
November 2003



strawberry press magazine

New fiction by Wanda Albano, Joshua
Lefkowitz and whit frazier

Perspectives on traveling cross-country
by Max Farrow

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
NOVEMBER 2003
VOLUME ONE ISSUE FIVE

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online 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 Five

Volume One, Issue Five of Strawberry Press Magazine has been a hectic issue to get out. My sheisty landlord and his conspirator the Super wouldn't let me renew my apartment lease, hoping to gut the place and raise the rent, and so I've spent a good deal of the month wandering around wondering where I'd end up living. Looks like everything turned out alright in the end, it always does, but it made putting out the magazine something of a greater challenge than it usually is. And it's usually quite a challenge to begin with.

That much said, we present Strawberry Press Magazine, Volume One Issue Five – the November issue. A good friend of mine and very talented writer just got back from a long road trip out West and back, and has written a perspective on it. It's a pretty descriptive piece, and when I read it I asked him if I could use it for the magazine. Never been out West myself – not farther than Chicago, but this piece brings up some pretty wonderful imagery of what I've been missing. This issue also features new work by Joshua Lefkowitz, whose work has previously appeared in the magazine. There is also fiction by Wanda Alba, who is completely new to Strawberry Press, and finally, new fiction by Whit Frazier.

We're continuing to work on the website, and I hope the upcoming month will allow me more time to get things done. Unfortunately co-editor Matt has been especially busy lately too, so that didn't help matters. The holidays might make things a little tricky too, but I think we'll manage. As for the upcoming holiday season, I wish everyone the best. I'd say happy Thanksgiving, but I really don't think all that much of a holiday that strikes me as ultimately ignorant, racist and sort of sick.

Cheers,

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Wanda Albano is a 22-year-old recent New York transplant from the Philippines. She's a MFA in Creative Writing student trying to mine the city's wealth of psychopathic inspiration. She lives full-time with her part-time psychosis.

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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

Another Angel

Wanda Albano



I dreamed of angels falling on the earth like a hailstorm. The place I saw in my dream was unlike any I've been to, yet it felt strangely familiar. It seemed to be a deserted provincial road, lined with trees and overgrown grass.

I could see the angels' shadowy wings scattered on the muddy soil, their bodies stretched out and barely moving, like white blood on red snow. The air was filled with fine down, as if a giant feather pillow had been slit open in the breeze. Some angels landed on their feet, but some lay sprawled on the ground, and some even seemed hurt, or perhaps, asleep. There was a pile of them on the asphalt road as well, angel heads hidden among angel feet. I looked up to see if more would drop from the sky. I felt a sudden, manic desire to run around like a chicken little clucking that sky was falling.

My body lay unraveled between pillows, my legs tangled in the bed's skin. The air conditioner hummed ever so softly. He was still asleep. He lay on the bed so peacefully it was hard to imagine that anything could ever be wrong.

He had seemed so content just the year before. His black hair was longer then, it had often been in a ponytail. The short spikes now stuck out in tufts from his head. He had been darker then, too, browned by all the hours he put in the soccer field. Now his skin looked like coffee that had been overwhelmed with milk. He was growing up, and he was growing away from me.

I turned away from him to watch the world from his window, my face pressed to the glass. The promise of a shining sun had already begun to stain the dark sky crimson.

It was cold. I wished he hadn't insisted on turning down the temperature so low. I hugged the comforter closer to my body. My feet burrowed deeper under the thin blanket. I was silently curling my toes, wishing my whole body could curl itself as well.

"Oh shit," I muttered under my breath. I had forgotten to tell my roommate that I wouldn't be going home today. There was a phone on the bedside table. I picked it up as silently as I could.

"Nix!" I whispered as soon as I heard her drowsy, "Hello?"

"Where the hell have you been?" she asked, irritated. "You didn't call me back!"

"I couldn't. I don't get service here."

"His place? What happened?"

"I'll tell you when I get home. Maybe in an hour."

"I hope you have your keys because I'm not sitting up to wait for you."

I heard an abrupt click as Nix hung up.

"Come back beside me," the man on the bed called in a whisper, still half asleep. He woke up just after I had replaced the receiver. His eyes were only half open as he placed a hand on my forearm, caressing it gently in invitation. I smiled, and shook my head. I pushed back the covers and got out of bed. I crouched down the floor, fishing for something to cover my nakedness. He pulled himself up and propped his head on a pillow. He lay on his side, staring at my unsheathed skin. The carpet seemed rough to the touch. Finally my hands came to what felt like last night's cotton shirt. I pulled it out from under the bed. It was big and light blue.

I went back to the bed and sat down. I kept my gaze away from him even as I felt him move. I heard a zipper travel the metal teeth of his pants. We kept our backs to each other as we hurriedly covered ourselves. Our bodies were suddenly shy of each other's scrutiny.

His shirt fell almost past my knees.

I stood up and walked across the room. I got a stick from the pack of Marlboro Lights that lay on top of the TV. The small apartment he was renting seemed to reverberate with the sound of my every move. I sat down on the couch by the door and lit my cigarette. The ashtray on the table beside me had been overturned, and ash had spilled from the glass top and on to the floor. I looked around the room, taking in the bamboo floor, and the paintings on the wall. I knew most of them were his. They were all in bold colors, full of naked angels and other tortured souls. In the midst of the darkness they seemed ready to jump out of the canvas. He hauled himself over to where I was, a cigarette between his fingers, and the whole pack on his other hand. He stood by the door, shirtless. A hint of stubble marked his chin.

"Are you okay?" He asked me, as if he was genuinely concerned.

"Sure," I replied, a practiced smile breezing through my lips. He sat on the arm of the couch and kissed the top of my head. I looked at him. He grinned and started playing with my hair. "You want to get breakfast or something?"

I shook my head. "I'm not hungry. But I can make you something if you want."

"No, I'll just have coffee." He put an arm around my shoulder and kissed me on the cheek, his hand twiddling the silver necklace I always

wore. I flicked off the ash from my cigarette, my arm grazing his thigh.

Then I saw it. A framed picture of a pretty girl perched on the table, black-haired and doe-eyed, all pearly whites and creamy chocolate skin. I had never seen it before.

“Who’s this?” I asked him, studying the girls’ saccharine smile.

“Valerie.” He replied uneasily, his hand suddenly still.

“Oh.” I answered planting my cigarette on the ashtray. “The girlfriend.”

“Uh, yeah.” He smiled cautiously.

“Hmmm, this is definitely something new,” I teased. “Any special reason you want her here?” I asked, attempting to keep it light, although I felt strangely jealous.

He put down his cigarette and took up the picture instead. He fingered it for a moment before putting it down. I saw his eyes cloud over with all the thoughts he had tried to push out of the way. They now came rushing back, released by the light of the sun that was gently streaming through the windows. The spell was broken. The tenderness in him receded like the darkness. He looked at me again, but this time the affection was gone. “I just think a lot about her nowadays,” he said.

I was quiet as I remembered that he had picked me up from the apartment that day smelling faintly of cologne. He had never bothered to put cologne on for me before.

“But he’s so ordinary.” Nix complained when she first met him.

“I know”, I whispered back.

The first time we met was in a bar on Essex. Drunk and miserable, he plopped on the chair beside me right after we were introduced.

“So, how are you?” I asked him, bored but trying to be polite. Undoubtedly, it was the alcohol that had made him go off into a tirade on his pathetic life and his too-conservative family.

“I’m only 24 and they’re already talking about business and heirs!” He had lamented. “Five years from now I’m going to end up just like my dad.” I had to smile at his melodrama. There he was, a lost little boy in all his vulnerability, pretending to be grown up. And at that moment I felt an urge to help him, to let him forget his problems, even for just a little while.

I stepped out of the shelter of the trees once I felt sure that the celestial downpour had stopped. My hysteria was gone, and in its place, a calm sense of purpose. I waded through wings and arms, feet and faces, and through the heap of angels I spotted one with the face of a young man. He was badly hurt. His wings seemed to have been crushed by the pile of angels around him. I helped him as best as I could, but I knew that soon I would not be enough, and he would have to turn to his own kind.

“Hey, I just need to take a shower, okay?” He said, breaking the silence abruptly, his tone painfully light. I nodded. He stood up and walked to the bedroom. He reappeared holding a towel and was on his way to the shower, when he stopped abruptly, hesitating.

“Are you gonna be alright here?”

“Of course.” I answered with all the false assurance I could muster.

I knew he would think of Valerie as the water from the shower flushed away memories of last night. He would wonder at the pretty angel of a girlfriend he had loved for almost two years. He would think about the hundred sacrifices his parents had made on the altar of his future. He would no longer be unsure, no longer faltering. I had become an exclamation mark to everything I was not, a mere frame to hold the portrait of his angels.

I went back to the bed and collected the clothes I had discarded on the floor. I exhaled the last drag of my dying cigarette. I dressed slowly and took a last peek through the window.

I noticed an envelope under the phone. It was addressed to me.

I went to the door and opened it as silently as I could. In the hallway were so many doors just like this one, perhaps housing a thousand other secrets. I stepped out and turned to peer at his studio one last time.

Outside was a safer place from which to watch the night uncoil.

