

this table is too long to hold hands



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Introduction

SEAN T. RANDOLPH

I called up Gabi a couple months back to get advice on the direction for this show. He always knows how to get the gears turning when it comes to ideas. We are both firm believers in the concept that even some of the worst ideas end up being the best. After riffing for a bit, Gabi latches on to something I said in my desperation about being willing to give anything for a good idea.

“What about selling your soul to the devil? There’s something there right?”

Next, he probably said something about the imagery of Bosch or Bruegel, but I can’t remember exactly. Somewhere deep in the conversation I was reminded of the episode of *The Simpsons* where Bart sells his soul to Milhouse for five bucks. If you haven’t watched this episode or don’t remember it, I can’t recommend it enough. *The Simpsons* has a precision and brevity to its visual language that is one-of-a-kind and particularly poignant in tackling abstract concepts such as the soul.

What really stuck out to me while rewatching this episode was how it ends. Lisa buys back Bart’s soul and presents it to him. I found this exchange between Bart and Lisa to be heartwarming. At the beginning of the episode, Bart tried to terrorize her with a prank, and by the end of the episode Lisa has selflessly saved Bart’s soul and he’s kissing her on the cheek. There’s nothing transcendent about Lisa’s behavior, she’s merely being a friend, sister and thoughtful person. This is the type of personhood that I’m drawn to and try to emulate. A type of being that values human connection and understanding above all else.

Which leads me to the conception of this journal. Alex and I thought it would be a good idea to invite some friends to share stories on the occasion of this opening. All I gave as a prompt was that the contributors’ stories had to be about human connection. Hopefully our writers read this preface and understand some of my logic in relation to their prompt.

Lastly, I’ll leave you with this, my connection to each of the writers in this journal:

Jess and I acted in a video work by our mutual friend Ren. The work, which was completely silent, involved us switching roles multiple times and gesturing to one another about an imagined artwork. I feel like we bonded quickly because we didn’t use words while filming, which allowed us to communicate on some other wavelength. I also remember eating M&M’s off the ground. It was a good night.

Ren and I took his daughter Hanah to see a matinee on a rainy day. This particular movie was at a special theater called Sala Chiqui. The theater had a multi-tiered playground that the kids could play in before the movie while their parents got drunk on couches and bean bag chairs. It felt like something that you’d find in the Mall of America and not in Getxo. It’s hard to articulate

how weird this experience was, but I feel like we lived through something deeply absurd that day.

Julie is from Montpelier, VT. This is important because ever since I learned this about her I’ve always acted like she’s from Brattleboro. If you’re from a small town that you’re proud of, as we both are, you know how much of a dig this is. She always took this joke in stride, which I always appreciated. Julie came to visit me in Tucson in her lowered BMW. She deserves a medal of bravery for this act.

Ren and I were visiting Kyle Jorgensen in New York City and we stopped to watch an amateur adult league softball game in McCarren Park. Maybe one of the better people-watching sessions I’ve ever had. We were placing bets on who’d hit a homer when a woman came to bat that we affectionately nicknamed “Stance.” Her stance was legendary to say the least. She made me swoon a bit and I threatened to ask her out. I never did, but we still talk about Stance to this day.

Taylor and I were driving to Chula Vista to have dinner at her partner Misha’s farm. We were so deep in conversation that we arrived at the Mexico border having totally disregarded all the last exit signs. We had to cross the border to turn around. Getting across the border into Mexico was speedy, coming back was another story. If I remember correctly it took a few hours, but my memory could be skewed because I had to pee really bad. That night, when we finally made it to the farm, I tried something called clabbered milk. If you have the chance to try it, I’d advise against it.

Kyle Martindale dressed up as a gladiator for Halloween and I always pictured him as one since. He used to buy Milton’s bread in bulk, the kind in the purple bag, from Costco probably. He’d live off bread alone for weeks on end and somehow he was still hella fit. I don’t know how he did it, but I never questioned it.

Jasminne and I met at ArtCenter through Julie. I remember asking Jasminne about what kind of art she made and her reply was complex, specific, and it made me feel old. I had to know more about this person. She’s not afraid to take risks in her work and I respect her greatly for this. One of her works involved her being locked in a set of stocks with a sign that said something like “peg the wench.” I didn’t partake but she had people throw green tomatoes at her. Very bold.

Dean was writing poems about Catholic stuff when we first met. These poems were beautiful and dark. I always thought of him as my name doppelgänger, Dean C. Robertson, Sean T. Randolph. Kind of like a slant rhyme but for names. I cut Dean’s hair once. He has very lush hair and he warned me of a bump on his head. This was very kind of him.

Our Channels

JESSICA DILLON
with drawing by Sid

Our channels
made to flow
inward
outward
human
being
is an
exchange
an encounter
the illusion
of the solitary
outline
containing
is never
enough
is never
full
to be apart
to remain
contained
an integrity
of giving
holds in
a loose
seaming identity.



Salt Junk

REN EBEL

Blackbeard writhes on the floor in front of me. Could it have been something he ate? Snickers from the galley. The men gather, watching, whispering. Smee eyes me malevolently. He doubts my leadership.

