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Volume One / Issue Two

New Fiction by Joshua Lefkowitz, Gary Simmonds & whit frazier  
Perspectives on Andrew Jarecki's *Capturing the Friedmans* and  
Max Beckmann's "Hell" exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art

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STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE  
AUGUST 2003  
VOLUME ONE ISSUE TWO

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Strawberry Press Magazine is pleased to present Volume One Issue Two. This issue features work by two authors new to Strawberry Press. It also features perspectives on the Max Beckmann exhibit now at the Metropolitan Museum of Art as well as the film *Capturing the Friedmans*.

Enjoy!

# *Natural Living*

By Joshua Lefkowitz

Joshua Lefkowitz has been writing for many years. His work has appeared in numerous literary and online journals including the following: *Acorn*, *Conspire*, *M.U.S.E.*, *Encounters*, and *New Graffiti*. He can be reached at [jlefkowi@hunter.cuny.edu](mailto:jlefkowi@hunter.cuny.edu)

Shaky has been standing on the sidewalk in front of the vegan bakery, staring at the soot stained glass storefront for the entire afternoon. He forgets that the bakery was shut down last week. It is his daily routine to stop by, to ask Joseph about work and a place to stay. He will need help if he is going to move on.

Until noon, Shaky spent the day, undisturbed, lying down, twitching in the cigarette butts, packaged food wrappers, grass and dirt of the center field in Tompkins Park. Strangers do not notice him like the other homeless people of the East Village, for he is always alone and he never asks for money. Those who only know Shaky from the streets are often disgusted by his unkempt appearance. His wardrobe consists of one, dusty outfit that clings to his body like an undersized cocoon too tight to shed. His brittle hair sometimes drops out from underneath his New York Yankees baseball cap, straight to the ground like petrified straw, scaring away nearby children and pigeons. His face is hidden beneath a beard that is caked with a compound of dirt and old, dried blood. Other homeless people stay away from him for fear of the plague. Anyone from the bakery that recognizes Shaky will simply walk past him.

Yet, it is often the case that bakery people walk past him without recollection, even though he has served them countless times. This happened, today, when Ms. Walkley, the self-avowed orthodox communist and "original progenitor of itchucation," surveyed the park for fellow intellectually proletarian comrades. Walkley has eagle-eyed vision; when she spots somebody she knows, she will assuredly bare down on that person with hellos and the weekly Marxist quote. It seems she should have remembered Shaky, especially after the events of last week.

Shaky used to be allowed to sleep in the basement unless he was experiencing uncontrollable episodes; his daily seizures often cause him to lose his bearings. He wakes up in a fright, screaming and violently shaking anything within reach. Numerous times his screams have scared the hell out of people walking on the sidewalk above the padlocked entrance to the basement. Consequently, Joseph would ban him from the store for at least one month. During these

periods, Shaky could be found on any sidewalk in the East Village. Even in the rain, he can sleep with his face flat on the concrete. The seizures help him to fall asleep, anyhow; they are often forceful enough to cast him head first into the ground.

Shaky has had three seizures, today. Each time he has recovered, immediately jumping to his feet while muttering foul language. He is pacing furiously. With every third step, he peers inside the bakery and yells, "I-know that. I-know-I, some, someone's. Baker? in there! Baker!" Once more the ill intent of the world against him has been revealed. Joseph is inside, illicitly trying to complete the last orders of his business. Since the bakery was unexpectedly closed he says that, "There is a moral obligation to the clientele." The police are not familiar with his working habits and stopped checking up on the place after ten. He has been baking for nineteen hours straight, the most he has ever accomplished in his twenty-four year career.

Joseph is a midnight baker; he rarely comes into work before eleven. When the bakery was legally operational, he could rely on his night shift to bungle his labor. The nighttime workers consisted of an irregular rotation of three heroin addicts, one former junky and two mentally ill individuals. Sandra had stopped using a long time ago, but was still very loyal to her junky friends. Every night she tried to convince Joseph to choose one of the junkies over Shaky or Cliffy, "Joseph, come on. You cand keep ledding dem work here. Dey crazy. Dey hands're fildy. Yesderday I saw one eading raw dough. An' d'od'r, he was clean'n one pan wid doo'picks. For de endire nighd." Joseph could not be persuaded; Shaky was Joseph's scapegoat for when the business was especially failing. During the Holidays, when Joseph desperately needed to complete his work, he would say, "I refuse to hire anyone who is not committed to completing his or her work for the evening. I have a ton of goals to accomplish: tofu cheesecakes, strawberry and chocolate tofu custard, tofu pizza, etcetera. Can you guarantee me that you will be productive?" Joseph's strongly worded speeches lacked the strength of his own conviction. Shaky only had to say, "But Baker-rrrr. But-I, I. How could you-you-ou. You. We're family." Although they were not family, Joseph

would not turn Shaky down. By hiring him each night, Cliffy was employed by extension. And, since Joseph was scared of being mugged, he hired one of the junkies for the night as a form of security against the other two.

Most nights, the kitchen was full of five people who could not manage to do more than bake a few items and to do some cleaning. Shaky and Cliffy would argue about how to do the dishes. One was told to do them and the other was told to eat the leftovers before they spoiled. Eating the leftovers was the shared fantasy of the anarchist vegan squatters of the East Village. Shaky and Clifford were incapable of understanding the value of this treasure. Neither of them ate regularly, yet the only bakery food they would accept was hot soup. Instead, one of the junkies would eat the leftovers and throw it up later.

Sandra was the only one who got much work done and this seemed to make her happy. She loved chocolate tofu cupcakes. Every night she would make a fresh batter of the gush and she would save one pound of it for herself. One of the junkies would sometimes quip, "Hey Sandra, you know. You eat so much of the chocolate, I think you made up that story about Carl knocking out them teeth." The junkies combined humor and insult in such a way that nothing they said was either funny or hurtful. Sandra rarely noticed when they talked to her; her world was nothing but baking and the chocolate tofu cupcakes. Everyone had his own world at the bakery, especially Joseph. He was the owner, manager and master baker, yet none of these titles aptly described his role. When he fired people they simply came back to work the next day, week, month or year. He could not follow his own recipes and took suggestions from the night crew on how to make vegan substitutions. When Joseph did not show up to work, he would leave the baking responsibilities in Shaky's hands. The bakery's relationship with its clientele was already tenuous. People who were loyal to the bakery rarely bought more than a cookie, and then they would only pay half price. These folks were not customers, they represented the dwindling groups of political vegetarians and squatters who once defined the neighborhood; they supported the bakery for the sake of real, healthy food. Steady paying customers were hard to retain, due to the unpredictable results of Joseph's baking. His irregular work habits broadened the damage.

When Joseph was absent, Shaky understood his responsibilities too well. Joseph's absence was precisely noted by Shaky, "Baker. Baker-er-s not here Baker. He has. He's not here right. Thirteen hours, forty-two minutes now-now. Now I'm. I say. I say. I'm in charge. Thir-teen hours for chrisakes. Where is he?" When Shaky ran the bakery, no one unfamiliar to Shaky was aloud to work. Since he could only positively identify Joseph, not much labor was accomplished during his reign. He would hiss at anyone who came to work in the morning, "Baker said. I. Well, Baker said. I-I-I-I. Baker said."

The menu was confounding enough for most people without Shaky's poor explanations: tofu cupcakes, dairy-less tofu ice cream, tofu pudding, tofu sandwiches, tofu-frosted cake; everything was "free" of wheat, refined sugar, dairy and any non-vegetarian ingredients. The goods were all put in the display case where customers could pick out the exact item they desired. The desserts were placed on plastic trays and plates with white index cards taped to the front as identifying labels. These labels caused a great deal of confusion, especially for new customers. They wanted to know, "Does the tofu cheese cake have cheese in it?" Tofu cheesecake was a misnomer. There was no cheese in the cheesecake, unless it was contaminated by Shaky. When he ran the bakery, confusion was rampant. He could not answer the litany of questions that often typified a single transaction:

"What is vegan?"

"Do you use genetically modified ingredients?"

"Is there any milk in the dairy-free cookies?"

"This stuff must be so good for you. It has to be made fresh every day since you guys don't use preservatives. How long ago was this made?"

The questions were endless and rarely answered to the satisfaction of the customers, especially those vegans who ate vegetarian in order to protect animals. When Shaky worked as salesman, he only managed to induce contempt. His lack of clarity elicited varying responses:

"What do you mean the tofu comes from here? As far as I know, tofu is not made in the city. You

have to go upstate, and I don't like how it's made there. So, where's it from?"

"You baked it, but you don't know what's in it?"

"You're asking me, what's organic?"

And to his uncleanliness:

"You're not going to serve me that food with those hands."

"You're probably why I've seen roaches here."

"You don't make the food do you?"

When Shaky would not let me work, I would sit around all day, watching him screw up with the customers. He had difficulty keeping his composure long enough to produce coherent single syllables in the presence of most people. With Walkley, however, he was pushed to his limit. Last week, when she entered the shop, her red army fatigues with matching beret and sandals seemed to bring his most feared hallucinations to life. She was wearing her pride all about as she tried to tell Shaky that she did not have to pay for the tofu brownies. "I don't know if Joseph has told you, but...well, see, since I give him all those magazines for free." Everything she said only induced a greater frenzy, as though she were a fast-talking devil intent on misleading him. "It's just that...well...I'd like a carob and a peanut butter wheat-free, chocolate-free, sugar-free tofu brownie, and Joseph usually gives them to me for free."

