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Volume One / Issue Three

strawberry press magazine

New fiction by Duncan Birmingham,
whit frazier and Joshua Lefkowitz

A Perspective on Liberia

**STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
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check out www.strawberrypress.net online. we publish fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. we are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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Volume One Issue Three

Strawberry Press Magazine is happy to launch the September Issue. In this issue we have new fiction by Joshua Lefkowitz, a former contributor to the magazine, as well as new fiction by Duncan Birmingham, who is new to Strawberry Press, and new fiction by Whit Frazier. There is also a short study of the history of Liberia, and its deposed president Charles Taylor.

The Liberia piece was an extremely difficult piece to write, and it's not the type of piece I generally like to write. While writing it I basically tried to give the reader a sense of what I found so fascinating about this unusual country by contrasting the history of the nation with the biography of Charles Taylor. I didn't feel like the piece was entirely successful, and I initially intended to drop it and have an all fiction issue of the magazine this month, but my co-editor Matt read it and said he saw worth in it. I should add that he also found faults with it. It's probably something I'll return to in a different format sometime later on in my life, but for now I guess it stands as a little history lesson at least.

Thanks to everyone who's written in to support this effort. Issues one and two only did print runs of 150-200 copies, but hopefully starting with this issue onward we'll be able to up our print run. Please feel free to write in with any comments, letters, ideas, suggestions or submissions.

Cheers,

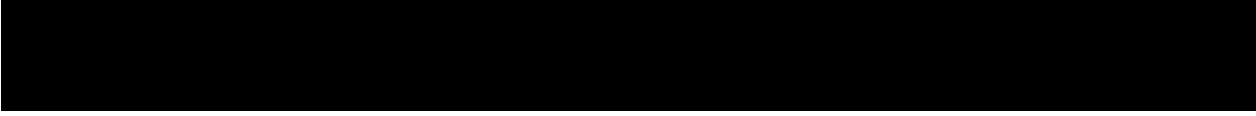
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Duncan Birmingham is a screenwriter in Los Angeles. His film, *Low and Inside*, is slated to be released by Universal Pictures in 2004. His fiction has been published in *Satire, uber* and *The Beacon Street Review*. His book of short stories, *The Anatomy of a Jackass*, is available through Brian DeFiore of DeFiore Literary Agency. He can be reached at dunc75@hotmail.com.

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

whit frazier is a writer and the founder of strawberry press magazine.





Where Were You When Stanley Kubrick Died?



Duncan Birmingham

With Sarah at the t-courts, I hole up for the afternoon in the air-conditioned luxury of the Xanadu Lounge. It's pretty dead except for a few suits and this old goat a stool down yapping loudly into his cell phone like it was a tin cup on a string. Sarah, the woman who invited me here to Palm Beach, slapped me last night. At a fund-raiser in front of fifty people, she slapped my face and told me to wash my hands before she slapped me again. In bed that night she calmly explained that I had picked my nose in the buffet line. She gets irritable with me at cocktail parties because I can't play golf, tennis or the stock market or even pretend that I do. As the winter season comes to a close, my pickle becomes crystal clear; one of those damned if you do, vice-versa scenarios. If my novelty wears off, I'm back to square one come spring. How much longer I can take her abuse and provide service with a smile is another story.

Since skipping New York with her last month, I've learned a lot about why this 54 year-old millionairess has been single since husband two, the hair-treatment tycoon, moved to Bali with his business partner's daughter. An obsessive compulsive, she works alongside a small army of Haitians who invade twice a week to scrub, polish and vacuum all twenty-nine rooms of her winter digs. At parties she says if cleanliness is next to Godliness, then she's got the freedom to be as naughty as she likes. She told me her mother was a severe asthmatic and even the faintest trace of dust in the house would trigger an attack and her father, a big-shot colonel, used to give the whole house the white glove test after Sarah cleaned. She never told me what the punishment was if she failed the test, but I've got a feeling it was more than a pre-dinner bed time. Sarah is big-time into punishment. I can attest to that.

As a model, I always considered myself tops in the hygiene department until I met her. Dirty fingernails at the table earn a crack across the knuckles with the flat side of a bread knife. But how can I complain when she pays for my mani and pedicures? She watches me shower. God knows I try to make like it's an erotica thing, but there's nothing sexy about a woman perched on the toilet barking out orders for where to loofa. Her cat, Lamont, is shaved hairless, a skittish pink ghost painfully aware of its own ridiculousness. Looking at it makes me weepy. I'm ashamed to admit she paid me to undergo electrolysis when we arrived last month. Putting up with the nonsense is part of the fantasy I fulfill with any of the women I've lived with. There was a time when I enjoyed it, excelled in it even; whether it was the

kinky sex stuff or just being someone to vent all that anger from all those shitty boyfriends and husbands and fathers on. I'm getting too old to be that someone, but where else do I have to go?

I can't help but eavesdrop on the old bat next to me, spouting off about Tom Cruise this and million bucks that; a real operator glancing at me out of the corner of his eye. Poofs like him grow like coconuts around Palm Beach. Finally he tucks the phone into the breast pocket of his horrid plaid sports coat and swivels his stool towards me: I know you, don't I?

I shrug and pick my teeth with a swizzle stick. I draw the line at fruits no matter how rich.

"Are you on television?" he asks. Normally I'd say get some new material, but he's the first person I've talked to all afternoon and I'm bored, so I tell him about a commercial I was in for some ambulance chaser in Queens. I played an amnesia victim which the director had joked was ironic because I had so much trouble remembering my four lines. The guy offers to buy me a drink, but I buy him one instead. I don't like getting stuck having my ear chewed off by some guy just cause he bought me a drink and besides it's on Sarah's tab. We introduce ourselves and his name sounds kinda familiar.

"You from New York? You're a designer right? You're somebody? Who are you?" I ask, well aware of how fruity I sound.

"I just told you." He chuckles.

"Stanley Kubrick. Kubrick. Kubrick. You're a movie maker. Planet of the Apes. I know you."

He rolls his eyes and says he doesn't want to get into it like I'm some shithead.

"Hey, I know plenty of big shots in New York. I get tables at Balthazaar's and I've partied at Heidi Klum's. So spare me the attitude."

"Of course my good man. It's just that I rarely travel beyond my Herfordshire estate and when I do, I don't want to, as they say, talk shop."

"Buddy, I don't care if you're Cecil B. DeMille, if you're trying to pick me up, try your luck with the next dude. This island's chock full of em. If you want to keep it kosher, we can chat."

"I'll try to restrain myself," he says.

Despite his protests, we start blabbing about his flicks right off the bat. I tell him about seeing 2001 when I was a kid with my baby-sitter, this drop-dead-gorgeous teenager called Karma. She never wore bras and my mom usually paid her in dime bags to watch me. I loved her madly. The whole theater was high as kites with everyone laying down in the aisles for the psychedelic third act and Karma let me hold her hand. I remember later that day we went to her friend's place and I

watched Road Runner cartoons while the three girls got high and drank screwdrivers. They decided to have a kissing contest. They sat me up on the washing machine as the judge. I was in heaven. Afterwards, they could have asked me to go out and shoot the president and I would have gladly complied.

"I named Karma the winner of course. I felt more passion in that sloppy cigarette- breath kiss than anything I've felt with the last dozen women I've been with," I tell him. "Combined."

Kubrick nods earnestly in commiseration and whips a mini- tape recorder from his jacket pocket and speaks into it very solemnly: "Note to Self: Capture the innocent lust of male youth on film." He winks. "Dedicate to Billy."

He never did Planet of the Apes. I admit I hated that Clockwork Orange shit. My mother and one of her boyfriends dragged me along to see it. I was terrified and couldn't stop squirming around in my seat. The boyfriend kept asking my mother to send me outside, but she kept saying I'd get into trouble. "Normal little boys love the movies, but no not Billy. Can't you be a normal little boy for one afternoon?" she kept saying. I can't stand watching any kind of torture. I couldn't stomach that one with Jack Nicholson either. Unlike New York assholes, Kubrick takes it in stride instead of making me feel unsophisticated. The mini-tape recorder makes another appearance: Note to Stan: Ixnay on the torture and blood for new chum, Billy.

