

BURN BEFORE

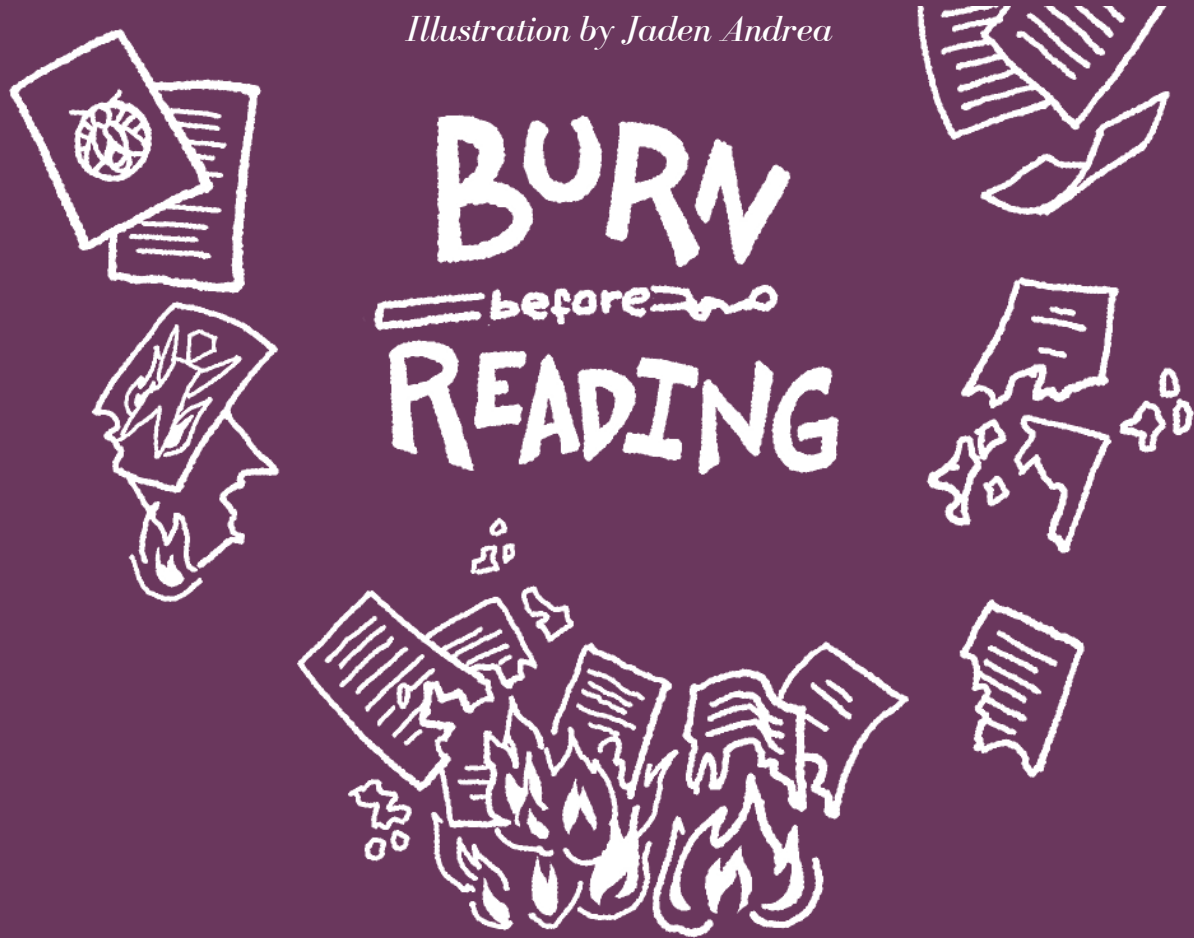


COMING  
TO THE  
OTHER SIDE

WINTER  
2023

*Cover Artwork by Repair Kit*

READING



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Tiger Lady

*Tiffany Baker*





*Dragnet*

## Desert Dreaming

Now, back home in my own bed  
I dream the Playa eclectic

ephemeral village of painted people  
fantastic sites and sounds  
a burning biped and a surging crowd  
consumed in a revelry of fire

their skin taut and red from too much sun  
hands and feet cracked and sore from caustic soil

eyes bloodshot and scratchy from windblown dust,  
wakefulness, intoxication  
they are even so a happy tribe

I face tomorrow the crawling roads  
trading my precious days  
for crushing debt  
and a parking space

which of these, I wonder, is the dream....  
it all seems so simple on the playa

before I briefly blaze into my own desert twilight  
please remind me to seek a place  
in between that harsh freedom  
and the chains of comfort

between dust devils and swirling fog  
between parched alkali and complacent leafy suburbia  
between incessant drumming and easy listening  
between the Black Rock and the Bay.

*George Post*



## Peace

*JSG*

“What are you hoping to get out of this?” he asked as he rode alongside me with the ease of someone who had navigated playa many times before.

It was my second night, but I was already feeling more comfortable and amply lit with LED lights flickering along the frame of my never-before-used bike. I had not yet thought about this seemingly big question. One almost as vast and deep as playa felt to me as a virgin.

What was I hoping for? Did I have any expectations?

Now I pedaled, legs already weary and eyes still adjusting to the combination of absolute darkness pierced only by the glow of neon lights and twinkling stars, as I let that question roll around in my head before “peace” spilled out of my lips. The weeks, months even, leading up to this moment were devoid of that—there were camp meetings, endless Whatsapp chats, and several long, ragged phone calls to work out the logistics needed to make my first burn a “success”—whatever that meant.

Beyond the logistics, the weeks, months even, of my life before that moment had included an extended mental health leave, weeks on the road soul-searching and seeking comfort in old friendships, a career-ending resignation, and a full-blown identity crisis. So I said peace.

“Peace is hard to come by,” he acknowledged.

“I briefly dared to look away from the path of my bike to glance over at this string bean of a man next to me, to catch his green eyes, and exchange a glance, a smirk, and a reassuring nod. For once, I summarized the previous six months succinctly: “It has been a turbulent time and I am just seeking peace. Contentment.”

And once I said it, I let it go. Instead of ruminating, searching, forcing peace to settle into my body, I spent my days frantically tugging my goggles into place, finding whatever shade I could, and lounging with new campmates who felt more akin to family.

In one moment, I roamed the streets with an old friend, unburdening ourselves of things that were holding us back—ego checking limiting thoughts and restrictive attitudes. We wrote them down, released them, and embraced both the literal discomfort of the day and the warmth of this community.

Another day might see me waiting, sweating, for a chance to bathe. To strip down bare and cleanse myself and to emerge briefly renewed.

The next night, after camp dinner, we set off to find a volleyball court, chasing and racing the sun as it already began to set. I hadn't touched a ball in years despite the many I had spent on the court and now wore clunky boots, a too-small bikini top, and spandex I had unearthed from a storage bin in my parents' garage—ones I no doubt wore as a 16-year-old playing club tournaments.

Our attempts to play were lackluster—shy of a few players we navigated over the small mountains of sand that cluttered the court. Passes were punctuated with squeals of slight pain as my forearms reddened quickly.

As darkness fell, we carried on, riding out together, a small gang that would have never come together in any other circumstances. Looking ahead, I'd see lights blink in various patterns, wheels glowing bright pink, and my friends' freckled with the faint shine of purple, blue, and yellow. These moments felt like childhood. Free and innocent of any care beyond the present.

We'd find ourselves laying under dancing lights, listening to classical music, in a puddle all together.

We'd find ourselves following the call of Beyonce's voice, at a drag show, eating pancakes.

We'd be in hammocks, hanging from swings, buried in a mound of stuffed animals.

We'd eat (vegan) grilled cheese and search playa for friends, art, and nothing at all.

We'd find each other buried under layers of playa dust as white outs raged and covered everything. Our imperfections. Our insecurities. Our worries. Our false sense of urgency.

Maybe somewhat ironically, my experience felt like the serenity prayer ringing in my ears for a week straight. A mantra many use to remind themselves of what is in their control and what is not—an invocation to accept what cannot be changed and to be courageous enough to change what we can. A key to finding acceptance and peace with the things beyond us. In this space of indulgence, exploration, and experimentation, I don't know if I found peace as we would normally describe it but it was serene. Maybe it was that wisdom of distinction and the understanding of what will remain the same and what will continue to flow.

Sitting there on that final night, in deep playa where the stars shone brightly and littered the sky, I found myself alone. A rare private moment. Maybe one I was avoiding because my mind had not been a safe place for a while. It was a place I went to condemn myself—to cast judgment for my perceived failures and to relive moments with regret. For years I had grown distrustful, anxious, and skeptical. Of others, yes, but mostly of myself.

I watched as art cars crawled past with their noise almost muted. Instead all I heard repeated back was "Ok. I am ok." I said it in my mind and again aloud as if to convince myself of this truth. I was ok. I am ok.

So, when I came to the other side, when I packed up my dust-laden belongings, queued for what would be a 13+ hour exodus, I didn't find everything people told me I would. I left with no playa name. No opportunity for an oversized faux-fur coat. No transcendent spiritual awakening. But I did find comfort. The reassurance to know that these ebbs and flows, these moments of connection and isolation, articulation and reflection are both necessary. And now welcome.

STEPHANE LABOUE PHOTOGRAPHY









The World is Watching



Back Room

Photo by Tad Philipp

# Homage du Dali

Artwork by Jack Champion

Photo by Ranny Viquez



STEPHANE LANOUX . PHOTOGRAPHY

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# Creating the "People's Art Car"

*Michael "Dustin" Fasman*



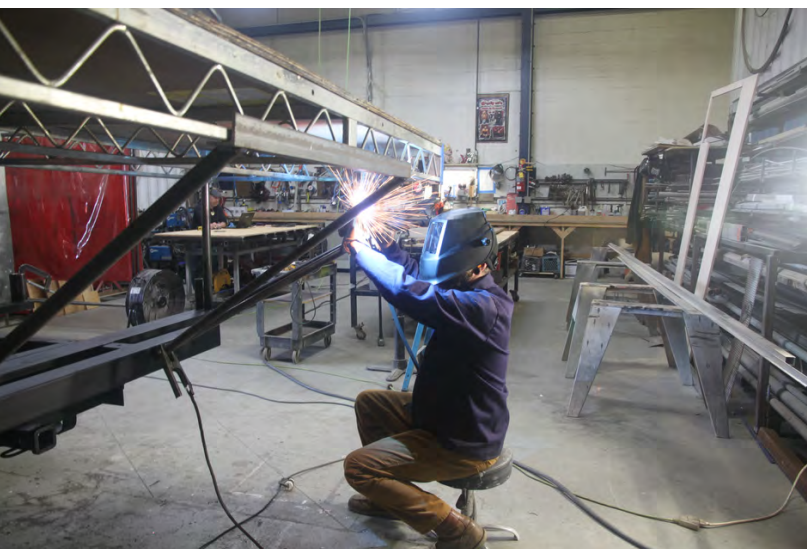
What do you do with a pile of scrap metal and an RV chassis? Make an art car of course!

In March 2022, with Burning Man only six months away, that's what long time burners Evan Collier, Benjamin Jones and Shiny Galeani decided to do. They worked together at Arch Productions, a commercial art and design company creating interactive experiences in the Hudson Valley town of Nyack, about 30 miles north of New York City. Arch was both a business and a place for artists to gather and create. Several other art projects destined for Black Rock City were already in progress.



One day Shiny and Evan were in the shop yard looking at the excess scrap and, as she recounted, thought "This is so wasteful. We really should make some kind of an art project with this." They had never built an art car but within a few days Ben came up with the concept of a cat and drew some sketches. Evan, a master metalworker, had brought a colorfully painted RV called "Harvey" to the playa in 2012 but it had been sitting for several years in disrepair. He dragged the carcass into the shop and got to work.

Shiny is well connected to the New York burner community and art scene. She recruited people to help at fundraisers and on social media. Even though neither she nor most of the volunteers had any metalworking experience Evan quickly brought them up to speed. "A shocking amount of people got themselves up to Nyack" Shiny said, "and we used all the scrap metal that the shop had and started building out the frame. It was really boring for a very long time because it didn't look like a cat at all. Just looked like a bunch of tubes. But very quickly it started to take shape, getting bigger and taller and heavier".



Harvey was rechristened "Harvey: Disco Kitty", made with up-cycled items from many local fabrication shops. Over 30 volunteers worked on the vehicle, with Evan teaching the safety precautions and techniques of welding.