The outline of the sun was in the sky now. “Last one”, I promised the empty corridor. I closed his door carefully and hurried to the elevator. Finally I stepped out into the morning, hearing the fluttering of wings overhead. The city birds seemed cheerful today. I walked round the bend where the taxis would be waiting, discreetly counting the money in the envelope along the way.

The Hungry Artist

Joshua Lefkowitz



Morsels, morsels melting, mm...mm...my-my, mouth-watering melon, mars-bars, M&M's, Mystic, mangoes, marshmallows, marzipan, mocha, Muenster, mozzarella, matzo, meat, meatballs, malomars, mulberries, mackerel, mint, martinis, malt milk shakes, mouse-meat...

During these past few decades the interest in professional eating has appreciated to a degree of overwhelming value. It used to be possible to make a simple performance on a street corner under one's own management, but today that is quite unthinkable. We live in different worlds now. From the onset of his binge, the hungry artist was an instant appeal to the children. Before his rise to stardom, he spent most of his days trapped in the living room, pinned inside the entranceway to the kitchen; a couple of children peeped in through one of the windows by standing on the backs of their friends. The rest of them ran about yelling, excitedly, "How fat is he?"

"Can you smell him?"

"How big is his underwear?"

The observers reported their findings in hyperbolized fashion. "He has horns growing out of his head," the first kid would say, and the second would follow, immediately adding, "He made a pact with the devil; the contract is hanging up on the wall." This had become the tradition of the ages. Armies of children ran about the neighborhood in search of such a spectacle: men who were incarcerated in their own living space due to the lack of congruence between the shape of their bodies and the pathways throughout the house.

In truth, it is inaccurate to say that the hungry artist was fat. He was never fat, obese, overly round, tubby, or wide-loaded; he was none of these things, *per se*. The hungry artist was hungry, hungry all of the time. He was not a person of possession, that is, he possessed neither love nor hate, angst nor obsession, desire nor fear, nor motivation, or so he explained to the children in order to appease their relentless prodding. In return for his answering their barrages of questioning the children brought him food: table scraps, curdled milk, packaged goods that had outlived past civilizations, and anything they did not trust to eat themselves. They never asked him what he desired, since he ate everything they threw at him. Mostly, they threw him Twinkies, synthetic cream-filled sponge cakes gathered from an abandoned warehouse on the outskirts of town. The children were most impressed with this trick of eating the yellow orbs of fluff since not

even the current day roaches would touch the mysterious stuff.

When he managed to get out of his house he went to Main Street where he was infrequently employed at Dairy Queen, Baskin Robins, Carvel, Haagen Daz, TCBY or some other local ice cream parlor chain. He was a faithful, competent and diligent worker so long as he was capable of arriving to work. When he did so, he was always on time, washed his hands after relieving himself, smiled, never miscounted a coin, neither rang up a wrong tab nor stole—he even docked himself the cost of the napkins he used to wipe his mouth—never asked for a raise, and followed orders meticulously. Customers were drawn to the store because of its unique family atmosphere prompted by the grace of the slightly and clownishly overweight, overaged kid who could not stop talking about sugar and popsicles, fudgcicles, candy, bubblegum, whipped cream, caramel, chocolate, on and on and on from open till close, Monday through Friday. On weekends, he stole menus to bring into work for comparison. Of course he sampled products everywhere he went. He reported back to his employers, impeccably detailing the offerings of the local competition.

While the hungry artist set out to embody the model worker, he could not avoid the effects of eating. It was not his intention to nibble on everything with which he came in contact, yet he could not help himself, and was really not to blame. In the presence of so much food and in serving so many customers, his impulses were expropriated. He was driven to eat excessively, as though he were feeding generations of tapeworms with a communal propensity for every sundae, shake, cone, ice cream soda and sprinkle.

A few months after beginning a new job, the hungry artist would awake one morning to discover he could scarce get out of bed; upon rolling to his feet and toward the bathroom it would be apparent that he had indulged too much the night before. He did not hold any general reservations against skipping out on work; it was the children and his boss over whom he worried. The former were always encamped about the house awaiting the next time he would be imprisoned at home. In regard to the latter, most of the artist's supervisors were cantankerous individuals desperately in search of any pretext by which to fire him. They were spiteful of anyone of greater fortune. In the hungry artist they saw a man who had something of joy in the world. When he took time off work to lose weight his

supervisor did not hesitate to dismiss him from his position, but not before reprimanding him for his gluttonous ways.

Occasionally, he won himself more favorable circumstances when he was hired by someone who felt sympathy for fat folks. This was the situation at the last ice cream-parlor-chain where he worked. Here, the hungry artist felt himself at home for he was allowed to grow beyond the popularity he achieved with his customers. He developed a gut that impeded his scooping arm's path to the containers of ice cream. At first this benefited the business of the store by attracting many passers-by. Locals and folks from neighboring towns gathered about to watch the fat man struggle with the limitations of his own life system. As he grew larger, it became increasingly difficult for him to carry out his duties relative to the ice cream scoop. The lines grew greater, but the customers found his condition decreasingly interesting. They enjoyed his sweating and panting for only a short time. When they were ready to eat dessert they found his service to be intolerable and made a great fuss about his inefficiency. Normally, he was fired when this predicament arose, but the sympathetic manager could not bare to dismiss someone on the grounds of obesity.

Instead, the sympathetic manager gave the extra large employee more responsibility, thinking that might do some small justice to prove the worth of such people, everywhere. The hungry artist was granted the privilege to gain weight, unhindered, and entrusted with the responsibility of closing shop every night. This freedom and trust intersected late one evening within an ice cream container located in the depths of the freezer. All the artist had aimed to create was a small midnight snack before locking up. Upon bending over into the bin for the scraps of ice cream left over from the day, he discovered that he had not enough muscle to pull himself up and out. He strained for much of the night trying to extract himself from the freezer. After many fruitless and painful hours of struggle, the artist decided his only option was to delve in further. In order to fit in, it was necessary to consume the remaining ice cream. He achieved this quickly and found himself resting tranquilly inside the freezer. And then he slept, and dreamt, and perceived a vision. This epiphany was difficult to verbalize. At least the artist was aware of something. As he put it, "Now, I know something of myself. Something most men will never know of themselves."

In the morning the sympathetic manager entered the store to the sight of a spotless catastrophe: no ice cream. The hungry artist had licked every lick and any drops of frozen moo-juice that he had missed he had snorted or sniffed off the glass, floor and lids. The manager understood that he had a problem with which to contend upon viewing the emptied bins of ice cream and toppings all about the floor. He knew the matter was serious when he discovered the fat employee trapped in the freezer. Unsure of how to deal with the situation, he paced about in a panic, attempting to formulate some options. He never considered that the hungry artist might freeze. There was no reason to worry for he was well insulated by the layers of lard that offered prime protection against cold weather, storms, hail, sleet, snow, fists, low-level projectiles and the interiors of freezers. The sympathetic manager thought he could cover for the hungry artist. He told him, "don't move!" while scrambling in the back for the stockpile of ice cream containers. The manager was swift, and for just cause; since the owner would be paying a visit, shortly.

Observing the hungry artist in a catatonic state the sympathetic manager thought he could refill the freezer and nonchalantly conceal the hungry artist underneath the containers of ice cream. This sort of sitcom scheming mentality was not uncommon and prevailed throughout the empire, even in such small towns located deep within the semi-developed sectors. The hungry artist was not unconscious, his body was expanding and the manager soon took notice. When the sympathetic manager returned with other flavors he discovered that the first crate of ice cream appeared to have been emptied from the inside out, for the carton was crushed yet the lid was sealed. He asked the hungry artist what had happened but this approach was fruitless.

"Twinkie, you eating the ice cream," the manager asked. "Hey, Twinkie, are you up? Come on get out of the freezer!" The manager wrote off the experience as his imagination and refilled the freezer with three cartons. When he came back he discovered the same thing. All of the containers were empty and the hungry artist appeared to be sound asleep in the same exact position as previously observed. "I didn't go to college for nothing," declared the manager. He grabbed the flavor that the hungry artist consumed the most and placed it in the freezer out of reach from the overly plump man. For the twenty minutes that he stood vigil to the ice cream, nothing in the air seemed to move or make a

sound. "I must be going crazy," the manager yelled aloud. He walked over to the freezer, prepared to check the carton when, "Get away from there, boy!" boomed the owner as he entered the store. "Go on, get out of here, you sicken me! Eating up my profits like that, as though I wouldn't notice."

"But sir, I wasn't doing anything," the sympathetic manager mustered.

"Bzzz, bzzz," he was rebuked by a bee noise and hand motion.

The owner locked the store and pondered. "Before I had walked in I was ready to introduce my penicillin enhanced ice cream, but with this, this, this beast of a man! What need!?" The hungry artist broke out of his meditation for a moment to share his epiphany. "I am an artist," he stated and then resumed his consuming meditation. And the owner ruminated for thirty seconds then rang up the register in his head. He stepped outside and found what he expected, the former manager groveling at the entrance to the ice cream parlor chain. "Spread the word," the owner boomed, "spread the word!" Thus began Twinkie's professional career as the hungry artist on the same day the owner became his impresario. It all began with the announcement of the talents of an artist the likes of which could only be explained by current society.

The impresario put the hungry artist on tour, setting up performances at local carnivals.

