disclosure, and Kaila got more and more nervous.

"Will I go to jail?" she texted her lawyer.

He answered: "You rejected the advice I gave you, and chose to go along with the other person. So I cannot give you a guarantee as to what will happen if you are found guilty, and convicted."

"But will I go to jail?" she came back.

"I cannot give you a guarantee of sentence if after a defended hearing, you are found guilty." he answered.

The bespectacled, blue-eyed court-taker, in a foul mood, grabbed the mike, turned it roughly towards her,

and droned into it: "Attention all court-users. No caps, hats, sunglasses, gang-patches allowed in the courtroom; turn cell-phones off or they will be confiscated, no children allowed; all those who have lawyers or have seen duty-lawyers and cases are ready to be called, take a seat at the back of the courtroom. The judge is about to come in."

"All stand for His Honour the Judge".

The tall, serious-looking, bony judge with a long nose and protruding ears sauntered in, carrying several files, frowned, bowed slightly, and sat down heavily.

"The District Court is now in session. Please be seated." commanded the Court Registrar.

The lawyers bowed to the judge. Everyone sat down.

When the case was called, Henry Fitzgibbon got up pompously, and gave his appearance for Kaila. Cindy Fancy gave her appearance for Untonian, and the judge asked abruptly: "What's going to happen today?"

"Your Honour, we are going on with the defended hearing."

"All right. How long will it take?"

"Two hours, sir".

"Very well. Stand down" the judge told the defendants, "We'll go through the list, and call your case again later".

The other cases were then called, some were disposed of on guilty pleas, and the rest were stood down. The judge was grumpy, because there were too many cases on the list, far beyond the available court time.

Their case was called again after the morning break.

"Are you going to lead evidence?" the judge asked the prosecuting sergeant.

"No sir! The only issue is, as I understand from the defence, is the validity of the search warrant. The prosecution briefs may be accepted in evidence by consent", said Sergeant Bulbow.

"Right. Who goes first?" asked the judge.

Henry jumped up, and said: "Ms. Fancy, Sir. I will adopt her arguments to avoid duplication."

"Ms. Fancy."

“Your Honour, the defence submission is that the search warrant is invalid, because the application for the search warrant was based on an anonymous phone-call to Crimestoppers”.

“Crimestoppers? What is the law on the subject?” asked the judge irritably. He was in no mood to go into the intricacies of case-law. He had diabetes, and his blood sugar rose at about this time each day.

“The latest Court of Appeal judgment ‘Palmer-Brown’ is exactly on the point, sir. It is a binding case”, said Cindy triumphantly.

“I know the Court of Appeal is binding on me!” snapped the judge. “Let’s see the judgment”.

He read the judgment while Cindy stood waiting with a broad smile on her face. He then looked down fiercely at her over his half-glasses, and growled: “This judgment does not deal with that aspect. It only refers to it in passing. Do you have anything else in your support?”

Cindy trembled. Judge Tankard was known for his volcanic temper, and everyone felt the tension. He always threw a tantrum a day.

“Yes, Your Honour” she said softly.

“Speak up! I can’t hear you!” he thundered.

“Supreme Court in Mohammed’s case has decided this very point, sir.”

The judge read that too, and his face grew redder and redder. He looked like a large gas balloon, ready to explode.

“Do you, or do you not, Have anything in support of your case?” he shouted.

“This case too does not decide the point. It only refers to it in passing!”.

“Your Honour, my respectful submission is that the search warrant is invalid because it is based on an anonymous phone-call”.

“That is your argument. Is there any case-law to support that? Obviously not! You are wasting my time by citing cases that have not decided the point. Sit down! Mr. Fitzgibbon, what do you have to say?”

“Sir, I adopt the arguments of my learned friend. I have nothing more to add.”

“Sergeant Bulbow, do you have any submissions?”.