*Photos by Michael Fasman and Tad Phillipp*

# Creating the "People's Art Car"

*Michael "Dustin" Fasman*

In late July, with just a few weeks left until the burn, Shiny was worried. "I didn't think we were gonna finish. We thought about all the things we could leave off. We were like, well, what if she didn't have paws this year? What if we don't finish her face with panels? What if it doesn't have any panels? It's just a frame. That's fine. Cause it doesn't matter. No matter what, we're gonna bring an art car. It just might not look like the renders. We didn't test the lighting until very close to leaving, probably four days, five days. And, same thing, maybe she won't ride at night. And we didn't have a sound system until we arrived on Playa. Our sound tech had been working 24 hours a day the week before, but things didn't come in on time. So maybe she won't have sound. That's fine."



Shiny recalled the team's biggest challenge was learning "the difference between perfection and safety, releasing the anxiety of things being perfect and just saying whatever it's gonna be, it's gonna be, and that's great, and working on a team where we can all say that and actually mean it." Despite the stresses everyone worked well together and remained friends.

In mid-August, a week later than hoped for, Harvey Disco Kitty was finally ready and loaded onto a trailer for the long journey to the Black Rock Desert. However, in Ohio the driver weighed the trailer and realized it was overweight for his standard drivers' license. Shiny advised him to avoid toll roads. "If he had gone through any of the tolls they would have been weighed and he would've been asked for his license and gotten pulled over. So he avoided all the tolls and we met in Missouri and unloaded a couple thousand pounds into our box truck".



Harvey made it to Burning Man and was a grand success, approved for both day and night driving permits by the Department of Mutant Vehicles. The team decided "Harvey was a car for everybody. We weren't doing private rides. This is a car that if anybody says, 'Can I get on your car?' The answer is absolutely you can." It was the "people's art car".

The Harvey Disco Kitty crew had "many great adventures out there. One of our camp mates is a suspension artist and his dream has always been to be suspended on a moving art car. So our camp mates threw hooks in his back and we drove him around for about an hour. That was great."

*Photos by Michael Fasman and Tad Phillipp*

# Creating the "People's Art Car"

*Michael "Dustin" Fasman*

For Shiny and many of the volunteer builders the best part of the whole experience was learning to work with metal, especially for the women. "I think it's something that is not considered traditional for women" she said, "and I know that Burning Man encourages everyone to play with whatever tools make them happy. The Flaming Lotus girls have been doing it for years. Knowing how to weld is a new skill that now I can use and puts me in a position to be able to make different kinds of art".

When asked if she recommends building an art car Shiny said "It depends how you want your burn to look. Having an art car, specifically an art car that's large, is a lot of responsibility. Not only to keep it running, which this year was really hard considering how dusty it was, but also to make sure drivers are sober and to make sure that people come on are making safe choices.

It's incredibly fun and I don't know that I would've seen all the art otherwise. We had a couple of people in my camp with that are in their seventies and I was able to bring them out all the way up to the trash fence multiple times and that felt like such an incredible gift."

While building an art car isn't for everyone she says "No matter what, I'd recommend that everyone help build art. I always tell newbies to bringing work gloves, it's your best gift. Whenever you see somebody that could use a hand, help them, you will meet the most incredible people and learn the most amazing stories of how things came to be here."

Harvey: Disco Kitty now lives in New York and attends local burner events, such as Decompression.



*Michael "Dustin" Fasman*

# Coming to the Other Side (London Bridge to Black Rock City and back in Lockdown 2020)



8am. It should be shoulder to shoulder on the underground waiting for the tube train. The platform should be triple packed. We should be jostling and hustling with the occasional eyeing of the opponent. Am I stood where the doors will open? Will he get in? Will she get in? Will they get in and not me and –

But we are a sparse group of people stood safely well away from each other. Masked or bandana wearing like bicycle couriers. We've been doing this a while now.

I catch eyes with someone down the track. It's fleeting. This is London. But they are not like the rest.

They are serene. People aren't serene in London. But his face is lit with a golden glow.

Across from them, a bonfire. Out of place on the underground. But no one seems bothered. It must be the norm. The embers float and dance around their shoes and now I see they are not shoes at all but dusty boots and bracelets. He wears bracelets of all colours. And the drone of 'Mind the gap' is replaced with a beat. I hear an electronic beat. It is distant at first but then rises. It's the kind of beat that makes your chest vibrate. That makes your core vibrate. Deep. It penetrates every cell in your body. You fight the urge to move. And the smell of the woodsmoke. –

You don't need your laptop where you're going, surely? I wonder this and as I think it, the wheelie case he trundles along behind him morphs into a bicycle. Old. A little rusty across the frame. Chunky tires. And smothered in neon lights. I want him to see me again and smile but –

This is London.



# Coming to the Other Side (London Bridge to Black Rock City and back in Lockdown 2020)



I look down and see my hands. I don't recognise them but they are definitely mine because they are attached to my body. At least I think so because they move when I want them to. And I too am wearing dusty footwear. Laced up and battered. Coated in the dust that you will only find in Black Rock. My hands are bejewelled, and henna-tattooed and I am standing looking down a dusty pathway created by pillars of flames, enticing me to go forward. To say yes to this adventure. To walk through this unknown door. In the distance, beats. Lights. The excited chatter of voices and every now and then someone passes me riding a hover board. ...Wait. ...

A hover board?

'Hi' I hear. And look around. Behind me nothing but bare desert. The silhouette of mountains in the distance. I adjust my wireless headphones.

'Hi!' comes the voice again. I turn back and there in front of me is a person floating on their hover board. They are looking directly at me. It's real. But also, not. Like. This isn't flesh. It can't be flesh. It's, err, virtual flesh.

'Where are you from?'

I'm embarrassed. Should I speak? How do I speak? Do I even have a virtual mouth? And when I've spoken will they just, like, hear me, or....do I have to do something. Panic! Ermm....I look down at my phone, with barely enough however many G's it takes these days to keep me in the virtual land with underground WIFI –

'Hi there' they say again.



# Coming to the Other Side

(London Bridge to Black Rock City and back in Lockdown 2020)

What if I just say 'Hi?' What if I just say "hi" or 'Hello' Or – God forbid, what if they answer back? They might actually hear me and reply and then what? The ridiculous spiral of human interaction nerves. Years of school bullies all rearing their ugly heads. Years of the way you were raised coming right at you. Years of unpleasant bosses. Years of nerves like first day of school and –

I take a breath to speak -

And just like that, they turn on their neon-pimped-out hoverboard and whizz off down the Desert flame lit corridor to where the party is coming from.

Fuck.

I mean.

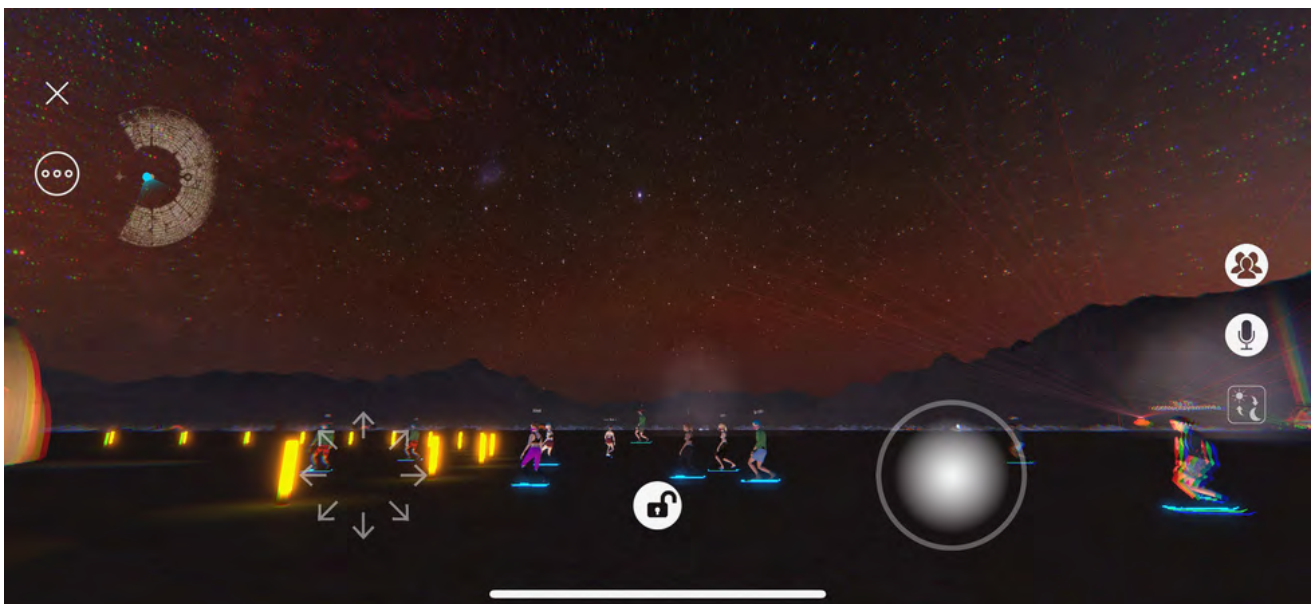
Hi! – I say.

Too late.

Too much thinking. Over-thinking everything. Too little doing. What is this inner dialogue? Ugh! Get out, bully! I am here to let go. To have fun. I will speak when I want to speak and to whom I want to speak to and fuck you for trying to stop me –

I learn a little something from this and find myself travelling down the corridor after them. The beats becoming clearer. And I'm not sure whether to go left or right but I see other hover-boards and head for that. Someone else must know. Someone else must know what to do -

I travel forward as I've learnt that 'forward' seems to be the best option and float myself into a room with a few other lost souls in virtual land, some too scared to speak. And then there are the found souls with the kind of openness and freedom of experience and comfort that being bereft of fear brings.



# Coming to the Other Side (London Bridge to Black Rock City and back in Lockdown 2020)



All of us collectively understanding that we are here. Together. On some kind of journey. From where ever we stand on the Earth gazing at our electronic devices. From whatever time zone we find ourselves travelling the Earth in. Collectively we meet here.

Now.

And The Man. When he burns, I can travel right through the flames to the other side. Yes, it is virtual and but also real, as I can see the man burning in real time but I am also stood in the middle of it all looking out at all the beautiful, precious unique beings gathered to watch. I watch people watching. On a 7-inch screen. The crackle of the burn. The voices. The moment we are sharing. I am certain I am smiling. We are all smiling. Virtually and really. Some with tears.

VRAAAAAZSHKKSCREEEECHshhhhhkkkkkkk!

The scream of iron and electricity. A heavy vehicle gliding along an electric powered track and cutting through the atmosphere with two piercing beams of light -

It smacks me like a ball being pounded hard into my stomach when the underground train arrives.

My clothes are uncomfortable and everyone else stood on the platform is in shades of grey and black. The lights are ugly and 'Wait for people to get off!' and 'There will be another train along shortly, please stand back.' Is screamed from the Tannoy.

I see a mouse scuttle into a hole.

I don't want to stand back.

I want the beats back.

# Coming to the Other Side (London Bridge to Black Rock City and back in Lockdown 2020)



I want to stand in. Stand in and watch from the centre of the flames and rise above it through its glorious wooden structure and feel the warmth, and smell the smoky burning wood and maybe hold hands with someone as our Summer ends.

But this is London.

I am at London Bridge tube station. And my virtual connection to Black Rock City is patchy at best on the underground.

I step on to what should be a packed-out train but even without the over-fill of people, I stare at my feet like we all do. Try not to make eye contact. That wouldn't be appropriate. Not here. Not now.

And I think about this for the rest of the day.



*Georgie Smith (@georgieinlondon)*



*poem by arianna brander*

it was as if i was burned to be rebuilt  
i chose to take it all off  
to shed the toxified layer  
strip to nudity

expose myself

i allow the dust  
to touch my reborn child-like skin

vulnerable?  
yes.

but in an environment  
where no one showers  
no one hides  
no one feels isolated  
nor judged  
in a space  
where no one can be perfect

my exposure feels natural  
my openness and expression feel safe  
my survival instinct  
to withhold myself in the real world is challenged  
and i heal  
beginning from within

till I Dance  
Cry  
Listen  
Sing  
Love  
Scream  
Hug

Laugh  
from my entire soul  
i get to let go of the tension  
the rigidity of the default world  
to be relit  
and live presently

# Mudman

The 1993 Man Burn was immediately followed by a storm; it's long since passed into legend, and many participants felt that our annual ceremony had somehow finally gotten the attention of the Weather Goddess. Just after the fiery 5-story-tall figure had collapsed into a pile of flaming embers, the wind began to blow violently, kicking up an immense cloud of dust. Then a drenching rain began to pour down, and as the rain fell it mixed with fine airborne particles of alkali soil. For a few minutes we were all caught in a very bizarre natural phenomenon: a mudstorm! Big, fat gobbets of wind-driven mud pelted down on everyone, sparing neither camper, campsite, car, nor camera from a uniform coating of muck.