* * * * *

The hungry artist's earliest memory was of himself consuming McDonald's French Fries amidst a tsunami of televisions tuned to different channels, a collective of images hodgpodged in his mind like an indigestible mush of food lubricated by an indecipherable stream of audio. In-between periods of his meditative binge, he told his audience such tidbits of his life. The artist was happy to answer any questions that his audience posed. They often induced him to explain how it was that he could eat and breathe at the same time. No one believed his answer that he did not do them at the same time, but that the process was one. For those who did not accept this explanation he deferred them to a note and diagram that described and illustrated the physiology of the artist. By the time people had finished scanning their eyes above the fleshy flap of his body that extended from the back of the artist's head and covered his shoulder blade, they had forgotten about the note and were drawn instead to the sets of tiles marked with different colored numbers. The hungry artist explained that the doctors expected him to die within the number

of days indicated by a red tiles, while the green set counted how long he had been fasting. The days alone did not alter the conjecture of when the artist would die. After one week of study the doctors put up a third set, a complex group of symbols that explained an equation developed to determine the value that was displayed by the red. "There is no doubt that he will die," the doctors announced each morning. "The difficulty in specifying the day is due to the tremendous amount of variables involved in the equation." They originally estimated that the artist had one year left to live.

This attracted little attention, so the impresario wisely put the artist on a strictly saturated fats diet. A tub of butter was designed for the artist to swim in and eat from, thereby maximizing his body's ability to create cholesterol. After one week the doctors were horrified to learn what he had been consuming and at what rate of consumption. "He should be dead," they cried. The artist was too focused on his craft to take notice of any examination of his physical being. Mostly, he conducted his meditative binges inside his ice cream freezer; no one could say for how long each one would endure. There were periods of limitless liquid consumption: R-C-cola, Sprite, Pepsi-cola, Seven-Up, Coca-Cola, President's Choice Cola, Pathmark-Shop-Rite-Acme-Edwards-Food Emporium-Price Chopper-Generic-Brand Colas, Snapple, and Mountain Dew. There were binges on Hershey's, Nestle's, Ovaltine, Swiss Miss, Tollhouse, Pepridge Farms. There were many phases of bingeing and many things upon which to binge; these were endless days.

By the thirty-ninth day of his binge, the artist was discussing his spiritual ideology before the crowds; he explicated to the people that there was no body, no true form. "A man is not a man. A womyn is not a womyn. We can only fight Buddha so long until we discover that it is only his finger with which we engage in combat." Incidentally, when the artist began such proselytizing the owner-impresario stopped the binge.

On the fortieth day, the overheated freezer was opened, spectators filled the store, a sound system played a military tune, an extensive unit of medical specialists surrounded the artist to measure the results of the fast, which were later announced on the local television news, a whaling device was prepared to lift the artist out of the freezer, and, finally, a small army of children arrived, distracted long enough by the promise of ice cream, toy guns and video-games to help transfer the hungry artist to a sterilized table in a

sterilized bubble where a carefully selected set of sterilized instruments and virtuoso surgeons were prepared for an unusual procedure, the first in what came to be known as *The Traditional Liposuction Celebration*.

The impresario thought the artist would corroborate and the audience would applause in rounds of furious appreciation for the spectacle provided. Yet, the hungry artist had no interest in shedding his skin. He was happy with what he had accumulated since his awakening as a being of art and artistry. His impresario would later explain to the investors, "The bottom line is we made a profit," and, "The product was not well packaged. The product was not well packaged!" and, "You have to understand the different forces at work here. Short term loss for long term growth," and so on.

Thin and sewn up, the hungry artist escaped his impresario and took to the road, a vagabond. Between each town he put the weight back on, consuming by the smell: birds' eggs, grass, sunlight, pesticides, paint, rubber, plastic and the sort. The hungry artist was left to his own devices in this public space where cars carried drivers who were too scared to give a pedestrian even a once-over and the municipalities were separated by the color of the street signs, the font of the lettering that identifies law enforcement vehicles and the denomination of the local church.

In every new town he entered he was immediately greeted by the owner of the local ice cream parlor chain, fast-food chain, supermarket chain, health-food chain, diet chain, pizza chain or any food related chain store one could imagine. These owners immediately took care of each of the hungry artist's needs and made sure that he looked his most presentable. He was set down in one of their storefronts to perform his art. Ads were placed in the local paper and by word of mouth the news was spread that a man of pure consumption was on display on Main Street.

As the hungry artist's flesh expanded over the course of weeks, the crowds grew greater. The hungry artist was displeased with himself for indulging in the attention of the crowds that swarmed about him. He worried that it would detract from his professional integrity and yet he felt himself loved and admired by his audiences. These periods of enthusiasm-muddleheadedness for public performance were outweighed by the torture he endured at the hands of the local business community. The impresario-owners hired speedy architecture firms to reconstruct their storefronts in order that the correct measurements were installed in time for the

hungry artist's entrance to town. By the time the artist walked down Main Street, the community artery was blaring and glaring, overshadowed by gorgeous, awe-inspiring-plastered-billboard-towers advertising his arrival.

He remained the talk of the town throughout the duration of his binge. When it was time for the *Traditional Liposuction Celebration*, the hungry artist's mood was transformed and in place of a jolly mass was an irascible behemoth. It made no sense for him to end his binge, right when he was in his best bingeing form, or, better yet, almost quite at his top bingeing form. He could not comprehend why they would not let him break his own record. Not only was he the largest and heaviest person who, without any glandular difficulties, had managed to come into existence, but he had the longest running binge in history.

The hungry artist grew to be legendary within the realm of the carnival. Elsewhere, however, he was feared and loathed. At every buffet restaurant, a sign was placed at the entrance; the hungry artist's face with a circle and a line through it indicated that he was banned from such establishments. Not that he could have made it through the door or even afforded to pay for any meal. A fat tax in many towns levied heavy fines on individuals who cracked sidewalks and could consume hotdogs from vendors just by walking into the aroma of the mélange of fetal pigs, cow lips, rat chips and squirrel bits.

The obese people of these communities became the scapegoats for, among other things: crime, hunger, obesity, disease, and poverty, . It was reasoned that the hungry artist was nothing more than a con at the top of his game, garnering food for free, selfishly eating everything, making a mockery of the human body by letting it consume for itself whatever whenever so that all that was distinguishable of the hungry artist's physical self was the rhythmic waves that undulated across his outermost layer.

At the height of the hungry artist's career there were many hungry artists, on corners, at carnivals and roadshows. They performed street binges, going about the town consuming dogs, cats, the elderly, the disabled, homeless, trees, and water, or so they claimed. No one took them up on their grandiose declarations but paid them in coins for their entertaining value. These claims of monstrous consumption later contributed to the demise of the craft and virtue of the artist.

In the realm of the youth, hungry art was immortalized as a chic-underground style to be recycled in the next thirty years and every subsequent thirty-year period. At night the local

adolescents conglomerated in their cliques and all, except one, doped up on narcotics. The one who abstained from the drugs was the designated leader, a rat-pack hungry artist in his own right. In the clubs, these young clones of the artist binged until their hearts' contents burst while their followers rolled around in the pillows of artsy flesh. The aura of neural bliss in combination with the soft warmth of blocks, patches and sacks of hungry art body cells created a dangerous reality. Engaged in this utopian sensation, the senses of these followers were overloaded to the effect that their rational selves were completely dissolved. Many of them did not notice how the body of the rat-pack artist in which they worshipped the ideal manifestation of complete freedom signaled its inevitable failure and neglected to make way for the moment when his demise would crush them.

The club binges were not the final embers of the livelihood of the hungry artist, for derivations of these formerly underground bacchanals are celebrated everywhere. It was the purity of the hungry artist that brought about the denigration of his own craft. His binges were restricted by the limited capacities of the small towns where he performed and the guidelines set out by his various impresarios. He was so popular at the local festivals, so sought after by every sort of small-time capitalist, that he was prompted to depart for the capital. And then there was the artist's insanity. His madness, they say, ensured the end of hungry art. At the last country fair, the artist lost his mind for reasons that can only be understood through an interpretation of the various deranged deliberations that the hungry artist delivered during this period. It was a frail, brittle man that he referred to as the *hunger artist*, who brought about his insanity.

The hungry artist arrived early in the morning for the first day of his binge. He assumed his place in the middle of a football-field-sized crevasse wherein a space had been cleared for his body to expand during the course of his exhibition. He inhaled deeply, gaining a few pounds, and declared, "My field, for a great binge. My best yet." And then there was the abrupt striking of a clock, a ringing of the utmost importance. The hungry artist scanned the carnival grounds until he spotted the source of this disturbance, a small cage on the edge of the crevasse. He went close to the cage but could not see inside for the bars were so thick that even from a close distance it appeared as though nothing resided within. He stepped nearer, then nearer still until he was almost sure he could make out

nothing. "But, there is something inside, I can feel it." With his face pressed against the bars, he inspected the shadows. And then they grabbed him, the bulging, soulful, vigorous, passionate eyes loosely hung from a string of head-neck-body-arms-legs. The hungry artist questioned him, "Is that your clock? Isn't it loud?" "Who are you?" "What are you doing here?" "Where did you come from" "What's with the clock?" "Aren't you hungry!" The man remained so still that it appeared as if he did not even breathe. The hungry artist observed the frail man for an hour and all that stirred was the clock. The hungry artist had to return to his station, but he did not take his eyes off what he perceived to be some sort of competition. He kept his eye on this stranger who remained immobile, always.