That isn't funny Smee, I say. We all had the same meal. It's the same every day: salt junk, brined limes, ship biscuits, champagne.

I try not to take Smee's barbs too personally. He's grieving now. We all are since Ed left. The men have a hard time talking about it, and that anger sometimes gets expressed in unhealthy ways. We do honestly need to figure out what's causing all the writhing. These sea burials are getting expensive.

The men all say they hate Ed for leaving, but I would guess that privately, like me, they have conflicted feelings about it. Not only because Ed was our teacher, but because the boat was his idea. Ed gave a lecture entitled 'To Understand the Beautiful One Must Take It Apart and Rebuild It from Scratch.' We set sail the following afternoon.

Was the environment 'toxic' at times? Maybe. Though I'm not sure I'd agree Ed was abusive. I never felt abused.

I also think, when we consider Ed's leaving (the sudden change of course, the disastrous 'tests of stamina,' the clumsy backpedaling, the purloined dinghy), it's important to keep in mind that Ed was in incredible pain toward the end. Having read his diary, I understand that Ed suffered strained ligaments in both of his knees. And there was, from what I can tell, a vicious stomach ulcer. We never knew.

In order to forgive Ed, we are learning to forgive ourselves. Admiral Benbow leads sitting meditation at dawn. We drop into ourselves and allow the feelings to surface. We name those feelings and then gently return our attention to the breath. Some find it useful to repeat a mantra.

Salt junk, brined limes, ship biscuits, champagne.

Long John Silver hosts the Friday night poetry workshop. It began as a eulogy-writing workshop on account of all the sea burials, but it quickly blossomed into something really special. Now the men go around writing little haikus and things. It's lovely.

We don't come into port anymore. It was exciting to hear 'land ho' the first couple of times, all of us running out on deck to catch a glimpse. But then it's always the same: a few charred remains, black smoke. When we encounter another ship, we hoist our red flags and pray there's no confrontation.

At sea, the important thing is to limit your options. When you keep your options open, barbarism becomes an option. The plank becomes an option. We rely instead on simple pleasures. The gift of sixty-nine demijohns of champagne, I learned from reading Ed's diary, was apparently intended as a kind of sardonic joke by one of Ed's longtime rivals, the Marquis de la Tour. We never knew.

On Tuesdays, Smee hosts a men's group. It gives us all a chance to process Ed's leaving, and to talk openly of our male traumas without judgment. Many of us left girlfriends ashore. Some left children and wives.

She says I'm not funny anymore, says Basilica Hands. You're the funniest motherfucker aboard! She says my jokes don't land. She says I try too hard on the setup. Utter bilge, dude. So I say, then why do you always laugh? Reasonable question. She says, out of pity, Basilica, out of simple pity. Treacherous wench!

One day I was folding laundry, says Popeye. Elizabeth asks why I always put the towels and dishrags in her pile. I say sorry darling, it's only habit. You see as a child I always did the laundry, and I'd always put my clothes in one pile and everything else in my mother's. Well now Elizabeth goes completely apeshit. She says, you're giving me your mother's pile? Don't you realize how twisted that is? She says, you need to start seeing a therapist. So what do you say? I say, You're the one screaming over a pile of laundry. You see a therapist? What does she say? She says, I already do see a therapist. What do you say? I say, since when? What does she say? She says, I've been unhappy for a long time, Eric. Who is Eric? Eric is my real name. Treasonous harlot!

My girlfriend doesn't like Steely Dan, says Benjamin Hornigold. Not even 'Peg! Not even 'Time Out of Mind! Or 'Reelin' in the Years!'

At night I cover Blackbeard with coarse rock salt and wrap him in a sheet of D Grade high quality tar paper. I roll him over to the taffrail (not easy, given the hook). I hear Smee's dumb footsteps behind me. I guess he's finally mustered the nerve to mutiny. I guess it's you and me both tonight, eh Blackbeard?

I can be a real jerk sometimes, says Smee.

Yes you can, I say.

I'm sorry, says Smee. I think Ed leaving brought up a lot for me.

For all of us, I say.

Smee says, I think you're doing a great job as interim captain.

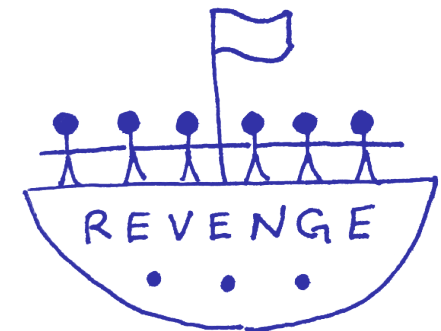
I say, it takes a real man to admit when he's wrong.

Smee says, I appreciate you.

I say, I appreciate you too, Smee. Now get over here and help me dump this bozo overboard.

One day we'll meet Ed in some unlucky harbor. We'll be stronger men, then. Peaceful and self-reliant men. And Ed will immediately recognize that we no longer need him, or that we never really needed him. That will terrify Ed. Revenge is a dish best preserved in a barrel of salt for up to seven months at sea.