Shaky shook his head in disbelief, "Oh. Oh. Oh dear. Oh. Oh. Oh my. Oh. Oh. Oh. Well. Well. No. Tell me. Baker didn't tell me that. Didn't tell me that. I. I. I just." He was too scared of her to meet her gaze and too scared of Joseph to give away something for free. The rest of his body stood still while his head shook faster and faster. Walkley waited for him to acquiesce, "Come on, brother, we're all comrades. I understand your oppression. But Joseph is my friend. It's okay. You see those magazines, the vegetarian starter kit? You should take one. They're for everybody." She held up one of the magazines for everybody to see. "Everyone should take a vegetarian starter kit. We all have to be vegetarian, stop eating meat, make our minds, bodies and souls healthy." Her speech went on for as long as Shaky shook his head. It was the same speech she has

given many times. It has never been rehearsed, she has never orated its major points in the same sequence and it has only been presented to audiences at the bakery. She describes her speech-giving style as part of, "The new institution of itchucation. The process whereby the flesh is irritated in order to awaken the mind." Today, her talk is met with anticipated agitation, "Yeah, yeah, we all know. That's why we're here, to get some healthy, vegan deserts." The surrounding vexation spurred her on. "Yes, we are being itched, that is itchucated, a bit now. We must itch each other so that we remember not to scratch one another. We do not know how to love one another. Hah, just look at the neighborhood around us. Starbucks has already infiltrated. Soon, we will all be helpless and defeated. Now is the time to unite and create coalitions to reinvigorate the revolution..." Infrequently, her speech produced a real affect on her audience. Performance artists might take notes or politically inclined individuals might transform the bakery into an impromptu meeting hall. Such sessions prevent the bakery from conducting any business. Walkley, alone, is irritating enough to drive away customers. Shaky is the only one to have ever thwarted one of her lectures. In trying to decide what he should do about the brownies, he became overwhelmed to the point of seizure. Now, he lay on the floor, biting his tongue.

It was the first time that customers were forced to notice Shaky's condition. I was the only one who could have covered for the sake of the bakery. But I wanted them to see it, to know their reaction. Walkley disinterestedly departed but not before saying, "I'll be back for my carob and a peanut butter wheat-free, chocolate-free, sugar-free tofu brownies." The rest of them waited in irritated shock. I laughed uncomfortably while Shaky writhed on the ground. They would not leave nor would they help. No one ever did anything for Shaky when he had a seizure. This time was not any different, except it allowed me to close the store early. "Give him another minute and he'll bite his tongue off," I joked. They looked at me with disgusted faces and peeled out of the store. I watched him, wondering what would happen if he died. Joseph told me never to call for help when Shaky has an attack. "He's scared of them. It makes it worse. Besides, then you have to go along with him." I decided to leave Shaky on the floor; it was befitting of an average day at the bakery. When I was sure that his seizure was over and that he was only sleeping, I left the bakery.

Before anyone from the night shift arrived, Shaky awoke and headed to the basement. He washed his clothes in a bucket of rusty water and tried to dry them on the building's furnace. The police and fire departments were not able to determine how the explosion happened or how Shaky survived. The next morning the bakery was wrapped in yellow tape indicating that it was shut down and off limits. Joseph had a lot of answering to do to a score of city officials. He went into hiding until last night when he snuck in. Customers thought the bakery was destroyed forever; they did not know that Joseph was inside, behind the soot covering the storefront window, baking frantically to make up for his sins.

The bakery is probably no more unsanitary than usual. The poor lighting had always made it difficult to see how truly dirty it was. The oven was rarely cleaned because the switch to turn it off was broken. Joseph explained that, "It's not economically feasible to try to fix this oven. It would cost a fortune." The oven was constantly baking, often on its own. Over the course of a day, it produced enough soot to cover most of the bakery. Every night the place had to be cleaned from the floor to the ceiling. Yet, there were places that could not be reached. The remaining soot turned into a substance that blended in with its host background. It closely resembled the same kind of dust that diffused from Shaky whenever he shook. I often wondered about the truth of the soot, if it had originated from the bakery or from him. Joseph neglected to talk about it the same way he would not admit to the presence of roaches and rats. No one noticed the dust, perhaps because New Yorkers are so accustomed to breathing in miscellaneous particulates.

Joseph called me during the week to inform me that I was fired. He says that I sabotaged the bakery, that it was my anarchist tendencies. "Ms. Walkley told me the whole thing." I never could make sense of that or any report about the bakery as told to me second hand. Every account of that place is a separate mosaic with its own incongruent parts. I only told her I was an anarchist so that she would leave me alone.

Today, things should change. No more watching Joseph work illegally. No more worrying about Shaky wandering into the East River. No more communist rhetoric. No more twisted tales for my own amusement. I walk

across the street and take Shaky by the arm. "What, but, but, who. Baker? Are you?" I pull him away from the bakery, assuring him, "Come on Shaky, everything will be alright. We're going to get some food from the Hari-Krishners." Krishners are great, except when they push you to make donations. Maybe I'll have Shaky join them. He'd make a good Krishner

# *Pass the Madonna*

*By Gary Simmonds*

Gary Simmonds lives in South Yorkshire, England. His work has appeared before on the webzine “The Murder Hole.”

"Pass the fucking joint, man," said Steve. "Don't hog the bastard." He looks at Mike and Mike grins, looking right back. The big M looks down at the large, cone-shaped, skunky joint sticking out between two fingers and allows his grin to fade before looking back up at Steve with psycho eyes and taking another puff. Very dramatic *and* well acted, I remember thinking. Especially for a violent thug like Mike. "Well come on, man" Steve persists.

Mike leans over the coffee table and offers the joint to Steve, only to withdraw it when Steve tries to take it. Then he takes another puff before offering it again. You can tell by the evil smirk on Mike's face that Steve won't be getting the joint this time either. "Fuck off," spits an unamused Steve, trying to sound like he doesn't want it anymore, but failing. Mike laughs but leaves his outstretched arm out in Steve's direction. The offer is still open.

"Take it," he says. "I was only fucking around, man. Don't get all pissed off about it."

Looking deep into Mike's grinning eyes, wanting to know whether or not this is a serious offer, Steve slowly leans forward again and reaches out for the joint. His fingers are little more than an inch away when Mike once again reclines back into his chair. He cracks up laughing as Steve collapses back in a huff on the laminated wooden floor and mutters, miserably: "Stick it up yer fucking arse then."

Now we're all laughing. I feel sorry for Steve though, especially as it's his gear we're all smoking. There's nothing you can do when Michael is in this kind of mood. He might be all smiles now but if you push him too far he won't hesitate to smack you right in the face with one of those huge fucking fists of his. Nasty bastard. I mean, don't get me wrong. I like the guy. He can be quite handy to have around when it kicks off in town or somewhere, an' he'll always stick up for his mates, but he can be a right cunt too.

Steve is now just slumped back against the wall, staring into his lap and looking miserable as fuck. He has done all he can on this one. He's pleaded and that is all you can do. Anymore and you could end up going to bed early, bruised.

Once he's settled down a bit and got over his joke Mike again offers the joint to Steve, who doesn't even look up. "Here ya miserable cunt," he says,

still smiling. "Have your fucking joint." Steve responds like a tramp who wakes up to a man offering him a thousand pounds, waving it about in his face, and a man with a huge, mischievous grin at that. He wants to take it but at the same time he doesn't want to be let down and embarrassed. At the end of the day though, you know that he will go for it no matter how many times you offer it and then take it away, because there will always be that little voice in the back of his mind saying *'This time, fella, this time could be the one'*. This doesn't mean that he won't try and disguise the fact that he's pathetically desperate. He slowly lifts his head and there is a resigned expression on his face, which says 'yeah, go on then, sure, I believe you. So you want me to lean forward and try to grab the joint before you pull it away again, ok then, here we go, again'. Despite this he leans forward and raises his hand to meet with the spliff and, wow, his face lights up when he actually touches it. *Yes! I did it mum!* Next step is to grip it between a couple of fingers...Got it! Now just steadily manoeuvre it from Mike's grip...He's not letting go! I sit amused, watching this spectacle as Steve's face drops once again. His eyes meet with Mike's and they call him a cunt. Just as Steve is about to give it up as a bad, degrading job Mike shows some humanity and lets go. Quickly Steve falls back and crashes into the wall.

Now acting cool again, and nodding his appreciation to Mike, Steve takes it and puts it to his lips. The fact that Mike hasn't sat back yet isn't bothering him at all. He hasn't even noticed. Slowly he closes his eyes and inhales, taking his time, drawing the smoke into his lungs. Both Mike and myself are watching this closely, wondering when he will stop and even *if* he will stop. Will he survive? He's going deep, filling not only his lungs but his entire body with the smoke. Excellent.

"Come on then fucker," Mike growls as Steve allows the smoke to drift from his nostrils. "Let's have it back."

Steve's ambience is now broken. Smashed by the brash unreasonable demand from a so-called friend. A so-called *good* friend, at that. But it is Mike.