The green tiles increased daily as the hungry artist's body oozed over the field while the other artist, the *hunger artist* remained firmly fixed in his cage. The frail man did not have any signs to indicate his progress; there was only the clock, its hands moving in a circle and its all-important ringing on the hour, every hour. No one else noticed. The hungry artist's envy grew by the week, then by the day and finally by the mouthful. He talked to no end about the absurdity of this interloper, who never ate, drank or moved. Was not this imposter fabricating but the same art form the hungry artist himself had mastered? Was it not just the same exhibition as a binge without food? This individual who shunned himself from the world, enclosed his art in the pit of his stomach, a stomach that did not exist, an art form that could not possibly exist. What really ate the hungry artist was the fact that the man did not give any indication of how long he had been fasting. And since no one ever paid attention to the *hunger artist*, perhaps because they could not see his cage, which was buried within the depths of the shadow of the hungry artist, the hungry artist was inclined to believe that there existed a grand conspiracy directed against his personal self.

The situation affected the hungry artist's concentration. He talked incessantly about the insidious nature of an artist whose sole means of telling the world "Here I am" was a loud obnoxious clock and an unoriginal antiquated clock at that. "Tick, tock, tick, tock...gong-g-g-g" the hungry artist mumbled, repeatedly repeating the sounds as he slurped and munched on popcorn, Goobers, Swedish fish, popcorn topping, hot dogs, pizza, Kit-Kat, Nestles, M&M's, Pepsi, coke, seven-up, sprite, iced-tea, lemonade, diet-those same drinks and mints. "And no one hears these sounds except me."

At night there were watchers, selected by the public, usually butchers, to ensure that he did not stop his binge. The hungry artist was informed that this was a mere formality, but he suspected otherwise. The initiated knew well that he would not stop consuming at any moment and that to do so would compromise the integrity of his profession. Not every watcher, of course, was capable of understanding this. There were often shifts of watchers that were very lax in carrying out their duties. They knew well what it was like to overeat, to need a minute to unfasten one's belt and recuperate from dining on pounds of chicken legs, wings, breasts, sausages, turkey burgers, hamburgers, and casserole—everyone needs time to make room for dessert. These watchers huddled together, far away, played cards and gave the hungry artist time to give his stomach a rest. Nothing bothered him more than to have to deal with the combination of the behaviors of these watchers and the frail *artist* who sat, caged in his shadow. Contending with both parties to prove his authenticity made his binge seem unendurable. To demonstrate that he was continuously bingeing he threw the food wrappers from everything he ate in the direction of the watchers. Piles of paper bags, cardboard boxes, plastic wrappers, spoons and forks from Krispy Kreme, KFC, Wendy's, McDonald's, Starbucks, Nathan's, Burger King, Roy Rogers, Pizza Hut, Domino's, 7-11, Wa-Wa, Boston Market, Au Bon Pain, Dunkin' Donuts, Blimpie's, Subway, Denny's, Taco Bell, and other lesser known establishments, filled the ground in front of the watchers who only wondered at his lack of cleverness in thinking that his actions were any indication that he was in fact eating the food. This insufferable situation was exacerbated by the silence of the frail man.

At this time the furious pace at which the hungry artist binged increased so rapidly that he empowered other parts of his body to aid in his struggle of perfecting his craft. He sought to assure his dominance over the other *artist*. The function of his anus was inverted. He shoved food down his nostrils and through his ears giving second priority to breathing and hearing. He pulled his eyeballs out and to the side, unconcerned with the effects it might have on his vision. He did anything to create new passageways within his body and new ways of consuming. Ultimately, he was so focused on his art that he could only afford the use of one sensory organ at a time.

The masticating and absorbing orgy of food—what the hungry artist coined food, that is

anything he could consume—created an environment of industrial noise that the clock, over which the hungry artist obsessed, could not possibly have been heard by anyone in his audience. If indeed it existed. If only he could have blocked out its tick-tocking, perhaps he would not have noticed the *hunger artist*. But it was there, he was sure; it had to be; there was doubt, yet there was no other explanation.

The hungry artist was further alienated by the actions taken by the groups of owner-impresarios that surrounded him. He was consumed by his work and therefore unable to monitor everything that was said. His sensory organs became severely impaired and he could only spare brief interludes to see, hear or smell what was taking place. In one eye, the hungry artist saw an owner hanging in the sky by means of a helicopter. He could not decipher what the owner was doing for his ears did not work synchronously with each other nor did they function in conjunction with his eyes or nose. No organ worked as it was designed. The hungry artist had adapted it all to function almost solely for eating. He could not be sure of whom his audience was composed at any particular moment, nor was he aware of how many owner-impresarios were present. It was a long time since he had been promised that they would only sell their wares on his behalf, that they would watch his performances as loyal, faithful servant-fans and would only act as advisors in making decisions about his career. Now, they appeared everywhere in his recent memories. Still, he never retained control of his faculties long enough to maintain a conversation with any one of them for he did not consider it worth the risk to sacrifice more time from his binge. There were blurs of images one moment, then nothing, not even blackness; then there were blurbs, cuts of sounds and then, nothing, not even silence; for the hungry artist the paucity of comprehensible information was overwhelmingly frustrating. The hungry artist was driven to further concentrate on his work for it was the only thing that provided any sense of order.

The audience sat always, encamped about a fence that was erected in order to distance the vomit, gas, drool and miscellaneous objects that spewed about from the rampage binge. This barrier was also installed to ensure that no one would be crushed were the hungry artist to keel over and die at some moment. Adjacent to the fence, a boardwalk was assembled. Delegates of the various business enterprises across the entire region and, in many cases, the very owners themselves rented out space to sell their wares.

Over megaphones and loudspeakers the owner-impresarios announced the performance of the hungry artist as the greatest spectacle in the world. They advertised their vendors, ringing out the prices of their different souvenirs of hungry art: magazines for weight gain, hand puppets, marionettes, tee shirts, sweaters, other embroidered garments and food that came "from the mouth of the artist himself!"

The hungry artist no longer conversed with his audience and, instead, pontificated on his advantages over the frail man in the shadows. The impresario collective were unaware of any man in any cage and said the hungry artist had been binging for too long and too rapidly and it was only natural for him to be a little crazy. Some owners were more sensible, explaining that the cage was nothing to show for, that perhaps there had been a *hunger artist* but he had moved on or died a long time ago.

Due to the alterations the hungry artist had made in the organs of his body and the functioning of his brain, it took his mind weeks to assimilate the conversations, sounds, images and events that he witnessed. By the time it was processed it was all in his own order, interpreted in his own way. It was the end of his binge and he was enraged by those from whom he could discern no practical purpose or meaning in connection to his work. As the owners prepared him for the *Traditional Liposuction Celebration*, he boasted across the fair grounds that he could binge for much longer. The owners praised the high ambition, the good will and the great self-denial implicit in such a statement and then carried on with their commercial affairs.

Forgotten by the public in this whole affair was the cage with the bony man or womyn or creature or *hunger artist* or whatever it was that fasted without the grace of fame or fortune. The hungry artist could not even recall a face by which to remember his nemesis. The only memory of this *hunger artist* would be within the *artist* himself, and that being had disappeared.

For all the hungry artist knew his body had crushed the cage and had eaten it and the *hunger artist* in a state of consumptive passion. And yet the frail man had accepted this fate. The situation drove the hungry artist mad. His whole life's work appeared to be reduced to a joke. This caged ghost had said to him, through no verbalized words, that to eat was a humorless joke against one's self and it was therefore a waste of time to swallow so much as a morsel. The hungry artist did not necessarily receive this message in its proper vane. He increased his food regimen by

tenfold, then by tenfold more. Soon the *Traditional Liposuction Celebrations* were held more frequently for the small towns did not have enough space to contain such an expansive body.

After the last *Liposuction Celebration*, the hungry artist put his tongue to rest. He did not utter a word to anyone before departing for the capital. He entered the grandest metropolis of the empire where he was unknown and unacknowledged. Freshly lipoed, nonverbal and passive, the hungry artist was immediately discovered by a modeling agency. They thought they had found a new marker of beauty at a bargain rate. They signed him to a lifetime contract, providing him shelter and food. He never asked for money, so they never gave him any. When his body recuperated from the liposuction, the agency's doctors informed their employer that the hungry model's adipose tissue was uncharacteristically absorbent and enlarging at a stellar pace. To remedy the situation, the agency first put him on sanction, disallowing him from eating any food. Still, his body grew, consuming as it willed. The hungry artist might have explained that his body was a consumer and that he had no part in its functioning, but he was completely disinterested with the matter. The agency put him on a strict regimen of no-fat-no-calorie-no-nothing-food, food that he could eat, but that would not be digested. The employees of the agency tried everything in their power to stop the growth of the hungry artist's body. They made him exercise, regularly and strenuously. They connected his body to a lipo-dialysis machine. Every attempt was futile. The agency feared that it would become the laughing stock of the fashion world. Or so, it would have feared this embarrassment if not for the owner of the agency. A wise man of business, the owner ingested his fashion and modeling venture into one of his more profitable corporations. Fashion was fine, he reasoned, for purposes of casual ambiance in discussing various business affairs, but it never paid him well.