Approaching land again. What's that on the horizon? Is it a party? Is it our moms? No, black smoke.



A Real Good War

JULIANA HALPERT

My late grandfather's LinkedIn profile remains online. Sam Halpert, based in Gainesville, Florida (still true, in a sense), is an Independent Writing and Editing Professional. I got a kick out of that. Maybe I got the freelancing impulse (/curse) from him.

One day, out on my parents' back porch, Sam proclaimed that I was "destined" to be a writer. I was ten, and I had handed over some story I was writing for school, which devoted the majority of its six handwritten pages about a family vacation in the Caribbean to making fun of my parents' behavior at the airport. I abhor the recitation of received praise, but I really cherished Sam's words, his certitude. I assumed he had special foresight. He was a published author. And he painted, too—these glaring, polychrome geometric designs on unstretched canvas. Stella knock-offs. I thought they were super cool at the time. My lawyer parents would always poke fun at them on the eve of our annual visit down there, anticipating the hours-long unveiling of his new compositions, a garage vernissage.

My family remains somewhat dismissive of Sam's writing, too. This past January down in Delray Beach, during an all-hands visit to my grandmother—who divorced Sam before I was born—my aunt expressed a measure of high-eyebrowed surprise when I mentioned that I had enjoyed his war book. And that I thought he was a good writer. But Susan is the biggest culture snob and wannabe-European of all time, and, despite my pleas, always refuses to turn on the air conditioning. "Didn't it get a review in the Times, though?" I softly protested. "Technically, yes," my mom intervened from the kitchen while stacking plates, her tone gesturing toward my naïveté. "But he pestered one of their book editors for months. Sam wore him down until the poor guy relented."

In truth, I haven't read *A Real Good War* since the seventh grade, when it had been the subject of my term-final book report in Comp 1. In the spring of 2017, I bought one of the final copies of the first edition on Thriftbooks, inspired after having just swung through Edwards Air Force Base on my first trip to the Mojave desert, the morning after my interview day at CalArts. But the book has sat on my bookshelf, shrink-wrapped, ever since. It was published in 1997 by Southern Heritage Press (St. Petersburg, Florida), then reissued by Anchor—a middlebrow paperback division of Knopf Doubleday—in 1999. The latter was blurbed by the Times.

In one of Bruce's classes at ArtCenter, he brought up the concept of retyping texts as a way to feel a proximity to them, to apprehend them in some other way. I may be getting that wrong. But it stuck in my head, and to honor Sean's theme of human connection, I've elected to open my grandfather's book to retype exactly 1000 words of it, maybe as a way to feel close to him, a guy whom my family mostly disliked, but who had a rather eventful life, who grew up so poor he was excited to get three shitty meals a day in the wartime Air Force, who put his three pretentious kids through college—a family first—and who unknowingly set me on a course.

A quick primer: it is fiction, but tightly autobiographical. At the age of 19, Sam signed up and became a B-17 navigator in the 91st Bombardment Group of the US Air Force during World War II. Nicknamed the "Ragged Irregulars," the 91st suffered the heaviest losses of any bomb group in the war. The famous "Memphis Belle" belonged to the 91st. There was about a 52% survival rate. My grandfather, improbably, completed 35 missions with his squadron in 1944, flying from a base in England to western Germany, dropping bombs on factories and bridges. He was honored at Buckingham Palace at some point; the magnet is still on my parents' fridge. This excerpt recounts his narrator's very first mission, en route to Ludwigschafen. Sam died on June 6, 2012, the sixty-eighth anniversary of D-Day.

I switch from the intercom to the command set and hear Hartak's voice coming over like static. "OK, tighten up this shitheel formation, we're over Europe now, let's stay alive." I force myself to scan my instruments. This is no place to screw up. We continue on the same heading for twelve minutes after crossing the coast, then swing left on our first dogleg. New compass reading is 078. I check the map and make out Lille six miles ahead and to the right. I keep busy reading my dials and calling for oxygen checks. It's altogether too easy to have a leak in your mask or hose, anywhere else in the line, and be totally unaware of the problem. Without oxygen at this altitude, you're unconscious in thirty seconds. After two minutes you're dead.

This leg of the mission, about 120 miles according to Odie's notes, should take fifty minutes at our present ground speed of 145 miles per hour. Outside temperature reads minus 33 degrees F. and my heat suit has conked out. I check to see if any of my connections have pulled loose. Wires extend out of me as if I were an oversized puppet. The line connecting my headset to the intercom and radio tangles with the one from my heat suit. Another wire runs from my oxygen mask mic to the intercom, and a flexible hose links my mask like an umbilical cord to the oxygen intake regulator. I'm bogged down with a parachute harness and Mae West over a woolen shirt, two sweaters and a heavy sheepskin-lined jacket. My movements are as stiff and clumsy as Frankenstein's monster as I lurch around in bulky sheepskin boots in my cramped area. Odie reports that we've blown some fuses.