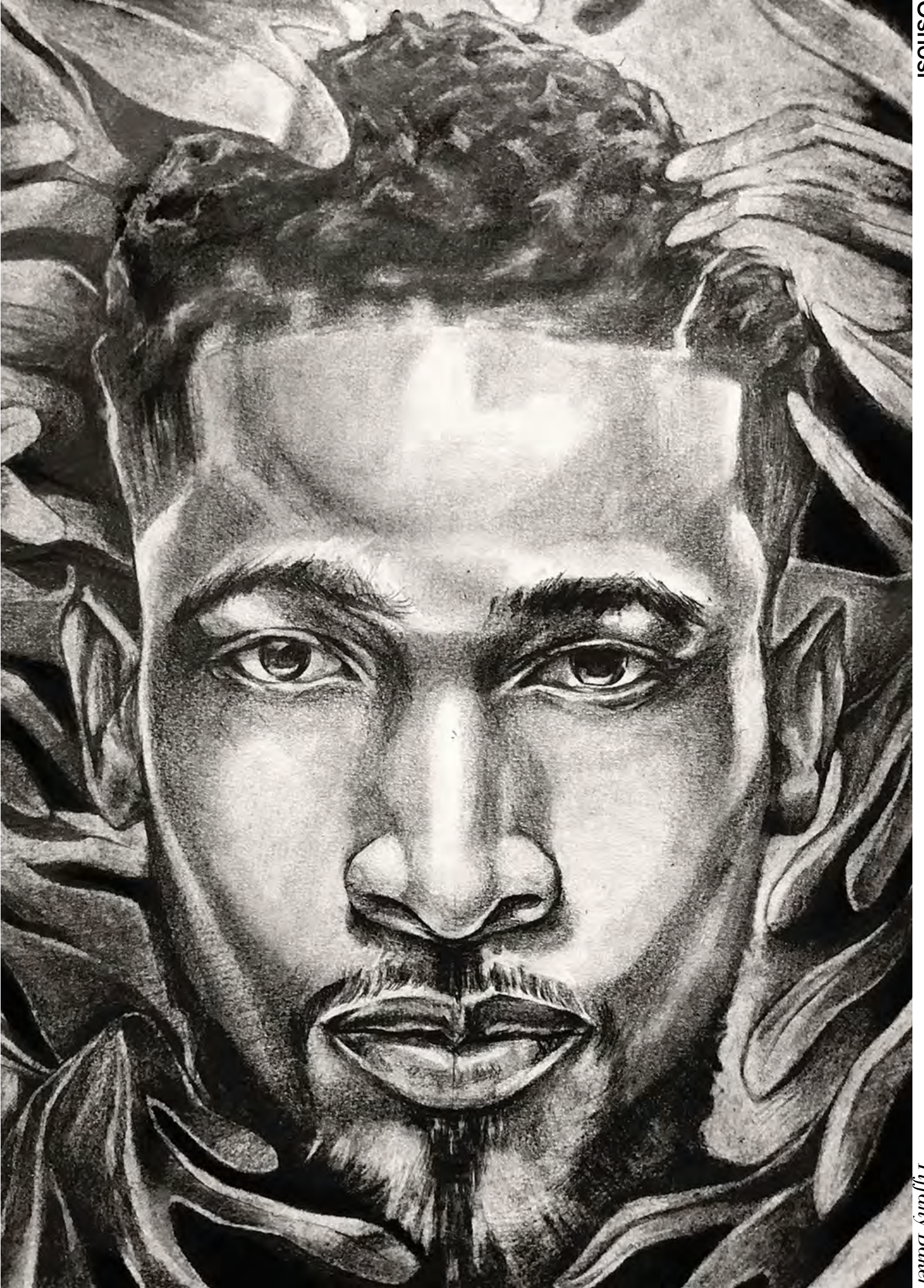


*Alyssa Wilson*

## Close Peg (Usha Seejarim) in Dust Storm

Rapid-fire lightning struck the hills surrounding the vast flatness of the Playa, momentarily turning night into day, and thunder boomed all around. I had a slow leak on my right front tire; it was just about half flat already, and visions of the Black Rock turning into a sea of mud made me decide I needed to put on the spare in case the rain continued and we had to drive out that night. Nothing quite like battling the elements while changing a tire to remind you you're alive! In retrospect, it was naïve for me to think I'd be able to drive off the Playa following any significant rain, but fortunately, the storm was brief, and no lightning struck anywhere near the camp. Within 15 minutes the celebrants had reformed a circle around the Man-debris bonfire, chanting and dancing on into the night. With the tire situation under control, my daughter and I washed up and got inside our relatively mud-free camper around 11pm, slid into our sleeping bags and crashed hard. Then at 3:13 a.m. (I know because I checked my watch), something started shaking the truck; I sat upright, thinking the wind was coming up again. But no, someone was pulling on the rear window handle of the camper, and he finally succeeded in yanking it open. I found myself staring into the wild spooky eyes of the being I've come to think of only as...The Mudman. He'd obviously gotten lost during the mudstorm, far from the main camp and far from a normal state of consciousness. In a voice which bespoke the intense loneliness of someone who'd been wandering for hours in the dark he said "C'n I come in?"

Without waiting for an answer he began to climb inside. "Whoa, man," I said, putting my hand on his mud-encrusted chest. "We're sound asleep here. Uhhh...where's your own camp?" He turned his face toward the open Playa and answered with two plaintive, quavering and unforgettable syllables: "It's goooooone..." A seemingly telepathic understanding flashed through my mind: the uprooted tent flapping against its stakes and finally surrendering to the wind, the sting of alkali particles against cheeks and lips and eyes, the pathetic huddling against the dry lake hardpan until the storm had passed, the unbelievable vastness of the 400-square-mile Black Rock Desert when you're alone and on foot on a moonless night. I considered desert hospitality versus the untidy importation of all that mud into my camper, plus the hassle of getting my sleeping bag washed, and was debating whether to go ahead and let him in. Thankfully, at that moment he seemed to notice the drums and lights of the nearby all-night Rave site, muttered "...maybe s'm people awake over there..." and then he was gone. I closed the window and laid back down, feeling small and stingy and overly civilized, thinking about Tuareg villagers I'd met in Morocco, people who'd take you right into their homes and hearts and give you their only camel if they perceived that you really needed it. I'll bet they wouldn't have turned away the Mudman...poor guy.



## When Waking Dreams Conjure a New Reality: Reflections from the Other Side



*"If the patient finds that the universe he lives in isn't good enough and he has imaginatively to construct a better one, then what matters is why he has to construct a better one."*

~Wilfred Bion

*"Everyone dreams, and no one knows why. Since the dawn of whenever, people have striven to explain the inexplicable: as a way of receiving messages from the supernatural; as a means of astral travel for the soul; as a portal into our past lives; even as a glimpse into a kind of meta-reality, to which what we perceive as waking life is in fact but a dream."*

~Stuart Mangrum

When Waking Dreams open our minds to hypnagogic consciousness, something sublime happens. In the shadowlands between wakefulness and sleep, we can freely construct new realities. While driving through the night to Black Rock City for my first (!) Burning Man I slipped into this transitional state of consciousness. My sleep-deprived mind sketched a forest of shadowy pixelated trees from the inky blackness beyond the periphery of my headlights. These apparitions towered overhead tunnel-like, a surreal experience in a treeless desert.

Hours later, I rounded a sweeping corner on Route 34 near Gerlach, Nevada and through the dim pre-dawn light another hypnagogic apparition emerged. Across the hazy playa, an improbable twinkling city beckoned. As I turned off the pavement, trails of dust swirled behind me. Heavy beats from BMIR filled the truck; my excitement grew. With the city lights close, I slowed to a stop and rolled down my window. A friendly face welcomed me home. We exchanged hugs and gifts; I rolled in the dust and rang the bell. Home indeed.

What an introduction to a transformational experience still unfolding in my mind.

My life in Black Rock City took the form of a Waking Dream, perhaps not in a strict clinical sense, but no less a form of transitional consciousness. The boundary between dream and reality blurred, spurred in part by sleep-deprivation and stimuli overload. Though I'd never been to Black Rock City before, there was something familiar about everything: the art-filled playa, music and whimsy emanating from every city block, even the sun-cracked playa and billowing clouds of dust. I kept seeing an avatar of my previous self engaging in this space, feeling the same emotions. It was akin to *deja vu*, but more intense. This entrancing environment helped to disrupt reality and awaken my authentic Self.

Since returning from Black Rock City, I have reflected deeply on Self. Before the Burn, I naively compartmentalized life as Burn vs. Default. Plenty of things I packed and planned for the Burn weren't part of my life in the Default World. While I hoped my Burn experience would be profound, I didn't yet have the personal experience or frame of reference to know. I kind of anticipated taking a break from "reality," dressing-up and playing for five days, and going back to my "normal" life. While on playa, the notion of Burn vs. Default kept giving me pause. Why separate these experiences and compartmentalize my life?

Having different selves (Burn vs. Default) does not mesh with authenticity. Our authentic Self resides on a spectrum of potential. If Burn Self exists at one end of this spectrum, why should I grant Default Self (which had been more limiting) influence? Why should I serve either? There is only room for my authentic Self, who belongs to all parts of my universe. My experience at the Burn has helped this Self continue to awaken and emerge.

Life is punctuated by threshold moments, where passage through a metaphorical doorway changes your thinking so significantly that there is no return. Burning Man continues to reveal itself as a threshold moment in my life. My experiences in Black Rock City have further opened my mind and prompted me to construct life with creative zeal. In recent years I have found myself bringing the fringes of my thoughts toward the center and seeking new fringes to explore. Since the Burn, this practice has intensified.



I left Black Rock City late Sunday night after the Temple burn. As with my arrival, I departed in a sleep-deprived state of consciousness. Nine hours of egress sent my mind wandering and dreaming toward the future. I drifted in and out of sleep during the exodus traffic pulses and saw new iterations of myself in Black Rock City and back in the Default World. I imagined art projects and new ways of self-expression, thinking, and being. My mind saw further possibilities for the ten principles to guide my life in the Default World. Most importantly, I reconciled why I should not default back into my previous reality or Self. How can I be truly authentic and imaginatively construct the universe I want?



Burn and Default continue to meld into a new reality. One day shortly after my return I found myself instinctively reaching into a pile of freshly laundered Burn clothes while getting dressed for work. That evening, I folded and hung most of these items in the closet with my "ordinary" clothes. Why shouldn't they be integrated into my regular wardrobe if they express my authentic Self?

I emerged from the other side of Burning Man 2022 transformed, thanks to my Waking Dreams. During the Burn I did not engage in superficial play or a game of dress-up. Something more profound occurred: I dressed into my authentic Self, shed layers I had allowed the Default World to place upon me, and danced closer to personal truth. So here's to Waking Dreams and the ways they shape radical self-expression and lead us to a more fulfilling reality.



The Brain can go everywhere  
but the body has Borders

# In Bloom



*Dragnet*

There's a doorway in the middle of the desert. A rich mahogany with six panels, it shimmers in the heat. Bugs rest on its grainy sides, delicately winged creatures with spinning antennae and peculiarly large eyes. If you bend in close, you might see yourself reflected back in each of their ommatidia, curiously warped, curiously large, curiously strange. The bugs make a humming noise, harmonizing with the shrill call of the wind, and the whispering trickles of the dust streaming along the ground.

The doorway has been here for a long, long, time. The doorway will be here for a long, long, time still.

Some of you may never find it, may never even enter the desert. And that's okay.

Some of you may find it, tilt your head at it and exclaim, 'what's a doorway doing out here?' before walking away. And that's okay, too.

This doorway isn't for everyone.

But there are those of us who spot the doorway and take that first tentative step closer. There are those of us who brush our fingers against the burnished wood, silky and smooth and strange. There are those of us who wrap our fingers around the brassy knob, surprisingly cool despite the blazing sun.