Kubrick tells me about the movie he's working on which he describes as being about fucking and getting fucked and fucking some more. It stars Tom Cruise and his sexy Australian wife. Kubrick says he's in Palm Beach scoping out mansion locations for the film. I tell him about Sarah's set-up, which gets me started on that whole subject. I go into how she picked me up back in Manhattan when I was working between modeling gigs as a salesman at Gucci. She was looking for something for her brother. I was just his size or would be if he took better care of himself, she said. Five minutes later I was giving her a one man fashion show in the dressing room. Customers lined up outside until finally the manager stormed into the dressing room. Sarah told him I should get a raise, but he threw me out instead. Three days later I left a note for the Upper East Side divorcee I was living with saying I had to see my mother on her deathbed and Sarah and I flew first class to Florida. In my defense, the divorcee had made it clear that she was in the process of ironing matters out with her husband, the congressman, and that I

was to get lost A.S.A.P, but keep my weekends open.

"A genuine playboy." Kubrick is beaming. "You're living the life of Riley."

"You'd think so." I fill in some of the less glamorous details about Sarah: the showering, the beatings, the foot massages and the slapping incident. It's not the worst I've put up with from a woman either. Not by a nautical mile.

"And what did you do after she slapped you?" he asks.

"Went to the bathroom to wash my hands."

"Sweet Christ?! Just because you're living off this woman does that mean you have to take her abuse?"

"That's exactly what it means."

"Why don't you leave her?"

"I can't"

"But you already said she's getting fed-up with you."

"She needs someone. Besides, I've got no place to go. "

"What the hell kind of playboy are you?"

"I'm a 40 year-old playboy as of yesterday. See this blazer and these pink fucking pants," I say motioning to my get-up. "She bought them for me. Dressed me up like a doll. That's me. From woman to woman, I become what they want me to be. For a while it usually feels right, like they know what's best and finally I feel like, hey, it's really me looking at myself shaving in the mirror. Making them happy makes me happy. Sometimes very much so. Occasionally love enters the equation. But it's all temporary. With time they're no longer able to rationalize what they're using me for and it turns to shit. I'm not in the position to call the shots. They go off to Fiji or someplace and I'm left broke and alone. Which wouldn't be so bad if--"

"If --?"

"If--I guess if I could just get up in the morning and know, ya know, know who I really was. Who I am, I mean, " I say surprised at my own drunken dramatics.

"Ah-ha. Herein lies the rub." Kubrick motions for another round of Kettle One martinis.

"I know every asshole who ever turned forty asks this question. But I mean it literally. I don't have a real home. People still call me Billy. I've lived all over the country, even in London and Amsterdam. Supposedly I am a man of the world, but I can't name any capitals and don't know diddley about wine. I've never owned a dog, bought property, been married, fought a war, mowed a lawn."

"All overrated." Kubrick slurps his martini. "Peter Sellers once said he'd played so many different characters he didn't know who he was. We were three weeks into *Strangelove* when he came to my trailer and said he couldn't play all four principal parts. The British officer, the paraplegic doctor, the President--fine. But he just couldn't do the redneck pilot. Naturally, I insisted and slapped him around a bit until he got hysterical. Peter always got hysterical. That's when he told me that. I looked him dead in the eye and said: lucky you."

"You're saying I'm lucky?"

"Bingo. See Slim Pickens was phenomenal as the pilot and Peter was kicking himself because he let his sense of self come first. Ask Dickie Gere; the Buddhists consider that lack of self the highest form of spiritual transcendence, of Zen-like enlightenment!" Kubrick bangs the bar emphatically. "Any Tom can get married, fight a war and own a goldfish. You've found your niche. Leave the bullshit to the philosophers in ivory towers and run with it. Take everything you are now, multiply it times one hundred and live your life. Enjoy the ride by letting go of the wheel."

"That's the opposite of any advice I've ever gotten off a shrink at a party."

"I'm lucky enough to have made thirteen films, seven of which are considered masterpieces, to remind me who I'm supposed to be. Why waste your time looking for the method to the madness? My whole life I detested vodka. Now I can't get my creative juices flowing without it. Go figure. It's all highly Kubrickian."

"Kubrickian?"

"It's a term Pauline Kael coined when she was panning Barry Lyndon. It wasn't meant as a compliment, but I took it as one. Defeat into victory, my boy."

We cheers to that. I'm flattered this genius is so interested in me. He makes perfect sense. Kubrick orders another round in a lispy voice, with his wrists limp and we laugh like a couple of frat boys over me thinking he was a fruit. I'm feeling pretty good until I notice the time. Shit, Sarah's having guests over for cocktails. I was supposed to be home an hour ago to tidy up, mix the drinks, meet and greet. I invite Kubrick.

Cruising across the island in the MG, Kubrick briefs me on my new state of transcendence: no more Burton to her Virginia Woolf, he says. Out of a small leather bag he has taken a battered football helmet and wears it proudly. He warns me to be careful on the turns.

"I'm enjoying the ride by letting go of the wheel!" I yell, driving no-hands. Kubrick clenches his eyes shut.

It's the usual cocktail crowd; Janice and Sam; the elderly lesbian neighbors, Jackie the leech, a few of the DuPont girls, Gino the shipping magnate, Frank Basco the soda king and his girlfriend with the sloppy face job and her spiritual advisor. Sarah's busy wiping up smudges and laying down coasters. They're in the living room, gathered around Jackie playing the piano. The lights from the outside pool dance along the ceiling and chandeliers. When we stumble in, everyone stops--just like in the movies.

"Bravo. My diamond in the rough is gracing us with his presence. A rough day at the bar, my dear. Honestly, Billy we've had to make our own drinks." Sarah rattles her empty tumbler. "Billy use to bartend at a strip club in Nevada." Sarah loves to make mention of the off-color aspects of my resume.

"I knew you looked familiar Billy," Gino says for a laugh.

"Is that Dan Marino?" Sarah motions to Kubrick, struggling in the foyer to get his helmet off. I give him a hand and he finally frees himself, stumbling back and stepping on Lamont's tail, causing it to dart off. He plasters back his greasy strands of white hair and goes around the room, pumping hands.

Sarah's giving me a dirty look until the name Stan Kubrick begins to resonate with the guests. Then she kisses me on the cheek, congratulating me on my ability to always "stumble into the most marvelous of characters."

"Billy has a nose for meeting the most interesting people," she announces to the crowd. "I guess that's how we met."

They're on him like flies on shit and Kubrick entrances them just like he did me.

"I'd always heard you were quite the recluse," Jackie says.

"Oh come now Jackie. Don't believe all that PR poppycock you read in the funny papers. Do I look like a hermit to you?" he asks seriously, dropping his hands to his sides and standing straight up for them to examine him if they dare.

They all rush to concur that he most certainly does not.

"Besides I always crawl out of my hovel for one of Billy and Sarah's parties," Kubrick says laughing.

As is the norm, I'm delegated to the sidelines, mixing the drinks and serving as occasional punchline to Sarah's jokes. I chat a little with the busty Irish girl serving the hors d'oeuvres, until

Sarah spots me and sends me on a wild goose chase to find Lamont. I stand my ground a minute, but she just glares back, waiting for the chance to cut me down. I obey rather than be humiliated in front of Kubrick.

Stumbling through the house with a bottle of Jack Daniels, I can hear Kubrick's Jack Nicholson impression echoing down the marble halls. Sarah is cackling the loudest. By the time I finally find the cat, the bottle is almost drained. The animal's balled up in the back corner of Sarah's walk-in closet. A closet bigger than my last apartment in Manhattan. Lamont creeps into my arms hesitantly and I look at the two of us reflected in the dozens of mirror doors. The cat's like a baby, all tender pink flesh trembling like Jell-O in my arms. I pinball drunkenly down the halls, the two of us meowing together. Kubrick is manning the piano with Sarah leaning towards him, her blouse giving him a full frontal.

"I was about to organize a search party, Billy" Sarah says. "Go ahead and make our new friend and me another round."

Kubrick and I lock eyes momentarily. He glances away, embarrassed for me. I must act instantly, before I give myself time to think.

"I'm sorry Lamont," I say to the cat before chucking it full speed across the room at Sarah. Lamont smashes into the side of her head, paws wildly at her hair for several seconds before dropping to the tile floor and fleeing out of the room. Like a top set spinning, Sarah stumbles across the room, hair in face, knocking over drinks until Frank's girlfriend's spiritual advisor catches her. The DuPont girls and Jackie are all over me, asking me what hell I think I'm doing throwing cats around. I push by them and out to the patio, past the pool and cabanas and down to the inter-coastal waterway. I can hear Kubrick playing *Memories* as I drop down on the grass, underneath the stars. Out for the count.

I come to on the back lawn, soaked by sprinklers and blinded by sunlight, a Hispanic lawn worker helping me to my feet and into the house. Lucretia and the girls are there and the house is alive with vacuum cleaners and dust pans, chemical potions and sprays. In the master bedroom, Sarah has her hair pinned back and is stripping the sheets. She starts swearing at me without even looking up.