I feel my insides expanding much like Paul's condom in the thin air at this altitude. My stomach is roiling and I fart off toots lasting fifteen seconds at a time. I hope they're dry. Still an hour and a half to estimated time over target. A wave of confusion and fear sweeps over me. I can't tell if it's part of my last wave or the beginning of my next, as I go through the motions of reading dials and gauges from a crouched position. No seat for the navigator on a B-17. You spend a lot of time on your knees. I keep taking care of business as best I can.

Sparks of light dart off the aluminum and plexiglass of the other squadrons flying all around us. The sun, blinding white with a slim rosy rim, is well above the horizon now, dazzling in a sky of purest blue. I have to squint as I crouch over Paul and look outside for landmarks. He points his gloved hand out past our left wing, where at about fifteen miles off to the north I see a pack of fighter planes closing in on us.

We lumber along at 150 miles per hour as they close in at twice our airspeed. The interphone is busy with chatter from all around the ship. "OK guys, watch 'em," says Odie.

The Ball turret gunner says, "They look like Messerschmitts." Their shapes grow larger as they speed toward us. I'm sweating through the cold, staring at them unable to move, like a bird at a snake. Then the top turret gunner calls out on the intercom. "It's OK, they're ours. Little friends." Twenty seconds later, about twenty P-51 Mustangs move into position as our fighter escort, darting beside and above us. They leave S-curved white feathery streaks of frozen exhaust that cross and merge with the long, straight contrails of the slow-moving bombers extending ahead and behind us for a hundred miles.

I mark the position and time of the fighter rendezvous. The marks are a bit steadier now, and I'm able to grip the pencil and write without removing my double set of gloves. A lot of the stuff they taught us in navigation school seems to be working up here, and I'm beginning to ease up a little. It's like when I first began to make a little sense out of geometry. I want to hold on to this feeling, but it soon slips away.

We plow on at our briefed air speed, 150 miles per hour indicated, altitude 25,000 feet. An undercast of five to six tenths altocumulus has developed below us at about 15,000 feet. I peer through breaks in the cloud and see Liege with its huge fortresses plainly visible even from here five miles up. Six minutes later we swing right thirty

degrees on a new southerly heading. We are now ten minutes from my first visit to Germany, about one hour from Ludwigshafen, and twenty minutes until the first planes of the lead group cross the target. As of now, the enemy can only guess at our destination. Our present heading would take us straight into Mainz or Frankfurt.

Odie calls in to the crew that he's just heard from Hartak that three of the forward groups in our wing are being hit by bandits. Paul points outside, and I see our fighter escort has dwindled down to three Mustangs flying above us. He says the rest have gone to join the fight up ahead.

We are over the Black Forest and no enemy fighters or flak yet. Odie calls in. "Stay alert, guys. We just picked up a message that the three forward Groups lost eight ships to Focke-Wulfs before our escort team beat them off." A feeling of cold dread snakes its way in and crawls around in my mind. How did I get into this? How do I get out? No way out. I'm light-headed, woozy. I remember to breathe again. My oxygen indicator blinks with every breath I take.

The Group makes a wide forty-degree right turn to take us to our IP twenty minutes away. The IP, the initial point, is where we are.



Body of Christ, Blood of Christ *A Brief Insight Into the Challenges of Passing the Sacrament*

KYLE JORGENSEN

The Holy Sacrament of the Lord is prepared and distributed to a congregation by the Deacons (12 - 15 year olds) and Teachers (15 - 18 year olds). Worthy members accept this offering with penitence.

The sacred ritual of the Sacrament has its origins in a humble loaf of bread. This item is the responsibility of the Teacher and is brought from home after being purchased at a local grocer. Generally this unblessed item appears in the form of a half-eaten loaf of Wonder Bread. The future "body of Christ" rests at the bottom of a red, white and blue plastic sack, and is under the protection of an honorable sixteen year old until Sacrament Meeting begins. Before songs or prayers, the bag of sliced bread is transported (sometimes ricocheting side to side across the Teachers body, like a mace) to the front of the chapel and placed on a small shelf beneath the Sacramental table. Occasionally the congregation is blessed by a Teacher who provides Marie Callender brand Potato Bread, or something of a similar mid-tier quality. ¹

While the Deacons sit reverently in the front two rows, the Teachers are busy preparing the symbolic blood of Christ in a small room behind the organist. This space, the size of a storage closet, is empty except for a small sink, some questionably sanitary bread and water trays and a stainless steel basin within the sink. This container, hinging at its center, is partially filled with tap water on one side, then tilted to flood the opposite, where twenty-four tiny perforations funnel the liquid into trays full of tiny paper or plastic cups (paper is preferred due to a more discrete disposal. The used cup is discarded into an opening within the water tray). Care is taken not to over- or under-fill the containers. The right amount of liquid allows for a perfectly satisfying swallow. Enough to consider Christ's immense sacrifice, without being a large gulp, a difficult to handle overflowing cup, or a minuscule sip of water. A good Teacher takes pride in these preparations. The same mentality is taken moments later while pulling apart slices of Jesus' torn flesh in the form of bleached white bread. Not too big, not too small. Just enough for a small chew and swallow.