“Yes sir. The search warrant is perfectly valid. The police conducted their own inquiries, and the application for the search warrant says so. In any event, sir, Crimestoppers is a well-known service for the public to bring crime to the attention of the police without the source of the information being put in any danger. The police are entitled to act on that”.

“Do you have any authority on that?” asked the judge.

“Yes, Your Honour. English cases are directly on point. I have given copies to the defence already, and these are the copies for the Court”.

“Right! I’ll take the luncheon adjournment now, and read them”.

The judge re-entered the courtroom at 2.15pm, and adjourned all the remaining cases. “I have read the cases, Sergeant. Do any of you have anything to add?”.

“No sir” said the Sergeant, and the defence counsel.

This judge was known to pass correct and carefully-worded decisions. He had sat on the Bench for more than two decades.

“I now rule that the search war-

rant is valid. Since evidence has been admitted by consent, and the search warrant has been upheld, the defendants have no defence to the charges, and are found guilty. Step into the dock, both of you.

Now, Mr. Fitzgibbon, what are your submissions as to sentence?”

“Your Honour, my client only went along with her partner. He is the one who is more culpable. My client is a housewife, Your Honour, with a two-year old child. She accepts that she has been found guilty of the charge. The respectful submission made on her behalf is that she be sentenced to a good behavior bond, an order to come up for sentence if called upon. She is aware that if Your Honour gives her that sentence, and if she offends again, she will be in serious trouble. She has a two-year old child, Your Honour”

The judge’s frown visibly deepened. He glared fiercely at the defendants, and then at the lawyers.

“Ms. Fancy?”

“Your Honour” said Cindy “My client is working as a scaffolder. He has been in the same job for the last ten months. He works long hours six days a week. He works Sundays too at times. He will lose his job, sir, if he

is sent to jail. Sir, it is very difficult to get a job”

“I know that” snapped the judge, “You don’t have to tell me that”.

“Sorry, sir! Your Honour, I do not accept that my client is more culpable as was submitted by Mr. Fitzgibbon. My client had to suffer every day the incessant nagging, the continuous demands for money, the humiliation and the torture. She would not give him a moment’s rest. She wanted a bigger and better house, good clothes, and the like. My client suffered in silence. He tried desperately to get a job, but couldn’t. Then by chance, Your Honour, he was introduced to a person who gave him the opportunity. He couldn’t resist. Anyone in his shoes would probably have done the same thing.”

“Are you seriously suggesting that doing a crime is not an opportunity to be missed, Ms. Fancy? Are you, eh?”

“No, no, sir! No sir. I didn’t mean that, sir. I...I...I merely say that he fell for it. Now he seriously regrets it. He is very remorseful. Truly. He will never break the law again. My respectful submission to you, sir, is that my client also be given a good behavior bond, sir. Parity of sentencing,

sir.”

There was complete silence as the judge pondered with his head on his hands. He had this habit, and the lawyers knew what that meant. They feared that he was going to do something unexpected.

“Do the defendants waive their right to a pre-sentence report?”

“Yes sir” answered both defence counsel.

The judge got up abruptly, saying that he would come back in fifteen minutes.

He started delivering judgment as soon as he sat down.

“The defendants face a serious criminal charge carrying a maximum jail sentence of seven years. The facts are as set out in the prosecution summary. I incorporate that as part of my sentencing notes. The defence accept the prosecution case. The only issue raised by the defence was that of validity of the search warrant. They say that as the application for the search warrant is based on an anonymous call to Crimestoppers, the warrant is not valid. I asked both counsel for the defence to show me a binding authority on the subject, but