"No," Steve says bluntly. "Don't be silly, man."

"Pass the fucking joint you cunt." Mike's voice is louder this time, and possesses a hint of

annoyance. "I only gave it you for one." Again Steve looks him straight in the eye and grins, shaking his head in disbelief.

"No."

From a dark corner of the room Peanut starts to giggle, and it is one of those giggles that you instantly know will last for about twenty minutes. We are gathered in Terry's living room getting wasted, though Terry himself has been absent for about two hours. He took the stereo into the bathroom stating that he didn't know whether he would shit or spew, or both, and my guess is that he is now asleep in there, unconscious on the piss stained carpet. His wife, Michelle, is away on a day trip with the kids in Blackpool, and Terry, being as predictable yet reliable as he is, said: "Come round in the afternoon, guys, we'll get fucking wrecked."

So we did. Steve, a long time grower, brought along enough skunk to kill a serious amount of brain cells. Mike brought some speed, the perfect drug for an awful night devoid of enjoyment and happiness, so thank you to him. Peanut, who has been asleep for the last forty five minutes, acquired some 'cheap' lager from his dad's off licence, cheap meaning that he stole it and is now charging us for it, only at a much reduced cost in order to ease his guilt. As there was nothing else left to sort out I provided the entertainment (two Dutch pornos and a copy of The Goonies). Terry provided the living room.

Eight hours into our session it is obvious who has taken too much of what. Mike is definitely speeding his bollocks off, as he has been chewing his tongue ferociously for some time now and I don't know how much more it can take. "Have some gum," I say, but he just looks at me silently through those two fucking huge flying saucer eyes, with his white tongue being totally abused by the superior crushing and mashing powers of his yellow teeth, and I retreat into the shadows, slowly, quietly, like a gentle breeze. Ssshhhhuw. One sharp movement and this fucker will pounce on me and tear out my bastard heart. I still feel him watching me, but in the shadows I am safe. The speed demon dare not enter the shadows, as he is completely paranoid. This is his weakness.

Someone far less threatening is Steve. Sat with legs crossed and a shaven head one could almost mistake this gentle creature for Buddha. In the seven years I have known Steve, both as his client

and friend, I have yet to see him without a joint. He is a constant smoker, and though his brain is rather mushy he is still the most intelligent person I know, though this is probably due to the amount of documentaries he watches while getting stoned when some of us are at work. At the moment, however, he is foolishly trying to piss off a seriously fucked Mark, who has psychopathic tendencies at the best of times. This shows a serious lack of intelligence even if he is in the right.

Peanut is the youngest of our little group, being born five years later than myself, and he has ginger hair. He was sleeping in the corner until Mike woke him up, since when he has done nothing but giggle insanely. This is where we are up to now.

"What the fuck are you laughing at?" Mike turns his anger toward Peanut. Peanut's laughing intensifies at Mike's aggressiveness. "Hey, Pea-fucker, what the fuck are you laughing at, eh?" Mike repeats his question as he climbs to his feet.

Steve, who is now also chuckling, raises his right hand. "Chill out, Mike," he says. "The kid's just fucking laughing."

"Yeah I know," replies Mike. "I know he's just fucking laughing, Steven. But what I want to know is what the fuck he's laughing at. Are you laughing at me you little shit?" Peanut is shaking his head, trying to speak but he can't stop laughing. It gets you like that sometimes.

"Does it matter? He's stoned isn't he? He's probably laughing at the artex job on Terry's ceiling or something, man. You know you can see some really freaky faces an' shit up there when you're fucked." Steve looks across at me nodding his head. "Ain't that right Jim?"

"Yeah," I say. "Whatever." I can't say I really want to get involved in all this petty bollocks, I'm just waiting for my turn on the joint.

"You guys are full of shit," says Mike, crossing the room to stand over Peanut. "That little cunt was laughing at me." Then, just like that he bends down and punches Peanut square in the jaw. The laughing continues though, Jesus this kid must be fucked. Mike's mad, starey eyes now seem to be out on stalks as he stares around the room in what almost seems to be mock disbelief. At first he looks like he's about to start shaking and waving

his fingers at Peanut Hulk Hogan style, but instead he just bends down and punches him again, this time on the nose causing it to bust open and pour blood over his face. The laughing stops. As Mick straightens himself back up I back up further into the shadows. I am not involved here, I'm just waiting in line for my turn on the joint.

“Sit down Mike,” he says. “Here, take some of this joint, cool down that crazy little head of yours.”

Suddenly it is all over. The air is lifted as if someone has turned on the light. Mike’s eyes lock on the joint which is now being passed to him and he smiles and says: “Fucking hell Steve, if you’d have done this before there would have been no need for all this fuss.”

He takes the joint and sits back down, with his face glowing red and a grin the size of a large white window. Now that The Angry And Violent One is in better spirits I feel able to start breathing and moving again. I lean forward into the light, what little light there is, and grab a magazine to skin up on. I can’t see Mike letting go of the one he’s just acquired, somehow. Back to his usual self he begins to tell us an exaggerated tale from his past.

“We were once in Newcastle, for my cousin’s stag do, and while we were out I got split up from the rest. Oh this is great, this. Somehow, fuck knows how, but somehow I ended up at this dirty little bar about two miles out of the city centre, which I shared with about four old guys who hogged the pool table all night. Now this bar was a proper shit-hole, man, I mean it was really minglin’. Anyway, I was pretty fucking hammered and I thought that I would try it on with the barmaid, some old slapper with a beard. A definite lesbian, you could tell with the way she looked at me, like she was a real mean bitch. So I thought ‘great, this’ll be a challenge...’ He pauses to take a toke from his joint, which is now just about all gone, and then he lifts his head up to look at the ceiling. “So I say ‘Hey baby, how’s about me and you get out of this shithole and find ourselves somewhere more private’. She had her back to me at this point I think, cos then she turns around and I realise that she’s not a lesbian at all. She’s a fucking man, man. That beard is a guy’s beard, guy, and he says ‘Why don’t you fuck off before I have to beat the shit out of you’ and I say ‘Listen fat man...’ Trailing the sentence off into nothing he looks across at me, busy rolling another joint, and grins

as if I’m rolling it for him. Then he looks at Steve and his grin widens, almost spilling into a laugh. He doesn’t bother with Peanut as snores from the corner inform everyone that he has fallen asleep, worn out by the uncontrollable laughter. His ribs will hurt in the morning, that is for sure. Probably as much as his face. The pause drags on for another few minutes as Mike gazes around the room, now looking slightly confused, and then he says to no-one in particular: “What the fuck was I talking about?”

Everyone’s attention is drawn to a door slamming to the front of the house, and in walks Michelle wearing knee-high slapper boots, a denim mini-skirt, a sports bra and a kiss-me-quick hat, all of which I am sure will still be fashionable in some remote run down village in the far-east. Following her are Terry’s little girls sporting sweaty coats from the ‘Free Place’ in town. She takes one look at us lot, the scum of the earth sat comfortably in her living room chilling out nicely, thank you very much, and she flies into a rage.

“What the fuck is all this? I shouldn’t have to come home to this shit,” she shouts. Steve, Mike and I all look at each other bemused as she paces around the room giving each one of us a dirty look in turn. “I shouldn’t have to bring my fucking children home to a house full of druggies.” She’s pointing too, sharp violent stabs into the air which are meant to pierce our skulls I’m sure. As she strides around, banging on, time seems to slow down and Terry’s better half moves in blurred slow motion as I realise that tiredness has suddenly hit me. The sound of her rantings become all bassy and muffled, like they’re coming from another room. She looks better this way, more graceful, and as I watch her I feel strange, like I’m in love with her or something. I really could go to sleep right now. Then she snaps me out of it and just stands there, in the middle of a very untidy living room, examining the rubble. “Where the fuck is Terry?” she screams.

Steve points lamely toward kitchen door with the joint. “In the bathroom.”

Screaming bloody murder she storms through the room, pulling her daughters along with her. We hear her crash through several doors and then shriek: “What the fuck are you doing Terry?”

Intrigued we all climb to our feet and run through to the bathroom. Black Sabbath’s ‘The Wizard’ is playing through Terry’s battered little stereo,

which is perched on the toilet seat. In the centre of the floor, stark bollock naked, is our host on his knees, masturbating. He is staring at us, all crowding around the door with our drinks and wide grins, and his skinny little body is vibrating like he is being electrocuted. The sight is disturbing to watch. God knows what his girls are thinking right now. Probably: *Mummy, why is Daddy trying to pull his cock off?*

But he doesn't stop. His eyes are bright red and half way into the back of his head and thick saliva is dribbling down his chin and he is jerking and jerking.

I am amused. Steve is amused. Mike is very amused. Michelle is definitely not amused. She's so fucked off that she has fucked off. She threw a jacket on and almost ran out of the front door, dragging the kids along with her of course. Don't want to leave them with sicko daddy, now.

Chuckling we all watch with some interest until the sticky end, after which Terry falls flat on his face on the hard, cold tiles.

The next morning I am awoken by one of Michelle's three big hard brothers. The gorilla drags me from my comfortable spot under the coffee table by my feet and kicks me right in the balls. I begin to splutter "What the fuck's going on here?" when the big lad bends down and punches me right on the nose, causing an explosion of pain in my confused, sleepy head. Well, back to sleep then.