After the sacramental prayer is uttered by mid-pubescent vocal cords, the distribution of the sacrament is underway by the hands of the Deacons. This process presents a few challenges. Constant adaptability is required. The order of distribution is specific

and hierarchical. The male priesthood holder with the highest authority receives the Sacrament first. This individual sits upon the "stand", somewhere behind the pulpit. After this display has taken place, the other Deacons (an average of six) move throughout the chapel, working their way from the front and back, towards the center pews, simultaneously. This operation can be compared to something like a thirteen year old secret service, functioning with non-verbal cues and a similar stoicism. These young men adjust to hold-ups as they occur. ²

The challenges of existing in a thirteen year old male body cannot be emphasized enough. Random erections frequently occur amongst the Deacons and for no warranted, or unholy reason. Not only do these boners materialize frequently, they also arise as a result of anxiety around their potential occurrence in the first place. If they strike while on duty, a Deacon must be prepared to accept this display, while entrusted with the sacred Sacrament of our Lord and Savior. Hiding this ungodly revelation proves difficult due to the white, buttoned down shirt and tie, tucked into hand me down Dockers. The seated congregation presents another challenge. These pious members are eye-level to the boner zone. This viewpoint is especially relevant to a young female population, having not yet grown to adult heights. One could attempt to use the Sacramental tray to shield the eyes of the congregation, but these containers are tragically small. The bread tray being 10 x 12 inches wide and only a half-inch tall, at most. The water tray, on the other hand, is much larger at 12 x 20 inches wide, but is distributed later in the ceremony. Regrettably, tilting the tray in an attempt to shield the unholy levitation is not recommended, due to the delicate contents being transported.

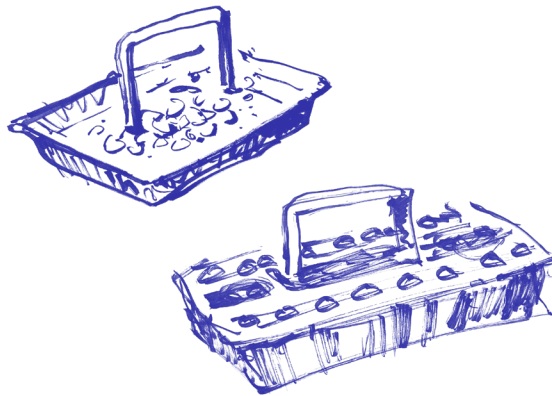
A. One solution to hiding the erection could be a mild hunch forward, possibly communicating a pious half-bow of reverence. This action would necessitate pants baggy or pleated enough to accommodate.

B. The other method in avoiding a scene is to tuck the erection into one's belt. With a tray containing the body or blood of Christ in one hand, this action proves challenging, if not impossible. One can avoid raising the mainsail in the Nautica formals by a preemptive tuck during the sacramental prayer, before the trays are handed out. This method is successful as long as the congregation keeps their eyes closed during the prayer, as they should. Another advantage to this method would be that lining up in the front corner of the chapel, the Deacons have their backs to the congregation. A potential downside to the tucked erection is that they tend to make the belt zone look odd. Regardless, the protrusion is much less vulgar than an untethered hard-on let loose in the face of a pious congregation as they attempt to wash away their sins.

Despite these real challenges, partaking of the holy ordinance of the Sacrament is an unparalleled way to experience spiritual renewal, only made possible by the flesh and blood of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

¹ It may happen that a Teacher will supply a loaf of Dave's Killer Bread. In most circumstances this generous contribution would have the makings of a home run in terms of quality, but this bread is in fact discouraged due to the high seed and grain content. These bits of sacrament have been determined difficult to chew and a distraction to those attempting to commune with Christ.

² An elderly member of the congregation with palsy can require immense patience while they handle a tiny cup of liquid. Spills and a general snails pace can cause a Deacon to be held up on a single pew for minutes at a time. Enthusiastic toddlers, eager for a snack, provide a completely different type of challenge.



Roommates

TAYLOR MARDIS KATZ

Regularly, I feel it would be perfectly sane for me to up and leave my entire life and take the overnight train to DC to help my best friend raise her baby.

Because unlike most people on the planet, I know what the fuck she needs, and I know where to get it.

I know the medicine of unearthing lost Polaroids from college, how it will remind us how lucky we were to run around kissing people in hallways, skipping frigid in tiny dresses across a snowy expanse back to our one-room homes, sipping cheap vodka mixed with mango smoothie out of a plastic bottle at 8 pm on a Thursday, taking advice from wise and terrible people, crying over boys and asking why over girls who didn't want to be our friends.

I know she needs more water, punny pens, a new cereal to look forward to, and a shower so long and hot that the dishwasher gives out mid-cycle in a shocked lack of heat. I know she doesn't give a shit about an organized closet, but that's she's going to need her favorite pants and the t-shirt with good memories sewn into it right on top of the shelf when she wakes up tomorrow.

I know she'll dress her kid in the hand-me-downs I bring and let me pull the hair from her drain and make her a second cup of coffee and cook that polenta with blue cheese and pesto we made that one time and never again that somehow proved to us that we would make it as adults in the world.