And, finally, there are those of us who actually turn the knob, becoming acutely aware of how slickly sweaty our palms are, how strange that there's a doorway out here, getting a bit too caught up in our own heads and thoughts and feelings and insecurities and fears and--

But for those of us who peer through, step through, and keep walking—everything changes, hyperbole upon hyperbole, the stars sing in glistening colors of red and blue and the sublime opens one giant eye, and stares back.

# In Bloom

Some of us will find a giant stapler, glowing in the pre-dawn light, a primordial island rising out of the ashes and dust.

Some of us will find a dumpling house, and gulp back gooey dough melded around spicy meat, washed down with sensible gulps of hotly brewed tea.

Some of us will find a boiling cauldron of miso soup containing the whole ocean.

Some of us will find a giant leaf to crawl into and lick sweet dewdrops from its waxy veins.

Some of us will find a night market, aglow with kites, glimmering wings, and lazy fish floating serenely by.

Some of us will find a four poster bed to snooze on, and awake inside a floating ball on pillows of sound and dreamy purple lights.

Others of us may find the perfect place to sit and watch the world go by. It is comfy and cozy and warm, just the way you like it.

Or a swing set with a spot opening up just for you. You kick off from the ground and remember what it feels like to fly, just for a moment.

Or a banana party. A cool drink in your hand, the dust clears from your throat.

Or a hug from a friend at just the right moment, soft and salty and warm. You don't know when you'll see this friend again, but you've loved them deeply for years and years and years.

Or a twelve-piece band, blazing to life with internally threaded fire. It's too hot to get too close, puffs of flame crackling through the air.

Or a jungle with a disco ball for a nose. You climb up some vines, slide down a tree trunk, and remember to laugh up at the stars.

Or, or, or. And, and, and. In, in, in. On, on, on. Here, here, here.

On the other side, there is everything. On the other side, there is nothing.

For all of us, we may see different. For all of us, we may see the same.

But all of us, we took that step. We walked through that door. We came out on the other side.

We saw.

We believed.

We found.

And we will return, one day soon, to lightly run our hands along the door, to push it open against the wind, and to embrace once again.



**First Dance**

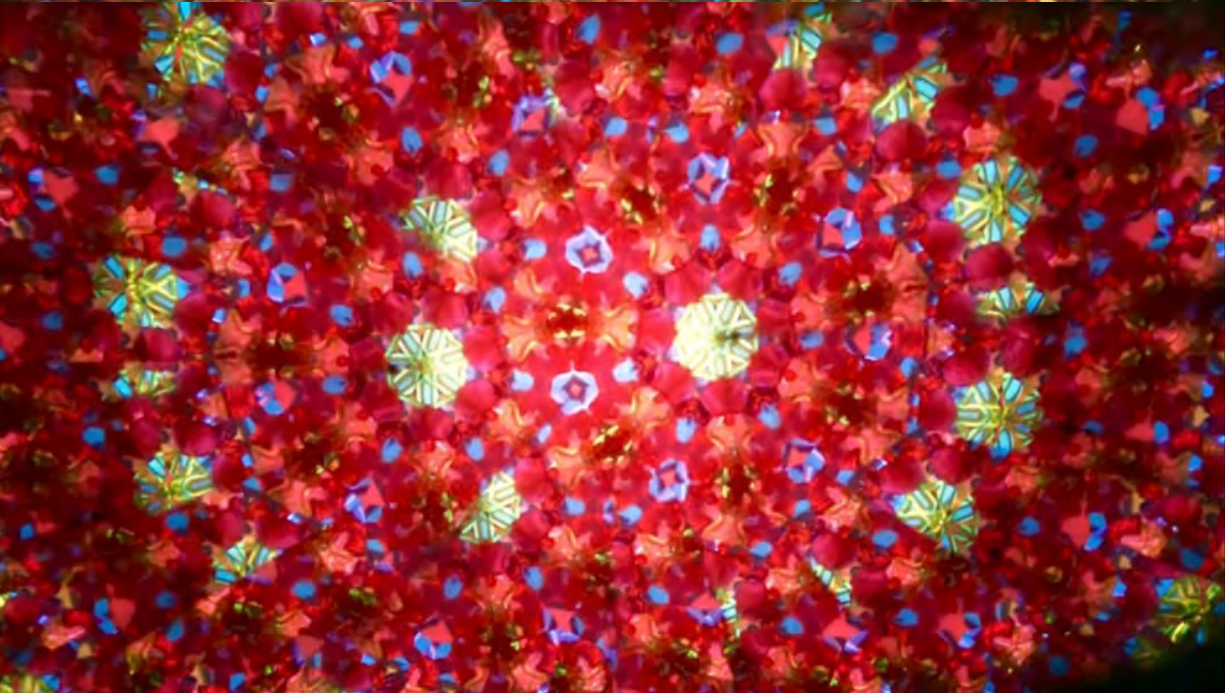
*Jordan Nahmias*



Flower Meadow



Hofmann Sunflowers



Sandoz



# Recommended Meditations from the Guided Meditation Station



The Guided Meditation Station would like to offer some portals so you can travel to the Other Side!

## **A Message From The Other Side - Guided Meditation (25:38)**

by Rising Higher Meditations

Take the journey into a place where you can receive guidance, inspiration, or understanding from the Other Side!

## **Meeting a Loved One in Spirit | Guided Meditation to Connect with Loved Ones (31:21)**

by New Horizon - Meditation and Sleep Stories

Go into a deep state of consciousness to find connection to a loved one that has crossed over. You'll feel safe and comfortable as those who love you come to your awareness to connect.

## **Receive Accurate Messages from Spirit Guides Guided Meditation (44:58)**

by Pura Rasa - Guided Meditations

This meditation is combined with a third eye and crown chakra opening visualization practice that will bring you to a deeper sense of self, enhance your perceptions of life, and connect you to the larger vibrations of the Universe. Here you can connect to your Spirit Guides and ask them for wisdom and guidance on questions you are currently working on.

Is This What Home Feels Like?

Mango



## BREAKING NEWS

# Unusual Butts Demand More than a Peek from Behind

*The Association for the Advancement of Rear-Oriented News (AARON) redoubles its efforts to bring the mainstream media to the other side with provocative, butt-positive depictions of well-known figures and institutions.*

Since 2019, AARON has pushed butts to the forefront with the AARON Report, a monthly email newsletter focused on elevating rear-oriented people in the mainstream media. A zero-profit organization, AARON continues to hit new butt-forward milestones and extend the reach of rear-oriented reporting. Notable developments of the past months include non-funded research on butt wiping, a deep dive into the buttholes of Vincent van Gogh, and a rear-oriented analysis of *Fifty Shades of Grey*.

## BUTTS NOW



Interested in receiving the AARON Report? The volunteer staff at AARON would never misuse your personal data, and it's become increasingly evident that they really don't know how. Each email newsletter arrives in your inbox at the rear-end of the month, free of charge.

VISIT OUR WEBSITE AT  
[WWW.AARONFORBUTTS.COM](http://WWW.AARONFORBUTTS.COM)  
TO SUBSCRIBE!

## WHAT CAN BUTTS TEACH US?

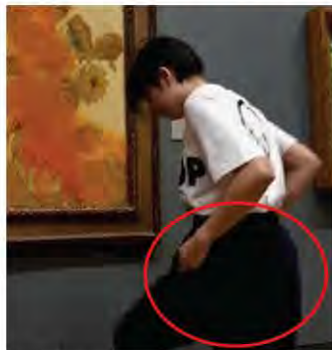
A rear-oriented approach can shed light on topics of global importance. By spotlighting people from behind, AARON aims to offer new perspectives on issues ranging from business deals to the state of the world at large. When famous individuals appear to hide or flaunt their butts, AARON strives to understand why. In cases ranging from butt shyness to society-level butt censorship, AARON persists in investigating the root causes of rear-oriented disparities.



*Today's news cycle is missing crucial information about the butts of society's highest achievers.*

At AARON, butts are more than the sum of their parts. Rear-oriented expression and the treatment of rear-oriented individuals can yield novel insights into sociopolitical conditions that affect people of all orientations. When viewed through this informed lens, butts may even predict the future.

## WHO BENEFITS FROM BUTTS?



*In a stunning display of courage, rear-conscious advocates force the establishment to look at their butts.*

AARON believes that rear-oriented expression is a key driver of societal health and that butt-centered persons around the world face similar pressures of frontal normativity. By reporting monthly on butts, AARON connects rear-conscious readers to a broader community of cheeky connoisseurs from across countries, cultures, and contexts.

## The AARON Report is appropriate for people of all orientations. It includes:

- butt-positive articles & resources
- analysis of rear-oriented people & scenes
- commentary on the state of rear-oriented affairs
- stories celebrating the impact of butts





# Blueberry Cake



2 eggs, separated  
1 c sugar  
1/4 tsp salt  
1 tsp vanilla  
1/3 c milk  
1 1/2 c flour  
1 tsp baking powder  
1 1/2 c blueberries

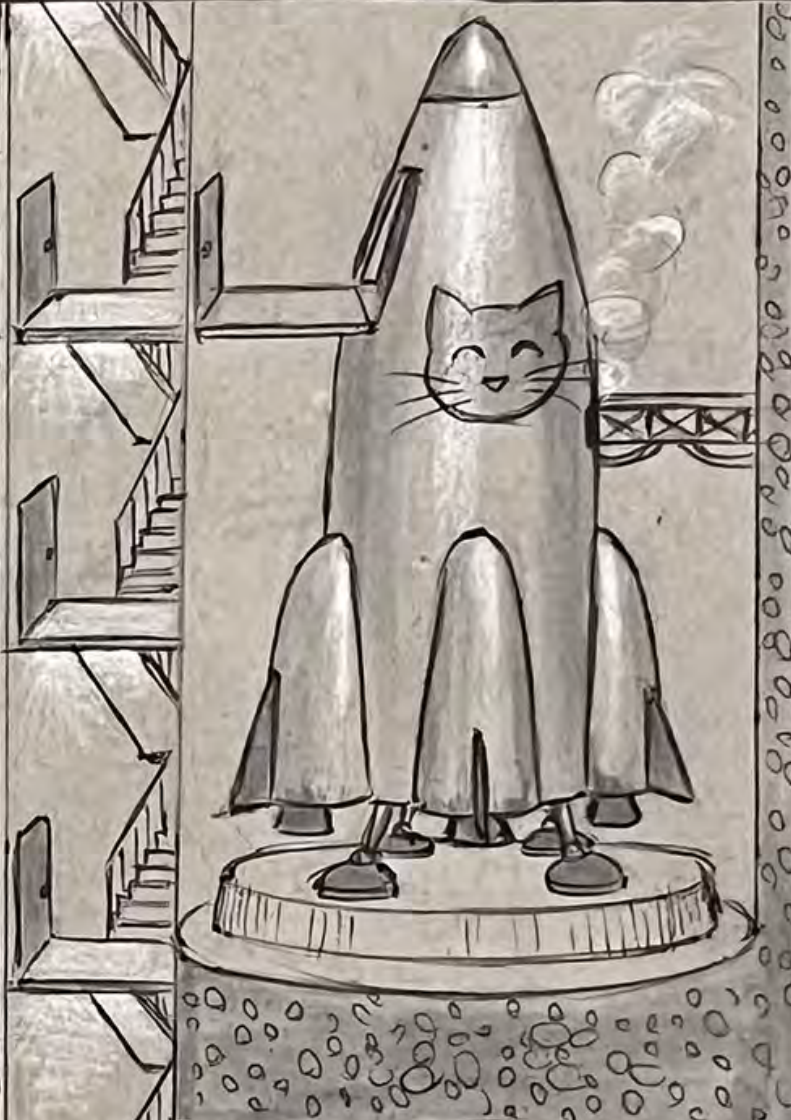
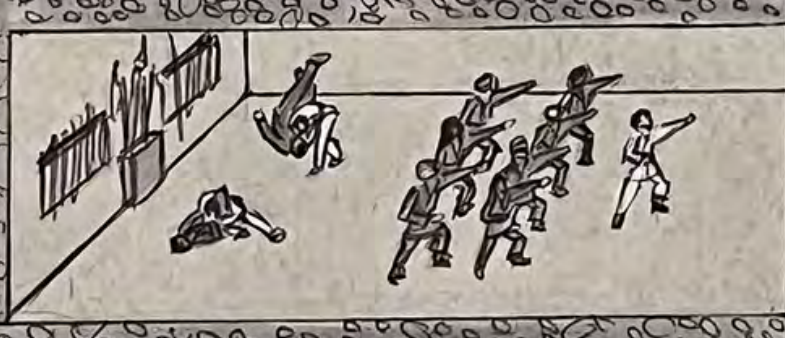
8" x 8" pan, greased

Beat egg whites until stiff - add 1/4c sugar, set aside.  
Cream shortening & add salt, vanilla and remaining sugar.  
Add the egg yolks. Beat until light and creamy.  
Sift flour and baking powder together.  
Add alternately to creamed mixture with the milk.  
Fold in egg whites and then the blueberries which have been  
tossed with some flour.