"You're mentally fucking ill," she yells at me, wrestling the bedding off the mattress. "And you're going to pay for that outburst last night. I've never been so humiliated. If Lamont had been injured I'd have you incarcerated. As it is the poor

thing's been hiding in the dumb waiter all morning."

"I'm sorry." I do feel bad about the cat, but secretly wish I'd been holding an anvil.

"If you think I like it when you're a naughty boy, Billy, you are sorely mistaken. First off you're going to write apology notes to Kubrick and all my friends."

"Where's Kubrick?"

"He stayed in the red bedroom. He took some Polaroids of the house, scouting it out as his new film location and left this morning with the DuPont girls. They were taking the boat to Nassau. Quite a coup for my little cocktail party. What a dynamic man. Too bad he makes such dreary movies."

"Did he tell you anything for me?"

"Besides expressing shock from your tantrum, don't you think we had better things to talk about than you?" She looks up at me for first time since I walked in the room.

"Christ, you're dripping all over the carpet, Billy," she says. "If only I'd known what a derelict you were when you seduced me in Manhattan. All I wanted was a little companionship. A tennis partner for the winter. Look what I ended up with. Get out of those wet clothes this instant."

I flop down on the bare mattresses, flip on the 54 incher and spin through the channels. Outraged, Sarah stands over me, clutching the bundle of bedding.

"You're wet for godsakes and you're not relaxing when you've got chores to do, Billy. I'm not just going to forget about your hissy-fit last night. You've been naughty and will be punished accordingly. Do you want me to get the belt now or later? We've got the Leukemia fund-raiser tonight. I hope your tux is pressed. Now or later, Billy, the belt. You're dripping Billy. Jesus Christ, you're fucking dripping!"

Stanley Kubrick. The name stops her like a bitch slap and I flip back a channel. "The world famous director passed away in his sleep last night," the glamour puss on television says. The man shown in the pictures looking stoic behind the camera and pow-wow with Kirk Douglas is plainly not our Kubrick. Besides the beards, they bare no resemblance at all. Sarah screams and I sit up. During the rest of the brief segment, Sarah repeats under who breath, who who, who. She is scratching all over. Hysterical, she picks up the phone, then puts it down again. Picks it up and puts it down. She glares at me suddenly.

"Who the hell was that?" she asks and slaps my face before I can shrug. "You brought some dirty, old, mad man, all dirty over here."

We are both crying, flipping the channels, looking at more stills of Kubrick. Not even close.

Sarah has the belt out and is lashing me with the buckle side while I slip around for cover on the bare mattresses. I wonder what went on between her and Kubrick last night. She collapses at the foot of the bed and orders me to call the police. I do. And her private physician. I do. And psychiatrist. I do. I feel dead too. My Buddhist transcendence, my multiplied me. I am all burned bridges and unanswered questions. My enlightenment from a genius was nonsense from a lunatic? thief? killer? She throws a handful of prescription bottles at me to refill at the pharmacy.

"You've really done it this time, Billy. You're going to be punished severely. You're going to be very sorry," she says before storming into the kitchen and telling Lucretia she needs her and the girls to scour the whole house all over again. When I hear her run the shower upstairs, I know she'll be in there most of the afternoon.

After the pharmacy I take the MG to the video store and rent all his movies, even the ones I know I can't watch. Sarah will have me under lock and key for a while. In picking 2001 off the shelf, a lanky pale vision in all leather reprimands me for hoarding all her favorite director's films.

"I cried when I heard this morning," she says.

"Me too."

Katrina is an LA casting director in town for her grandparent's fortieth wedding anniversary. We compromise about the movie and I follow her back to her grandparent's condominium. Like gargoyles, they're perched on the back balcony smoking Chesterfields and watching the shimmering traffic snake by. My clothes are still damp which I say is from a thundershower I got stuck in. Katrina picks a nifty blue running suit out of her grandfather's closet for me to wear.

"It's you," her grandfather says and she agrees. "You can have it."

We drink Bloody Marys and watch 2001. Except for the monkeys, it's boring. And during the film I think who's to say who's a genius. One Kubrick is dead, the other is in the Bahamas with a couple of millionairesses. I am here transcending the old skin and slipping into the new. Towards the end, I hold Katrina's hand like I did with Karma so many years ago. From the balcony, the grandparents invite me to their anniversary party tonight.

"You'd be great in commercials," Katrina says, refilling my drink. "Have you ever been to LA?"

Somewhere Kubrick is smiling.

Ogden Osgood

whit frazier

When I was about twenty-two or twenty-three I worked one summer as a dockhand in Annapolis, Maryland. It was a moderate summer, just a few spells of hot days, and we used to sit around the docks, smoke cigarettes, talk trash and have an all around good time. We worked pretty hard and didn't make that much money, but we got along well and that made the time pass. Most of the other guys were just your average blue-collar Annapolis types, or else students from the Naval Academy or something, but I'd come from Baltimore. That made me something of the odd man out, but as odd as I was, no one was more strange or unusual than Ogden Osgood, a young man maybe twenty seven years old who said he'd lived his whole life in Belmar, New Jersey, and was genuinely excited about a move from that dreadful seaside town to this bustling capital city.

"It was always bad," he would say, "but once I graduated from High School you can't imagine. At first, you know, the summer after High School I would go out to the beach every day and fish; look at the ocean, that kind of thing. It can change you, the ocean can. But when winter came things got weird. I would drink Canadian Club and sit at the window and stare for hours."

Ogden Osgood was a funny looking kind of fellow, real tall and lanky, almost like a spider the way he moved. He had short spiky hair, a brown black color, and a round little face that squished up all his features. His nose alone stuck out, like a skyscraper in the middle of a valley. When he talked his pitch came out alternately in squeaks and booms, so it sounded like his voice was constantly cracking.

"One day I just started walking," Ogden used to say. "I was sitting on the beach fishing. Second summer out of High School; and I just got sick of it. Got up, brushed off the sand and started up the beach. I hit the Boardwalk and kept walking. I don't know how, but I ended up right here in Annapolis, and here is where I want to stay."

That was all anyone knew about Ogden's history, background or life before he came to work at the docks. He never volunteered any other information, and if someone asked him about something, he would shrug his shoulders and say, "I'm not really sure how to respond to that."

Ogden first showed up a couple weeks after I started working there. Before he came around the only people I spent any time with were two of the other dockhands. One we called Skipper, just

because he spent most of his life on shipping boats working long hours through long weeks on long journeys by sea. The other was a kid named Samuel, a guy about my own age who liked to shoot dice, drink gin and steal cars. He came from a pretty good suburban background, college dropout and everything, but he'd been in and out of jail so many times this job was the only one he could land. We made a pretty motley crew, the three of us, and usually when we got together after work, we just wound up going to one of Annapolis' million different sports bars for some drinking and pool. Our usual spot was a dive right on Dock Street called Armadillos.

Armadillos was just like any other dive sports bar in downtown Annapolis, but Amanda worked there, and she was the only person I spent any time with other than Samuel and Skipper. We got to know Amanda just by how often we went out to the bars, and since Amanda was one of the few female waitresses willing to put up with the three of us out together drinking, getting rowdy and just generally doing our thing, Armadillos turned into our regular spot. Amanda was a fun girl and she was fun to look at too. She was medium height and had all this pale red hair like the mane of a lion. She was probably about thirty-two or thirty-three, and her hands were a little wrinkled from working as a waitress her whole life. Her face was starting to develop wrinkle lines from chain-smoking too, but she had her own style. She'd wear silly, frilled up dresses, pink and red and orange with flowers and such on them, blueberries or starfish. Always something new and interesting with Amanda, and every one of us, me, Sammy and Skipper used to grin and lean into our drinks and whisper, hey fella, she's really all about me tonight, can you tell?

Sammy and Skipper were just clowns though. At first we all acted like clowns, but then sometimes I used to go and see Amanda before work, and sometimes after the fellas went home, I'd stay after and wait for her and walk her home. I enjoyed having her around, and I enjoyed her being with us there at the bar, but I was the one that told her one night if she stuck around Annapolis, she'd be waiting tables for the rest of her life, and maybe she should try to get out of here. Mostly I used to go home and look up at the dark shadows on the walls and ceilings lying in bed and dream about someday getting out of Annapolis myself and maybe even taking her with

me. About going to Paris and Rome and Venice and all these other romantic places. It was nice to dream, but that's all they ever were, because I hadn't been to any cities larger than Baltimore.

It was just a little bit after the night I told her that when Ogden Osgood showed up, a suitcase in each hand. He put down the suitcases, wiped his face with his shirt and walked over to Skipper. "How does a guy go about getting a job with you folks?"