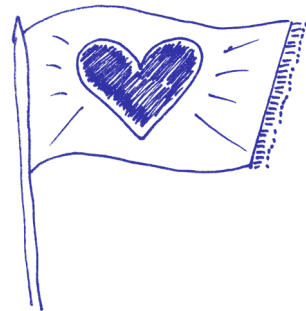
Because when you have taken Greyhound bus with someone to New York City, listening to one mix CD over & over with an earphone in each of your ears; when you have seen someone heal slowly from Dengue fever; when you have refilled a plastic dining hall pitcher to ward off an unavoidable hangover; when you have run over a chipmunk together during Minute One of a road trip; when you have seen someone cry in the middle of Trader Joe's on their thirtieth birthday and known exactly all the reasons why and felt absolutely that their tears were valid, you can do superhuman things for them without a single sore muscle.

Because when you are a citizen of a country that has only one other person in it who loves Ani DiFranco as much as you do, for sentimental reasons and also reasons related to guitar prowess and that one amazing concert; who somehow feels the same way about dogs (meh) and movie trailers (yum) and also everything else, including what is funny, what is sad, and what is, indescribably, funny/sad, you don't take that shit for granted.

You sew the flag of that nation despite not knowing where the thread came from, or the names of any of the stitches.

You whittle a flagpole from a sapling, despite never using a knife for anything but food and cardboard, and tie that flag to it, and use it to ward off anything sharp the world decides to throw it at her.

And you plunge that flag deep into the fertile land that surrounds the home of the too- small, vast, ever-expanding room you two will always share.



The man with a hole in his side

KYLE MARTINDALE

There is a gringo legend, in a little town south of the California border, of a man with a hole deep through his side. The hole in the man's side was so big, he could bury his own fist in it. And it was so deep, you could hear at the bottom the quivering membranes of his body's organs. The hole was less a wound than a natural feature; a burrow in the field of his ribs. For years he toured the desert towns, smiling at people and surprising them with gifts from his hole. Usually it wasn't much: an onion or a pack of gum, a plastic toy for the children. But sometimes he pulled out giant zarapes or bricks for a house, or a candle, already lit.

When a dog who had lost his sense of smell stuck his snout into the man's hole, it went home and sniffed out a dead raccoon which had been causing a stench from beneath the porch. In the next village over, there was a woman who had lost both of her arms in an accident, and had to be dressed and tended by her husband and children. When the man with the hole came by, he told her to reach inside. "Como puedo?" she said, incredulous. But the man with the hole said to her again, as he unbuttoned his shirt, "Alcanza el interior." Then it was the husband who protested, accusing the man of being a pervert, but he insisted, shaking his head and saying, "You can bind my hands and cover my eyes." Then the woman believed and pressed the stub of her shoulder to the hole in the man's side. There was a moment that felt awkward, their unfamiliar skin now intimate. But as she leaned away she drew with her, slowly, the entire length of her very own arm.

During this time in the man's life he was well fed, even growing a little fat from the offerings of grateful people he had helped. The hole grew, too. But he walked for many miles a day answering the calls of other people's misfortunes and was becoming tired. As his fame grew, so did the crowds gathered in the villages, and so did the expectations. Every time he reached inside, they each expected to see something more amazing to appear from his hole. This only exhausted him further, and seemed to deplete the magic of his hole. The people began to tease him when all he could offer was a flower he had picked, or a rosary he had stashed in there. Still others would depend on him for miracles, and utter impossibilities. When people had lost things dear to them, they would expect them inside his hole. "¿Dónde está mis niños?" women would demand, and the men, "¿Dónde está mis burros?" The man would thrust his hand in the hole, twisting his arm and reaching his fingers into the nooks of his innards.

The grin on the man's face would fade into grimace. "Lo siento," he would say, withdrawing his empty hand from the hole, and walking through to the next town.

One late afternoon, as the man was walking on a secluded stretch of highway, some drug-runners pulled over and blocked his way. They mocked him and pushed him back and forth between them. "¿Está en tu agujero la Policía?" said one of them, and they all laughed.

"Ahora," said one of the drug-runners, drawing and pointing a gun at the man's forehead, "Quiero dame un fajo de dinero Americano." The man reached inside, and painfully retrieved a wad of hundred-dollar bills. The men went wild, firing their pistols in the air.

"El mayor diamante en todo el mundo," said another, and the man did it, flinching in pain. The edges of the diamond cut the man's skin as he retrieved it from his hole, and a small trickle of blood began to issue. The drug-runners were beside themselves, entranced by the diamond and by this astounding resource. They began a long list of orders, which the man could barely keep up with:

"Un serpiente cascabel," said one.

"Mas dinero," said another.

"Cinco pistolas Smith and Wesson."

"Cigarros Cubano."

"Cien kilos de cocaine"

"Una Chihuahua con rayas del tigre"

"Una espada conquistadora."