I wake up again and instantly raise my arms to protect my face from more damage, then I realise that I'm on Terry's back lawn. My face feels swollen and my back and legs feel bruised. I roll onto my stomach, which also hurts, and look around. Mike is under the swing looking very battered. Steve is lying next to me and he appears to be equally sore, and Peanut and Terry are nowhere to be seen. I struggle to my feet and limp to the gate. Pain has totally taken over my right leg and my left one feels only slightly better. On top of this I have a total bastard of a hangover. Leaning against the bedpost I fish some cigarettes from my jacket pocket. They too are crushed and look as though they've had the shit kicked out of them. Three out of the last five in the packet are broken so I pick these out and sling them. I take one of the two remaining cigs and place it between

my lips, then I light it and begin my journey home.

The shortest way home from Terry's is through the industrial estate, which sprung up about two years ago. Most of it is still wasteland so I cut over, weaving between knackered wheelbarrows, broken fridges and the occasional burnt out car. This area is a fucking shithole, man. I mean, OK, it's not the council's fault that kids like to joyride, it's just something kids do, but they could clear all the burnt out cars away once in a while. Pretty soon the kids will end up shifting them themselves because they need the room to dump and burn out new cars.

Off the industrial estate now and walking down past the school and through the park. I stop to throw up all over what was once a flowerbed and is now just a place where dogs shit, when I notice a tribe of joggers up in front, all wearing bright colours and carrying bottles of water, heading in my direction. The group consists of about five burly men, who really don't seem to be enjoying the exercise, and two women. I recognise one of the women instantly, anyone would. "Fuck me," I say. "It's fucking Madonna!"

For a moment I am paralysed, but I quickly regain control over myself and jump into the bushes. This is a sign, it must be. This explains everything.

I sit and hide as the joggers pass, then I give them a minute to make some distance before sprinting back the way I've come. Through the park, by the school. Shaking, I make my way to Lizard's house on Winter Estate, or Suicide City as it is happily referred to by the locals. Over the last five years there have been no less than fourteen suicides around this neck of the woods, but I suppose that means that there is fourteen less people to wait behind in the dole queue, so fuck it. Every cloud...silver lining and all that.

When I reach the front door Lizard's mum answers. Eileen is great, a wonderful woman. She answers the door wearing nothing but a little pinny, which is nothing out of the ordinary for her even if she is knocking on sixty. Saying that though she doesn't look her age. She's beautiful.

"Is Lizard home?" I ask anxiously. I can feel sweat pouring down the side of my face.

"Course he is love," she replies with a big genuine smile. Of course he is, he's always at home.

"Come in."

She backs away from the door and turns around, revealing her large, nude, perfect backside. What a tease. I follow her into the living room where Lizard is sat on the settee reading yesterday's copy of The Sun. "Harold, love, James is here to see you. And I bet we can all guess why."

Guess why? How can they possibly know why? Lizard lifts his head to look in our direction. "You alright mate? Come and sit down. Mum, you couldn't make us a brew could you?"

"Course I can, love. Do you want a drink James?" My god she is lovely. Had a wank over her once, at least. I would love to fuck her proper, right now, while she's in that sexy pinny. I want to drag her into the kitchen and bend her over the sink and swiftly stick it in.

"I'll just have a drink of water please, Mrs Harvey," I reply, sitting down. "I'm a bit hungover actually.

"What's happened to your face, James? Looks like you've taken a right hiding there love." Her voice is full of concern but I don't see how telling her about my terrible night of drink and drugs, total excess all round, will help either of us. Besides which I have more pressing issues to discuss with Lizard.

"Nothing," I reply. "Just got a bit drunk that's all."

Eileen leaves the room with an "Ah well, you boys. It's no good for you y'know," and Lizard puts down his paper. I don't know if I mentioned that Lizard is wearing, and always wears, a lizard costume, but if I didn't then I have now. He hired it from a place in town for New Years Eve about three years ago and never returned it, didn't even take the fucker off. I do think that that New Year really fucked him up though, mentally like. Millennium Eve it was, and about ten of us met up at Mike's house in fancy dress and decided to go into the countryside for a party. There was me (as Jesus), Mike (as a devil), Steve (as Steve, the lazy cunt), Lizard (as a Lizard, of course), Terry (as a Vietnamese prostitute), Terry's Michelle (as an American soldier in Vietnam), Chris (Lizard's brother, as Jack the Ripper), Sarah (some bird I was seeing at the time, who either didn't bother or who came as an English prostitute), Denise and Cathy (a couple of twins who Chris brought along, came as the Abba girls). Mike drove us in

his Land Rover, with all of us crammed in like battery fucking chickens. I don't know how Mike managed to get us there without being pulled or killing us all, because the mad cunt was pissed off his head. Anyhoo, we did make it to some field over the other side of Sheffield, towards Manchester, and we put up our gazebo, which was the closest we could find to a tent, at around ten pm. Then we all got hammered. Es were flying around, as was a bit of Charlie. All kinds of alcoholic beverages were being drunk in vast quantities and the air was filled with a skunk aroma. Magic. I was really regretting coming as Jesus though, as not only did Mike insist on poking me with his plastic Halloween devil's fork everytime I strayed within poking distance, but I was fucking freezing wearing only some dirty dishcloth and a thorny crown.

But the next morning, or closer to afternoon, we all woke up feeling very shitty. It took us a while to realise that Chris had disappeared, vanished, gone without a trace. Just totally fucking not with us anymore. We spent hours looking for him, then the police spent weeks, but nothing was uncovered. It was as if aliens had come down in there fucking U.F.O. and fucking abducted the cunt. Just like that. The bastards. He was a good lad, Chris, and we all miss him. Lizard took it the worst though; I mean the kid was his brother like. He never came out of that Lizard suit, which I thought was going too far, but now we're all just so used to it we don't even notice anymore. Sometimes I wonder whether Chris actually killed Lizard, or ate him or something, and then put on the suit to hide, but then I realise that I'm just thinking bollocks. Makes you wonder though...

I remove the last crumpled cigarette from my crumpled cigarette packet and light it.

"So have you heard then?" Lizard asks.

"Heard what?" I inquire without much interest.

"Have you heard about my new neighbour, man?" Lizard jerks his head to the left to indicate which side the mystery neighbour has moved into. He seems very excited about something.

"No, but fuck it!" I say. "I haven't got time to discuss new neighbours, man, I need to tell you something. I'm in big fucking trouble..." But then I freeze as Lizard butts in with:

"It's fucking Madonna, guy! Can you fucking

believe it? Madonna lives next door to me."

Lizard is rocking back and forth on the settee with excitement, giggling like a kid. I feel sick. This can't be. "Madonna?"

"Yeah man, I mean no-one could believe that she'd move here but hey, at least it's better than living down in the pit-houses with all the smack-heads. I mean you get smack heads round here but at least these aren't pit houses, man..." Lizard is blabbing on but I'm not really listening. This is unreal. I need to concentrate. Madonna?

I can't believe it. All my worst fears *have* come true. I rush to the window and look out over the street where Lizard's story is backed up by a huge Limousine parked on next-door's front lawn. How the shit did I miss that when I was coming down the path? I know that it is hardly confirmation, and it wouldn't stand up in court, but no-one else round here has a fucking huge Limousine on their front lawn.

"This is bad news man," I tell him. "This is very bad news."

Lizard looks at me in disbelief. "Are you fucking kidding me, guy, this is fucking great. Madonna as my own neighbour. Madonna, man. I've dreamed about this, man. I tell you what, man, I know where I'll be going for sugar later."

"No you don't understand," I say. "I've dreamed it too. But not like that, I mean really. She's after me, man and she wants to kill me. I've dreamed about this for weeks, man. She wants me fucking dead." I don't know how else to try and explain the situation without sounding totally insane and stupid.

Lizard has stopped rocking and is now looking right at me, or at least I think he is, it is very hard to tell with that stupid blank faced lizard head. "What the fuck are you on about?" he says, then: "Oh, I know what this is. This is jealousy, isn't it? I finally have something going for myself, something accomplished, me, and you just want to ruin it all for me. And you're supposed to be a friend," he shakes his head before adding: "You're just scared that I might get to shag her before you do."

I can't believe what I'm hearing, the dense cunt. How can I explain myself any better? "No man, don't be stupid. Neither of us are ever going to get

a chance to shag her, you knob head. I'm telling you that I've dreamed about Madonna killing me. I've dreamed about it for months now. I'm not even fucking kidding you, you fool."

"Bullshit," he says, matter of factly, like it was an answer in a pub quiz. *Question eleven tonight is: What comes out of a male cows arse? Question twelve: What is the opposite of China?* "So how does she kill you then, in this...dream?"

Now I'm up and pacing the room. "Various ways. Sometimes it's really crazy shit, like in this one dream I had she bites off my hands and then my feet and then puts her fist into my mouth so I can't breathe and I suffocate. Then there's the dirty ones which I feel have just been manipulated versions of the initial warning dreams created by the pervy side of my brain. Mainly though she just fucks me over with a hammer. But the end result is the same, she always kills me, man, sometimes even with tigers, and now that she's moved here I know that she's going to do it for real. Why else would Madonna move into a semi-detached house on a shite estate in Barnsley?" God this is fucking silly, I'm shaking and even I can't really believe what I'm saying.