Ogden was working with us down at the docks within two days. He was a good, steady worker, but he never talked much, and he used to stare off sometimes into space way across the water. It was a look Skipper called the thousand-mile stare, and he said he'd seen folks get it a few times out there on the ocean, where they'd develop this look, a look like a man probably seen too much in his life. He said it's the kind of thing happens to soldiers and sailors, and apparently to the boys over in Belmar, New Jersey too. Sammy said it wasn't a damn thing, just Ogden being pretentious and putting on airs, and that the more we paid attention to it, the more we did exactly what he wanted us to do, and he couldn't give a damn about Ogden Osgood one way or the next.

The next day come lunch, me and Skipper sat down to eat with Ogden. Sammy refused to, and he walked off along the dock kicking stones and eating his sandwich, glancing back at us the whole time like we were testing his patience.

Skipper said, "don't mind him, he never trusts the new guy. What brings you to Annapolis?"

"I don't really know. I walked here. I used to live in New Jersey. Nowhere you know. A little seaside town. It's called Belmar. There's nothing to do there but watch the ocean. It's too cold to go to the ocean most of the year. One day I started walking. I guess Annapolis just drew me to it, because I ended up here. And here is where I want to stay."

"Why stay in Annapolis?" I asked. "I used to live in Baltimore. There's a lot more going on over there, and it's not far. You've walked this far already. And then there's Washington too, but I've never actually been."

"I like the water," said Ogden.

"Baltimore's got water."

Nobody said anything for a while. Skipper was looking down at his sandwich. Ogden was looking across the Chesapeake.

"Why not Baltimore if Baltimore's got water too?" I asked.

"I'm not sure how to respond to that," said Ogden.

Ogden was just that way, and he brought his own personality to the team. Ogden never found much of a niche with any of the other dockhands besides me, Sammy and Skip; and Sammy didn't like Ogden all that much, though he learned to get used to him. Skipper would invite Ogden out to the bar with us for drinks, and we would go to Armadillos, get drunk and act rowdy. Meanwhile, Ogden would sit quiet and composed and look off across the bar out the window to where the boats sat bobbing on the dock. Ogden would match us drink for drink, but he never showed it. Each order would be the same: "I would like a shot of Canadian Club and a bottle of Rolling Rock please thank you." He never deviated, not once. Sometimes we would try to trick him into getting something else. Skipper would say to Amanda, "a round of Kamikazes for everyone!" And Ogden would reply, "I would like a shot of Canadian Club with a bottle of Rolling Rock please thank you."

The first accident happened on one of these nights when we were coming out of the bar. It was late and dark and quiet on Dock Street, and a couple kids were hanging out by the water. They'd been passing around a bottle in a brown paper bag, and when they saw us they came up to start trouble. Ogden said, "let me handle this one."

Skipper didn't want to let Ogden confront the kids by himself, but Sammy said, "he says he can take them. Let's see if Ogden's got heart." So Ogden walked up and explained to them that we were simply coming from an evening spent at the bar and would prefer not to be bothered on our way home. The kids just laughed and one of them pulled a knife. He looked Ogden up and down and said, "hey man, who do you think you are?"

Ogden said: "I'm not really sure how to respond to that."

Ogden was out of the hospital by the end of the week, and the doctors were saying it was a miracle he survived at all. He'd had some near misses with some vital organs, and they said he should take it easy for a week or two. But two days after he came out of the hospital, Ogden was back working on the dock again like nothing happened. He never talked about it; he never complained about his injuries, he just went about his everyday business. When people came up to ask him what happened or how he was doing, he'd say, "I'm doing just fine. The doctor said I was lucky, but I already knew that." And that was that. You couldn't get another thing from him. The first

day Ogden was back Skipper suggested we all go out for a drink down at Armadillos after work to celebrate Ogden's recovery. I said that's how the trouble started in the first place, because I thought Skipper was being a little insensitive, but Ogden said he liked the idea. So that night we went back to Armadillos. Amanda was surprised to see Ogden back so soon, and she cooed over him all night, and brought him free drinks and asked how he was. When he gave her the line about the doctor said I'm lucky, but I already knew that, she winked at him and smiled and said, "Oh are you?" That got Skipper and Sammy roaring, falling off their seats like a couple clowns, but I didn't see what was so funny about it.

I stayed that night late while Amanda closed the bar. "Your friend Ogden seems to be a real trooper," she said. "He's a strange guy, but I like him."

I said. "It's hard to know what to make of him. I think he's a little bit crazy."

"Oh, don't be silly," said Amanda. "I think he's kind of cute."

The second accident happened only a few weeks later. This time it happened on the docks, and for a while, some of the boys thought it was a stunt Sammy pulled. Skipper wouldn't hear it, though. "Sammy can be a rough kid," he'd say, "but he sure as hell ain't a killer."

It seems that while loading up cargo on one of the large sailboats, the sail swung loose and around. It ended up smacking Ogden in the head, lifting him off the boat and hurling him into the water. We were all pretty on-point when it happened. Everyone kept their head, went through the proper emergency procedures, and had Ogden out of the water and breathing within seconds, but no one thought he would make it. For two days Ogden was in a coma, and none of us thought he'd be coming out of it. We'd walk up and down the docks looking down, rubbing our chins, "it sure is a shame about Ogden."

Skipper would get philosophical: "I guess you just can't take this life for granted. Something can happen anytime anyplace anywhere." Even Sammy seemed sort of down about it.

A whole week went by like that, with no word on Ogden. But on Monday morning, when Skipper and I walked up to the docks, who should we see there but Ogden Osgood, working away as stoically as ever, like nothing happened.

"Hey Ogden man, I'm glad to see you're up and about," Skipper said, rubbing his neck. "But maybe you should go home and get some rest for a couple days before coming back on the job."

Ogden shrugged and said, "I'm fine. I spent the whole last week sleeping. It's time for me to get up and be active."

Sammy asked, "What did the doctor say?"

"He said I was lucky," said Ogden. "But I already knew that."

After the second accident, Amanda couldn't get enough of Ogden. We would stop by Armadillos and she would go on and on about how he must be both blessed and cursed. Was he invincible? We all kind of wondered about that. She bought him free drinks all the time now. Sometimes a free appetizer or something too. Ogden took it all in stride. He was polite, but always reserved, and never flirtatious. Amanda would slide up next to us at the bar, put her arm around him and say, "I know you must've been a heartbreaker back in Belmar. Come on and tell me how many girls you've been with."

"I'm not really sure how to respond to that."

Ogden's indifference was a turn-on for Amanda. It got to the point where Amanda stopped letting me walk her home, she'd say, "why don't you let Ogden walk me home tonight. You always do it."

I was going to other bars again. A lot of times I would go all by myself after work and drink until close. I was showing up late to work, skipped shaving and missed meals, lost sleep. Sometimes Skipper and Sammy would come up to me and say, "hey man, we're going to Armadillos tonight. You wanna come?" I always said no unless I knew Ogden would be going along with them. I couldn't bear the idea of Ogden and Amanda around each other without me being there. So if Ogden was in, I was in. If not, then I'd be spending the evening at some other dive. One day Sammy said to me, "look at yourself, man. This is pathetic."

I went home early that day. The sun was hot and bright, and I felt dizzy and sweaty the whole walk home. It really was pathetic. Sammy was right. It occurred to me that the best thing to do was just to kill myself. The idea came as naturally as you might decide to take a mid-day nap. Once it was in my head I couldn't shake it. After all, I said, if Amanda's into all this grimness and death and morbidity. The only problem was figuring out how.

The walk home gave me some time to think it over. The most appropriate thing probably would've been to jump in the Chesapeake, but it didn't seem right to do the act without going home first. I could always come back. I also liked the idea of poisoning myself because it sounded

painless and relatively easy, not to mention no mess for folks to clean up afterwards. The problem was where could I get a poison like that in such short notice? I didn't like the idea of knives or guns too much, but if I was really serious about getting things done, I couldn't rule them out entirely. There was always gas, of course, that was painless and clean provided nothing set off a spark. On the way up my street I stopped by the liquor store. I could always just drink myself to death too.

By the time I got inside, the sun was at its peak, and the light was coming in furious bright slants through the windows. It felt like a really wonderful afternoon to kill myself. I sat down and turned on the television and thought about what I was doing. It didn't seem to have any reality outside of the intonation of the word: *suicide*. I got up and grabbed a notepad and a pen. I didn't know whether or not I should leave a note. When I was a little kid I always thought it was selfish when people killed themselves and didn't leave a note, just explaining how things were and mostly *why*, but now the idea seemed kind of silly to me. Why? Well, why not?

