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C U L T U R E

Birds in their Little Nests Agree
Orly Marella

Recent events on campus raise the question—what is diversity, anyway?

When the word “diversity” is uttered, what image springs to mind? Perhaps a school park with children of various races playing together in harmony. Or the lively PSU park blocks, where several languages can be heard on any given day. In reality, diversity is a much more complex concept to understand. Incorporating diversity into neighborhoods, the workplace or even student groups relies on an intricate web of cultures, social statuses and history. Diversity implies differences and that those with differences are working, living, learning and playing together. However, it also implies that in order to be considered different, one must be a minority.

Minority status and diversity were important subjects early this year at the annual budget hearings of the Student Fee Committee (SFC), the group that allocates student fees to groups on campus. All of the groups seeking budget approvals were sent diversity-related surveys to complete, but five members of Portland State Professional Sound (PSPS), a group that provides sound engineering services for any PSU group or event free-of-charge, were hit especially hard by the SFC’s diversity interrogation. They were called out for their lack of diversity and for not sporting enough ethnicity at the hearing—then, they were condescendingly referred to as “a bunch of white boys.” Not only does this sort of comment imply that being white immediately precludes you from having any kind of culture, but the word “boys” writes a person off as immature and irrelevant. Among those offended was PSPS member and Pathos contributor Richard Hernandez, whose presence as a Hispanic was clearly ignored.

Why was the issue of race so important at this hearing? Students left wondering if the ethnic and gender makeup of their groups would affect their budget proposals. After all, the hearing was taking place as a forum to discuss budget needs. It’s difficult to say whether diversity played a role in the approval of budgets or if this was just an information-gathering tactic. Most of the student groups had their budgets cut, so pinning the reason on lack of diversity is impossible.

So if diversity is so complicated, let’s break it down. What does it mean to be a minority? Who occupies this role and how does it affect one to hold the status of a minority? Contrary to popular belief, being a minority has nothing to do with the numbers of individuals in any one group. For example, women are considered minorities, but they outnumber men. However,
in the numbers game, there is somewhere that women fall short and that is in the realm of power and money. Simply put, minorities are any individual or group of people that do not receive an equal allotment of available resources.

Being a minority can be made obvious by simple physical appearance such as being a woman, African American, or requiring the use of a wheelchair. But there are several other minority statuses that may not be easily identified. Some people’s races may not be as apparent or racially mixed backgrounds are becoming more common, and it’s impossible to have a box for every person’s unique blend of cultural heritage, but does this mean that they should not be counted?

The categorization doesn’t end with race, either. While the SFC was concerned with race and ethnicity at the hearing, their questionnaire also addressed sexual orientation and gender. Although gender may be easy to spot physically, it isn’t always aligned with the way one identifies one’s self and, furthermore, sexual orientation is a personal matter. Perhaps not everyone who isn’t easily categorized wishes to label themselves or is willing to declare their orientation. Why should this affect the budget of the student group they belong to?

There are several types of minority statuses and each of them is underrepresented and under-funded. If the issue of diversity in student groups is one in need of examination, it should be done with sensitivity and respect and by a committee that is not directly related to the funding of groups. The meeting left many involved feeling attacked for not being diverse enough or excluded by the lack of recognition of the diversity they did have. None of this is particularly relevant at a budget hearing. Perhaps the SFC should have advised groups constructively on ways to increase diversity instead of belittling them for being too white.

The convergence of institutional racism and political correctness has made for a very confusing and insincere social climate. We expect diversity to be a hand-holding ceremony where all the colors of the world come together like a rainbow, but skin color is only one aspect of diversity. It is just the one that is most focused upon because it is the most visible. Perhaps the illusion of inclusion is enough for some. If, at first glance, an African American, Asian, Latino, and woman are seen commingling with the majority (white males), has diversity been achieved? Does presence equal power? In some instances it does, especially when it comes to voting power where the voices of all need to be heard, but in other cases imposing diversity may just as well be false unity. If it is so important that student groups need to be more diverse, we should ask ourselves why. It is definitely important if certain groups of individuals are purposefully excluded. Hernandez told me he wishes there were more minorities represented in PSPS, but that the group is what it is. However, everyone is welcome. No one is turned away. Should student groups campaign to diversify themselves? And would this lead to tokenizing the minority that do join? “Thanks for joining our group, Muhammad. Now we are finally diverse.”