Turn batter into greased pan. Sprinkle with some sugar.

Bake for about 50 minutes at 350. Should be done, but  
check.









*Dragnet*



### 3 Renders of a Guitar



*Hideki Watanabe*



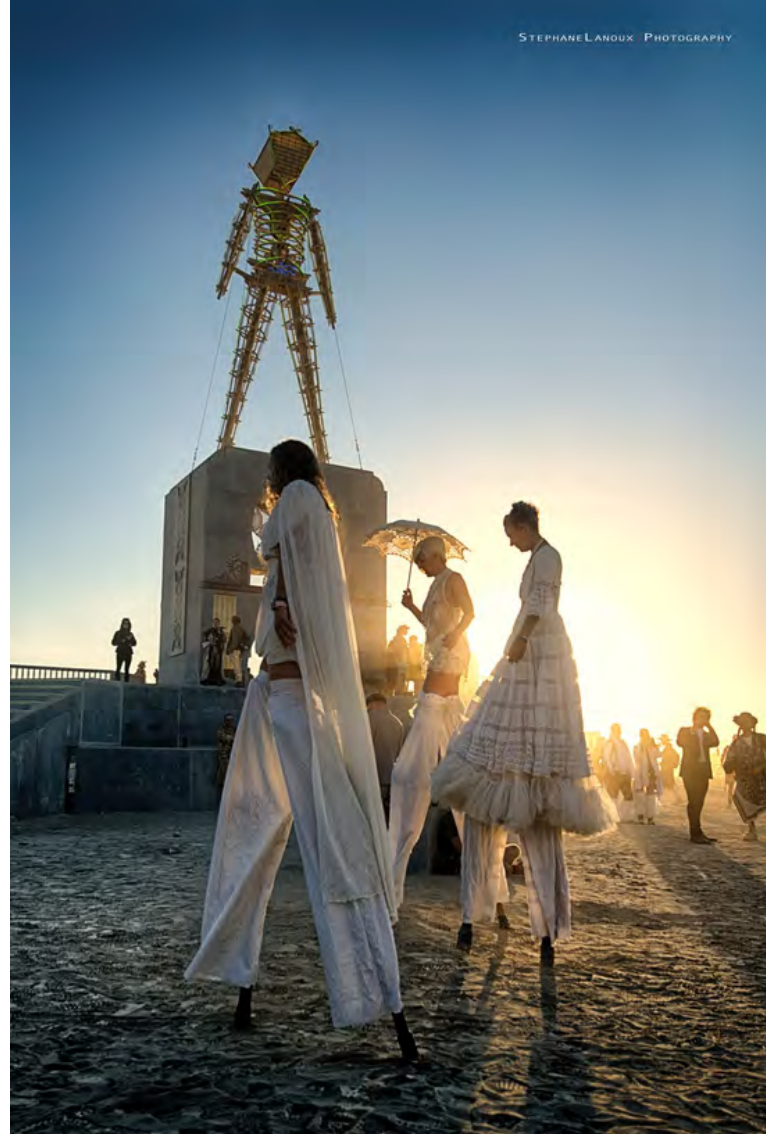
# Animal

## *Javy Awan*

The animal kingdom reasserts itself, and royals of every species demand recognition, embassies, tribute, and free trade. Gullivers emerge who speak the animal languages—but are they humbugs or humdingers?

The animal kings and queens convene—red carpets of all widths roll out across the floor of a crossroad wilds—a quarry and swamp near a river of Eden.

These are no Babars, who acceded to the throne because he walked upright in a tailored suit and stopped into the jungle after the old king had trunked a poison mushroom. These royals are ferocious, furious at being so long unrecognized, and hold their sway by fang and claw—the firstborn of firstborns, back to the Ark. They rove free in the cities, pampered like celebs, pursued by paparazzi, whom they suddenly devour, but it's hushed. Passersby genuflect—we must make our amends—uncertain before a greater and a lost power.



# Someday in the Stars (A Fantasy)

*Marilyn Rea Beyer*

*Upon hearing  
"Something in the  
Stars" by South for  
Winter*

Someday in the stars  
A small boy will arrive with a basket of Mason Jars  
From Muncie, Indiana.

The Star People will be intrigued.

The first jar, tinted blue, will hold  
slender, sharply pointed spears of green  
springing from heavy dark matter, deeply brown.

One clear jar will be filled with something in constant motion  
The color of the faraway night sun,  
another clear jar will contain an endlessly moving Invisible thing.

The boy will uncover the jar of green and brown.  
"Smell," he will invite them.  
They will come close and breathe in.  
Their golden-ringed, midnight-blue eyes will grow wide  
and their visible hearts will glow like roses.  
"Grass!" will say the boy. "This is what I run through  
On the nights when I look up at you."

He will pull out the jar the containing night sun in motion  
And unscrew the metal lid.  
"Taste," he will hold it up to them. "Taste."  
And their sparkling fingers will dip into the jar.  
They will bring them to their cloud lips and sigh.  
"Honey," the boy will tell them.

One of the Star People will pick up the clear jar in motion.  
"Pour it out!" the boy will shout,  
and they will hold out their hands and pour it out among them.  
"Aah!" they will murmur, "The Sea!" for the Star People  
know all of the languages of the Universe and  
can see their reflections in Seas of the Earth  
and they know of Water and its sisters, Ice and Salt, on many planets.

But they will be drawn most irresistibly  
– as if to a great, galactic magnet –  
to the last jar. The Star People will gasp.

"What of these?" they will ask, "Have you imprisoned our children?"  
"Oh, no!" the boy will exclaim.  
"These I brought as a favor to them and a gift to you.  
They are lightning bugs. I love them."

The boy will unscrew the ring, pop open the cap,  
And hundreds of fireflies will fly out  
filling the darkness someday in the stars.



# Rude

*Javy Awan*

I'm pushing through, I'm acting rude. I'm cutting queue, ignoring rules. I've hooked school, acing insults and ain't-that-cool. I scoff and scowl at points of etiquette and manners, striking quick as any kick-you-in-the-canner. If I'm a flaneur, I've got the 'tude, stemming from the root of rudeness, noisily offensive, shouting down, talking over, singing lewdly in the streets, out of tune, rude for keeps. I push and shove, bump and run, spurn lovey-dove. I flout at hoity snobs above, no doubt who's number one. I plow into bumlbers, no time for fumlbers, I plumb dumb and dumber, never thinking, rotten stinking, drunk at that, no tipping the hat—too polite, where's the fight, the go-get-it-that's-mine, the give-it-all-here, have-no-fear, pugnacious, devil-may-care, fire up a flare, never comb my hair—look you, I'm rude. I'll feud with any quarrelsome dude—if iron sharpens iron, rude strops rude. I'm barreling down like a toppled drum of crude, bowling, momentum rolling, no hindrances can stop me, leap aside or I'll bop you—read my vanity plates hammered out in the slammer: R-U-D-E. Kaboom! I've crashed down the gate of the touted Manners estate. I've handcuffed the guards, drugged the Dobes, burned rubber in the shrub-lined loop after hot-wiring the coupe, head-bonked the head butler to mix my own drink, fizz-spritzed the Angora fixing to spritz me, fired up the TV, flipping channels full blast, cussing in fricatives and four-letter scats. What halts my invective? A curly waft of perfume, like in the cartoons—I'm stunned to see standing, at hand, my archenemy Ms. Manners, stunning in sheath gown jeweled, with elegant gloves to her elbows, smooth shoulders and arms bare and graceful—what a beauty, what a figure, what brute strength—what the? She clenches my neck in a gloves-off grip, directs my head to a sink, wedges open my mouth with a fresh bar of soap, and scrubs hard. I squirm up for air—“Kwa-ptui!” Bubbles loft everywhere. Am I in love? I bow, I kneel, I can't believe my blushing ears: “Learn—er—teach me, please, Ms. Manners!”



*Dragnet*

# Black Rock Station



*Artwork by Black Transportation Co*

*Photo by Tad Phillip*



**Tuesday Morning**

*Rider*

## A Text to My Therapist

As you know I'm unaccustomed  
to expressing strong emotions  
like the ones I shared today.  
I am so very worried  
I hurt your feelings  
and that doing so will cost me our relationship.  
For what it's worth my ability  
to take that risk is a measure  
of how much I trust you.

[How ironic. Since I accused you  
of gaslighting today]

Still credit where credit is due  
I took a big risk today.

\*\*\*

I recall assurances to the contrary  
upon your lips, but how can I hear  
those words through my worry?  
I am here you promise  
Not going anywhere.  
Happy that you let yourself  
express what you were feeling.  
And, I know those words  
may not sink in  
...keep re-reading them ;)"

## My Black Beret

Thank you for remembering my hat.  
When you handed it to me in the hall  
outside your office, we shared what felt  
like the most vulnerable moment in a  
session full of navigating tricky terrain.  
My berets are not a casual fashion choice.  
They're a kind of public declaration of the  
connection between my public and private  
selves. It goes beyond my Yankee cap,  
which has become a fraying anchor to my  
childhood. How interesting that I left it  
behind. When we held it together, Harry  
Potter physics made sense: the inside  
space felt much larger than the outside.

## Homework for My Therapist

Here's some homework,  
--if you want it. I am open  
to reading these poems  
together in session.

That's not true. I proffer  
submissive language  
to top from the bottom,  
knowing you will see  
through the ruse and  
declare me a brat.

Try as I might, I cannot hide  
my desire. I want you to read  
the poems, to know you are  
thinking about me when I'm  
not there.

—

I hear your voice  
though you are not  
here, "Make room  
for all the feelings."

Okay. Sigh. I suppose  
there's something about  
which to be curious

--n'est ce pas?





*Jamie Newman*

Shared my life  
Always for others  
Ancestors appreciate  
Helping sisters and brothers  
Making choices  
Best one can  
Sometimes right  
Sometimes wrong  
Yet enjoy daily  
Life's sweet song  
In the scheme of things  
It will be done  
We all go home  
When our shell is gone  
So walk mother right  
Sharing her love  
Makes it easier  
For Ascension above

Doing time  
In my mind  
Making choices  
What to find  
Searching high  
Searching low  
Each choice a path  
A way to go  
Keep it simple  
Matter of fact  
Always perform  
A generous act  
Do unto others  
As want done to you  
Generosity in mind  
Helps it come true  
Fight not the world  
It's cruel not kind  
Frequency of energy  
Can help one unwind  
Select not shadows  
Play in the light  
For then good things  
Are always in sight

Blessings to all  
This fine day  
Wishing each awakens  
In own positive way  
Feeling the blues  
Need some shuffling shoes  
Time to go  
Bust a couple moves  
Feeling thoughts  
About things to do  
Savoring actions  
Let's make em true  
Paralysis analysis  
Financial slavery  
That's where it seems  
Current society be  
A fractured group  
Wanting own thing  
Must be unified  
One song we must sing

# Zebra Stripes

*Marilyn Rea Beyer*

How many times had I died in my mind?  
Cycling full-tilt through the crossing,  
Invested in my right-of-way.  
I could see how it would be.  
The impact: The bike, a mangled projectile,  
And I flying head over ass,  
Knees, ankles, and shoulders  
In every wrong direction.  
Then dark, and done.

I suppose I'd go to Heaven,  
Or at least not to Hell.  
I have no important sins.  
And from aloft post-mortem, I would view the  
vehicular homicide:  
The driver – a girl – maybe, what? Nineteen...?  
Distracted by urgent youth,  
Hit the brake a beat too late,  
Killing me, bike and all.  
Then from Heaven, I would see in horror  
That otherwise innocent girl  
Living out a life sentence on Earth.  
My life taken, hers destroyed.

That's why I stop at zebra stripes.