I put the pen and pad down and stood up. I paced from one corner of my room to the next and back again. I went to the kitchen, poured myself a drink and went back to pacing. I noticed that my sadness over Amanda had been replaced completely by the concept of suicide. They no longer even seemed related to each other. I poured another drink. Which method had I decided on? The apartment was making me feel stir crazy. I decided to jump in the Chesapeake.

Outside the humidity and the drinks I'd thrown back had me delirious. My heart was going a mile a minute, and I kept feeling like I was about to stumble. The idea of drowning started to sink in. The whole horror of suffocating underwater. I remembered a time when I was a kid, how another kid had dunked me underwater and held me there for a long time. I remembered thrashing and wanting to scream, but not being able to. Most of all I remembered how painful and terrible it was. By the time I walked up on the Chesapeake the memory was so garish I turned around and walked back.

The question of how was still pressing me. I walked back to the apartment and sat down with the bottle. Maybe the easiest thing to do was drink myself to death. It would be hard to stomach taking in a whole lot of alcohol at first, but once I got on a roll, I'd be alright. Then again, I wasn't a heavy drinker. I didn't know if my stomach would

reject the alcohol before it killed me. Only one way to find out.

I finished the bottle within half an hour. I was pacing the hallways with my mind slipping back up in against itself, past where the last thought stopped just before I got there. The sun was losing force crashing through the windows, the long beams ladders through the blinds, and still with no means of self-murder. I walked down into the kitchen and turned the gas on all four burners. Then I went around the apartment and slammed shut every window and every door. Everything was just a question of waiting now. I sat down on the couch, lay back and closed my eyes. I folded my hands over my stomach, like in classical sculptures of dead people. Everything serenity.

I don't know how long I was out, but I woke up puking. I crawled off the couch and dragged myself across the floor with the sunlight and shadows pirouetting like ballerinas. I couldn't stop the flow of vomit, and I couldn't stand and I definitely could not think, focus or concentrate. I rolled over onto my back, and I think I remembered old stories about how this is how Jimi died, don't roll over on your back, man, but my brain was blinking in and out. Across from me I could see out the sealed up window the twilight setting in over late afternoon and the clouds against the sun auburn, rose and lavender. It was the most gorgeous thing I've ever seen. I propped myself up against some object somewhere. My head was pounding and drowning at the same time. The twilight clouds kept shifting so the colors were floating through small crystal fragments of the sunny early evening, where they formed a floating ocean, lit underneath by an orange sun. God, I thought. It's moments like this one make a man glad to be alive.

I woke up in the hospital a day and a half later. My roommate had come home and found me. I'd suffered some asphyxiation from the gas fumes, but I was okay. They released me from the hospital, and I rested for a week and thought about what I did and how I'd be able to show my face in front of the old dockhands again. When I went back it wasn't so bad as I thought. Everyone was real nice and understanding. Skipper said after work we'd go have some beers. He said things on the dock were business as usual. Even Sammy was friendly. I expected him to be a lot more sarcastic. As for Ogden, they said, he'd packed up and left for Baltimore the same night of my accident. Hadn't even said goodbye to anyone.

"Maybe he figured he was bound to get killed out here," I said.

That night we went down to Armadillos. Amanda was there and she said she'd heard about my accident and was I alright? It was nice to hear her sound like she cared about me, but it also felt a little patronizing, and – and I've had moments like this since – where I wish I'd succeeded. And what were you supposed to say when everyone kept calling it an accident? We stayed and drank late and then at night I waited while Amanda closed the bar. When I walked her home at night she invited me upstairs.

After that life was back to normal. Work went on at the docks, and drinking went on at Armadillos, and I walked Amanda home almost every night she worked. I worked that job until the end of the summer. After that I moved out of Annapolis and went to Washington. Things weren't quite the same at the docks after the night I tried to kill myself anyway. I could see it in the way Sammy looked at me. A few times I even overheard Skipper say to people that I'd caught the thousand-mile stare. I try to see it when I look in the mirror sometimes, but never can. Maybe I'm staring right past it.

The night before I left for Washington me, Skipper and Sammy went to Armadillos for a final night out together. We talked and drank and laughed about the summer, the good times and the bad, and finally conversation turned around to the topic of Ogden. Skipper got real quiet and leaned into the table.

"Alright," he said, "if you want the real scoop on what happened to Ogden, I'll tell you. We couldn't tell you at the time, just because it seemed like you weren't in the best place back then. I think it's okay now."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Well it happened like this. It had to be around five or six in the late afternoon, early evening when this happened. Same night you had your little incident. Anyway, we're all hanging out down at the dock in Eastport, working, talking, just doing what we do. Ogden is staring off in the distance as always, that thousand-mile stare of his. Anyway, the thing is he just starts walking. He's staring at the sky and he's staring at the twilight sun on the Chesapeake, and he starts to walk out to it. Like a moth to a flame. At first no one says nothing, cuz we figured he was just doing his own thing. You remember how Ogden could get. But he walks right up to the edge of the dock and keeps walking. It was the strangest thing I've seen in my life. He walked into the bay and

kept going. He never stopped. We were all standing there waiting for him to come back, but he never did. By the time anyone knew what the hell just happened, it was too late. I'll tell you one thing though, and I may burn in hell for saying it: but I've never seen anything so beautiful in my whole life as that image of Ogden walking out into the bay in that sunset. I'll take that one with me to the grave."

On the walk home that night with Amanda, I asked her about it. All she could do was cry. "Knowing Ogden, he probably didn't even die," I said.

When we got back to her place she invited me upstairs.

"I have some last minute packing to do," I told her.

"So when you're settled in Washington you still plan to send for me?"

I looked at Amanda's sad, pretty, aging face. "I don't know," I said. "I don't think we should see each other anymore."

I didn't wait for her response. Turning on my heel I headed back up the block. The streetlights stretched blurred orange against the Chesapeake out towards the moon. I stared at the water and tried to conjure the image of Ogden walking into the bay. It was comforting. Something to stay with me through the long walk home.

Perspectives

Liberia

On Monday, August 11th, the president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was forced by the United States government to step down from power. He relinquished the position reluctantly, and ultimately only after it became clear he would either have to step down from power or die violently like his two predecessors. This historic milestone for the very young republic of Liberia was just another chapter in the still ongoing story of a nation whose history reads like a political fable.

The history of Liberia provides an unsettling negative of the history of the United States: it is a country that was forced to confront its crimes face-to-face in the form of violent revolution – an alternative reality the US has yet to experience.

It begins in the early 1800's when black slaves still heavily populated the country. Although most blacks were still slaves, times were changing, and as more black Americans became free men, they began to fall into an awkward integration with white European-American culture. Black Americans had been integrating into white American culture all along, but all the same, most Americans, pro-slavery or otherwise agreed that blacks would never be able to assimilate with whites. The reality of the situation is that white America was not so much skeptical that blacks could assimilate into the culture, as they were afraid that blacks might gain the power and ability to stage a violent and historically devastating revolution: in essence, exactly what was to happen a century and a half later in Liberia.

By 1820 plans were already well under way to send free blacks back to Africa – a spot in West Africa bordering Sierra Leone they named Liberia – “land of freedom”. By the late-1820's the plan was in motion. The first settlers in Liberia found the conditions devastating. Yellow fever and malaria killed off a lot of the early Western settlers, black and white before much work could be completed. On top of that the indigenous peoples were understandably upset about being forced into a Western society, where, as I'm sure they must have realized from the

start, they would be treated like second-class citizens in their own land. There was initial resistance, but they were unable to keep it up in the face of Western technology. White officials from America gave Liberia the jumpstart it needed in government, drafting a constitution, holding office and appointing council members, but by the late 1840's not only had a full-fledged government been established in Liberia, the country had also declared sovereignty and was being run by elected black president Joseph Jenkins Roberts.

Liberia's social structure was just another version of America's, where people were either savages or nobility. The Americo-Liberians, or Liberians who were from America or descended from American blacks enjoyed the highest social status in the country, being in complete control of the government and the economy. Below them were the indigenous peoples of Liberia and then the black slaves who were recaptured from the slave ships. It is fair to say that much of Liberia's history has been spurred on by the tensions that have arisen because of this unusual social dynamic.

Liberia was also a country plagued by financial hardships. Liberia's export goods were primarily agriculture, and the money it cost to maintain the country's imports overwhelmed the amount of money that came in from exports. For this reason, the government always had difficulty keeping the indigenous populations under control, and lacked both the ability and the desire to make the indigenous populations feel like they were a part of the European community that had overrun their homeland. Nevertheless, for over a hundred years Liberia managed to maintain what seemed a relatively peaceful and apparently untroubled history.