Would a group campaigning for more diversity lead to tokenizing the people that sign up? —“Thanks for joining our group, Muhammad. Now we are finally diverse.”

is mixed. Sexual orientation is another factor that is not usually noticeable at first glance, neither are unapparent disabilities such as partial blindness or severe epilepsy. Another common invisible minority is that of the working or underclass. None of these minority classifications are mutually exclusive nor are their boundaries limited to one minority. One may hold the status of minority in one circumstance and majority in others. For example an affluent, able-bodied, gay white male holds the minority status of being gay, but is in the dominant majority in all other categories. The point is, one classification does not make one a part of the dominant majority. It is just one aspect of who they are.

Race and ethnicity are not synonymous. The definition of race implies blood lineage and unchangeable physical traits while ethnicity encompasses culture, language, nationality and self-identification. Ethnicity is fluid and is shaped by upbringing, society, and peers. People of mixed race are often confounded by this need to categorize everyone by race and are left out of every category unless the frequently absent “other” box is available to check. And how inclusive is the word “other” anyway? Those with
Some years ago, when I was in the nine-to-five harness of the laboring rabblement, I held down a miserable job at an automotive body shop as a dutiful grunt whose existence consisted mainly of drinking late into the night and rising maddeningly early to a restless and red-eyed morning. Stupefied and silent, I would stare into the mirror until I could imagine cracks emerging from the smooth, cool surface, and would then turn reluctantly and stagger forth unto another dirty day of muted inner frustration, amid grizzled auto-body workers and harping bourgeois customers.

I was working as a gofer in a downtown automotive body shop, and spending the greater portion of my day trying to
remain unseen by the hyper-frenetic management. If I wasn’t sweeping up the fine dust of metal shavings with an industrial broom or pounding out dents from a car body frame, I was sneaking away to the top level of the building to gain some separation from the clanging tumult, crass humor and paint fumes. From my shirker loft I was awarded a heightened view of downtown Portland, upon which I would often muse over the manic energy of the city and the seemingly go-nowhere-ness of it all. From this removed vantage point, I would usually stare off into the middle distance for an immeasurable amount of time and try not to throw myself out the window. However, it eventually occurred to me to that it might be healthier to have a book on hand to read and provide myself with some kind of sane solution to the otherwise insane realities of a perfunctory existence. Given that those moments of reprieve were often at and unexpectedly disrupted by work-related duties, I decided to forgo the post-modern liturgicals of, say, Ulysses and instead would pass those needle-head moments in the company of poetry.

It’s always befuddled me a bit why more of us don’t consume poetry like we do digi-tunes or fast food. Once you start feeding yourself a little each day, poetry becomes a kind of existential grout in all those little cracks and holes in your inner basin. Of course, there’s a lot of bad poetry out there and bad poetry is as dangerous to the health as syphilis, in that it works slowly and silently to soften the brain of the infected.