STEPHANE LANOUX PHOTOGRAPHY



Where Dust Meets the Sky

Octavia

## So you're out on a limb

*Mark Andrew Heathcote*

where paranoia's learn to swim  
 or somersault fall mid-air.  
 And to your despair  
 you find no one truly cares  
 no one sees you as a friend or foe.  
 They stopped caring about you, child  
 along-long time ago  
 oh, where to begin?  
 Our realization of all this  
 is profound,  
 Lord knows I'm not thin-skinned  
 some folk are-fished-out of  
 lakes and drowned in canals.  
 Others find their feet  
 and say I won't-be-cheated  
 life goes on.  
 Fill-in-that lake, concrete that canal  
 or divert that river  
 I'll not-be-drown anytime soon  
 in that wee pond  
 I've been well and truly schooled.



*Artwork by Michael Benisty, photos by Stephane Lanoux*

Broken Together 2.0

STEPHANE LANOUX PHOTOGRAPHY



# Piratical

*Javy Awan*

The earth curves softly into that zone  
where birds migrate, hibernations cease,  
ice releases life from its weakened jaws,  
splashing up pure water—now meteors drop  
as smooth glass ovals, aglow into our hands,  
with bottled notes in angelic script  
so lilting, so beautiful, you must read it  
by pressing it first to your heart, then to your ear—  
the message appears, and you know what it says  
but cannot pronounce it—you must live it out,  
because the message breathes from the lungs of love!

We must cast off on that dangerous voyage—  
I'm hard at work on the old battleship,  
scraping rust from the hull, and spreading  
the paint that will weather the sprays  
of waves and of dolphins—how its wake  
will ridge with sunlight the seas' dark surface,  
to penetrate the depths with combs of rays,  
as love filters through these expanding ribs.

The draped guns on each deck mean no harm—  
but there will be fireworks, and small craft  
at play while we anchor, as voices drift by  
in ditties, hails, and banter. We have goods to ply,  
gaining wealth with each transaction—  
the cargo is full and empty and full up again,  
ever richer—this will repeat till home harbor.

I know I'm in love because every time  
I run my pennants up they fly and flap  
with a handsome snap, and suddenly  
others in the harbor reply, not to me  
but signaling their own sweethearts—

It's like being a prime mover, though clearly  
something has moved me—no, someone—  
of exotic features, of provocative shape, speech,  
daring, music, sass, dance, and elegance—  
all that captures the heart! But forswear piracy  
for mollifying couth? Ho! Step lively, mates—

She's sailing across with all banners flying—  
a sleek frigate charged with mines of locked gems—  
I must align course, steer alongside, full rudder,  
then grapple and board like a practiced pirate,  
dagger vised in my teeth, my head  
bandanna'd, fierce eye on the treasure,  
hands to the struggle, mano à mano, til we fall,  
she and I—for lack of Romance language—  
there in the cabin—to something à something!



**Diver Up**

*Ranny Viquez*





## Overheard in a Salem Witch's Shop\*

*Shelli Jankowski-Smith*

We need to order more of those Bright Blessings  
 mugwort used to make the old ones fly, you can use it for a trip  
 my mom is all Celtic but I'm into the Norse gods  
 no, light the green candle not the pink  
 it's too hot today, that's why the baby's crying  
 she's a good cat but I wouldn't screw around with her  
 the damned kitchen sink is leaking again  
 I wanted to keep my daughters close so I spelled them so they couldn't move away  
 just rub some eucalyptus under your nose  
 I hate that crap New Age music she plays  
 these people are crazy  
 I'm looking for subsidized housing now, it sucks  
 the fairies have been flashing around my yard this spring  
 always mix sweetgrass with your sage  
 if she insists on using cinnamon oil in her bath then she's going to get a rude awakening  
 I used to have the Sight but it's getting weaker as I age  
 shut that front door, some creepy entity keeps coming through  
 I hate Halloween  
 you're a psychic, so dress the part  
 yeah, they all feel the ghost in the basement but he's harmless  
 don't worry about it, I take care of my girls  
 this construction work unleashed all kinds of weird energy  
 so he asked me "what herb do you use for dark lust?" and then he pulled a coconut  
 out of his pocket... what the hell!?!  
 why yes, that IS tinsel in my hair  
 she pretended to be looking at our window box, but she just came over to spy on us  
 this dragon's blood is getting dusty.

\* this poem is a compilation of actual quotes overheard among customers and staff during my time working at a Salem witch's shop



# Seven Lovers

*Marilyn Rea Beyer*

I was not always thus:  
Crisp sheets,  
Matching dishes,  
Old-fashioned values,  
Modern wishes.

I buried bones in Paris,  
I made seven lovers weep.  
I swam the seas of Africa,  
And never stopped to sleep.

I made love in Eden's vineyards,  
Fingers painted with the fruit.  
I dyed my head hilarious red,  
And wore purple silken suits.

I followed Albert Schweitzer,  
Paved the highway up to Nome,  
Even hiked that wall in China,  
Then I settled down at home.

The me you see before you, ah,  
Sips wine from hand-blown flutes.  
And except for rare occasions,  
I always tell the truth.

citpati



*Ranny Viquez*

# To be born here is to know you are, blest

*Mark Andrew Heathcote*

Manchester is embedded, in my heart  
Its poetry, music and public art  
Artist, Dante Gabriel Rossetti  
Hangs alongside L. S. Lowry's sketchy  
Waterways, buildings that smelt like latrines  
Dark brooding, inner-city landscape scenes  
Industrial factory workers, dogs  
And young teens, men and boys in boots and clogs,

Smog-painted cotton mills, oily canals  
Red-brick chimneys turned over like sepals  
Are they now luxury condominiums?  
But the canals are still hideous  
They are filled, with shopping trolleys, beer cans  
And infected needles, a dozen rats-  
Plus keep watch for the bulldozer's approach  
While the city expands on its encroach;

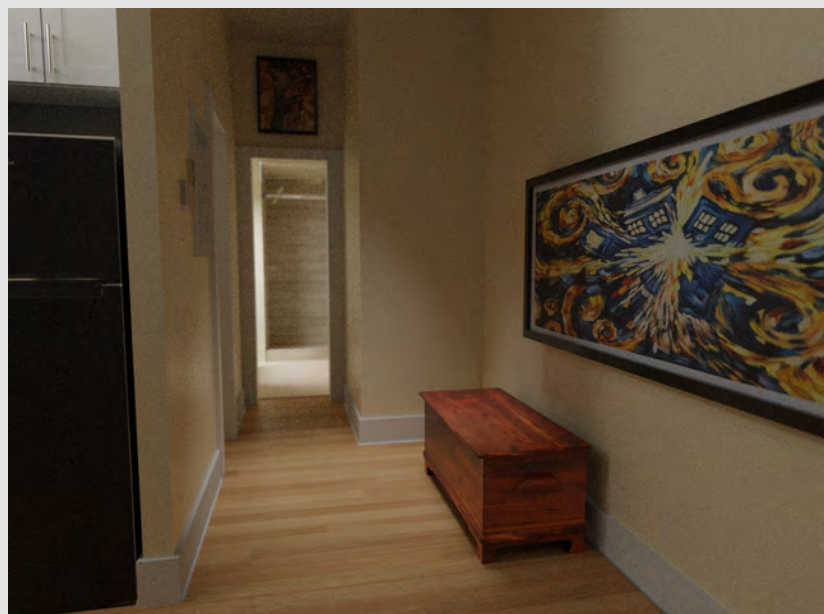
Towering cranes cover the skyline  
Monolithic monuments like saline-  
Tubes feed the greed of an ambitious few;  
Little has changed; we're still back of the queue  
Us match-stalk men proud of our heritage  
Our northern soul, Boddington's beverage  
Our own-poetess Dame Carol Ann Duffy  
It's all a part of our Topology.

It's the way we danced at Twisted Wheel  
A spinning backflip into a cartwheel  
The rave music of the Hacienda,  
The acid house gyrating dilemma  
Wanting never to sleep or surrender  
Back into that sad 9 to 5 ever-after  
Back to that poorly-paid Lowry sweatshop,  
It's in my heart, my blood, every teardrop.

Manchester's iconic Joy Division  
Love will tear us apart, that cynicism  
Is what binds us all kid, that and The Smiths  
Heaven Knows I'm Miserable Now—riffs  
Legends like Bobby Charlton and George Best  
And those like Denis Law, who wore both vests  
Manchester is buried, deep in my chest  
To be born here is to know you are, blest.

# 3 Renders of an Apartment

*Hideki Watanabe*





Love to my family  
 And all my kin  
 Love to all  
 I consider a friend  
 Most of all  
 A woman I know  
 She the one  
 Who helps love grow  
 Thank you Love  
 For that you do  
 Smoothing the edges  
 That tend to hurt true  
 Miss you during sleep  
 Miss you when away  
 Grateful for your love  
 Each and every day  
 Know things been tough  
 For it seems our age  
 Where all encounter  
 A challenging stage  
 A sign of Thanks  
 An expression of Love  
 Owe much more  
 Than a pat and a hug

Feeling energy  
 Pulsing to and fro  
 Providing guidance  
 Where to go  
 Simplify things  
 Simplify life  
 Competition and money  
 Create all strife  
 Failure to share  
 Between the souls  
 Impacts destiny  
 Alters true goals  
 Failure to teach  
 To our youth  
 Spiritual reality  
 And honest truth  
 Follow the heart  
 It knows the plan  
 Follow it true  
 Life may be grand  
 Blessed are people  
 From angels we descend  
 Stay true to heart  
 This earth we will mend  
 ~Frank Thoughts

# Home Before Dark

"Shape without form, shade without colour,  
Paralysed force, gesture without motion."  
-"Hollow Men," T.S. Eliot

On a warm Long Island summer night in 1979 about seven months before my father, who was a lieutenant in the New York City Police Department, unexpectedly died of a heart attack, he sent me to bear witness to a ritual murder. What's more, I enjoyed it. In fact, I rooted for the killer, who was a young man not too much older than me. He brutally hacked his victim into pieces with a razor sharp machete. Each time the blade tore into his victim's flesh, I cheered. "Kill the old man. Kill him."

As usual, my father occupied his familiar spot on the living room couch. He spent nearly all his time at home there. He mostly slept. Sometimes he read, listened to opera, watched TV and nearly always had a Lucky Strike dangling from his lips.

No one else was home that night. My mother worked the three to 11 shift in the ICU department of Brunswick Hospital. My grandmother and sister visited with my aunt who lived around the corner. My brother was in Virginia serving in the Navy. I was downstairs lying on my bed reading.

Around eight o'clock my name thundered from upstairs. "Bobby." the "o" came out like the "a" in father with a slight drawl. The "y" like Fonzie's "Ayyy."

I dropped my book and ran up the stairs, "Yes dad?"

"Want Carvel?"

Carvel is a New York-based soft ice cream franchise that was fixture in every strip mall from the East River to Montauk.

He didn't care whether I wanted ice cream. He just didn't feel like driving. I hated him for his lack of control over his appetites. Or, who knows, maybe that was the only way he could be nice.

I stuffed my feelings into their cage and replied. "No thanks. But I'll go to the store for you."

He reached under his prodigious belly into his trouser pocket, withdrew a worn leather billfold, and handed me a \$20 bill. "I want a chocolate nut sundae with vanilla ice cream." Like I didn't know.

20 minutes later I stood at the couch's edge handing him a Styrofoam cup full of ice cream along with his change.

He took the sundae. "Have you seen Apocalypse Now?" he asked.

Not sure how to answer, I tentatively replied, "No."

The question seemed odd. He didn't go to the movies. At least I thought he didn't. I know he didn't go with my mother. Then I remembered yet another one of his uncontrollable appetites—this one far less benign than ice cream.

Anger flashed, "He must've seen it with his skank mistress"

## Home Before Dark

She was supposed to be a secret. But late one night several years earlier my brother and I and saw him in her car in front of our house. We tacitly agreed never to speak of it.

Concealing my father's sins seemed the best way to avoid hastening the dissolution of our family. Bearing the secret had consequences. At 17 my brother ran away and joined the Navy. I gained 60 pounds and nearly flunked out of college.

"Go see it," he ordered. "It's fantastic," This time emphasizing the first syllable and sounding the "a" sounded like "Ann."

Proffering his change, I told him, "No thanks. I don't like violent movies."

He waved off the comment and the change, "See the movie."

"But there's no one to go with,"

He reached for the Newsday lying on the coffee table and thumbed to the Living/Arts section. "There's a nine thirty show at the Lowes in Bay Shore."

"But dad," I protested.

"Go!"

Anger and frustration swelled. Fear contained it. Years of beatings and bullying taught me to suppress my feelings. So I went and I lied to myself. "Pick your battles."