they were unable to do so. Therefore I am free to decide on what I think is proper. Crimestoppers is a well-known organization which has been around for years. It gives the public the safe means of reporting crime without the source being known. The identity of the person giving the information over the phone is protected, and the criminals cannot therefore take revenge. My finding is that the search warrant is perfectly valid. I do not feel that it is necessary to discuss the case law cited, because it does not decide the point. I will merely give the references at the foot of this judgment, so that it will be known that those cases were cited, and were read by me. I hold that the charge against both the defendants has been proved beyond reasonable doubt. I now proceed to sentence the defendants. Both counsel have submitted that the defendants be sentenced to a good behavior bond, i.e. an order to come up for sentence if called upon. I consider those submissions misconceived, and ridiculous. The operation was a highly sophisticated one, and had been carried on for a lengthy period. The defendants knew fully well that they were breaking the law, and they did not care. I hold that both the defendants are equally culpable. The pathetic attempt to arouse sympathy by pointing out that they

have a two-year old child is untenable. There is a government agency that cares for children who cannot or will not be looked after by their parents or family. If I were to take that aspect into account in sentencing, I would not be able to uphold the law, as sympathy would drown the sentencing principles. That is not what the legislature intended. The law has to be upheld in spirit and in letter. I therefore sentence both the defendants to twelve months jail. I have taken the aggravating and mitigating features into account in arriving at my decision. Actually there are no mitigating features. The aggravating features demand that I impose a custodial sentence. That sentence will therefore be twelve months jail with standard post-release conditions. Stand down.”

Kaila swayed.

Her knees gave way, as she fell down unconscious.



The image features a central golden circle containing intricate musical notation, including notes and clefs. This circle is surrounded by several concentric white rings. Radiating from the center are numerous golden lines of varying thickness, resembling sunbeams or rays, set against a white background. The word "POETRY" is written in a bold, red, serif font across the lower portion of the central golden circle.

POETRY

LIQUID THOUGHTS



Crouching by the fishpond,
Leaning over, staring,
Lured into the
Darkening
Pool.

See!

Vivid
Liquescent,
Koi-wannabes,
Deep in contemplation;
As I languish away my own life.

THE HILL



I am fond of thinking the hill the elephants and the villagers climbed
to flee the Great Tsunami is the hill of my dreams,
where my friends and I just sit in the sun and breathe,
accidental Buddhists, as when we spent our days
smoking pot and staring in silence at the unsolvable world,
maybe the hill in the Beatles song or perhaps the hill
where the Indian braves smashed Custer's ear to help him listen
in the afterlife, where Bob and Carol and I
and Chris and Mary and Bruce and Barry and Duncan and Janet and Weena
will always sit, no future in anything but the humble
act of sharing a patch of grass, the place we tumbled down from
when Tony fell to cancer and flattened our red hearts
like steaks to feed each other in the kitchens of our grief,
I'm thinking lomo saltado with yellow Spanish onions, food
for the climbs to come. We gulped like starving dogs
in the tidal night, like any villagers would.

BOTTOM SHELF WHISKEY



you are over the
age of twenty-one.
you enjoy bottom shelf whiskey for some unfathomable reason.
you enjoy bottom shelf whiskey best when it is free so much
that you drink the unattended bottom shelf hundred proof whiskey someone else left sitting
on the kitchen counter though you are
well-acquainted with the concept of property being the citizen
of a capitalist nation; to
prevent the owner of the bottom shelf hundred proof
whiskey from deducing your red-handed thievery
you make a note of the approximate
fire water level before you pour any,
perhaps it drips seductive, ocher into
your half-empty lukewarm can of Co-Cola,
perhaps you take a sip and cannot taste it,
pour s'more. when
you are done you release the lever
of the kitchen sink faucet your landlord installed in 1975,
hold the ersatz half-gallon carafe under its flow until you are satisfied that it looks about right,
just as you did when you were high school age
living under the same roof as Mother,
who assumed she must
have drunk
more than she had realized.

BLAME



To say there's blame enough to go around.
It means of course that no one will be blamed,
And those responsible will not be found.
With guilty parties never being named,

It means of course that no one will be blamed.
The ethics we once counted on are gone.
With guilty parties never being named,
Gone also is the truth we counted on.

The ethics we once counted on are gone.
Deceit is now the key to our success.
Gone also is the truth we counted on,
And with it, loss of trust is limitless.