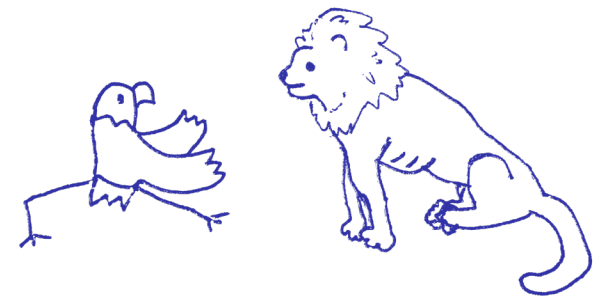
Out came the rattlesnake, and the money and the giant handguns, the Cuban cigars, the drugs, the dogs and the swords, each extraction more painful than the last. For the man seemed to be getting weaker and weaker with each demand, until he was swaying back and forth, trying to maintain his balance as he dug out the treasures from his hole.

"Ahora, una collar de perlas para mi novia," said the leader of the group, smiling a big, gold-toothed smile. The man with the hole in his side staggered forward, coughing and wheezing, catching himself on the shoulder of the bandit. He reached inside with a trembling arm and jerked out a fistful of bloody pearls, tangled and souped with mincing's of his viscera, putting them in the hand of the drug-runner.

"What is this?" he said, suddenly terrified, and dropped the bloody pearls into the dirt as the man with the hole fell to the ground. The drug-runners ran to their car, scrambling to collect their treasure, leaving the man with the hole in his side lying face down in the last rays of the sun.

The next morning, he awoke in great pain, and slumped himself up against a rock. He knew what he needed, but there was no flask of water inside his hole, no car or helicopter to carry him away. He reached, groping within his bloody orifice, wanting to believe his salvation lied within, but pulled out only a silver spoon. This made him laugh so hard that he caught his side in pain and passed out. A woman found the man lying by the side of the road and took him to her sister, Rosalyn, who ran a hospice in the foothills of the Sierra Ciprés. Rosalyn, the owner and caretaker of the hospice, took the man into a room with twelve other men, all lying in beds. She put a bandage over the hole, made the sign of the cross, and eased him to rest on straw-colored sheets. Within days, each of the twelve men in Rosalyn's care had developed, painlessly, great, gaping caverns in their sides. That is to say, they experienced a uniquely parallel de-growth of identical holes in the home of their ribs.

None were excited about this to say the least. After all, they had problems of their own. But Rosalyn recognized both the divinity and the potential for dividends, and was selling tee shirts to friars and fanboys in no time. Soon, American newsrooms, inboxes and feeds were percolating with the south of the border buzz about a couple of Mexican cardinals pushing for the canonization of a Saint Rudolpho, as the people are calling him, who had recently died in hospice outside Tijuana. The Vatican has declined to comment on the issue but droves of believers make pilgrimage to his grave every year, making a complete mess of things at the border.



splinters

JASMINNE MORATAYA

it was the time of splinters outside just like everyone said it would be, but all of the people who said it with flashy smiles were now marked by curdled scowls or just downright dead, because few things changed on a granular level beyond an ever-diminishing quality of life (which is boring to read through and even more boring to experience). the rocket to oblivion was more of a slow, meandering bus ride over a flimsy road. people were still accusing me of living inauthentically, but our teeth were falling out at an accelerated rate. the way had crumbled underneath my feet.

it was cold cold and colder still. we were a contingent of former students who conducted our posthumous lives in the mug factory. we slept in the rafters together when the day was done, and mumbled concessions to each other about the state of things, but mostly we were silent. it was me, you, lucite, annette, and ethel. we all had tricks that kept us from dying like dogs.

sometimes we read old clippings that we'd find in dry corners. the clippings would say things about disarmament or singular, sublime, and direct approaches to making and unmaking the world. sometimes the clippings wouldn't say anything either, and these were always my favorite. an image of a sexy lady in a state of undress. gauzy newsprint. what could be more glacial, cold, and perfect?

we put handles on mugs for hours and then we fired them in an underground kiln. annette would write obscene phrases, ethel would paint defunct flags, lucite would draw mean little faces. one time i asked if we could make anything other than mugs and everyone scowled at me.

we exchanged the mugs with the people at the fruit gel factory or the fluorescent orange cheese cracker factory for sustenance. the people at the water processing plant were too good to give us water for our mugs but we needed water desperately and would trade up until we could get some.

sometimes it would be like this:

mug-mitten-tea-syringes-rare earth metals-toner cartridges-pemmican-tamagotchi-water.

but oftentimes it was a more painstaking affair:

mug-medical staples-eyeglass cleaner-firestarters-sage-vitex berry-flavor crystals-frying pans-carrot tops-shotgun shells-HDMI cables-fireproof condoms-soothsaying scottish fold cat-water.

we mended our clothes and cooked and planted seeds knowing none of them would grow. it was cold cold and colder still, but...



Oakland at Night

DEAN C. ROBERTSON

We land in Oakland and Nick picks us up in his limousine. The driver is an elderly man, and an elderly woman is his maid. They look like Nick and Kelsey, but 50 years in the future. She hands out packets of salt, and he gives us each a glass of champagne. Nick rips open the packet and pours it into his glass, raises it and shouts at an unreasonable decibel, "Umami!" We drink the champagne and pocket the salt.