### **Apocalypse: Now!**

Director Francis Ford Coppola and John Milius, who co-wrote the first two Dirty Harry movies collaborated on an adaptation of Joseph Conrad's literary masterpiece Heart of Darkness. Instead of a European steamboat captain and ivory trader named Marlow sailing up the Congo to retrieve a lost soul, the U.S. government ordered a Special Forces captain named Willard to journey up a fictional South East Asian river named Nung to "terminate with extreme prejudice" a Green Beret colonel named Kurtz who'd gone native.

The movie faithfully captures the essence of Conrad's story. It argues against imperialism and the fundamental hypocrisies of our culture. It paints a stark portrait about the flimsy mask of civilization worn by men. Bereft of checks and balances, we revert to the brutish and unflinching laws of nature.

My father dropped out of high school at 17 to become a paratrooper in the 82nd Airborne. Two years before that he tried to enlist to fight in the Korean War. He fooled the Army or more likely they didn't care. His parents had to drive to Fort Dix in New Jersey and drag him home. My grandfather, Nathan, who was a small time bookie and loan shark, didn't seem to mind. My grandmother gave him a vicious beating. Dreams of glory and adventure had to wait. So, I doubt my father read Heart of Darkness.

# Home Before Dark

## Ignus Fatuous

The novella did not inform my father's motivation. Whereas, my English professor assigned it because Conrad occupied a hallowed slot in the cannon of dead white guys deemed essential to understanding the transition from 19th Century literature to Modernism, my father sent me to watch the movie to give insight into his situation and to presage the climax of our own version of the Oedipus Rex.

At the time, I thought of the movie as nothing more than ignus fatous, foolish fire, flickering on a silver screen. I judged my father harshly for bullying me into going, for his many sins venal and mortal, for his lack of education, and for his inability to express himself.

I had no compassion for his situation. Men like my father, sons and grandsons of dirt-poor Eastern European peasants still carried the attitudes and burdens of institutionalized poverty and serfdom. When young, survival required the ability to take pain. When grown up, existence required the ability to inflict pain. They worked to survive and aspired to define themselves by their jobs. They expressed themselves through their actions, which nowadays is called toxic masculinity. They taught by example rather than by story.

## Hollow Men

I arrived home close to midnight. The empty, Styrofoam sundae cup, stained black with rivulets of chocolate syrup lay forlornly on the coffee table like a decapitated head carelessly tossed next to its body. My father indolently lay beside it. Every lamp in the house burned brightly in contrast with the movie's lurid world of shadow. Low-key lighting hid Marlon Brando's swollen body and shrouded Kurtz in mystery. High key lighting revealed everything. A Lucky billowed smoke from an ashtray.

Moments before Kurtz's death we hear him reciting T.S. Eliot's poem "The Hollow Men." "In this last of meeting places /We grope together /And avoid speech /Gathered on this beach of the tumid river."

Clearly *Apocalypse Now* contained something he wanted me to learn. He had a lifelong relationship with violence and the law of the jungle that began with an abusive mother and father who supported his family with illegal gambling and usury. It played itself out in the Army and later when he joined New York City Police Department. As a rookie, he got his taste of war when his duty required him to shoot and kill an armed robber. He associated with the corrupt cops and worked in some of the toughest neighborhoods in New York City.

Except for our genes, we had little common ground because he shielded my brother and me from the brutality of growing up poor in the Bronx—at least he tried. It made for a complicated relationship because his ideas about being a man were the living embodiment of what we now call toxic masculinity because they revolved around the ability to fight and domination. He had no respect for me because I cried easily and preferred to run rather than fight.

Driving home from the screening, I keenly observed how Marlow and Kurtz stood for the late Victorian man grappling with a rapidly changing world, Willard and Colonel Kurtz symbolized the 80's permutation of the American man: neurotic and self-absorbed, victim and perpetrator, dissolute men adrift without no moral compass. It was an analysis I'd like to think would have delighted my professors.

"You were right dad. It was a good movie. Thanks for the treat."

I fumbled over a few platitudes as his crystal blue eyes seemed to ask, Are you here to kill me? I averted my glance.

# Home Before Dark

What passed for a smile brushed his lips.

"There's some change left,"

"You keep it."

I bent down and kissed him on the lips. "Night dad."

He rolled toward the back of the couch in a peaceful easy motion and closed his eyes. All these years later, Eliot's words bubble up, "Shape without form, shade without colour, /Paralysed force, gesture without motion." ("Hollow Men").

## **Hollow Point**

"The Contracting Parties agree to abstain from the use of bullets which expand or flatten easily in the human body, such as bullets with a hard envelope which does not entirely cover the core, or is pierced with incisions."

-The Hague Peace Conferences of 1899, "Laws of War."

What ended with a screening of Apocalypse Now began in 1969, when my father gave me his .22 caliber Remington bolt action rifle for my 12th birthday. My memory says he bought it about a year before I was born along with a 12-gauge shotgun for his one and only hunting trip.

The black and white section of my family photo album documents the trip. One image depicted a skinny man-child standing erect in a clearing in the middle of a nameless wood. He stared into the camera holding a lifeless young buck off the ground by its antlers.

Hindsight and literary license afford me numerous opportunities to create a tidy mythology about my family. The "Great White Hunter" shot reminds me of a passage from The Rise of Theodore Roosevelt that describes the future president's last hunting trip before marrying Alice Lee. Edmund Morris says, "One more adventure remained to him as a bachelor." He quotes Roosevelt telling his mother Mittie "I think it will build me up."

My father and Roosevelt came from very different New Yorks. I wonder if that is what was on my father's mind? Did he really think mastering the woods and killing would build him up? Or was it just another in a long list of half-baked schemes concocted on a Bronx street corner by him and his buddies?

Myth and reality occupied the same space, albeit for only a moment. Conflating a moment Roosevelt's life with a lesser man like my father makes for an effective literary conceit. It contributes to myth after all.

The bottom of the snapshot marked the time as November 1956. A month later my 18 year old mother would become pregnant me and then sent off to a home for unwed mothers in North Carolina. About six months after that, he and his family rescued her from the home. My father made her "an honest woman" before two random strangers in a North Carolina city hall. three months later I came into the world through no fault of my own, and like TR, the trip presaged his youth's expiry.

The circumstances of my family's beginning were one of many secrets. I knew very little of this story growing up. All I had were the pictures and fragments of memory gleaned by being in the same room as the grownups as they discussed the past.



## Home Before Dark

With the ubiquity of digital recording devices and social media, we have become exhibitionists who record every moment with pornographic detail for mass consumption. Snapshot photography in the 1950s was far more intimate. People usually reserved the camera for significant events because film required deliberate intentions. This imbued moments of light recorded on cellulose acetate with importance, whether because they were in fact so or because the act of recording made them so. Those pictures of my father's hunting trip provide a lens through which to glimpse into the mythos my parents intended to create about their lives.

The myth's narrative goes on to say the kill shot was the last note that the 12 gauge ever sang for my father. I remember the tragic look on his face as he told me about the buck's sad eyes and how they filled his heart with regret. That left me confused. I knew him as a fearless warrior: a New York City policeman, the kid who ran away from home at 15 to fight in the Korean War, the paratrooper who served in the 82nd Airborne, and the man who meted justice with a leather belt.

He gave away the meat to a nameless poor family. The shotgun went to our family doctor. Only the photos, his hunting tags, and an buck's antlers and scalp mounted on a wooden plaque. It hung on the wall of the room my brother and I shared when we lived on Nelson Avenue in the Bronx. Those forking branches of bone frozen in adolescence by a 12-gauge slug always seemed so fragile and small.

After we moved to the suburbs the hunting paraphernalia--including the trophy—disappeared--all but the .22 caliber Winchester bolt-action rifle that he kept stowed in the back of his closet.

For many years, I believed he intended to use it as some sort of initiation into manhood. Literarily the conceit works. As I think about it now through the lens of middle age, I think he kept it as a memento of his own youth. Every man needs to remember the time in his life when the way forward was not writ.

Like many boys throughout the ages, he viewed hunting and war as great adventures. They were moments where others paid the ultimate price so the strong could prove their mettle. One can argue about whether that is learned or natural. Ultimately the debate is pointless. Men perpetuate the myth. Boys grow up believing in it. And by the time we cotton to the bullshit, we have sons of our own.

I read about guns and war and watched war movies as a kid. My fifth grade book report about the famed World War II American Volunteer Group "The Flying Tigers" numbers in the top five of my (real or imagined) literary accomplishments. In the seventh grade we had to take wood shop. I made a cherry wood ammunition box, which I still have.

My friends and I talked about guns. We played "Army" with improvised toy guns. No one had enough money to buy real toys. We went to nearby construction sites and dug foxholes into the dirt piles and then threw Ping-Pong ball sized clods of clay, which we called dirt bombs, at one another until someone cried.

On the rare times when my parents weren't home, I stole into their room and gazed longingly at the milk chocolate colored case with the beige pleather trim and dreamed of the day when it would be my turn to unbuckle the leather strap and remove the weapon from its case. I imagined the darkly stained walnut stock pressing against my shoulder as I cradled the forestock in my left hand and wrapped my right around the pistol grip. I imagined the contrast between the warm wood and the chill of the metal trigger as it conducted the heat from body.

The deer always fell with one shot but there was never any blood.

## Home Before Dark

My father never took me hunting. He did, after much cajoling, bring me to the Town of Islip shooting range. We went on a chilly autumn day not unlike the one I remember from the hunting photos. Before we left for the range, he sent me for the gun.

But not before warning me about an upcoming lecture, "There are some things we've got to talk about before we leave," he said. "And then you've got to clean the gun. I haven't used it in years." We stood in the kitchen when the order went out. I skipped to his bedroom and fished out the gun. Then we went downstairs to the den where we sat on the couch.

"First of all," he said in a very stern voice. "This is your gun but you are never," he hit on never like he meant business, "To use it unless I'm around." My father didn't say things like "is that clear?" or "do you understand?" He issued orders once and once only.

I nodded my head up and down vigorously.

He continued. "Always assume it's loaded. So never point it at anyone and never, look down the barrel. If I catch you doing either one, that'll be the last time you see this," shaking the gun.

He held the rifle by its pistol grip. The muzzle pointed down and away from us. "This is the safety. Flick forward and you can't pull the trigger push it that way and" CLICK went the firing pin, I heard the sound of metal tapping against metal. "Never trust the safety."

He drew back the bolt and said, "Here's the chamber. When the magazine is full, bullets come from inside and you slide them in place." He slid the bolt forward and torqued it down. "This gun holds 12 .22 long rifle bullets. They go in here," pointing to the front end of the gun at the entrance of the tubular magazine.

"Hand me the cleaning kit," he assembled the jointed cleaning rod, placed the plastic tip on its end, slipped a flannel cleaning swab through the eye of the tip, and dipped the swab in the open bottle of sweet-smelling gun cleaning fluid.

Placing the butt of the gun on the floor he rammed the swab down the gun's barrel and pulled it back and forth.

"See how dirty this is?" he said gesturing with the cleaning rod so that the soiled patch waved before my eyes.

"They should come out clean. Get another patch and you try."

Nothing in the world existed but that gun. I grabbed another of the white flannel swabs and nervously threaded it into the plastic eye. When I dipped the rod into the cleaning fluid, the bottle nearly tipped.

"Easy son," my father said in a tone that sounded dangerously (and surprisingly) close to endearing. The butt wobbled between my feet and the muzzle slithered like a snake. In a rare display of patience, he waited as I rammed the patch down the barrel and stroked.

"Like this?" I asked pulling the thin aluminum tube back and forth at a considerable pace. "Go easy." He steadied the gun by placing his left hand. His tobacco stained fingers wrapped around my other hand and he slowed the stroke. "Like this," he said in that awkwardly endearing voice.

Stale cigarette smoke, old spice aftershave combined with the noxiously sweet odor from the gun cleaning fluid to fill my nose.

## Home Before Dark

Satisfied that I understood the rudiments he said, " When you're done, clean up the mess and call me."

He wasn't upstairs for more than five minutes when I called out, "Finished."

"Did the last patch come out clean?"

I lied, "Yeah--" Well it was pretty clean.

"Don't say yeah," he bellowed from the kitchen. "Say YES."

"Yes dad."