The owner thought he could make a television program out of the fat man. According to the latest surveys and polls, data indicated that hungry art performers were the latest craze across the empire. The televised show was packaged as a wholesome sitcom, slotted at the time when families ate together. After holding a meeting with the hungry artist, it was instantly clear that such a show could not be produced. At this time, the hungry artist's skin was coming apart at the seams. His tissue was held together by lynchpins and steel thread. He could no longer digest food

and still, he consumed. The owner was quick-witted and turned what surely could have been a disaster into a commercial success. The body of the hungry artist contained a rather large surface area, big enough to plaster advertisements all about. The owner conceived a brave new concept in television programming called *Consumption: a full day of commercials uninterrupted*. It was the only solution given that it had become too dangerous to move the hungry artist from where his puddled form was set.

Eventually the station was deserted, save the automated cameras focused on the hungry artist. His was the only program aired twenty-four hours a day. The show consisted of ads plastered on the hungry artist's rotting belly. (And if one were bold enough to try to look underneath these billboard advertisements, one would discover that the hungry artist no longer had an epidermis, that the paper, on which the advertisements were placed, had replaced his skin. Without any source of nourishment left in the building, his body had begun to consume itself). There was not even the need for a cameraman since the stomach moved by itself, providing a full range of angles, and movement that was necessary to keep the audience entertained. The stomach pulsated recurrently, providing a mesmerizing oceanic noise that crashed with the flashing of different products on the screen. The wave-like pulsations of miniature billboards hypnotized the audience, captivating them with endless images of food, clothes, gasoline, airlines, automobiles, hardware, electronics, and toy store chains. These images were reinforced by the ranting voiceover that incoherently smashed sounds into sentences from which only product names could be distinguished.

The audience awaited the sight of the products mentioned by the rambling voiceover, thus bolstering the attraction of the products. It soon became a family game to guess at what time the product mentioned would be aired on the screen. Children gathered around the TV dressed in their prime-time-best-logo-lavished tee shirts in show of support of either their favorite commodities, advertisements or both. This billboard fashion permeated through every class. For most it was on socks and undergarments, footwear, pants, shirts and hats. For the more reserved professionals and administrators it was neckties, eyewear, cigars and personal automobiles. The elite did not model this fashion but made sure their servants were fully adorned in the most haute of logo culture.

In the television station, the hungry artist was unaware of his surroundings and situation and felt

at liberty to talk to himself, especially about his contempt for the caged thing that had been lost in his shadow long ago. He sat in a lazy-boy recliner for decades, spending the course of his life minimizing the costs to the owner while maximizing the profits. Oblivious to the degradation of his body, he religiously continued his binge in solitude. The doctors had warned him not to consume and all efforts were made to keep food away. Letters mailed to inform him were not received since he could-not-would-not move and there was no one in the building to deliver them. Such correspondence and caution did not appear to be necessary since there was no food within consumptive reach of the artist; more accurately, there was no food per se. There were rats and roaches. While these did not seem to be adequate sources of nourishment, the hungry artist's body continued to expand. One might think that he consumed these vile creatures, but it was more plausible that they were eating him, nesting in the remnants of his flesh and expanding their populations within the folds of his skin and the cavities of his organs.

The owner became concerned when he heard reports that rats had been appearing on the hungry artist's program. The gravity of this situation was underscored by the fact that the hungry artist had taken up a diatribe about the horrible taste of fast food. It was relayed that the hungry artist had again stopped speaking, that his last words were, "It's not about your way or my making it great, obeying your hunger or any of that." After a pause he concluded, "I couldn't find the food I liked. If I had found it, believe me, I would have found peace and stopped eating when I was finished. But there was so much, and it amazed me that none of it was good. So, I was eating ever since that curious first bite."

The owner was slightly upset, for this stream of free revenue would be gone. In the place of *Consumption*, he aired a zoology program that displayed creatures designed for future food products. The most recent food good was a pigantheron, something that would taste like pork when cooked, produce cow's milk without the expense of grazing, would have the grace and beauty of a panther and was rooted in the ground like a plant; and though some of itself may have tried to move, it was ultimately a plant creature, or so they referred to it as such. This plant-like feature, was of course, designed to cater to the special needs of the vegetarian consumer.

...Morsels, morsels melting, mm...mm....my-my, mouth-watering melon, mars-bars, M&M's,

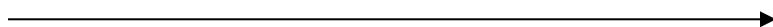
mystic, mangoes, marshmallows, marzipan,
mocha, Muenster, mozzarella, matzo, meat,

meatballs, malomars, mulberries, mackerel, mint,
martinis, malt milk shakes, mouse-meat...

There is sometimes a jungle
Beneath the small blue stars.
Obscure sounds thrum an ancient rhythm
And each step reopens the world,
Like a lost and happy child keeping pace
With the cool and wandering night.

The vastness of everything when we are alone!
Even beneath the electric glare of the city,
We can slip between the people
Into those places
Where the world of our dreams
Hangs as sacred as sleep.

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PERSPECTIVES





Photo Copyright 2003, Max Farrow

Travel with... Me

By Max Farrow

1: Travels with...Me

Things change in increments. And when the increments are miles, things can change in a hurry. Driving out of our beloved DC area, something happens as the little numbers roll over on your odometer. The roads become unfamiliar, the land more green and arid, and the people more salt-of-the-earth. In a way, things become more real out here.

Your faithful reporter has commenced a road trip this month. The goal: the International Motor Press Association annual meeting and test days. The car: the author's own '90 Lincoln LSC. First stop: Coshocton, Ohio, in the middle of the Buckeye state, on the way to Detroit, Michigan.

Expedient it may not be, but there's nothing like land-based travel for actually seeing this land of ours. Airplanes provide quick elapsed times, but little comprehension of the nature of the land you're passing through and above. The train provides a better look, but the vista is usually limited to land America's railway companies bought and promptly devalued over the past two centuries. The bus is cost-effective, but slow and a real exercise is self-imposed depression. Best of all modes of travel, I find, is the automobile, a personal escape pod, replete with personalized entertainment and lumbar support.

About fifty miles northeast of the beltway line, changes become evident. Land is cheaper, and houses have more yardage. Agricultural implements are in evidence, and roads become curvier and yet more anonymous. I'm pretty sure I passed a haystack museum. It's odd, but it seems that the town councils out here have run out of imagination; roads are designated with numbers and no commemorative names. There's no Johnson Street or Smith Highway--there's just County Roads one through one thousand. This trend becomes more and more palpable the further out you go; it's as if nobody worth remembering ever lived out here.

That's not the case, of course. Good people abound in the outlying areas of America. My first stop in small-town Ohio brings back memories of such folk.

Coshocton, a small factory-and-tourist town six hours outside of DC, was once home to a good friend and his family. I've spent time here in years past, in small houses decorated in a timeless turn-of-the-century style that the DC elite pays exorbitant amounts to recreate. The town square

is just that, lined with small shops, bars and homey restaurants. Life here is slow and comfortable, and although it's being slowly encroached upon by strip-malls and Wal-Marts, it's still some people's definition of American Paradise.

Heading out of semi-rural Ohio, straight north to Detroit, the route is 83--maybe not the quickest, but surely the most scenic. And for those of us motorists who love a challenging drive, surely the most fun. The Lincoln is a willing partner on these smooth byways, powered by trusty Detroit-bred V8 power and stuck tight to the road via the best suspension that early 1990's America had to offer.

Of course, I'd be able to tackle the curves that much faster in a new Acura RSX or perhaps a new Mini, but that would look wildly out-of-place out here. The automotive landscape here is dominated by the home team. Chevys, Chryslers, Fords and their badge-engineered variants outnumber the probably more competent foreign competition by an incalculable number. I have a few theories on this phenomenon. First, the simple fact that most dealerships out here sell mostly American products. Second, the good people who reside in these places have a resilient, robust (and possibly misplaced) faith in U.S. products. It may take generations before the "Buy American" creed, based on blind faith, is erased from rural America's collective conscious. Asian companies are making inroads here with new products like Nissan's full-size Titan truck, slowly eating away at Detroit's dominance in heartland markets. But, it will take time.

Arriving in Detroit early on a Sunday morning, traffic is minimal. If you're ever up here, take the opportunity to cross the bridge to Canada--the land is markedly nicer there. Detroit proper has the world's worst roads, bar none--I'll never complain about Mayor Williams' sluggish response to pothole repair again. Even Ecuador's highways were easier on the suspension (and the kidneys). Otherwise, Motor City is neo-classic Americana, industrial, and boring. There are pretty suburbs and subdivisions (Birmingham is the region's Bethesda, if you're looking for an overpriced meal), typical sprawl, and gambling is legal. The ethnic communities here seem to be negligible, and the lack of diversity is a prime cause of the perceived lack of dimension here. Smaller towns on the outskirts, like Ann Arbor, seem to have more to offer. And, on a personal note, no matter how competent your writing,

nobody is willing to offer you work based on first impressions.

Some things you learn on a trip like this: Your *national* cell phone plans aren't quite so national. One trillion locations or not, your Visa card may not have the worldwide acceptance you think it does. And no matter how much you drive, there are still myriad new vistas to see and new destinations to anticipate.