In 1944 William Tubman was elected into office. His presidency is one that is contradictory and controversial. On the one hand, Tubman did a lot for the indigenous population of Liberia. It wasn't until his presidency that the indigenous population of Liberia had the right to vote. He built schools,

hospitals and roads along the coast where large parts of the indigenous population lived. He attempted to integrate them into the political and economic life of the country. At the same time Tubman was also a puppet for the United States government, and an authoritarian leader of his own people. He set up networks of spies to suppress political uprisings; he changed the constitution to keep himself in power for seven terms running and he controlled the media. With this kind of leader in office and given the history of Liberia, the gap only widened between the Liberians and the Americo-Liberians. Tubman died in 1971, and was replaced by William Tolbert, a forward looking optimist, who took office at a time when tensions were extremely high, and was removed enough from the indigenous people to have every move he made second-guessed and often misinterpreted by the general population.

The end result was disastrous. In 1980, Samuel K. Doe, an indigenous sergeant in the army, formed a *coup d'etat*, stormed the presidential manner, and shot Tolbert to death. In the aftermath he had thirteen other top officials executed as well. Doe took power of the country under a new government, the People's Redemption Council (PRC) and began to run an outlaw state in a country that had been brought up in the shadow of the United States' guilty conscience. Doe's presidency was marked by paranoia, authoritarian pressure on opposition, and complete inexperience with the complicated bureaucracy involved with running a nation. At first support for Doe had been strong among the Liberians, but as he became more corrupt and tyrannical, his popularity began to wane. Tribes within the indigenous peoples of Liberia that had always lived peacefully together began to fight amongst themselves. Doe placed favoritism on his own tribe, the Krahn, when choosing which council members to keep and which to get rid of. By 1985 Doe had gone so far as to declare himself the winner of an election that he did not win, an incident that would repeat itself in the United States' own history just sixteen years later.

II

On January 28th, 1948 in the town of Arthington, just a little outside Liberia's

capital, Monrovia, Charles Taylor was born, the child of an Americo-Liberian father and a Gola tribeswoman mother. He grew up a troubled and rebellious child, expelled from schools, restless and constantly getting into trouble. As he got older, he developed a fascination with the history of Liberia and its connection to the United States. When he was 24, he finally made a move to Boston, Massachusetts where he went to school for his B.A. in Economics. While in the States, Taylor worked his way through the ranks of the Union of Liberian Associations to become the national chairman. Taylor used his position in power to demonstrate against then Liberian president William Tolbert, who instead of ignoring Taylor, insisted Taylor take up a public debate with him. Taylor's quick mind and pension for language made him easily outshine the president, and further established his reputation as a political figure of note.

Tolbert was so impressed that he actually invited Taylor to return to Liberia and take a position in his government in the spring of 1980. It turned out to be a tumultuous and historic time in the country's history. On April 12th, 1980 Tolbert was assassinated by Samuel Doe, and the government was taken over by the first indigenous president the country had ever seen. It would have been reasonable for Taylor to be afraid for his life during a time when the Liberians and Americo-Liberians were in what basically amounted to a civil war, and where retribution against a hundred fifty years of oppression was taking place on a daily basis, but amazingly enough, Taylor managed to get himself a valued position in Doe's government as head of General Services Agency.

Taylor was up to his own tricks, though. In May of 1983 Taylor was accused of embezzling nine hundred thousand dollars and depositing them into a private bank account. Naturally fearing for his life and freedom, Taylor fled Liberia for the United States. A year later he was arrested in Boston, and while awaiting a final verdict, he managed to escape from prison and vanish into the underground for the next four years.

It wasn't until July of 1990, when Taylor invaded Monrovia with the National Patriotic

Front of Liberia (NPFL) that he was seen to resurface. The NPFL was divided into two factions – one led by Taylor, and the other led by a revolutionary named Prince Johnson. By September Johnson's forces had seized the government, tortured and finally executed Samuel Doe. Johnson's position in Monrovia led to a civil war between him and Taylor's factions of the NPFL, and after five years of violent civil war the men called a cease-fire and signed a peace treaty. Two years later Taylor was elected into office. That was 1997. On June 4th 2003, Taylor was brought up on war crime charges by the United Nations. His government was accused of dealing arms to the rebels in Sierra Leone, violent agitators who were known for chopping up the bodies of their enemies, man, woman and child.

On Monday, August 11th, the president of Liberia, Charles Taylor, was forced by the United States government to step down from power. He relinquished the position reluctantly, and ultimately only after it became clear he would either have to step down from power or die violently like his two predecessors. This historic milestone for the very young republic of Liberia was just another chapter in the still ongoing story of a nation whose history reads like a political fable.

III

But where exactly does that leave us? How are we supposed to understand the history of this country and how are we supposed to relate it to our own history, and our own understanding of race, social order, power and the ways in which we try to improve our world? The history of Liberia is the history of

complicated individuals who got involved in something a lot larger than they imagined. It's also the history of a country that had to grow up grappling with questions a lot larger than it could always handle. What is the Perspective here? There are facts and there are interpretations.

When I think about Liberia's history and Charles Taylor's life, I'm confronted with a stream of questions. How are we supposed to understand Charles Taylor, whose rebel government turned out to be just as, if not more, corrupt than the rebel government he overthrew? This cycle has constantly recycled itself from the British oppressing the colonists, to the colonists oppressing the blacks, to the blacks oppressing the Liberians, to the Liberians oppressing themselves. Each new oppressor throws aside the values that sparked rebellion in the first place.

They say absolute power corrupts absolutely. Well, maybe. I don't believe human beings have an innate inborn nature myself, but something is happening here. How as an American in the twenty-first century can I look at these strange examples history offers us, and learn to use them to understand myself, my actions, my motivations and my ambitions better? Every thought, action and idea I formulate is immediately called into question, estranging me from myself – creating a civil war between an oppressed indigenous concept of a self, and a social perspective that I long ago learned to accept and assimilate.

Bucktown, New Jersey

Joshua Lefkowitz

The two jakes have been masters of their environment for over two decades. They have eliminated the doubt associated with instinct by training themselves to work solely by routine. For instance, watches are unnecessary tools because they have patrolled their sector long enough to know time and location as a single unit of information. Their shift begins at precisely midnight as they exhale the last dose of Marlboro Lites. The work period is eight hours long with five minute cigarette breaks at two and six o'clock. In addition, they have a meal break at four o'clock for one half hour; in lieu of eating they opt to sleep for twenty-nine and one half minutes before drinking a once-hot cup of coffee purchased earlier from Seven Eleven. They have chosen the most practical place for repose: the school parking lot located central to the rest of the sector.

On school grounds the stars are too many to count, but it is illegal to walk upon the property at night. From everywhere else in town, it is impossible to see the nighttime sky. The continuous array of streetlamps positioned every twenty feet on each road illuminates every marker of space in front of every house and casts a cloud of glare that impedes the view above the telephone wires. The land has been carved into residential blocks of suburban dwelling; every building is intended for habitation by a maximum of four individuals with the exceptions of the school and police department. All of the trees have been cleared from the front lawns in order to remove the threat of shadows. The police are sure this has ensured a secure town, not only in almost entirely eliminating serious crime, but also in deterring skunks from walking around the neighborhood and diffusing their scent about. The only outdoor space that offers cover from the daytime sun or streetlamps at night can be found around the school. The two officers park their car beneath the largest shelter, a great oak with a fence running through its center.

The metal protrudes in and out of the tree seamlessly. Looking straight on, it appears that the tree dominates the terrain, that the fence ends on one side of the trunk and begins anew on the other. From the top view the situation is opposite. Barbed wire has mangled half of its limbs. Only a few branches manage to grow. Unable to reach a level plane, they struggle outwards and sag towards the ground. Years of autumnal leaves have been trapped atop the trunk, piling together to form a degrading depression that sinks towards the fence at the center of the tree.

This hopeless battle of the tree to incorporate the fence into its body is not remarked upon by the officers. They limit verbal communication to its barest necessity. Even the radio remains off unless a transmission is anticipated. Dispatch can only assume that the officers will respond since they have never missed a single call. The officers have studied the statistical data over a ten-year period and correlated it with their own personal logs. Every call has been completely predictable for the duration of their careers.