"Are you fucking real, guy? Do you know what you're saying? You're saying that Madonna has moved home just to live near you so that she can kill you. That is crazy talk, guy," Lizard says, still shaking his giant Lizard head.

"You don't believe me do you?" I ask.

"Course I believe you man, you're a good friend and you know this" says Lizard, patronising bastard that he is. "But why would Madonna, a woman who is probably the biggest selling female solo artist of all time, why would she want *you* dead, man? Why you? How the fuck does she even know you exist?"

"I don't know," I reply. "I don't know but I'm not willing to find out either."

I look back through the window where Madonna is now on the front lawn, leaning on the Limo with her arse high in the air, engaged in conversation with the driver. Man that is a very fine arse. I would love to...

"Oh fuck," I say, ragging the curtains closed. "I've got to get out of here guy."

I'm panicking like fuck now as Lizard stands up to block my path. "Calm down, Jim. What the fuck's getting to you, man? Sit down." Just then Eileen comes in with his cup of tea and my glass of water. I sit down, but I don't rest. I can't. I need to go home.

"Cheers, ma," says Lizard taking his drink and sitting back in his chair. "And then: "Have you heard this? Jimmy's going crazy, man. He thinks that Madonna's gonna' fuckin' kill him. And that's why she's moved out here." The bastard.

Eileen looks at me curiously as she hands me my water. "James, is this true?" she asks in a very strange manner.

"Yes," I reply, dropping my head and feeling more than a little stupid. Feeling like a complete twat if the truth be known. "It is. I've been having these dreams about her Eileen, and she's always trying to kill me. And seeing her today it just..."

"What?" She interrupts me sharply, and I look up to see her face full of shock, then anger. "You saw her today? And she did that to your face? Why I've got a good mind to go round there and..."

"No, no no no Eileen. That was Terry's Michelle's brothers, back at Terry's this morning but..."

"Why, what happened?" asks Eileen, totally forgetting about the real issue, possibly on purpose.

"She came home and caught him having a wank on the bathroom floor," I explain. "It's a long, boring story but..."

"So why did they hit you then?" Eileen isn't giving up that easily.

"It's complicated. We were all fucked and..." I wish she would allow me to finish a fucking sentence. Just one sentence, man.

"Were you all having one? A wank that is." She's taking the piss now.

I can feel myself going red. Lizard is really enjoying this, bouncing around pissing himself in the background. "No Eileen," I reply. "We were just there."

"What, watching?"

"No. Well, only after Michelle came home." I'm not making this any better for myself am I?

"You mean she came home and you all decided to start watching Terrance play his fiddle in the bathroom before her brothers beat you up? Sounds like you had a strange night, James. No wonder you're all messed up about seeing Madonna today. It's the shock. You need some sleep boy. Have an hour on the sofa there."

"No Eileen, I really have to get out of here." I get up and rush past them with a quick apology and through the kitchen into the back yard. I feel possessed. Fear has gripped my body in a way it never has before. Am I going fucking mad or what? I run through the yard and out onto the street where I head toward home, taking the long route so as not to pass Madonna's new house again.

The jog home only takes fifteen minutes (and this must be the first time I've jogged or ran in years, so it is painful. I feel as sick as I have ever felt), but I'm so petrified that it seems to take hours. Any one of the cars that pass me could have Madonna sitting in the back with a sniper rifle. Am I paranoid?

As I approach the front door down the driveway my mother, who is just leaving for work at the butcher's, opens it. I run straight in and upstairs and into the bathroom where I vomit all over the floor and the toilet seat. I collapse onto the nice, cold tiles and close my eyes. Maybe Eileen was right when she said that I need some rest, but I can't. I can't rest with all this shit in my head. What the fuck am I going to do? I feel like some kind of prey, like a little brown mouse. I am the hunted. An innocent man hunted by a powerful and wealthy figure, who I am totally useless against. Am I going to have to hide away forever, until my hair goes all thin and falls out and my skin turns pale? Well, that is the only plan I have at the moment so it'll have to do. Anytime I go out she could be there, waiting, a professional killing machine on my back lawn with an AK47.

I hear my mum climb the stairs and come toward the bathroom where she seems to stop at the doorway. Somehow I manage to prise open my bloodshot eyes slightly and take a look around. My mother is indeed standing in the doorway, taking in the mess and shaking her head with her hands on her hips. Bless her, she doesn't need me

taking up space and making mess in her house, but she is patient.

“Well you dirty little bastard,” she snarls. “You’d better get this shit cleaned up before I get home this afternoon or you’re in fucking trouble. All right? Can you hear me? Useless little prick. I’m off to work.”

Then she’s gone and I allow my eyes to close again. I don’t even hear the front door slam before drifting away.

After about twenty minutes kip on the cold bathroom floor I awake feeling much perkier. More positive. To be honest I’m starting to feel that maybe I’m blowing this whole Madonna situation way out of proportion. I think that a bad hangover and my general shitty feeling may have distorted my judgement. Just a dream fuelled by drugs, drink and a heavy dose of old skool paranoia. I’ve been fucking depressed, man, but not any more. It’s not even nine o’clock in the morning yet. I’ve got the whole day ahead of me.

After a wank and a quick shower to freshen myself up I decide to search the kitchen for food, even though my stomach still feels fragile. I consider making hot dogs or spaghetti hoops, but not being arsed I settle for a few custard creams and a bag of Quavers.

I find the living room where it usually is. I intend on watching some TV to numb my mind, Kilroy should be on soon, but at the doorway I freeze, allowing nearly half of a custard cream to fall from my open mouth. Sat on the sofa is a huge hammer, cartoon-like in its size, and sitting beside the hammer is Madonna, smiling, in a black PVC catsuit. My first thought is 'Oh fuck!' but then I'm all like 'Jesus, man. You're beautiful.' and I spend a few minutes just staring at her, hypnotised by her beauty. Before I know it she's on her feet and she's got the hammer and she's still smiling. Great teeth. I return her smile as the hammer swings back and then SMACK!

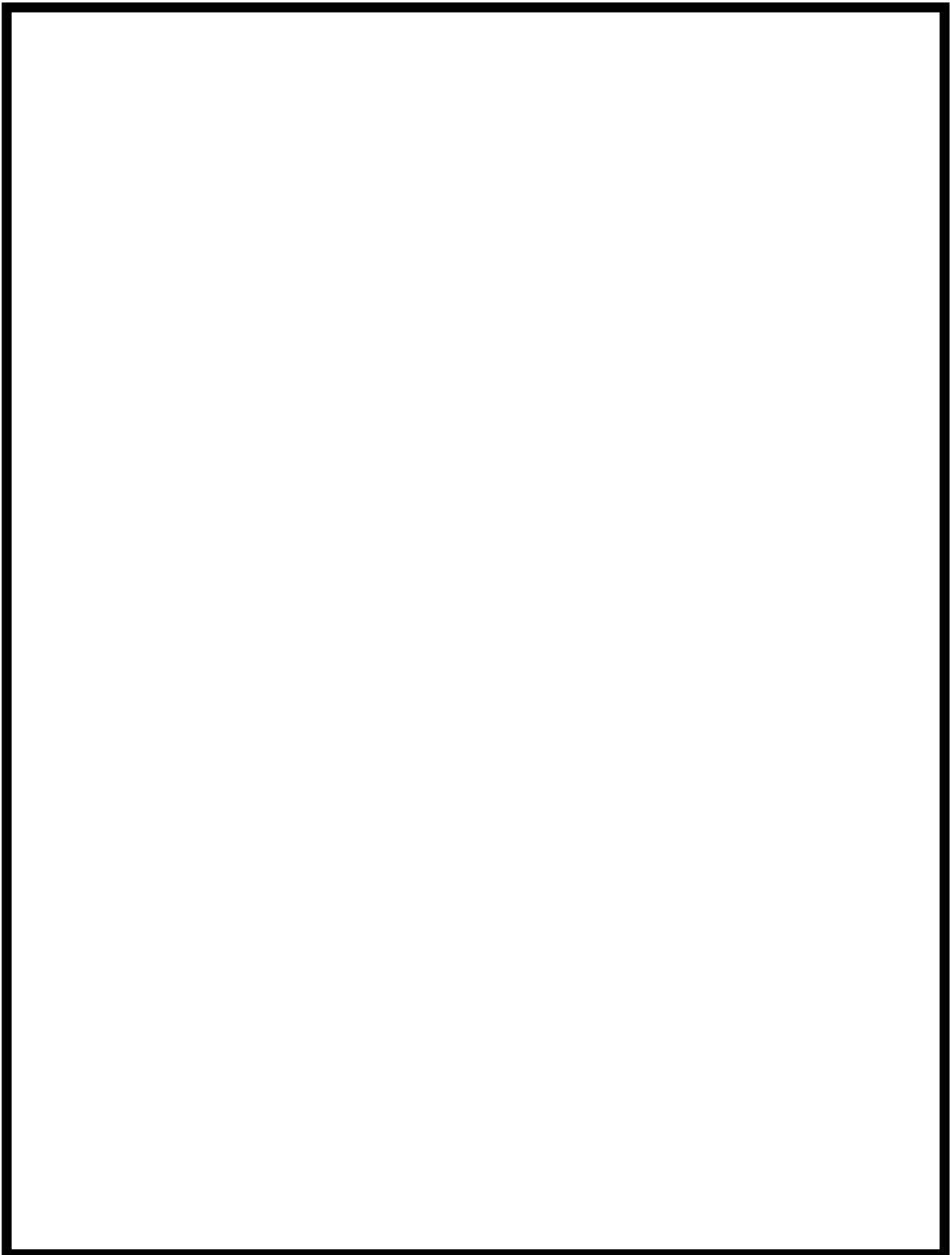
Right on the head.