Next week, Chicago.

2: Fear and Beatings in the Midwest

Further and further from home, your normal inhibitions begin to peel away. So much of the person you are (or pretend to be) depends on your surroundings; and when you're in an unfamiliar area, you just may find yourself shifting to reflect your new locale.

Scary thought.

The fading sight of Detroit in the rearview could be described only as a relief. More so with the secure knowledge that friends await in the Chicago area.

Chicago sure seems to be a fun town. Saturday night was spent at what I was assured is Chicago's hippest nightspot, Visions. Land of 10,000 dance floors. The city itself is a real metropolis, at least measured by the quality of the food.

In truth, though, I spent more time in semi-rural South Bend, Indiana, on the outskirts of the Windy city. An odd amalgam of golf-course-communities and redneck/roughneck agricultural types, South Bend seemed to me to be indicative of the state of modern American countryside. On the surface, you see quaint country charm and bucolic farm life, if you see anything at all from the interstate. But people live here, and real-life drama is just as evident as in the big city.

In areas like these, a significant portion of the population is dependant on the government for a portion of income. And many recipients supplement this meager income with various semi-legal activities. Combine that fact with the knowledge that there's little to do out here but get hammered, and you find a community in which the stagnant economic pool consists of a bunch of people swapping cash for dope and back again, with a trickle coming in from the government and going back out to bars, fast-food joints, and the like.

By all appearances, out here, having kids is almost a prerequisite to graduating to the drinking age. While conventional wisdom decries this behavior, allow me to postulate that this may be the saving grace of the heartland. With nothing

better to do, a child can be a real stabilizing factor. I met a number of folks whose lives revolved around their children. Born to young parents, such children might not have the best opportunities handed to them, but some of these near-adolescent parents work tirelessly to provide for their offspring.

And then again, some don't. With all the drinking and drugging that takes place in the center of our country, there's bound to be some accompanying depravity. I witnessed no fewer than three fistfights in as many days. As I've said, drugs abound, in forms you've likely never even imagined. Ever thought about snorting horse tranquilizers? Of course, the county jail is almost a second home to some denizens. Some people seem to be as inexorably (and fatefully) drawn to violence as the moths are to my headlights flying across I-94.

I'm writing tonight from a hotel room in Bismarck, ND, courtesy of Aunt Dayle. This is the area my Mom's family is from, but I doubt if she feels much more of a connection to this state, chock-full-of-nothin', than I do. The people are awful nice, and the climate, for at least this week, is agreeable. But otherwise, this is relatively unremarkable country. One thing you notice out here, about cows: good for eating when dead; not so appetizing to the olfactory senses when still prairie-grazing.

What else can I say? Wisconsin has great bratwurst and cheese, Minnesota has, well, lots of lakes. And a car museum; I have pictures. Otherwise, I can't wait to hit the Pacific Northwest.

3: Westward, Ho!

Escaping the dreary North Dakota badlands into Montana gives you a feeling akin to taking a deep breath upon arriving at some tropical paradise. My northern route meant I did miss the famous Wall Drug in South Dakota, but I was able to catch the not-so-famous Wall of Insects that forms an informal barrier between the badlands and the northern hill country. Once stopped for gas, I spent more time scraping carcasses off my now-opaque headlamp lenses than I did pumping petrol. Nevertheless, Big Sky Country is breathtaking; a real gem in America's goodie-bag. I spent the better part of an afternoon racing a freight train across an amazing tableau of the American West. Sunset was a revelation. Once I hit the Rockies, and the terrain became treed and green, I could only marvel at the beauty of the earth we're given. Once you hit the peak of the

peaks, you've crossed into the Idaho panhandle, and you're greeted by a visage of none other than stern Smokey Bear. The descent is a letdown, once past Lake Coeur de Alain (likely translation: "Cur of Alan"), and into arid eastern Washington. After two hundred miles of flat, brown land, the reward comes in the form of the Cascade mountain range, as beautiful as the Rockies and the gateway to Seattle.

Seattle! Unofficial motto: "It gets kind of annoying after a while." I have close friends in the Emerald City, and was thrilled to spend three days there. Most of the daytime was spent at the annual music and arts festival, Bumbershoot, watching local music acts and comedy performances in an atmosphere of liberty and liberalism. It was fun, but something about it all seemed a bit contrived. It took a day or two before I realized what it was: the city itself, and the inhabitants. Seattle is like San Francisco Lite; chock full of hipsters and dare-to-be-different kids that all seem the same inside. You're lucky to spot a person of color, and everyone has money; even the streetpeople. I was solicited for change numerous times, by so-called bums with suede sneakers and iPods. Hey, voluntary unemployment can be boring; could you begrudge a homeless person his 80 gigabytes of pirated mp3 files?

So, on Sunday, I hit the road again, joining the throngs of BMW pilots Seattle's southbound freeways, headed for Oregon. Had dinner with family south of Salem, in a bucolic little locale full of farms and good people on front porches. I pressed further southward that night, and made camp at the base of Mount Shasta in California, expecting to awake to the beautiful vista I remember from childhood camping trips. Awake I did, but the mountain was all but obscured. The locals said the air was dark with wildfire soot. Obey Smokey, people! After a shower and a quick swim in the lake, I headed towards San Francisco and family.

You all know me, and you've all heard me ramble on about the merits of northern Cali. I'm not going to repeat myself here, except to say that if you're blessed enough to live within driving distance of the Golden Gate, thank your stars and, well, let me know if there's any job openings.

4. Through the Desert in a Lincoln I Never Named

Some say that Las Vegas is Paradise, and I can at least attest that the road there is long and hard. I-5 to the 15 and then angle back up north through the hills—eight hours out of S.F., and you're

there. It is an oasis in the dry desert, I'll grant it that. You crest that last hill, expecting to see nothing more than the topographical tundra you've grown so used to, and suddenly, you're greeted by the New York skyline, the Eiffel Tower, pyramids and sphinxes and somesuch, and it does almost seem like a mirage. The funny part is, it only becomes more surreal once you settle in.

Vegas bills itself as a tourist town, but some locals in the know verified an observation—more than half the folks you see strolling the impossibly long blocks from casino to casino; or huddling intently inside, in a haze of smoke and liquor; are regulars. One of the surprises on this road trip has been the proliferation of legalized gambling in states east, west, and central, but the hardcore still flock to Nevada.

The allure isn't hard to understand, once you hit that first score and you're up twice what you came in with. Of course, the House knows that that's when you're really hooked, and you'll stay on that line until your luck runs out. I felt the tug a couple times, but I'm lucky enough to be poor, and once I found myself ahead by a couple hundred, I could pull out with no regrets. Some in my party (not to name names), had more trouble letting go, and enough money was lost at least to cover a new set of DJ turntables (did I give it away?). Still, the flashing lights, the neon, the fountains and the not least of all the free drinks conspire to lend the town appeal beyond easy money. Vegas does have my gratitude for those couple wins, however. Thanks to Bally's, I'm pretty confident that I'm going to return home with at least 48 cents—Canadian.

Arizona was a bust. I had anticipated a great reunion with an old friend, who, as it turns out, has become something of a hermit. Is reclassified a word? The state, though, is one of the most surprisingly beautiful territories I've covered since Montana. The Grand Canyon is, well, grand, but in my estimation, maybe not as scenic as the rest of 'the Grand Canyon state.'

Took a quick side trip through Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, only a few miles across the border from El Paso. Since I spent some time a couple months ago in Cabo San Tourista, I thought I'd get a closer look at the rest of the 'Gran Pais.' The burned out cars just over the Santa Teresa border, looking to have been shot directly off the road during some wild midnight chase, made a sobering welcome. The city was bigger and more sprawling than its Texas sister city, but clearly flatter too, and probably about equal in population. You can only stack cardboard,

plywood, and aluminum sheeting so high, but there seems no limit to how densely you can pack such a city.

Does anybody in America have reason to complain about anything? I think not.

Otherwise, the drive through Texas was a droning 36 hours of nothing. Some observations, when there's nothing else to observe: I'm pretty sure Gatorade is loaded with vitamins and minerals, which is good, seeing as I can't remember having a vegetable in about a month. Discovered a new CD—if anyone besides me was crushed by Bradley of Sublime's premature passing, pick up the Long Beach Dub Allstars. Nuff said.

More to come, in the land of southern hospitality.

5. South of Eden?

East of Arizona, east of Texas...well, son, there ain't much. It's a dead drive, so to speak. Best to tackle it in a hurry—get it over with before you realize you've started.

If you're lucky, you'll end up in New Orleans, with a friendly place to stay, as I did. The concept of Southern Hospitality is not a joke there. It's a breath of fresh, if somewhat thick, air. Everything's so colorful, literally and figuratively.

Perhaps it's all the humidity, but things move slow (everything but the traffic, that is—I've seen more polite motorists in prison motor pools). Nawlins food is sublime, Nawlins people are friendly, and the city itself is awash in history. Walk the French Quarter, and you'll likely find yourself throwing up beads to a party girl standing on the balcony of a building once used as a slave exchange. Or, maybe you'll find yourself just throwing up. Both events are equally plausible, in Nawlins.