As far as the two cops can tell, little has changed. The length of the grass is the same as it was at this time the year before. The houses are all the same size, shape and color, and the streets paved with the same miscellaneous black substance. Any disturbances within the community unfold according to the regular cycle of drunks, abused wives and mischievous teens that exist within every generation. The occasional incident of a more serious nature does not represent the norm. The people have always been predictable, actions within the town always in tune with the seasons. Yet, there is a particular quality of the youth that addles the cops' innards. This situation has taken some time to develop. It began when their children were found listening to Rap. At first, there was not much to observe about the music; it was another trait to attribute to drug dealers and troublesome black youth. This is how it seemed in the police training video: skinny Jamaicans with long dreads and guns sitting around a smoky room listening to gangster lyrics about killing cops. A cultural critic from the *Times* in the city managed to obtain a copy of the training tape and remarked how dangerous it was in the hands of such a homogenous community. Those in the department patient enough to sort through the verbiage of the critic's article found the analysis laughable, particularly his conclusion that their so-called misunderstanding of the art form represented, "A catastrophic indicator of the horrible violence that is destined to befall any person suspected of being black." Most officers do not bother with newspapers, especially not the two night patrolmen. They try to remain convinced that hip-hop is a trend, another minor change in music, like Rock 'n Roll before Elvis. Yet the white faces on their children's compact disc covers causes concern. It reminds them of the violence unleashed in places like Colorado; they anticipate a day when the town's children will wreak havoc upon the community. They have worried like this for some time, but never in a conscious state. They have fought symbolic

battles in their dreams, between the un-American and the patriotic; their values have won every time, until tonight.

The two jakes jump out of sleep, coffee flying from the cups in their hands and soaking the cabin. Their sense of routine had been successful for over twenty years; now it seemed to be ruined in an instant, by some ethereal force. Turning on the radio, the airwaves are dead. For the first time in decades the two cops feel their instincts emerge. They suspect gunshots, but cannot confirm. They wait longer, patiently losing their patience. Sweaty anticipation spurs them to investigate on their own. They roam the streets in a disorderly fashion, shining their lights randomly down the driveways that line their path. They doubt themselves, upset by thoughts of forced retirement due to work-related stress; statistically, it is their time. Five minutes into their quest, disturbed by the thoughts of uncalculated events, they realize they are covering ground inefficiently but continue on in silence. When they arrive at the suspect's street, the nature of their disequilibrium takes form...

II

Atop my white picket fence there is a blue jay chanting, "Buck 'em down, Buck 'em down, Buck 'em down, Buck 'em down-n!" I was sure that I had covered every section twice, yet the bird upsets me by perching upon an unpainted spot. Such newfound stress will augment the condition that has me stuck in bed. While I am proudly the only one capable of properly fixing that fence, I am admittedly too sick to tend to the defective property. This bothers me to no end, much the worse that I have confessed to such a disgrace. There are other flaws as well, such as a small crack in the driveway that I repaved at the beginning of this summer. My land was once a source of suburban wonder worthy of envy from even the great estates in Englewood Cliffs. My lawn is still refined with lush, thick, fragrant, freshly cut grass. However, there is one stretch of lawn that, because it rests in the path of the shadow of the chimney, is light green like the neighbors' lawns. And my wife wants another child. We already have one, and I dare say it is not fiscally responsible to take on such costs when we cannot guarantee the security of our future. Thinking now I seem to recall two children, three, four...

How these concerns have come to consume my attention is as much a mystery as this bothersome bird that flaps incessantly about my window. The

revving of a lawnmower in the neighborhood disrupts the blue jay's chanting. An air conditioner is powered on and the bird is drowned out completely. The cooling device is more distracting than any talking animal. Its droning engine makes me nauseated, causing me to wonder about my propensity for sickness and how long I can keep these K-Mart sheets clean. No, no, they must be from Sears. Calvin Klein might be more fitting, but are not those the same as the ones found in Macy's? I must rest my head from these thoughts, lay them down on fluffy, oversized pillows that look like billowing marshmallows. The sickness is gone, I have decided. A doctor will come in the room and tell me I am cured. No, the news will be worse. He will tell me that there is no sickness, that I have imagined the entire ordeal and will require medication to fix my behavior. It is true that I have recently found myself in a tortured state of deluded existence, but no medication will remedy the current situation.

I have lost my face. I refuse to get out of bed, to look in the mirror and view the state of my former self. I do not need to see my freakish reflection. I know there is no longer any nose, chin, eyes, mouth or eyebrows, the entire face is a blackboard washed clean. Not one single indication that there is something that belongs here, no dried out pores, oily pimples, birthmarks or freckles. Soon I shall be completely mad. The coloring is off, too; a man's skin should not change color. He does not have the luxury to choose the state of this organ, but once it has been given, it should not be taken away. I have always been one color, the color of my parents, yet I cannot remember them now. Here, in bed under the sheets, I have no memory. It seems to have fled away with my face. How I can see is a mystery to myself that drives me to further agitation. There is no logic here. I can see myself in bed, colorless and immobile. My heart is not beating. I cannot feel it. I am not in my body. There are two of us, or one divided individual. Perhaps I am the face and that is my body. I might just be an eye, a retina, or some nothing that feels falsely connected to the faceless body before it...

III

Kodak cannot remember a single dream from the past six years. Every night he awakens terrified and completely disoriented. Initially, his sleeping disorder consisted of nothing more than a pause in his breathing; after a few months, he was waking for a brief second in the middle of the

night. Over the course of a year, these disruptions grew noticeable and Kodak could not easily resume his rest. He tried his best to ignore the phenomenon and to focus on his hip-hop career, but his sleep became more greatly disturbed. After two years, he was jumping upright, gasping for breath. Desperate to quell the condition he began a heavy diet of marijuana and alcohol. This method had the added benefit of augmenting his lyrical abilities and for more than three years he successfully subdued the affliction. However, in the past few weeks, the problem has returned with nauseating intensity.

Kodak fears these nightmares that he cannot remember. They are depleting his physical resources and taking a toll on his mental faculties. He often loses all sense of his identity except for the streams of lyrical texts running through his mind; he sees waves, whirlpools and cascades of hip-hop verse when he closes his eyes. He hears voices that sing choruses and rap freestyle *a cappella*. The lyrics and voices are not his own creation, but are the last pieces of himself that he trusts. They receive most of his attention, even when there are more pressing matters at hand.

Kodak normally recuperates within a couple of minutes. This latest dream, however, has jarred his memory, indefinitely. He has awoken in a violent fit. A lone, grimy voice in his head chants, "Buck 'em down, buck 'em down, buck 'em down, buck 'em downnnnn..." It begins as a whisper, but quickly rises into a commanding roar that jolts Kodak into an upright position and causes his eyelids to pop open. His eyes are swimming in pitch darkness, the resonance of an unknown sound rings deafeningly in his ears, and a mysterious metallic smell creeps above his own body odor.

The carpet has absorbed years of smoke. The cigarette butts strewn about the room reek of stale chemical tar. There is a pile of Heineken cans and Budweiser bottles, some still half full after sitting almost one year. Kodak's nostril hairs have adapted to the bizarre foulness of the room, what smells like a blend of urine and carbon paper. He distinguishes fresh odors, such as the nicotine that emanates from the streams of sweat that run along his body. The drug would be enough to induce physical tranquility, if not for the troubling scent of gun smoke.

The poor lighting causes Kodak's eyes to dilate futilely. The streetlamp casts a dull glare that does more to emphasize the shadows of the room than illuminate any specific articles. Kodak sees his hands outstretched before him towards the wall in front of his bed, clasping some object

hidden by the dark. Scores of questions hijack his mind. He shakes them away and focuses on his hands. His right index finger is tightly constricted, holding what feels like a trigger pinned down. The invisible gun is warm and still smoking at the nozzle. He feels for the make; it is a nine-millimeter with an empty clip.

Kodak stands up and roves about the room, kicking for corpses. Finding none he peeks out the windows to see if anyone nearby has heard any shots. Observing no one, he sticks his head outside to listen for police sirens. He cannot even make out the sound of the wind sweeping into his face; his ears have stopped functioning properly and the only thing discernible is a distant clicking in his auditory canals. As his hearing begins to return, the clicking grows louder, evolving into the pounding of a fist at a door in the corner of the room. A muffled voice accompanies the knocking. He cannot make out any of the words through his stunned hearing, but the situation feels routine. He locates a lighter and a pack of Lucky Stripes atop the dresser next to the bed. He lights a cigarette, puffs desperately, and exhales with indignation. He loathes the taste of such a cheap brand, but the nicotine calms him. The knocking stops and he listens to the floorboards that creak as the person walks away.

Kodak looks for bullets, in case anyone is looking to threaten him—the lyrics in his head assure him of this possibility. If the police show up, he will need to make up a story. He walks over to the window, tripping over unrecognized objects. Closing the curtains, he completely covers the viewing area of the window. Making his way over to the door, feeling the soles of his feet bruising and tearing on what feel like cold, jagged pebbles, he holds his tongue in order to avoid the nuisance of a second intrusion. Feeling for the light switch against the wall, close to the door, he finds an adjustable knob and sets the light to a dim output.