Deceit is now the key to our success.
It's now 'the thing' for one to lie and cheat,
And with it, loss of trust is limitless.
We've got to recognize it as deceit.

It's now the thing for one to lie and cheat,
And those responsible will not be found.
We've got to recognize it as deceit,
To say there's blame enough to go around

WALK



March 28, 1941

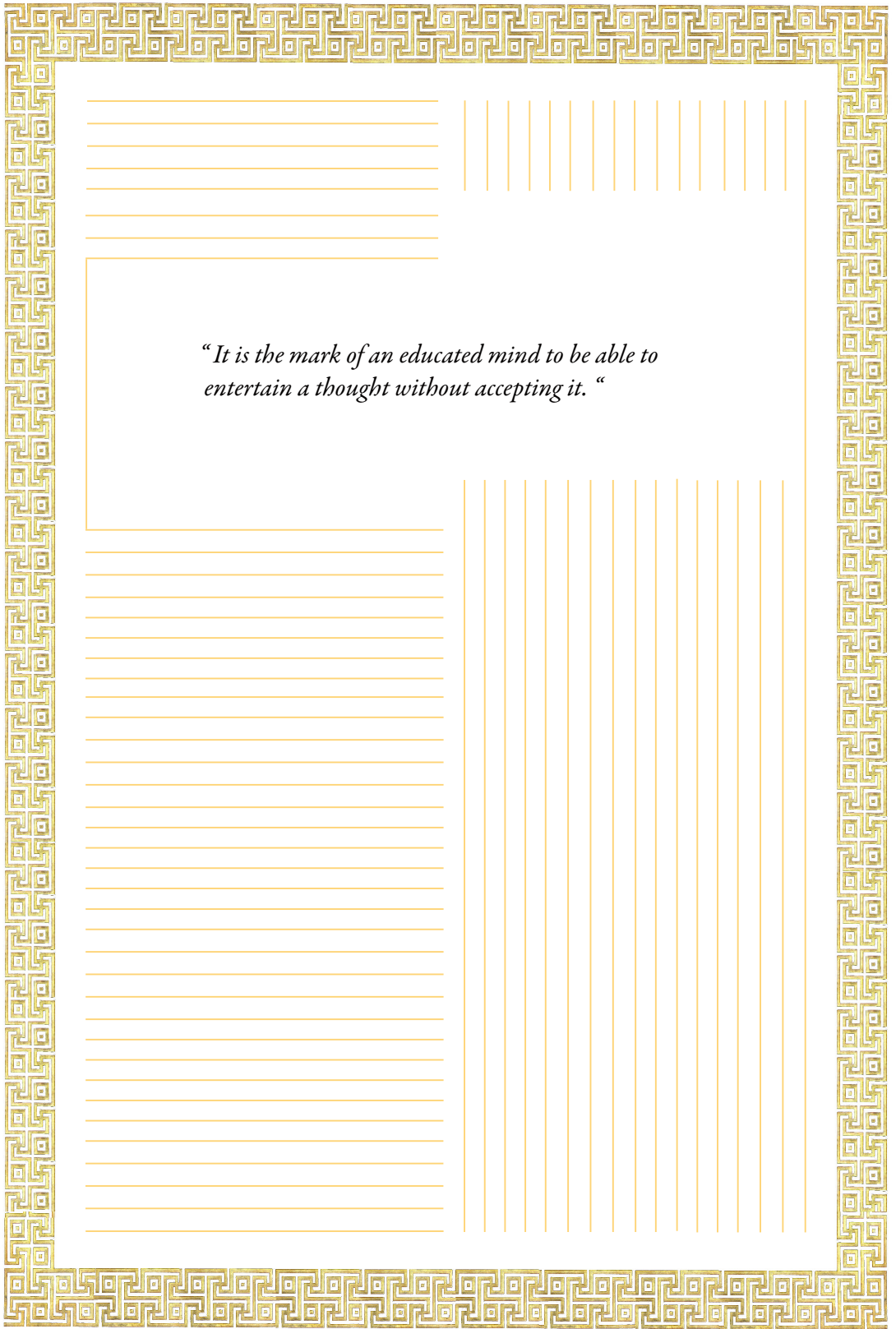
There is room
In the Ouse
All one has
To do is
Take it take
A step just
One at first
The mud will
Hold wet stones
Will glue thick
Soles all Ouse
Has to do
Is rise not
All at once
Black mass just
Part for whole
None at rest
All one has
To do is
Walk on wet
Soles take steps
Rise walk walk
As if healed