The fucking bitch got me.

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# Perspectives

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This is the type of shit makes you want to give up fiction. *Capturing the Friedmans*, Andrew Jarecki's debut film is a multi-layered piece that can be discussed from a number of different angles. So much so that the essential meaning of the film will be different for different people. It's a film that says just as much about the audience member as it does its own subject. With that much said, keep in mind I'm writing this perspective as a writer and not as whit frazier.

The film is a documentary about an upper middle class family living in Great Neck, New York – an affluent Long Island suburb. The basic family unit consists of the father, Arnold Friedman, the mother Elaine Friedman, and the three boys Jesse, David and Seth.

The father, a pedophiliac, is unmasked by a police undercover operation. From there shit escalates rapid-fire until the situation gets completely out of hand. A stash of hidden kiddie porn found in his study leads to a full investigation of this Arnold Friedman – an award winning, well loved and respected computer teacher – that leads ultimately to charges of horrific sexual abuse performed on children in his own classroom.

I went to the film thinking Friedman was guilty as sin. I really didn't know much about the film one way or the next before seeing it except that it was about some child molester who lived in Long Island. But Jarecki likes to play with the audience's conviction about the innocence or guilt of Arnold Friedman and his son Jesse (also brought up on charges of child molestation). It looks at first like Arnold Friedman is just a closet pedophile – a guy who doesn't actually act on his desires. And maybe that's all he is. I mean the best angle in this film is the actors – or rather, the family. It's hard to say if the family members are acting or being honest interviewees. No one in the family is able to tell the truth. Half the time not even to themselves. When Jarecki uses Buck Owens' version of the song *Act Naturally* to open the film, it's a brilliant choice. The family's immersion in their own fictions, lies, fantasies and denials paint these characters much better than actors could have done. It's already a family of actors.

*Capturing the Friedmans* is also a reflection on film itself as a medium. Jarecki pulls this off naturally and confidently. The Friedmans after all, are a family obsessed with watching themselves on camera – particularly David, who does most of

the home filming. It's an aspect of the family that makes a lot of sense alongside their inability to grapple with reality. David admits that some of his memories he doesn't remember at all outside of the camera, like "a picture your mother takes of you as a child. You don't remember the moment, just the picture."<sup>4</sup> The film weaves layers of present day interviews, home footage and sensationalized media footage to create a multidimensional work capturing the perspectives of each of the family members from the start of the scandal to present day (excluding Seth, who refused to be interviewed), the media and community and to a lesser degree, the filmmaker himself.

Jarecki seems to be of the opinion that Friedman is innocent – and as an audience member, it's the impression I got as well. Who's to say if this is because of Jarecki's direction or simply the facts of the case. But the charges against Friedman are so outrageous, and there is so little actual evidence against the man that to believe him guilty is to buy into the hysteria of a community terrified of anything outside the norm. Is Friedman being prosecuted because he's an outed homosexual pedophile with an upstanding position as a teacher in the community, or because he's actually guilty of molesting children? It's a hard call. Even his family is divided: his wife loses faith in him early on, but his children don't; especially David, who even now argues his father's innocence to the point of fanaticism.

But how are we supposed to understand innocence? Clearly Friedman's guilty of being a pedophile; moreover he's guilty of raising his children and living with his wife under a curtain of deception that immediately makes a happy, well adjusted family an impossibility; but most importantly he's guilty of feeling guilty. Well shit, he probably should feel guilty. After all, he ruined his children's lives before they were born, he ruined his wife's life because he couldn't be honest with her and he ruined his own life because he couldn't be honest with himself. In the film Arnold comes off as a friendly, charming, intelligent and thoughtful man it would be difficult not to get along with. It doesn't change the fact that he's also selfish and cowardly. He may hate himself for it, (which it really appears he does) but he doesn't hate himself enough, because he does nothing to change. Everything he does, right up to his last decision on the planet, is a

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<sup>4</sup> All quotes in this article have been paraphrased.

glaring testament to his cowardliness and selfishness. When he kills himself to get his son the \$250,000 on a life insurance policy, is this supposed to be an act of redemption? Besides the uncertainty of whether or not Friedman molested Jesse as a child, Friedman was also responsible for Jesse's thirteen-year incarceration. To atone for this, he doesn't try to become a better man – a man that his children can look up to, get answers from later in life, and maybe even learn to understand and respect; instead he kills himself to buy everything off for two hundred fifty grand. I mean, shit. That's not even all that much money.

As it turns out, Friedman *isn't* exactly innocent. You feel like you're getting hints at this throughout the film, just from the way interviewees talk about the man. Regardless of whether or not Friedman touched any of the children in his computer class, he *did* molest two children at another time and place. This is serious information. It changes the man from a pedophile to a child molester. It's one thing having fantasies; it's a whole other thing to act on them. In this light it's hard to feel bad for the man even if he's not guilty. Most folks (and I'm right there with them) feel that molesting one child warrants a lifetime of suffering, and if it had to be the result of trumped up false charges, well fuck it; what goes around comes around. In fact, throughout most of the film, even though I realized I'd probably never find out for certain what happened in that classroom – whether the charges were a hundred percent accurate, grossly exaggerated or altogether false, I really hoped I would find out. As soon as Jarecki revealed that Friedman molested two children – one the child of someone he has the audacity to call a friend – it didn't matter anymore. Good riddance. By any means necessary.

So what is this film about? Is it about film and America's preoccupation with watching itself? (One of the funniest, creepiest scenes is David in his bedroom looking into the camera, explaining that unless you are him, you have no business watching the footage that you're watching.) Is it about family? Is it about lies, denial, deception and the blurring of the lines between reality and make-believe? Is it about the media, community, hysteria, America, pedophilia, homosexuality?

I mean, shit, it's really about all these things. It doesn't really say anything about any of them, but it confronts us with a lot of questions we don't ask ourselves on a day-to-day basis because we aren't looking at ourselves. Which is just to say that *Capturing the Friedmans*, more than anything, is about the audience. And not the

audience on a communal level either, but each audience member individually; the way a good book can be about how each individual reader discourses with it.

Most films aren't like that, just like most people aren't like Arnold Friedman – at least on the surface. But beneath the surface is precisely where Jarecki wants to go with this film. The American family unit is an interesting phenomenon, and it probably hasn't been explored as fully as it needs to be. Since the advent of television the United States has understood family in two ways: Family on Television and Family in Real Life.

Everybody knows families in the fifties weren't all *Leave It To Beaver* and *The Brady Bunch*; that's just the way television depicted the middle class American family, and it was an ideal to aspire to. This mentality of making a distinction between real and ideal persisted for a long time in American culture. The blaxploitation sitcom families of the seventies and eighties portrayed an ideal for African American families to work towards – case in point *The Jeffersons*. Even the far less affluent Evans family in *Good Times*, despite living in desolation, managed to maintain a relatively upbeat, positive and happy household, where issues arose, were confronted and resolved. This is a role Hollywood continues to support, and it always has been and always will be a popular vehicle for entertainment: showing things how they should be as opposed to how they are. As wealthy America gained more affluence in the eighties, the standard of the ideal continued to rise. Sitcoms like *The Cosby Show*, *Silver Spoons* and *Family Ties* depicted families where affluence and healthy homelives were the norm. But somewhere in the early nineties the American public began to develop a cynical attitude toward these kinds of shows. They were lacking authenticity. Strong expressions of disaffected family life were coming into mainstream culture through youth culture, which was disenchanted with the fairy tale reality their parents grew up striving after. This led to a basic formula of change that has repeated itself in the arts time and time again. The first step is satire. Shows like *Married with Children*, *The Simpsons* and *In Living Color* spoofed the concept of the healthy family by creating gross exaggerations of the opposite. The concern wasn't with getting closer to reality, but getting as far away as possible from the absurd picture perfect family portrait. The second step is a move away from satire into a new vision. That new vision was reality. Gritty television shows like *NYPD Blue* and *Law and*

*Order* led to grimier and grimier realism. And then of course, the advent of Reality Television which, ironically enough, is less realistic than *Leave it to Beaver* ever was.

*Capturing the Friedmans* on the other hand is very real. When we watch the Friedmans – certainly a gross exaggeration of the average person's situation – the grotesque falls away just enough for us to recognize ourselves in these people. For example, why didn't the wife believe her husband and why did the children?

My guess is that in this documentary, as in life, the relationship between husband and wife is essentially the relationship between two strangers. The relationship between parent and child is not – or at least, it's a lot less so. Elaine defends her position by saying that Arnold "has never been honest with [her]." That's undeniable. She wakes up one morning, looks at her husband and realizes she's given thirty some odd years of her life to a man she doesn't know. How can she unconditionally believe he's innocent? The children never think of their father that way, because they are him. You see Arnold in David and Jesse. You see a lot of Arnold in David and Jesse. He molded them, and the man they understand him to be is as much (if not more) a part of themselves as it is him. David says it at the beginning of the film: "despite the fact I know my father did all these things, I don't think he was a different person than the warm, funny man I knew him to be." Well, he was and he wasn't; but that's not the point. The point is that David is really just talking about himself.