Kodak sets himself down before a large looking glass only to discover it is mostly an empty frame. A couple of jagged sections remain intact; he makes out his mouth in one small fragment and one of his eyes in another. On the floor lies the rest of the mirror; it is shattered into so many bits that there is not a single image to be fashioned from any one of them. There is blood on the floor where some pieces have been removed from the pile. He is directed by stinging pain in his foot to brush himself clean of shards, smearing blood across his hand. He wipes himself clean on the carpet, then roves the floor for a clear plastic bag lying amidst the broken

glass. He opens the Zip-Lock and sticks his nose inside. It smells like skunk. There are rolling papers at the bottom. He draws one out and proceeds to roll a joint.

Kodak slowly tokes the weed until he finds a relaxed and removed state. It then occurs to him, in a buzzed manner, that he cannot recollect a moment before the echo of gunshots that awoke him. But the high flows through his mind like muddy waters, putting him at ease, so much that the sense of immediacy relative to his current circumstances disintegrates. He picks up a pair of headphones from the floor. As he slips them over his head, the padding of the ear pieces chafe against his auricles, producing a rustling sound that is augmented by the marijuana. It reminds him of a record needle on vinyl. He moves the headphones back and forth against one ear to mimic the sound of a D-J scratching. He does this for the duration of his high, continuing it even as he hypnotizes himself. The text of lyrics that run along the walls of his mind begin to blur and fade. He hears voices rhyming in tandem, unfolding an epic tale that plays like a music video inside his head. Under the effects of the weed, the story runs in loops, an overlapping mess. There is the figure of a hip-hop hero, a mortal that won divinity in death. This hero was a prince stranded in another kingdom. His mother, who had been banished to another land, had forgotten him and his father was rumored to be a defeated god of war. The hero is larger, stronger, more powerful and wiser than Kodak, but the same in fundamental appearance. When the hero tragically dies at the hands of the evil empire, betrayed by his own followers, there is the telltale silence of the people, signaling the redemption that will follow. Succeeding his death, the hero's magnificence is finally appreciated and the people exalt him forever. The scenes from this epic tale play out in random order, as though they are outtakes programmed into a digital videodisc. Kodak has experienced this high before and likes to enjoy it frame by frame.

Amidst the scenes of fantasy, Kodak's memory slips back into the foreground. It is impossible to place their relevance by time or space as he is completely blazed. He looks at the clock. It is three, though there is no telling if it is the right time. He is supposed to go to his job in the morning, yet he has been inspired by this epic high for some time; tomorrow could be the day that produces a new sound. Satirical images of failed emcees slither through his mind, premeditating self-doubt. The chanting grows louder inside his head, "Buck 'em down, buck 'em

down, buck 'em down, buck 'em downnnnn..." He rolls another joint, as tight as before and places it in his ear. He amasses from the floor a briefcase-sized compact disc container. He opens it and peruses through the complete library of hip-hop music, including his own demos.

Kodak is bothered by the sticky film of sweat that overlays his skin as well as his unfashionable attire: a dirty, ripped hoody and tight-fitting sweat pants. But anxiety compels him to leave the house, immediately. After grabbing a Gucci bag, he stashes a bundle of brand named clothes inside, picks up his hip-hop archive, shuts off the lights and starts a smoke that he puffs three times before stamping it out on the floor from where he grabs his car keys. He creeps to the door, undoes the padlock quietly, and slowly exits. On the opposite side he carefully locks up. He tiptoes down the hallway away from the room and stops, uncertain where to go. A creak in the floor makes him doubly unsure; for a moment he is frozen stiff.

Kodak is standing in a house, his home, in fact, but he will not recall a single detail of its layout. He makes out a banister down a long corridor through which he proceeds. Along the way he passes by many objects in the dark, what must be family memorabilia, things that completely disinterest him. His memory has almost completely returned; but he has no interest in admitting this fact or entertaining the memories associated with his personal self. When he reaches the staircase he is overcome by serene ennui. The stairwell leads in front of the main entrance to the house. Above the doorway is a large window granting a view of part of the landscape leading away from the house. He skips down the stairs on tiptoes. The door is not even locked. He slips outside into the Jersey Summer air.

Lush, dense, dark green grass surrounds the house. The hypnotic chirping of crickets compete with the droning sound of air conditioners and lawn sprinklers. Looking over the quarter acre of land, there is no reason to worry about the police. Kodak heads for his automobile, a standard, gray, automatic, mid-sized, four-door, made-in-the-USA car called the *American Spirit*. It is parked two blocks away underneath another glaring streetlamp. It is not an ideal location to smoke a joint, but it is his custom. After running one block, his lungs are on fire. He sucks on air for the rest of the journey. Before entering the *Spirit*, he lights a cigarette. His lungs reject the carbon at first, but the nicotine quickly subdues any resistance. He is relaxed and ready for another hit. He opens the car and enters, igniting the engine

before he sits down. After turning the stereo to full blast, he inserts his favorite album, *Makavelli*. He dances to himself a bit as he lights his joint; smoking away, he absorbs the bass, energizing his body and clearing his mind of the oncoming worries. The high comes on stronger than ever. He smiles, content with his anticipated achievement. As the song fades, so does he. By the time the next track begins, he has already blacked out...

IV

The blue jay lands on the windowsill and looks in on my bedroom. He is chanting vehemently, struggling to overtake the noise of the air conditioner. I insist aloud that this must be a dream, but no one will answer me and the bird's voice takes a defiantly imposing tone.

The officers step out of their car and approach the suspect. The windows are fogged up from smoke and Kodak's heavy breathing. One looks Kodak over while the other surveys the surroundings. One knocks on the door methodically, waiting three seconds for a response. Upon opening the car, beats of bass intercept the first jake at the chest. The sensation is disturbingly physical and mentally disruptive. He searches desperately for the power button to the sound system. The music has degraded into waves of distortion that strike him in regular succession. He does everything to stick to his habits, while his ears swell in pain and his face itches from vibration. He slams the door shut, setting off a cascade of car alarms on the street. The second officer curses aloud. The first feels the surge of adrenaline rush, and then the second. They slip into its control.

He hops off the windowsill and darts at the compact disc player. Funny, the machine is turned off and I hear music playing far away, echoes of poets in an indecipherable tongue. I make out rhyming staccato, and freestyle free verse of untold slang. There are countless songs, many that are familiar to an unknown part of me, and many that have never been. They are all missing bass, treble and any sort of instrumental accompaniment. It is odd to me that I hear this now, and here. It does not belong here, not with a person like me.

Kodak sleeps through the first round of open handed blows to his face. The semi-hard knocks from the nightsticks do not jar him. The police drag him out of the car, yelling at him to wake up. The officers grind his face into the black asphalt. They are compelled to greater degrees of violence as Kodak's slumber proves to be ever deeper. His skin tears and blood splatters on the street. Tracts of epidermis are ripped from his face. Some pieces sprinkle away like dust.

I yell at the blue jay to turn off the music and to exit my house. He flies at my face and pecks holes in it, then flutters about the room, slowly and resolutely attacking everything. He smashes my framed pictures, cherished photos of family and friends, my record collection, Armani suits, the fake Rolex; no the real Rolex; both of them. Nothing is left intact. Tiny little pecks destroy all that I have...

V

When the music has come to an end the car stops vibrating and Kodak awakens. Opening his eyes, he witnesses the two police officers laboriously tearing his compact discs to pieces. "Whooh-whooh, that's the sound of the police" yells the first jake and the second responds, "Whooh-whooh, that's the sound of the beast." They laugh together wholeheartedly, their fears somehow abated. Kodak does not understand the scene to which he has awoken, but comprehends the police as taunting and infuriating. He feels the desperate urge to run; although his body is still numb from the narcotics his injuries prevent him from standing up and taking off. He is only able to rock back and forth. In doing so, he notices something jutting into his coccyx. Reaching into his butt crease he produces a nine-millimeter. He does not recognize his own gun. He holds it in his hands, mystified. There is a lone, grimy voice in his head whispering, "Buck 'em down, buck 'em down, buck 'em down, buck 'em downnnnn..." Kodak does not trust this voice. He is alone. His head is silent and empty. There are no more lyrics in his mind, and only darkness when he closes his eyes. He tries to calm himself with peaceful thoughts, by imagining himself walking into the Wiz to replace his lost discs. Somehow, this reverie is not settling. "My music will never be the same," he thinks.