At this time, I was reading a wide variety of poetry, but the one poet that I kept straying back to and finding myself continually astonished and stirred by was a mysterious figure from the ancient Persian Parnassus known as Rumi. If you have never heard of him, don’t worry; in your media-drenched lives, you probably will sooner or later. Because whether it’s by Patti Smith, Barbara Streisand or that hook-and-crook guru to the stars Deepak Chopra, Rumi’s appropriation by American popular culture has been a rapid and rather bemusing one. Like any powerful presence on the American cultural scene that so widely appeals to a variety of individual interests, Rumi is in danger of becoming just another pseudo-spiritual icon of the cult of image and personality and, unfortunately, his poetry has proven to be a quick score for those in the business of selling “essences.” But if one can gain some remove from such an Americanized Rumi, one will find in the interval that at least these poems, translated in an earnest and open style by Coleman Barks—now a retired Professor of poetry in Tennessee—can hold an immediate and ineluctable grip. I’d never come across poetry that smoldered with such erotic and spiritual fervor. These poems felt as if they embraced the chaos of sensuality and infused it with the character of a holy dance. There was a kind of sacrament to the earthly, and a drunken, mad desire for the transcendent. It was as if the very fact of living for Rumi was itself an act of deep and abiding love, regardless of the pain that comes from living so vividly.

I spent more and more time with the poems, hoarding over them like a secret treasure that I didn’t want to share with anyone else. I studied the wisdom in the work, looking for something to lead me out of the dark isolation of my own life. But what I kept finding was a mystical kind of knowledge—akin to what one might find in the works of William Blake or St. Teresa. But this writer was more imaginatively exotic and unpredictable. I slowly began to realize that the echoing of his voice came across such a chasm of time and culture that to understand him fully would be a work unfinished.

Rumi, who, according to Powells.com, is now the most widely read poet in America, was more than just a metaphysical poet—he was also a religious scholar and lecturer who, after his death, inspired the religious movement of those wandering ascetics the whirling dervishes. He was born in 1207 near the city of Balk in what is now Afghanistan, and fled Mongol invaders to eventually relocate to the town of Konya in present-day Turkey. It was here that Rumi met a spiritual rover that would change the course of his life forever; a man named Shams of Tabriz (pronounced “Shaums”). Shams is described by Rumi as “both sun and moon,” and their spiritual friendship borders on the erotic. But it would be a simplification to homoeroticize this relationship—rather, it was through the portentousness of the other that a deeper steadfastness towards a higher reality of the divine was forged. For Rumi, Shams became the central metaphor of God’s existence in the world. And when Shams

The echo of his voice came across a chasm of time and culture; to understand him fully would be a work unfinished.
was mysteriously murdered, possibly out of jealousy by one of Rumi’s sons, the intensity of separation and longing associated with the loss of the divine incarnate set Rumi’s imagination on fire. You must understand that before Rumi met Shams, he was a fairly strait laced academic, abiding the sectarian rules of religious authority. But I guess you could say that when Shams rolled into town, the first act of liberation he performed was turning Rumi out—spiritually speaking, of course.

In a similar fashion, that is what Coleman Barks has been accused of by his critics who are legion among followers of the classical 20th century scholars of Persian philology and ‘Oriental Studies’. The authoritative scholars of Rumi hearken back to the last decade of the 19th century in which the preeminent Cambridge don R.A. Nicholson translated Rumi into annotated eight volumes of exhaustive research. I’ve never read any of these particular translations, and I doubt Deepak has either, but I have read a lion’s share of the translations by a scholar whose work in Rumi owes much to Nicholson and came a generation later in the form of the British scholar A.J. Arberry. Arberry virtually owned the market on Rumi for most of the 20th century. It’s no surprise, then, that many in the business of keeping their authoritative academic lockdown on the Rumi market rankle when they read the natural intimacy of Barks’s American vernacular transforming the identity of the ancient Persian poet who for so long was in the custodianship of the classicists.

Another intriguing aspect of this story is the reception of Rumi’s sudden popularity here in the West among Eastern religious authorities. Part of the mystical movement of Islam that Rumi helped spearhead has been criticized for placing too much of an emphasis on an unconditional submission to fate, destiny and the will of God. Immersion in the irrational and belief that the laws of God held a higher position than those of man have been cited by a sizable number of Iranian intellectuals and activists as symptoms of a tradition of religious intolerance in the Middle East and throughout the world. What is sometimes referred to as the culture of inquisition sprang from the time of Rumi and continues today. These are important historical insights to keep in mind when reading the romanticized, 21st century Rumi.