Reach touch one's
Own bones the
Still warm stones
Sewn in the
Ouse will make
Room for all
For all there
Is but one
Must go one
At a time
The Ouse leans
In too hard
All mouth all
Want raw teeth
Too hard to
Close too close
To take in
One by one
The slow cold
Mud takes hold
Rib by slick
Rib Ouse wets
One's legs one's
Waist one's chest
Soaks arms in
Black mud there

Is room and
It is one's
Own space dark
Studs stone bone
Joists thick lath
Bright wet word
Nails some long
Known not to
Float but drown
Ouse makes one's
Room takes one's
Shape its still
Face cloud by
Cloud Ouse yet
Not Ouse one's
Wet tongue tastes
Dank roots one
Gums each stone
Each inch one
Drinks pounds tons
Flow past yes
Ouse makes room
Yes the sea
Pulls yes the
Kite tugs yes
The wet spool

Gives way all
Ouse does is
Choose its quick
Brown mud jumps
Bed to bed
Shoes slowed by
Blood by lung
By head by
God of course
Yes one must
Take the next
Step there is
So much more
Room than one
Knows what to
Do with why
Would one jump
The bed's edge
The low bar
Lit by fang
By nail by
Wet fur by
Floods long past
Why not go
Deep such troughs
Don't ask is

All this mine
Don't ask how
Much do my
Sewn stones weigh
Don't ask what
Is the Ouse
If not just
Once and for
All just walk
In just lean
In you will
See in Ouse
There is the
Room one needs



Horizontal lines for writing on the left side of the top section.