We arrive at Nick's condo and the elderly couple unloads our luggage onto Adam's luggage cart sculpture that was stolen from ArtCenter. "How did you get this?" Adam asks. Nick raises his index finger to Adam's lips, ties a piece of velvet over Adam's eyes, and tips his head back. "Open your wet maw," Nick whispers into his ear, and then pours Morton salt into Adam's mouth. He leads Adam to a boat on Lake Merritt. A blindfolded woman who looks like Sharon is there, holding the oars. Blindfolded Adam sits on the bow and Nick launches the boat. Meanwhile, we can't get into Nick's condo and the elderly couple speaks to us in riddles, then backwards. One holds a mirror up to Justin's face. The other gives Brenda a pen and winks. We don't see Adam for the rest of the night.

We unpack our bags and get ready for dinner. Nick gives us freshly brewed coffee. He sits in the corner, facing the wall. "I don't like watching people drink coffee!" he shouts, again, at an unreasonable decibel. Outside on the balcony, Brett speaks but it sounds like fog horns. The smoke from the year-round fire hovers in the air.

We're in a privately-funded rideshare. Chris is our driver, but also a rider. The service is called Oakland at Night, but everyone calls it OAN. Screens mounted on the backs of the seats tell us about debates between two old white men, one promising change, one promising that change has been made. One white man will nominate the other white man to his administration, regardless of the election's outcome. They call this compromise, but we know it's all about maintaining the status quo. We speak, but the voices on the screens speak for us, repeating, "This is the new truth." Buildings burn behind us. Bodies hang from lampposts.

We eat dinner at Burma Star. Nick is cooking in the kitchen. He tells us an unnecessarily long story about the importance of tea in Burma and fermenting tea reminds him of his past and he reads dreams through the leaves. He tosses a hodgepodge of ingredients into a

giant stockpot: crab legs, a sweater, two rubber ducks, a Hot Wheels car, milk, a photo of us from our trip to Croatia, a turkey ranch sandwich from Quiznos, and a large bag of Himalayan pink salt. He places the stockpot into the oven. A timer dings somewhere outside. He pulls out the pot which has turned into a platter that's just a giant pile of salt. He places the platter in the middle of the table. He cracks the salt with a giant spoon to reveal Big Mouth Billy Bass singing, "Don't Worry, Be Happy" while a miniature Jure and Kaitlyn eat tomatoes and dance. "Mmmm, umami," Nick mutters to no one. "Umami!" Jure and Kaitlyn shout with their hands in the air. We notice that the restaurant's name changes from Burma Star to Burisma.

Stanko regales us with trivia. Nick stands outside, smoking his Juul. For some reason, everything we say is subtitled below us and we can see the text. Nick only reads the action captions while eating from a box of Cinnamon Toast Crunch and a bucket of smoked Maldon. He stares off into the middle distance and mutters something about airports and owls. He puts Veruca Salt on the jukebox. Grace eats a bowl of cinnamon raisin oatmeal and cries.

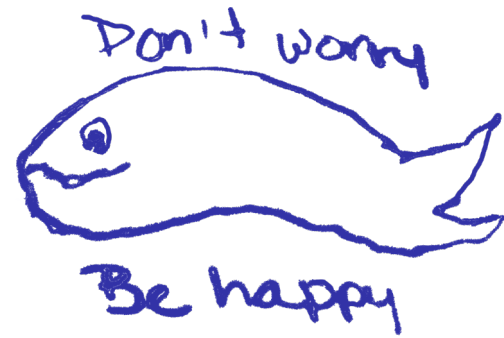
Nick's Juul is now a meth pipe. We think maybe that's why he has been so weird. When we confront him about his potential problem, he assures us that it's just an analog Juul. He pulls out a box of coarse kosher salt, pours some in the pipe, lights it, takes a deep puff, exhales, and then shouts, "A man's life of any worth is a continued allegory!"

We are on the patio of Oeste and collectively wonder if we are dreaming or if this is real life and then wonder if real life mimics dreams more than we realize. If the hyperreal exists, then this must be it. We drink salted mango Whiteclaws. A woman walks onto the roof of the building across the street and starts signing. It's Christie. Jessica plays the keyboard behind her. Whenever we turn to them, it seems the building moves closer. We all look down to see a heart beating at our feet. When we turn back, all we can see is her pupil and our bodies floating inside her eye. We look more closely and see Nick sitting on a leather chair inside a room we have never seen before. He laughs at nothing. The wood-paneled room has no doors, no windows, just velvet curtains suggesting an entrance or an exit with neither existing.

We sleep on the grass next to Lake Merritt. The way we lie looks like it could be a pattern, but it is hard to discern if there is a pattern. Birds sing a pleasant song, but they have the faces of Ric and Abigail, Eric and Sheila, Tessa and Erik. Nick plays hacky sack by himself while Tanya, blindfolded, plays with wine-drunk effigies who have Dean's face.

There's an open casket next to us. Inside it is Billy Bass singing "Bad to the Bone" but in Steve's voice. Matt and Lance row a boat while Sebastienne sits at the stern, holding a miniature parasol.

Floating on the surface of the lake, Adam's velvet blindfold.





boots/et layout by
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