The trip to the rifle range took less than ten minutes before we screamed around the corner onto Freeman Avenue in my father's maroon 1968 Mustang coupe. In honor of the day, he had left a long strip of rubber at the top of our block and drove like Junior Johnson running a load of 'shine along the back roads of Islip. The range was across the road from Islip Speedway, it seems to nod approvingly as we pulled into shooting range's parking lot. For an instant I felt torn but the entrance of the rifle range called louder.

We turned onto the gravel parking lot amid a riot of rubber flinging stones. The roaring 289 stopped. The doors opened and quiet enveloped the scene. Two cars parked at lazy angles sat by the main entrance: one belonged to the range officer, the other to the counter person.

The ever-present Lucky dangling from my father's mouth wagged up and down as he spoke, "Alright Bobby, get your rifle. "

'He said my rifle,' I thought to myself I reached in the back seat, grabbed it, and followed him to the little office by the gate.

"Where's the muzzle pointing?" he snapped.

"Oh yeah," and I directed it downward. We were the first people at the range that morning. He paid the fee, bought some targets and we walked over towards a row of wooden picnic tables behind the firing line.

"Take your gun out and place it over there," he said pointing to a rack in front of the wooden tables.

Just after the rack was a narrow tarmac strip about six feet wide with white vertical lines cutting it into maybe ten slices. 50 feet beyond that, we saw an earthen berm that was maybe 15 feet wide and 20 or 25 feet high. Lined along its bottom edge was a row of wooden posts upon which were affixed the tattered remains of old paper targets.

The range officer, who resembled a crusty marine drill sergeant, walked towards us. He wore a pseudo military uniform complete down to the campaign hat and sidearm.

"Morning," he said, giving me a curt and manly smile. "You here to shoot?" My dad interceded before I could respond and they fell into an impromptu conference. I couldn't hear what was said because they walked just out of earshot. But at one point I saw my father reach into his pocket. He produced a thin leather wallet and flipped it open and shut.

# Home Before Dark

The gold NYPD sergeant's badge inside flashed briefly like ray of sunshine through a thickly clouded sky and then went dim just as suddenly when the black leather cover flopped closed. The range officer nodded respectfully and walked back towards me.

"Now son," the ranger officer said, he prefaced all his opening remarks with preposition now. "You're going to shoot from the prone position. That means you lay down, put your left arm under the gun like this, and your right hand right here," pointing to the muzzle end of the barrel and the pistol grip respectively. "And the butt here," pointing to my shoulder. "Don't shoot 'till I tell you and you stop when I say stop. Is that clear?"

"Now, get your gun. Lay it down by position five. Come back here for the stapler and let's tack on a target."

The three of us arrived at the target post more or less at the same time. Both of them hung back slightly. Though my attention was focused on the task of pinning up a target, I could sense that conspiratorial smile men get when they see a young boy committing his first fully approved manly acts.

Finally the moment I was waiting for had arrived. I spent the better part of the last year reading everything I could get my hands on about guns and shooting-war books, shooting magazines, you name it. I had the knowledge. The target was set. I had five bullets in my hand. The ranger officer blew his whistle and recited his litany.

"Ready on the right, ready on the left. Load five rounds and await the command to fire." he paused for a moment while I fumbled with my bullets.

I laid on the ground and awaited the officer's next command. My father nuzzled up behind my ear, "Line the tip inside the notch, make a lollipop with the bull's eye, hold your breath, and squeeze."

The range officer blew his whistle again and shouted, "Chamber your first round and commence firing."

The gun felt heavy in my hands and wobbled despite my attempts at steadying it. The black bull's eye skipped and danced atop the metal sight like the bouncing ball from a Warner Brothers cartoon. "By the light," Crack. I jerked the trigger. "Of the silvery moon . . . ." Who cared if the bouncing ball didn't stop.

A puff of smoke billowed from the chamber followed by the acrid smell of burnt cordite. I drew the bolt back. A brass shell flew out and hit me in the face just below my right eye. It felt warm. Another bullet replaced the spent casing and I drove the bolt home.

"Don't jerk the trigger," my father commanded. "Hold your breath, make a lollipop, and squeeze."

The tune faded and the black dot stopped moving, I held my breath. Squeezed-CRACK. A burst of adrenaline shot through my body from the surprise.

"That's it son," said my father.

After spending my last bullet, the ranger officer blew his whistle and said, "Place your weapon down and back away from the firing line."

I looked at my father with the excitement that only a 12 year old can muster, "Let's go look at the target."

## Home Before Dark

With the range officer's approval, we walked across the no man's land to the target. Three shots hit. One was actually in the black but not dead center but in the black. We put up an new one and in the space of a whole morning I finished off my first box of 50 bullets.

That was the one and only time my father ever took me shooting. After that, things returned to normal. I went to school. He went to work. Our conversations lapsed back into monarch and peasant colloquies.

"Cut the lawn."

"Yes dad."

"Take out the garbage."

"Yes dad."

"Did you rake the leaves."

"No dad."

"Do it now."

Pubic hair, shaving, first dates, wrestling team, driving lessons, drinking beer, the graduations, going away to college and everything else in between the day my father took me to the rifle range and the night he sent me off to see *Apocalypse Now* for my final moral instruction reeked and dripped from the swamp of confusion through which those of us who grew up as boys in the latter part of the 20th Century have been obliged to pass.

The ancients we're told had cultural mechanisms for training boys to become men. Adolescent boys were removed from the familiar, separated from their homes, families, and daily routines tells Robert Bly in *Iron John*. Then, "The old men tell the boys stories as soon as they enter the men's world." (IJ, p.34) They ritually wound the initiates and suggest through the stories that the injury stands for "a variety of childhood wounds" (p.34) as well as for the wounds all men receive and must bear in their lifetimes.

Our culture offers no such initiation rites. Rather we rely on public school, the media, and lukewarm ceremonies like what we find in the Boy Scouts, like confirmations, or bar mitzvahs, or graduation ceremonies, "You're a man now," the principal beams as he hands you the diploma and flips your tassel from left to right-or is it right to left? I still can't remember despite having attended three graduations of my own and numerous others for family members. And all the drum beating and hairy-man stories alone won't fill that hole in a man's life.

We ignored the wounds for a long time. In the first half of the 20th century, fathers taught sons that the ideal man was strong and silent, crafty and smooth, and sometimes violent. But, vulnerable? Never. How many of us as boys heard, "I'll give you something to cry about," in the midst of a beating?

Literature and Hollywood reinforced the notion. I know I spent hours as a child watching old 40s and 50s movies-mostly cowboy and World War Two genre. My father was always at work or sleeping and his brothers were too young, so John Wayne, Robert Mitchum, Jimmy Stewart, Humphrey Bogart, and a galaxy of other silver screen leading men were my mentors.

Just as Athena adopted the guise of Mentor in *The Odyssey* and taught Telemakhos that boys wait, men act, my silver screen mentors donned character after character in story after story and taught me that men bore their pain and hardship stoically. They did the right thing when faced with moral dilemmas. And they took swift and violent action to solve problems.

## Home Before Dark

My reading wasn't much different. I was a big Hemingway fan. He taught us that wounded men marched on despite their injuries. Only weak men allowed pain to ooze through the cracks of their masks like pus that proved you weren't made of the right stuff. Robert Cohn, the pugnacious but tentative Jew from the *The Sun Also Rises*, comes to mind. He was less a man in Hemingway's eyes despite having both his testicles.

In World War Two soldiers who fell apart in firefights suffered from battle fatigue, not Post Traumatic Stress Syndrome. They were an embarrassment, worthy only of a contemptuously flung leather glove in the face.

Something happened in the 60s and as a culture we began acknowledging men's "wounds," (which gave rise to today's victim culture). Some might suggest the women's movement was the cause but I don't think so. There are other explanations that are equally as plausible. In the guise of Mentor, the goddess Athena tells Telemakhos, "The son is rare who measures with his father, and one in a thousand is a better man." *The Odyssey*, Book II, p.27.)

Tough odds, to be sure. But even that is little more than Homer's literary fancy. Say, rather, the cultural pendulum unexpectedly reached its apogee and didn't hang around long at the top. That's how it is with pendulums. We watch them travel with great determination along an arc and cannot imagine them ever returning. But the very forces driving it one way, pull it the other. William Butler Yeats expressed this notion in his metaphor of the interposed gyres, which represented the dual nature of humanity. The tip of one touched the base of the other and they spun along in opposite directions. We spend our time mostly in the middle but travelling to the bottom of one vortex or the other.

Despite what people might suggest, we aren't really much more than three or four generations from those "ancient initiation practices" lamented by Robert Bly and his followers. Indeed, William Faulkner captures the essence of the Southern American version of ritual passage into manhood in his novella "The Bear." The story begins with Ike McCaslin at age 16, "For six years now he had been a man's hunter. For six years now he had heard the best of all talking. It was of wilderness, the big woods, bigger and older than any recorded document . . . . It was of the men, not white nor black nor red but men, hunters, with the will and hardihood to endure and the humility and skill to survive." (*Go Down Moses*. p. 191)

What marked Ike McCaslin's ascendancy into the status of "a man's hunter" was the felling of his first buck. But that too was part of a larger process. First he was admitted into the Major DeSpain's hunting camp as a 10 year old novice who'd completed a preliminary apprenticeship by hunting squirrel and rabbit in his own backyard. When the men deemed him ready for the wilderness he was given to Sam Fathers, son of a slave once owned by Ike's family. Sam instructed him in woodcraft and hunting.

He oversaw the boy's development, away from his family and society. And when he shot his first deer, Sam Fathers, his mentor, marked Ike's face with the still warm blood of the dying animal in a gesture which said, "You're a man now. You can find your way through the wilderness. You have the inner-strength to pull the trigger. This carcass and its blood symbolize the consequences of your actions."

"The Bear" was a celebration of the wilderness but it was also a eulogy for its passing and with it went rituals such as "the best of all talking," or marking the initiate's face with blood. Despite his prowess as a hunter, Ike McCaslin never fit into modern Southern society. He rejected his patrimony, his claims to the land, and lived a kind of monastic life in which he clung to the ways of the old.

With the passing of the world's wildernesses, survival's requirements have seemingly changed irrevocably. Clearly defined roles for men seemingly no longer exist.

# Home Before Dark

Popular culture and most men's books haven't been particularly helpful in their efforts at redefining masculinity because so much of what appears on the screen or in print is based in large measure on commerce and popular opinion.

We all find ourselves scratching our heads after having watched years of TV and movies because the ideal Hollywood man mutates with the regularity of the flu virus: one year lionizing strong silent types like John Wayne, Lee Marvin, or Clint Eastwood; another year admiring the vulnerable qualities of neurotic crybabies like Woody Allen or sensitive types like the Alan Alda of the long running TV dramady M\*A\*S\*H, or machines like the RoboCop and Terminator and now zombies or vampires.

Inspired in part by the popularity of Bly's *Iron John* we reexamined our assumptions about manhood; however, most so-called men's books borrow the terminology of victimization. They're written by apologists eager to atone for the patriarchy and toxic masculinity. Besides they ignore the most basic fact. This might sound like the out of touch ramblings of an old man in an era of 50 genders but men are men and women are women. There's no need for apology. There's a need for identifying our differences and celebrating them. That's what will provide the energy for a lively culture.

Perhaps most damaging of all, pseudo-psycho-literary books like *Iron John* or self-help books like Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's *King Warrior Magician Lover; Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine* assume that the road to what they call the "mature masculine" passes almost solely through the intellect in the form of ancient stories and popular Jungian psychology.

Their approach is fundamentally wrong. Men are taught to define themselves through action rather than reflection and while reflection and thought are certainly important, I'd rather act. Why? The best way to solve a problem is relying on one's strengths. For me the solution has been to face the world with honest determination. I stopped blaming my parents and society for the empty feeling inside. The ancients with their initiation rites and their putatively ordered societies faced the same basic problems as us: the quest for significance, a fear of entropy, the need to thrive.

The ideal solution already exists. Homer set it to words almost 3,000 years ago in *The Odyssey*. We should learn to live Odysseus' life: seize opportunities as they come, kill when you have to, cry when you're sad, learn from your mistakes, and get home before dark. Odysseus' wisdom comes from the journey not from the achievements along the way. Peace of mind comes from taking action. Peace of mind comes from integrating your self-knowledge, feelings, and actions. But as *The Odyssey* teaches us, our relationship with it ebbs and flows as we journey from adolescence to the grave. And when we reach the end, our job is to walk inland with an oar over our shoulder until we meet someone upon the road who's never seen one. Plant it there and tell them your story.