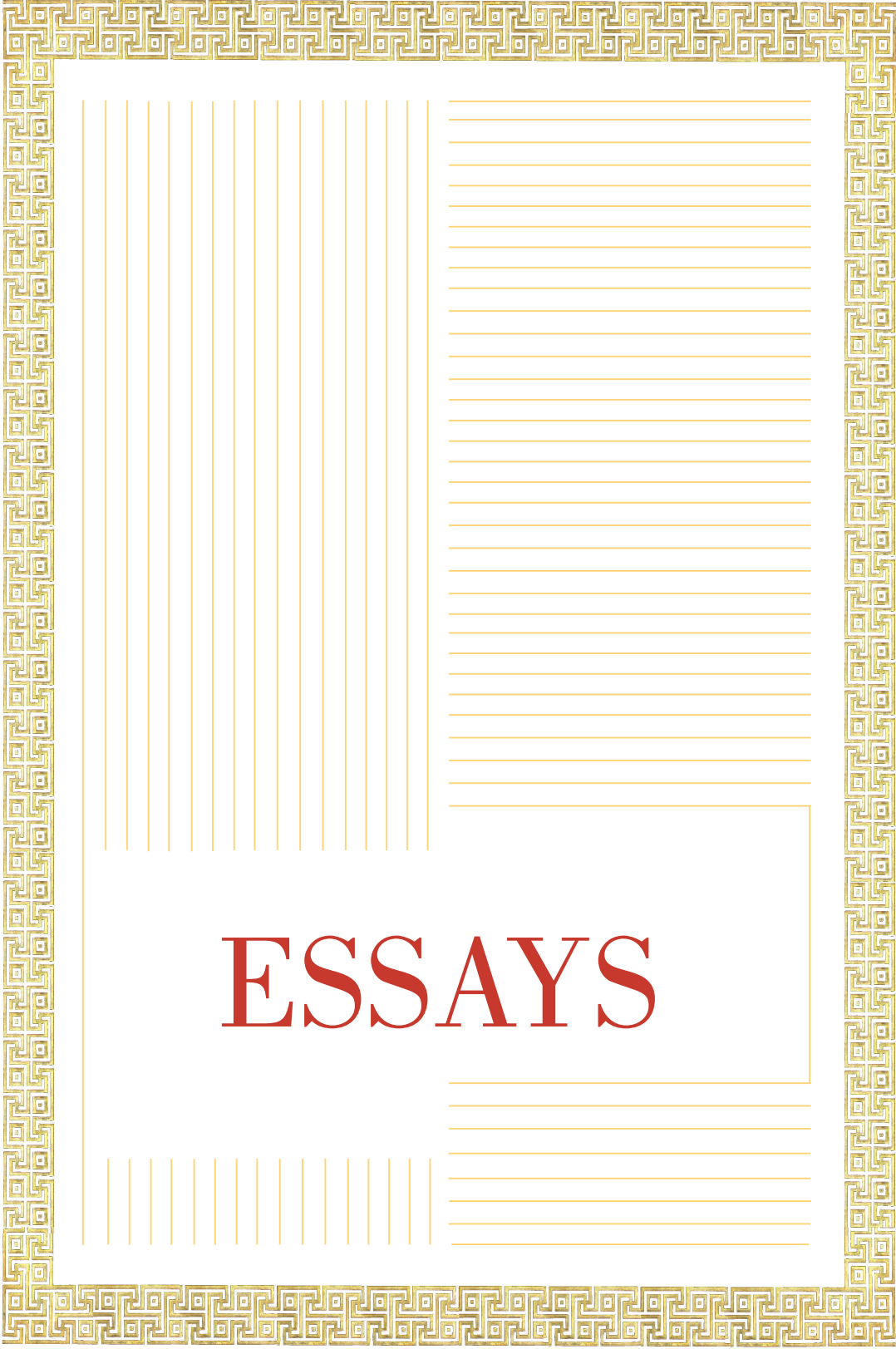
Vertical lines for writing on the right side of the top section.

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

A large rectangular box for writing, positioned below the quote.

Horizontal lines for writing on the left side of the bottom section.

Vertical lines for writing on the right side of the bottom section.



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

ESSAYS

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

FORT KETAMINE

Some Time this March

The exhibition was destroyed some time before The Count and I arrived and has since degraded into a party. Relics of a time long elapsed lie broken and scattered across several rooms. Fragments of what was arguably once art.

A door greets me in the hallway, broken and forgotten and detached from its frame. I resist the temptation to rap its surface as I pass.

After another bump of K I discover the paper-mâché coated bathroom. It appears the atmospheric support

mechanism in this room has failed, entombing it in ice. The Count fingers his gram nervously as he takes the scene in. His mindset has not been the most stable as of late.

In the kitchen there is an innumerable amount of empty bottles preventing the room reaching its full capacity. They stand like a long dead army, watching over the swallowing and insufflation and debauchery. I suspect this is not part of the exhibition.

I push open the bedroom door and stand gaping at the structure presented to me. Articles of furniture assembled like Tetris pieces. Cabinets.

A wardrobe. A sofa positioned on its side. All pressed together into a tower close to scraping the ceiling. Perched at the top, a regal chair overlooking the room. People on ketamine huddled around it with the intimacy of a family of monkeys. With unsteady legs I clamber up a ladder to Fort Ketamine's apex where I am accepted within their ranks.

From her throne, the King declares that I am the Jack. I am then introduced to the Knight, Jester, Rook and some others. A medley of chess pieces and playing cards. We exchange gleeful high fives and inhale more K from keys.

As we survey our dominion from above, I share an unrivalled sense of empowerment with my royal network. On the floor beneath us lie our subordinates. Plebs too weak to continue into the night. Quiet and spent and frivolous. A handful of them share a mattress and a single duvet. Shivering and fighting for sleep beneath the music.