Spend a little more time, and walk the rest of the city. It's a port town, and fortunes rise and fall with the seas. Once-stately mansions sit, divided and divided again into apartments for longshoremen. Unwashed shacks share block space with what could be the city homes of plantationers. And nobody seems to mind.

Nobody, that is, but Mother Nature. Situated four feet below sea level, the city seems constantly at war with itself. There's a constant struggle to keep vegetation from reclaiming yards, porches, and roofs. On the plus side, there seems to be plenty of work for carpenters and housepainters.

Bidding a fond and regretful farewell to the city of mufalletas and po'boys, the next, quick stop is Chattanooga, Tennessee. I've got family there, a happy group of Bible-belters. I've spent some time in other areas of Tennessee, and was, let's say, less than impressed. My family fed me well, however, and explained the benefits of the town to me. It's an arty town, it seems, also with a multitude of churches.

Okay, I wasn't sure what to make of that.

Then, a last, mad dash back up north. That was the last scheduled stop, on the way through home to the International Motor Press Association's Annual Meeting and Test Days. If you want to read about my time there, check www.asianfortune.com for regular columns. Or, buy a subscription, for cryin' out loud.

It'd be easy, and expected, to end this multipart travelogue with some sort of sappy statement, like, 'but, through it all, I've learned that the best place to be is...home.' And, in truth, I fully expected that that would be my conclusion, no matter how trite. Now home, though, I've had a change of heart. I can't wait to hit the road again. My horizons have been painfully, and perhaps forever, widened.



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The Sensualist

Whit Frazier



Around 1:30 Sunday afternoon, Simon Dimple came out of the little shop a block down the street from his apartment with a whole, fresh trout wrapped up in a brown paper package. The package was cold and heavy and wet, and so was the day, a couple hours after a pleasant autumn rain. The leaves were colorfully wet dead stains on the cozy gray sidewalks, and clouds passed and looked like warm smoke from cozier chimneys and comfortable homes in good old Strawberry, Simon Dimple's favorite town, no questions, no doubts.

It was a fine day all around for Simon Dimple, a fine day looking forward to a fine evening spent enjoying one of the finest operas of all time, *La Boheme*, a masterpiece that appealed to cabdrivers and classicists alike, and Simon walked home singing sad romantic arias in his head and thinking about his darling Clementine.

Clementine was a fine young lady who lived in New York, but grew up in Strawberry. As children, he and Clementine had lived on the same block and gone to the same schools, though for the longest time Clementine paid him no mind. He, on the other hand, felt like he'd remembered Clementine for as long as he could remember, and when he was in Junior High School he would walk out to the docks in Southport, look across the water and recite *Annabel Lee* while skipping stones. One afternoon in his first year of High School he got bold, because she was in his English class. They were reciting famous poems, and when it came his turn to recite, he went to the front of the class, said loud and brave: "This poem is for Clementine!" and recited *Annabel Lee*, right there in front of Clementine, their classmates and everybody; he was nervous and excited, and he could barely even finish the poem, what with everyone laughing and such – (everyone, that is, except for Clementine, who fled the room, and the teacher, who was looking very pale and concerned, and couldn't stop staring at him like he was crazy) – but laugh, stare or flee, after that things changed.

It had rained earlier, sure, but now the sun was starting to peek out just a little bit – orange on the orange trees, and the hearty smell of the trout mixed with the scent from the cider vendors on the corners, and they mixed with all the pumpkin vendors, and Simon Dimple decided there could be nothing finer than a pleasant stroll through Strawberry on a fine autumn afternoon. When he got to his apartment, he turned around to look one last time. It inspired him so much that he sat straight down on the damp sidewalk and admired his little town and all the people that populated it.

Clementine, she loved New York, and sure, he could understand that, but there was nothing in the world like Strawberry.

After a while, he turned around and headed upstairs to his apartment. He put the trout away in the refrigerator, took a hot shower, changed clothes and helped himself to a snifter of brandy. His back patio looked out on a little park, so he stepped out there and breathed in the air with the flavor of the brandy; he watched the women and children and said, *she was a child, and I was a child in this Kingdom by the Sea*. Then he went back inside and helped himself to another small snifter of brandy.

Simon Dimple went from the kitchen back to the living room, a tidy square room with blue curtains and blue carpets, and large bay windows looking out onto the street. His patio was connected to the living room too, and even though it was a little bit chilly with the patio doors open, he liked the autumn wind blowing into his living room, and sometimes a stray wet leaf would come waltzing colorfully into the room, which delighted him. He turned on his stereo, and put on one of his old vinyl recordings of Prokofiev's *Peter and the Wolf*. It was a children's piece, but a piece he considered to be his theme song whenever he was in the sort of happy, playful mood he was in this afternoon. The melody moved him to finish his snifter of brandy, head back to the kitchen and pour himself another.

Once he was in the kitchen, Simon began basic preparations for the fish. He diced up onions, celery and various other vegetables. Then he moved onto various herbs, chopping coriander, mint, basil and tarragon. Once he'd chopped the herbs and the vegetables, he set them aside on the chopping board and put half a stick of butter in a small saucepan. He decided to help himself to another snifter of brandy.

Simon Dimple took a sip of the brandy, set it down and walked back across the kitchen to where the butter was now fairly well melted in the saucepan. He slowly, little by little, began to mix first the chopped vegetables, and then the chopped herbs into the melted butter in the small saucepan, and reduced the heat. He watched the whole mixture simmer, and his head started to feel light. He walked over to where his snifter of brandy sat, sniffed the brandy, and hopped seated atop his kitchen counter. Through the adjacent living room the cool autumn afterrain crept the corner and stirred up the scents of the vegetables and herbs simmering in butter, the warm, rich, sweet aroma of the brandy and the smoky autumn opulence, while the Prokofiev piece whistled Simon and

Peter's theme song with a laughing little flute so that when Simon Dimple finished his next snifter of brandy, he decided he must most certainly have at least one more.

The next task at hand was to clean and bone the trout. Simon opened the refrigerator, pulled out the cold, damp package, placed it in the sink and unwrapped it with a certain amount of reverence. Once the package was unwrapped he lifted the fish and turned it over several times. The fish was sleek and wet and a little slick to the touch. He ran his fingers over it. The eyes looked like they were looking up at him, like a dog or a cat when you pet it, and except for the stupid terror in the eyes, Simon Dimple decided there was something decidedly noble about those eyes. The body was slender and blue-green, and a radiant pink-red line ran down the trout's midline. Turning the fish over, the body changed from blue-green to silver, and then faded into a dirty snow white. He turned the fish over again. It was a beautiful trout. The most beautiful thing he'd seen in his life. He laid the fish carefully back in the sink and went to change the record. He put on some Chopin, because nothing else seemed delicate enough to match the beauty of the fish. When he re-entered the kitchen, he decided he and the fish should have one last glass of brandy before he chopped it up.

He had been very deliberate about playing Chopin's *Trauermarsch* to accompany the occasion, so when he poured out the two snifters of brandy, he did so solemnly. "A toast to your beauty," he told the trout, brandishing a snifter. He lifted the fish from the sink, opened its mouth, and emptied the contents inside. Then he lifted his own glass, clinked it against the empty glass, and quaffed his own snifter empty in one gulp. "And now," he said, "the time has come. For all beauty is the beginning of a terror we are just able to endure, and which awes us only because it so serenely disdains to destroy us."

With that much said, Simon Dimple opened his cupboard, picked up his kitchen knife, placed it just where the head began, and lovingly positioned his hands across the knife, looking for the cleanest, most humane cut he could possibly inflict. It was just at that moment that the telephone rang.

Simon had been expecting a call that afternoon. Clementine was supposed to call him once she got settled into her hotel so that they could make definite plans for the evening. He put the trout back into the sink, placed the knife next to it, and walked into the living room where the

closest telephone was located. He turned the Chopin down. "Hello?"

"Simon. How are you?"

"Clementine! Are you in town?"

"Yes, I'm at some dreadful hotel off Strawberry Circle. King Strawberry Inn or something like that. Oh, Simon, this town just *has* to get over itself."

"Well, you shouldn't be so harsh on it. You did grow up here, you know."

"That's exactly why I *can* be so harsh, Simon darling. Really. When will you ever move out of this dump?"

"Now, Clementine. That's not fair. You know how I feel about this town."

"Yes. Yes, I do. You're stubbornly sentimental. That's how you feel. Well, I'll tell you this, Simon Dimple: Strawberry is no New York City, and I should know. What could you possibly know about anything spending all your time here?"

Simon didn't say anything.

"Anyway," Clementine went on, "at least Strawberry can put on a decent Opera. Aren't you just *thrilled* to see Puccini tonight?"

"As a matter of fact, I am," Simon said, perking up a bit.

"I'm glad to see this town hasn't completely destroyed your sense of culture."

"Well, on the contrary," said Simon. "I've been doing quite a bit of reading. I go to the theatre a couple times a month, when I can afford to, and you know how I love my music. I've even learned to cook a bit. I was thinking, if you were up to it, I picked up the most succulent looking rainbow trout this afternoon at the market, and I've been preparing it all afternoon. I was thinking, if you were up to it, that maybe after the opera I could whip up a dish of herb baked trout. Splendid stuff. I had it at a restaurant the other night, and I managed to find a recipe for it online that sounds absolutely delicious."