Elaine was never good enough for her own family. The most thought provoking thing she says in the whole film is that "children latch onto the abusive parent." I don't know if that's true or not – for myself, both of my parents were abusive – but it's a line I'll probably think about for a while. Of the two Arnold certainly *was* the more abusive. The fact that he raised a family in the first place is testament to that – a man who had to go to therapy because he couldn't trust himself to have male children. His behavior once he had the children continued to be abusive. In the end he landed one of his sons in jail. The children's attitude toward their father is therefore, understandably ambivalent: they love and respect him, but they hate him and don't respect him. Jesse says, "I'm certainly not going to end up like the old man, throwing chairs around the room..." – and the brothers laugh. They laugh their way through a lot of things – frantic antics that work as distraction from an ambivalence they feel for their father, and ultimately themselves.

I think a lot of families have a similar dilemma, and this is what's at the heart of the dysfunctional family. It's not necessarily that dad slipped out or mom was screwing around or Uncle Funky molested you. The family unit is a war. And it's a brutal one. Anyone who sees *Capturing the Friedmans* can tell Elaine Friedman was on the losing side, and can see what that does to a person and what that in turn does to the children. Husbands and wives stay strangers; children are free game – and the children become weapons of war in a battle the parents themselves don't understand. The children learn to identify themselves with both parents, but lots of times they take sides. The problem is that being raised in this type of situation comedy breeds sickness. The symptoms of this sickness are a strong duality of self-love and self-hate. The war after all between husband and wife is *sexual*. And the child must be either male or female. Layers of complicated sexuality develop in the child without the child realizing it. And when it comes time for the child to get married, he or she inadvertently brings some freaky shit to the table. This has always happened, and will continue to. What really warps the game is contemporary American culture's tendency to think of family as Family on Television and Family in Real Life. The objective used to be to make the two things synonymous. Then, realizing we'd never realize that, Family on Television focused on spoofing the idea of Family on Television and that was supposed to be closer to the spirit of Family in Real Life. The thing is, in the process we've forgotten to look at family *for real*. It will never be accurately portrayed on a sitcom, cuz honestly man, family ain't funny. It's fucked up. But we learn to heal ourselves by looking at ourselves – and *Law and Order* and Reality television and Al Bundy and Family on Television and Family in Real Life – that's not looking at ourselves. It's looking the other way. They fuck you up, your mum and dad. Should we continue to be the victims of strangers?

## An Imaginary Museum

The museum can be a pretty lonely place sometimes, especially if you're just going to hang out by yourself and check out an exhibit. That's why I usually don't go to museums unless someone's in town wants to go or something like that. You just need to be in the right mood. I'm not sure I was in the right mood the other day when I went to check out Max Beckmann's "Hell" exhibit, which is on display at the Met until August 31<sup>st</sup>.

I just didn't have the kind of focus you need to go do a museum right. I got there, slipped into the main building, passed the security guard and didn't end up paying anything, which, if you're more poor than rich, is the way to go about things. I knew from research that I had to go to the south wing or something like that, but when you walk into the Met without focus, you get lost. Really the building, what with the architecture and then the ancient sculptures and such, works as a pretty fantastic work of art in and of itself. I found myself wandering up and down the halls. Into rooms and out of rooms. I wasn't looking at the art – the individual works – this happens to me every time I go to the Met – and it never puts me in the right mood to sit down and observe a picture. In fact, I don't think I've ever done that – sat down on one of those benches and observed a picture for a long period of time. I know you're supposed to, and that people get a whole lot out of the artwork doing it, but I never have the patience. I like to wander around museums the way I'd want to wander around an old castle or something – just mazing my way through an old, elegant landscape of relics. But today I was planning to sit down and take in Beckmann's "Hell" lithographs. I wasn't in the mood, no; but I had a story to write, and while usually I'd just can the story and come up with a new one, I'd already printed up August's cover – so there was no turning back.

I worked my way through the Greek and Roman Art – straight into the bar and cafeteria. It's a pretty drastic change, but it works because it snaps you out of your wandertrance and reminds you that you're here for a purpose. Right. Max Beckmann. I stopped at the bar and had a Beck's and moved on. It wasn't the right thing to do to have that beer, but that's how it happened. Besides, it was just one.

After the bar I went through the African and Asian Art gallery, which put me right back in wandertrance; the trance now decidedly deepened by the Beck's effects. I went through that wing without really seeing a single piece – or anything

at all for that matter. I was walking slow, and I felt like I was absorbing everything, but when I went through the doorway everything vanished into the twentieth century.

It was a pretty busy Sunday at the Met, especially in the Twentieth Century Room – or however it's called. Beckmann, apparently, was directly upstairs from there, so I pushed my way through the crowd and headed up to check out Beckmann's "Hell" lithographs.

I have to say, it wasn't the most popular attraction in the museum that afternoon. There was only one person spending any time with the exhibit; everyone else just breezed right through. The person sitting there taking in the overwhelming black and white lithographs was a very skinny, very pale young lady, maybe twenty eight or twenty nine. She had a mop of curly black hair and was wearing faded blue jeans and a tee-shirt. She was really into the lithographs – like you see sometimes in Museums – people sitting there with a book open – looking, writing and sketching. She was doing all three.

It was kind of uncomfortable. I'd been hoping either no one would be bothering with the exhibit – or there'd be a crowd – either way, so long as I got to remain innocuous. But there wasn't any way around it. I sat down on a separate bench, opened up my notebook – and looked.

There are eleven lithographs total in Beckmann's series, all of them black and white, and all of them disturbing. I did a little research on Beckmann before coming out to the Met. Just the basic stuff – a quick online Bio – a little bit of background information about the lithographs. Apparently Beckmann worked as a medic in World War I, and during that time he saw the atrocities that inspired these prints. The prints are dark, chaotic and powerful. The way I understand it (and I could be wrong) is that Beckmann had a nervous breakdown while working as a medic in World War I. After he recovered, his art made a drastic change from Impressionism to the more reality based constructions that you see in the "Hell" lithographs. But I'm not sure Realism is the right term for what he's doing. For example, you can see some early Impressionistic influences in this work – and also an element of Cubism, where his characters seem to be uncomfortable in the space they occupy.

Let me stop right here and admit something. I'm no good at talking about the visual arts. In fact, I'm not sure why I decided to write on a painter to begin with – especially one I know

almost nothing about. I think I was just testing myself to see if I could do it. The truth is I can't. I can say if I liked it or not; but that's about as far as I can go. And I liked the Max Beckmann "Hell" lithographs. But everything I just said about them I lifted from the girl who was sitting there. So I've admitted it. Those are her observations and not mine. Here's how it happened:

I was sitting there looking at the pieces, feeling warm and sleepy because of that bottle of Beck's, and sort of dreaming about when I'd be able to have another, when the girl came over and asked me if I was a big fan of Beckmann's work. I told her I wasn't, but that I wrote articles sometimes for a downtown magazine, and that my latest assignment was this exhibit. As it turns out of course, she was a big fan of Beckmann's work, and she asked all these questions about the magazine, and what it published, and when, and etc... I was pleased to be able to promote Strawberry Press a little bit. But what was really great about it was that she seemed to know *everything* about this Beckmann character. So I just started asking her questions and let her talk. She talked about Beckmann's early years as a softer, more impressionistic painter – like Delacroix maybe. She talked about how at twenty-six or so he was already a well-renowned painter in Germany – about his aspirations to live and work in Paris – about his long and troubled marriage to Minna Tube – how he eventually divorced her and remarried. It was really pretty informative – a lot better than the little bit of information I found online. She went on to talk about how Beckmann served as a medic in World War I, about how the atrocities he witnessed caused him to have a nervous breakdown. And when he began to work on his painting again in 1917, he came back a new artist. He developed a style that was very much all his own, and he eschewed references to movements when discussing his work. How his work made it into galleries and museums all over Germany, only to be removed and confiscated when Hitler came to power. How he was an exile from his own country after that. How his work matured. How his style in the "Hell" lithographs is apparently the beginning of the budding of his mature work.

The lithographs are unique and unsettling. They borrow technique from Expressionism, Impressionism, Cubism and Classicism, but align with none of them. The girl went on to talk about how mythology and religion played a large role in his work – like the work of Expressionist Gustav Klimt. She talked about how the colors in the paintings became more intense – how they battled

with each other. She explained that what was so great about these lithographs was that by working in black and white he'd achieved that same intensity of color and expression by using these two opposing colors to depict a hell that was so real it became unreal. She let me know (which at this point didn't surprise me) that Max Beckmann was her favorite painter of all time. That she came here every Sunday afternoon – she *had been* coming every Sunday afternoon ever since the exhibit opened, and she would continue to come back until it closed.

I listened to what she said, and I actually took notes. I mean, she was doing all my homework for me. It was really pretty cool. But finally I had to come out and ask her: what is it about Beckmann that you find so fascinating?