Truth Stands Revealed

Ketamine is incessantly referred to as a horse tranquilliser by the British media. However it is no more a horse tranquilliser than a human or dog or

rabbit tranquilliser. It is used as a general aesthetic in human medicine but due to the hallucinations it causes not as a primary one. Ketamine is also used to manage pain in large animals, but is not particularly effective on cattle. Cows sleep an average of four hours a day.

The Fall of Fort Ketamine

The Count staggers around dizzily beneath us having crossed into paranoia long ago, his eyes wide and vitreous. Casting an unrepentant glance over his world, I take a bump of K from the secret compartment of our monarch's ring.

Memories of family, friends, lovers and enemies dissipate with each sniff. They become smeared faces, substandard and spent. Old components from a time before Fort K. I have no need for them now; everything is how it should be. But all good things must come to an end.

Intoxicated with power, the Jester mischievously leans forward. With ape-like arms he grasps the fort's structure and begins rocking the thing with surprising power. A gorilla aggressively responding to a threat. I hang on for dear life as our home shudders under his strength. Cries for help go

unheard. Subordinates below stirring from the commotion. The Count tugs at his hair as he watches in horror.

A heart-stopping crack from the structure prompts a simultaneous royal gasp. The Rook tumbles from the tower with a cry of terror and is forgotten. I fumble for something to hold onto but there is little. Fingers faltering under each jerk. Each digit subtracted like seconds from a countdown. Voices begging the Jester to stop but he is too far gone, his manic grin the only response offered.

Then I am falling forever, the distance elongated by the K. Everything smearing as though I am tearing through space at an unfathomable speed. In my condition I am unable to brace for the fall and for a moment it seems I pass straight through the floor. Then with a thump I hit it like a bag of sand. Possessions rain down around me. Someone's phone. A set of keys. Pens tinkling like music. I lie there for a moment in a daze, wondering what happened to the contentedness and empowerment and my dynastic position. The Count has long fled the room.z

To the relief of us all the Jester settles and the turmoil ceases and it does not take long for the happiness above

to return. Reluctantly I crawl onto the mattress and under the duvet but it brings only coldness. Beneath the callous glances of the ruling class I discover the true meaning of solitude.

Unrelenting music keeps me awake as it had done to the other subordinates. The tables have unexpectedly turned. I lie there for a while listening to the festivities above, too distressed to rejoin them. Then I stagger from the room, haggard and anguished and inferior. My nobility a thing of the past, I exit into the industrious streets where the spirit of ketamine leaves my body.

THERE'S A WEREWOLF IN MY HOUSE AND HE'S CAUSING A LOT OF NOISE

You stand at the window, looking at the rain. The Picture of Dorian Gray lies upside down on your desk. The spine is broken. The once perfect copy, battered. You've just been introduced to the term 'art for arts sake'. You don't really think much of it. You don't really think much of Wilde's book. Your roommate says it's one of his favourites. You disagree. There's tragedy, yes, but not a worthy one. There's art, yes, but art for the sake of it. Or do you misunderstand? You don't know. You don't care. Writers don't need to think about the purpose of their writing, do they?

A literature student will say that you chose the colour blue to suggest melancholia, you however chose it because you like the colour blue.

You move from the window and think. Writers are liars, glorified, wholesome liars but then again they're more than that – they're makers, makers of the beautiful, the tragic and all the things in-between. They're Gods. They decide who lives and who dies, whose dreams come true, whose dreams fail. So, you lay down and think about your story, what it will actually be about. You've had some ideas, jotted down a few notes but nothing has really surfaced until now. Now you

have that experience, that art, burning inside you. You have the tragic realisation most writers need, right? 'A writer is the sum of their experiences', you heard once on a movie trailer entitled, very imaginatively, *Writers* and you agree, because now you have something to write about, something real you want to explore, however painful it may become.