It can also be claimed that Barks in some ways stuck his head out over the parapet for these cream-pies by constructing his own myths about his mystical calling to the work of translating Rumi, weaving entertaining stories of traveling space and time in dream landscapes to be blessedly anointed by mystical presences to the Holy Joe position of liberating these poems of Rumi too long caged by the steel bars of British erudition. It is also interesting to note that Barks stated his central aim was to work only with the translated text, firstly because he does not read or speak Persian, and secondly because too strong of an emphasis on the historical or cultural context would obscure Rumi’s wild and generous spirit to a foreign audience.

How many lives can one man live? Probably only one; but his work may remain infinite, a timeless battleground for the politics of culture and feeling. Rumi may not be living a new life, but his work has been renewed and he has a new identity of sorts for a new world of listeners and readers. A few of which turned out to be those unlikely rubes back at the body shop I spoke of earlier. After a few months of unsuccessful hiding I was found out by my steel mashing cohorts to be a poetry-lovin’ sissy boy. They let me off the hook pretty easy after a few weeks, and to my surprise one day I was approached by the ringleader of the shop inquiring about where the location of “that book by Rummy” was. (Remember, dear reader: the name is pronounced “Roomy.”) It was his lunchtime and he wanted to read some more of the poems in the break room.

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**A Rumi Glossary**

Some terms pertaining to his life and work

- **ghazal** — a Persian poetic form, usually an ode to unattainable love, used to express the sorrow of separation
- **sohbet** — spiritual conversation; teachings passed down from teacher to student through storytelling
- **sema** — the use of song and dance to get closer to God, used by, among others, the Mevlevi order founded by Rumi
- **ruba’i** — a Persian quatrain, with an AABA AAAA rhyme scheme. Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” is in this form. A collection of such quatrains is called a ruba’iyat.
June 17, 7:30 p.m  
Powells, 1005 W Burnside  
**Norman Ollestad** reads from his autobiographical work *Crazy for the Storm* about growing up in Malibu and Mexico in the late 1970s.

June 17, 6:30 p.m  
Rontoms, 600 E Burnside  
**Think & Drink**: An open discussion of morality and self-deception, led by writer Ursula K. Le Guin and OSU philosophy professor Lani Roberts. Think & Drink is a bimonthly discussion series sponsored by the Oregon Council for Humanities.

June 24, July 22, August 26, 7:00 p.m  
Northwest Library, 2300 NW Thurman  
**Verse in Person**: Oregon poets read from their work at this monthly event.

July 1  
Deadline  
**2009 Happy Hour Poetry Awards**: See alehousepress.com for details.

July 12-18  
Cerf Amphitheater, Reed College  
**Tin House Writers Workshop**: This year's Summer Writers Workshop features multiple seminars, readings and panel discussions. Seminars are $15, readings $5. See TinHouse.com for more details.

August 1  
Deadline  
**Moonrise Press** is looking for poetry about Frederic Chopin in honor of the 200th anniversary of his birth. See moonrisepress.com for details.

August 31  
Deadline  
**River Poets Journal's Jukebox**: Junction USA is looking for poems inspired by American songs. See riverpoetsjournal.com for details.

September 23, 7:30 p.m.  
Buckley Center 163, University of Portland  
**B.T. Shaw** is the poetry editor of The Oregonian and teaches creative writing at PSU and the University of Portland. She will be reading her poetry and answering questions.

September 24, 7:30 p.m.  
Arlene Schnitzer Concert Hall  
**Wally Lamb**, author of novels *She's Come Undone* and *I Know This Much is True* will be reading from his new work. See literary-arts.org for details.
Two years after the release of her much-lauded debut novel, Monica Drake turns her focus to new outlets and muses on her writing history.

How long have you lived in Portland?
I’ve lived in Oregon off and on since I was born, and have always had relatives in Portland as well as other areas of Oregon, so I visited even when I wasn’t actually living here.