Really, her answer, it was just the same thing that makes any of us fascinated by any artist: she first saw Beckmann's work in High School while taking an art class and going through a big book on the history of Western painting. The work spoke to her right away. From then on, the more she saw Beckmann's work and the more she learned about his life, the more she fell in love with him. I can understand that. That's how it works with everything. She said something really memorable – I just like the ring of it: "You go through your life admiring some artists and not admiring others – and then one day a real friend comes along and changes your life."

The way I see it, that pretty much says it all. Artists are craftsmen, thinkers, revolutionaries, whatever. But that's beside the point. When someone really connects with an artist, it only has so much to do with how talented the artist is – there's probably someone else that's more talented. It's the feeling of making a friend – finding someone who really understands you (illusory or not, I don't think it matters) – that adds that element of what people call "magic" to art. And that magic is what makes art such a spectacular thing – art in every creative manifestation.

Anyway, she went on and on about Beckmann while I listened and took notes. After a while she laughed like, 'are you gonna reference me in your article?' It was pretty funny. I told her sure, why not. She could pick up a copy of the magazine at St. Mark's Bookshop. She should check out the website. Did she have any writers she was really into? She said she read, but not all that much. Mostly when she read she liked to read mysteries and such.

Her name was Chloe. Which is just to say, there, I've officially referenced her. I imagine

she's at the Met right now. It's a beautiful Sunday afternoon – a week later, actually. I can see her sitting in that large room with her sketchbook open, quiet, awed, reverential. She's discoursing

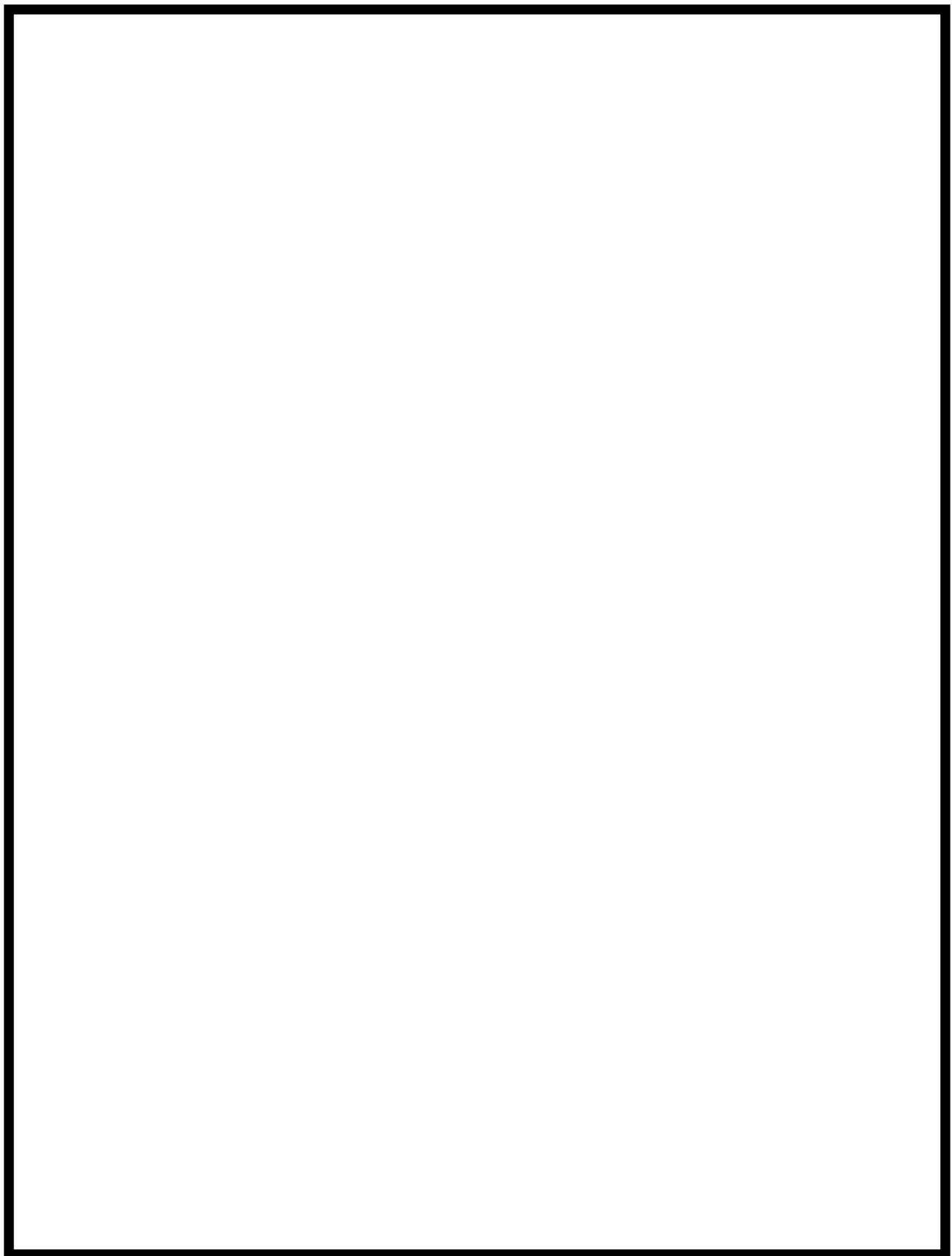
with a friend that died a quarter century before she was born.

The museum can be a pretty lonely place sometimes.



*FolkLore*

*whit frazier*



## I

One warm autumn night in St. Louis Billy Lyons and Stagolee walked into Cab Calloway's. They'd come from Big Eddie's down the road where Billy won a stash of cash. Eddie Jones was a sore loser. When Stag shot him, Billy laughed.

Cops didn't want no parts of Stagolee. And wasn't anyone else wanted Stagolee dead or in jail. Folks knew how he made Bessie wail. Took her with him everywhere he went and he wasn't keen on letting folks touch her. He shot old pastor Faraday just for blessing her. Sheriff wanted Stag to hang for that, but when he came around Stag shot him too.

Stag was mean as a killer comes, but when he got on that guitar, he made men weep and women swoon, he'd sing:

*Jim Lee, Jim Lee, come shine a light on me,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I fear the deep.  
The 'Jim Lee' up the river, backin' up an' down,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I'm water-bound.*

Rumor has it Stagolee made a trip to the crossroads one night. Came back with Bessie. Them two was never parted. Nicest guitar in all Missouri, and no one could make that lady sing like Stag. No one could kill old Stag after that neither. Couldn't catch him, kill him, shoot him, stab him, nothing. Folks said it was Bessie.

## II

The night was clear and the moon was yellow and the leaves came tumbling down. Billy Lyons and Stagger Lee shot dice in Cab Calloway's. Stagger said he was bound to take every last cent Billy won off dead Eddie Jones. Billy said he'd best not count on it. He'd take Stagger for everything he was worth. Even that raggedy old guitar. Watch and see. Stagger stared daggers at him. Everyone knew no one could beat Stagger at dice, not even Billy Lyons. Billy was pretty well known around town. Always carried his old man's silver studded pistols. Folks said he had nerves of steel.

Two hours later Billy Lyons sat looking pitiful sad. Damn well cleaned out. Well done, he said. Let's move on. I could use a drink. Stagger Lee grinned like the devil. You're buying Billy Lyons. Out in the street he sat down with Bessie. Let me have a moment for my soul. Wasn't a person on the planet could say no to Bessie and Stagger Lee when they sang:

*Jim Lee, Jim Lee, come shine a light on me,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I fear the deep.  
The 'Jim Lee' up the river, backin' up an' down,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I'm water-bound*

Rumor has it Billy Lyons was out to test Stagger Lee that night. That's why he tried to dice with him. Even tried to trick him on the last role. That was an eight. Wasn't no seven. Shoot that back. Stagger Lee shook his head. It could come to gunplay if it had to. Otherwise it was a seven and that's how it stayed. So that's how it stayed. Out in the street Billy said: I bet I can play that thing better than you.

## III

The dogs were howling and the wind was blowing and the moon was round and red. Stagga Lee and Billy Lyons looked at each other. Ain't a man in Missouri can play like I play. Billy said: don't think you the only one been down to the crossroads. What's that supposed to mean? You know what it means. Stagga Lee and Billy Lyons looked at each other. Billy you can't play like I play. You can't dice like I dice. You can't whore like I whore. You can't shoot like I shoot. Come to think of it Billy, it ain't much you *can* rightly do.

Well right then and there Billy Lyons snatched Bessie from Stagga Lee's hands and started to play.

*Jim Lee, Jim Lee, come shine a light on me,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I fear the deep.  
The 'Jim Lee' up the river, backin' up an' down,  
An' the side-wheel knockin', Lord, I'm water-bound*

And what do you think Stagga Lee did then?

Rumor has it Billy Lyons blocked the first bullet with Bessie and caught the second in the neck. The night got quiet and the dark came creeping in and all Stagga Lee could hear was the blood bubbling in the back of Billy Lyon's throat.

They say it was Eddie Jones' brother who came creeping that night. Came creeping up mad and crazy and full of moonshine and put a bullet through the back of Stagga Lee's brain. Whoever it was run off with Bessie and Billy Lyons' silver studded pistols both. Them pistols never turned up again, but the way I see it, folks have been playing on old Bessie ever since.