So you get off the bed, you have to do, you may do it in some sort of trance but you do get off the bed and you sit in front of the laptop. You stare, through watery eyes, at a white blank page, stretch your fingers and type. You take breaks, you walk around the room, have a sip of water, the odd biscuit but for however long it takes you sit there and hit keys, forming words, forming sentences, creating. And, when it's done, when all that pain, that heartbreak, that madness is down on the page, you sit back and look at it. However many pages, however many words, all done. Whatever it may be you sit and look at your creation. God.

And then it's time for people to see it. You're nervous but you give it up, sacrifice that art to the prying eyes of spectators, of potential critics and judgements. You shuffle in your seat and look over the pages as they read. You know the character, you know

him very well. You know the story, you lived it, you walked the same steps as him, said the same words, felt the same damages. You blink and look up to see the expressions of those around: some elated, others confused, each with an opinion, even if they won't say it.

You've given a piece of yourself in this art, the fragments of you are buried in the words, cascaded on each page so when they open their mouth and discuss you feel like you're sprawled on a table, naked, being examined. They pick at each word, pull at the dialogue, discuss the characters. They don't like the main character, he's too...human? But they don't use that word; they say other things – annoying, heartless, cold. He's not likeable. You're not likeable. You're human. You're flawed. Then they don't sympathise with him. He is his own demise, brings his own destruction. They look to you for some sort of meaning but you say nothing, if you open your mouth the secret will be out. They say it's well written, beautiful even, but hard. You take that as a compliment. 1984 was hard. *Bleak House*, *A Clockwork Orange*, Picasso, Beethoven, they were all hard, not necessarily enjoyable at first.

But then someone looks up, someone who hasn't spoken yet and does speak. She gives her opinion and it's

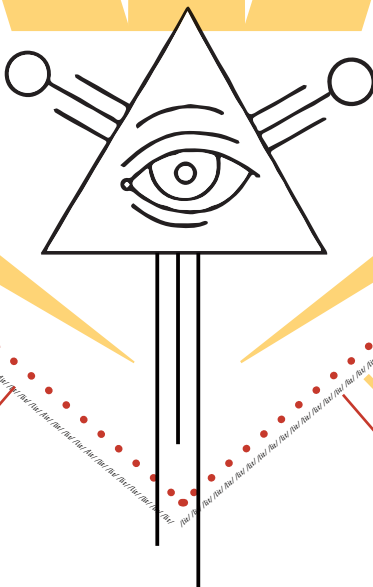
the right opinion, it's what you wanted somebody who read it to say. She gets the character, he's human, he's natural. She gets the situation – we bring out our own demise, she says, we're all flawed. And she's right. We don't always make the right decision. This story reflects reality. She says it and you smile. She gets it. You did your job. And people discuss reality – should art – literature, paintings, music – explore the horrors of the world? Is there not enough horror in the world already? Do we really want to see it in our form of escapism? And the conversation goes in circles and your story is somewhat abandoned in the discussion but as you flick through the pages, feel the words, the characters, you know that you caused this discussion, that it's your doing.

You leave the room and head home. You sit down at your desk and pull upon a document to begin writing. The typing is loud, triumphant almost, and you go at it because you have something to say. All art is political Jonson. Otherwise it would just be decoration. And all artists have something to say. Otherwise they'd make shoes. You heard that once, in a film called Anonymous and now you get it. Political is something to say, not necessarily the politics of the country. Politics can be an opinion, your opin-

ion about the colour blue, about oranges, about love. You explore politics in your art because you create an opinion. And today you created an opinion from everyone in that room.

You type louder now, more words seep from you. The noise booms. There's a werewolf in your house and he's making a lot of noise. Creating his worlds and casting ideas to the page.

As you stop, you think about all of the opinions – the good and the bad – and you smile. They all had an opinion, they either loved or hated it, it got under their skin. Because you can't help but think that art is a form of love and the worst kind of love is indifference. Which they didn't feel.



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