"Oh, Simon, you do need to move out of this horrendous dockside town."

"You don't like rainbow trout?"

"Ugh! Fish! Disgusting, Simon, utterly revolting! They're slimy, and – and *fish*, and they stink to high heaven. Really, Simon. To eat such stupid, revolting creatures as a grown man. As a *cultured* grown man. Besides, darling, I thought you knew that I'm a vegetarian."

"Oh."

"Well, don't start sounding all long faced about it, love. We'll just go out to eat somewhere. That way we can both get something we like."

Though if you get some horrible gaping fish, I may just have to walk out on you." She laughed.

Simon didn't say anything.

"Anyway, how have you been, dear?"

"I don't know. Okay, I guess," Simon said. "I suppose we haven't talked in a rather long time. I haven't done a whole lot of anything. Like I said, I enjoy the theatre; and my music of course. Sometimes I like to go on walks. I don't know all that many people these days, you know. Most everyone we grew up with left Strawberry."

"Well, you can't blame them."

"What about you? How is New York?"

"Oh, darling, if you only *knew*. The theatre there is just tremendous. And then there's Broadway, and the museums and art galleries; Soho is like a giant art-gallery in and of itself. It would amaze you."

"I'd like to see New York someday."

"Well you'll die never having lived if you don't. There are all the cute punk rock kids in the east village, and there's Central Park – darling, you always loved the fall. You would *adore* Central Park in the fall. It's like nothing in the world."

"I'd like to see it."

"And then the men, oh the men just knock you out, Simon. They're so cultured and intelligent. Not like the men you meet in Strawberry. Not you I mean, Simon, you're different of course; but I mean in general. And then they're so handsome. I met my ex-husband at an art-gallery opening. He was the most charming man on the planet. A bastard, as it turns out, but he was so cute and smart and funny."

"I never knew you got married," Simon said, heading towards the kitchen, where he decided both he and his insulted friend were in need of another glass of brandy.

"Wow, Simon, it really *has* been a long time, hasn't it? We were married for a year. We got divorced in June."

"I'm – I'm sorry to hear that."

"Well, don't be. The last thing I need is someone's pity. Just like a man, he was seeing some little trick he met at some club downtown. What a man like that was even *doing* at a club downtown, I can hardly fathom, but boys will be boys."

"It doesn't sound like he was right for you," Simon said, filling up the two snifters, and clinking them together.

"Well, it seems like no one ever is."

"True."

"Remember the time you read that poem dedicated to me, all the way back in High School?" Clementine laughed.

Simon laughed too, while the trout gulped down its second glass of brandy. "Of course."

"God, that was humiliating."

"Yes. I guess I was a little silly back then."

"Oh, Simon, you've always been silly."

"Well."

"I should've just married you, I think. You should move to New York, Simon Dimple, and we'll get married straightaway."

"You mean it?"

"Of course, darling. Why wouldn't we? We're both single, responsible adults!" She laughed. "We could sit by the fire at night and read each other *Annabel Lee*.

Chopin's final heavy movement came slumping through the kitchen doorway. Simon took a sip of his brandy and headed back to the living room.

"Well maybe I'll do that."

"Oh, you should darling, you absolutely should. Anyway, listen. Why don't you meet me at the theatre just after quarter past six? That way we can get good seats and maybe even have time for a cocktail at the bar before the show starts. How does that sound?"

"That sounds great, Clementine."

"Well, then, it's a date."

"It's a date. You know, Clementine, it's great to hear your voice again."

"Oh, darling, I just *adore* you," Clementine said. "See you then."

Simon Dimple hung up the phone. He looked at his watch. It was just going on four o'clock. If he took a cab around six he could be at the theatre in fifteen minutes, though on a day like this, and with this much brandy in him, he preferred to walk. He walked into the kitchen and looked at the trout lying in the sink. A thin line of brandy was dribbling from its mouth. Simon gathered up the fish, careful to keep it settled on the unwrapped package beneath it, and brought it into the living room. He set it down on the couch and went back into the kitchen. In his kitchen cupboard he found a large bowl and along with it, he grabbed the bottle of brandy.

Once he was back in the living room Simon put the fish in the bowl and filled his snifter. Chopin's *Trauermarsch* had finished, so he went and changed the music to something a little lighter. A little Bach, for culture. The Goldberg Variations. Exquisite. Glen Gould recording of course. Civilized music for civilized discussion. He sat down on the couch next to the fish.

"So," he said. "We are all insulted tonight. You, me and the whole wretched town of Strawberry."

The trout didn't say anything.

"Yes," Simon agreed, "it's hard to know what to say. A little speechless myself, and I'm not the type of fellow usually at a loss for words. It has been a long time, though. How is she supposed to understand how we feel about things? She's out there in New York, and here we are in Strawberry. You've seen other places, other cities. Perhaps you've even been to New York yourself; but I've spent my whole life in Strawberry, and how am I supposed to know where she's coming from after all these years? Three years, and I'm expecting... To be honest, I don't know what I was expecting. What say you, brother fish?"

The smell of the sizzling butter made Simon jump up and head back to the kitchen. The butter had burned, along with the vegetables, into the pan. Simon turned off the heat and let the pan sit. "Just as well," he said, "dinner's off anyway. Besides, the fish and I have become friends." He headed back into the living room for another glass of brandy.

"Well, brother fish," he said, sitting back on the couch. "Another for you too, then?"

This time, pouring the brandy into the fish's mouth, he got a little sloppy and some of the brandy spilled onto the couch. Instead of cleaning it immediately up, as would have been his normal course of action, he let it sit and drank his own glass. The wind coming through the open patio door was getting wild and colder, but the brandy was making him feel warm. He looked over at the rainbow trout with red and orange leaves blowing across the blue rugs, Bach on the radio and said, "Brother fish, I believe, we both of us have had quite enough."

When Simon Dimple woke up it was about a quarter to six. His head was pounding, and he felt disoriented, but when he looked down at his watch, he lurched himself forward off the couch and stumbled towards his bedroom. No time to take a shower, he would have to go to the opera stinking of brandy, but that was okay. He washed his face in the sink to refresh himself, before sloppily changing into his eveningwear. Outside the day had gotten a lot colder, and the little bit of sunlight that had been there in the afternoon was gone. The sky was gray, and the wind whipped the little leaves around the sidewalks, and Simon Dimple stood by the side of the road shivering and perplexed, waiting for the cab he'd called.

He arrived at the theatre just a little after a quarter after. Clementine was waiting for him in the lobby. "Simon, darling!" she cried. "Late as always. How many years has it been? And you look... well, why, Simon, you look as if life has given you a rather sound beating over the years."

"Well," Simon said, "you look lovely as ever Clementine."

Clementine had been a skinny tall girl, with braided black hair and glasses, and a lot of boys made fun of her when she was young, and a lot of girls too; but a lot of boys also fell in love with her. As an adult she was still a tall, skinny young woman, but her hair was pulled up in a bun, and she wore black-rimmed glasses that were an oval kind of shape and had gold-rimmed interiors and were made by Dolce & Gabana or somesuch. As an adult lots of women made lots of fun of her when she wasn't around, but men were always falling in love with her. Simon always figured she made other women jealous. Clementine loved to have men in love with her, and Simon loved to be in love with her, and so they loved each other very much.

Clementine was wearing a dark red coat, and a black evening dress. Simon thought she looked stunning, but he still couldn't help stifle a yawn. And the yawns kept coming all night. All throughout his favorite opera of all time Simon Dimple couldn't help but yawn. Nothing seemed to be comfortable enough: for one, the seats were too far away, and the opera glasses just made his eyes tired; secondly, once his eyes were sufficiently tired, he had trouble keeping up with the score, so that he constantly lost pace with the music and/or the story and found himself straining more just to figure out what was going on than enjoying the evening, and finally, what with everything tiring poor Simon Dimple out so much, and what with Clementine's deep sensual perfume, Simon found his tired eyes occasionally gave up altogether and closed for whole scenes at a time.

Dinner was worse. Clementine dragged him to her favorite restaurant in Strawberry – a place known, idiotically enough – as *Strawberry*, where Clementine dined on eggplant parmesan and topped dinner off with a desert of chocolate covered strawberries. Simon was too confused and sleepy and stupefied to know what to order, so he just followed suit with the eggplant parmesan, and drank a great deal of brandy, which, ultimately, did nothing to help his perplexed state of mind.

"Simon really, how this town has jaded you!" Clementine said as they left the restaurant.

“Oh, Clementine, would you really marry me if I moved to New York?”

“Darling, how could you possible believe any different?”

Simon Dimple returned to his apartment a little after midnight on Monday morning. When he walked in the first thing he smelled was rotting fish. The apartment felt like a freezer, what with the balcony door wide open and leaves fluttering all over the blue rugs. When he turned on the light, he saw the mess in all its glory: with the fish on the couch, and the bowl collapsed in a heap of water and brandy on the floor, the rugs blown around the room, the invading fall leaves, the brandy spilled all over the couch, and the flies

buzzing from the living room over the dead fish and the rancid butter. The stench and the mess and the brandy and his head and the eggplant parmesan and Clementine made him sick – sick to his stomach, and he threw up right there on his beautiful blue rugs. And then Simon Dimple dropped onto his couch, right next to the rotten fish, and couldn’t help but cry.