How long did it take you to write Clown Girl?
I spent ten years working on Clown Girl, learning how to write a novel. I wrote it three different ways and each round took about three years. It was a huge learning curve. Before that, I’d been writing short stories, which is a different form altogether.

How so?
Short stories are all about compression and what Poe called the single effect. They’re often character-driven. A novel requires a stronger sense of overall plot to propel a sustained narrative. There’s a difference sense about which moments to unpack, and when to clip along.

Graduate school, in my experience, is most often oriented toward workshopping short stories which can be read and discussed as complete units within a short time frame. After graduate school I wanted to write a novel and in many ways then started again, learning a new form.
What do you feel you got out of your MFA program? I read an interview with Francine Prose where she says that, basically, teaching writing has shown her that MFA programs are superfluous and you either have it or you don’t. Do you agree?

I went to grad school in Tuscon, at the University of Arizona, where I studied with Joy Williams, Dagoberto Gilb, Elizabeth Evans, Beth Alvarado, Dick Sheldon and other writers. I chose Tuscon in part because it was a three-year, rather than a two-year, program, and I imagined the extra year would give me more time to get publishable writing done. Looking back, I realize I needed more than one extra year! Graduate school was a mixed experience. I really learned how to teach there. I worked closely with academics and theorists who pioneered ideas within student-centered teaching models, and I believe I came away with a lot to offer my students.

Workshop, on the other hand, may have given me less to work with. I’m in a top-notch writing group in Portland, and really a grad school writing workshop just couldn’t compete, so maybe it’s not a fair comparison. I do think that many aspects of writing can be taught, though. Graduate school expanded my reading range and brought me in on conversations I might not have had otherwise. I met terrific writers and am still in touch with most of them.

Writing is a long, ongoing written conversation. Grad school was a chance to bring aspects of that into my immediate life, into real conversations with working writers. I appreciated that tremendously. There’s a book called The Portable MFA which claims to offer everything a creative writing program can offer, and for the most part that’s probably true. Still, the most important aspect of grad school is really the community, the one element which can’t be packaged in a how-to book.

Did you always want to be a writer? Were you always a writer?

I’m not one of those people who can easily say “I always wanted to be a writer.” I know my mother, a poet, says that of herself. Friends, like Cheryl Strayed, an essayist and novelist, also makes the claim. I had no idea what I wanted to be when I was young, but I was in love with the science of swamp life and I liked to make things out of anything—walnuts, sawdust, scraps of fabric, colored tape. I read a lot and made up stories and was obsessed with drawing and thinking about how people ever know what to say to each other. How do people manage the constant improvisation of conversation, one sentence falling after another?

I could’ve studied Wittgenstein as easily as literature. In college I studied painting and art history. I still wish at times I’d kept painting. I went to the Portland Art Museum today and saw work by Michael Brophy, Lennie Pitkin, William Givler, Phyllis Yes, Paul Missal—all those long-time and old time Portlanders, and the paintings were so lush and dreamy, it was heaven.

I took a few writing classes at PSU as an undergraduate, and at the same time studied painting and art history. After I graduated, I met Tom Spanbauer, and became his first writing student when he started up a private workshop out of his home. I met Chuck Palahniuk in that workshop, when the group was really small, just a handful of us. Meeting Chuck was a fantastic thing. He laughed at all the right places in my work. That’s what it took for me to keep going—one person who enjoyed what I was doing. Writing is really all about audience. For anyone who wants to write, I’d say find a workshop and put your stories out there, learn to work with an audience. It can be nerve wracking to read work out loud to a group, but it’s so helpful.

What kinds of things are you drawn to in literature? Who are your favorite authors?

I like interesting work that seems real in its own way, though not necessarily always operating as realism. I get a kick out of George Saunders, who uses a crazy voice and wild comedy to raise moral questions, and questions about how we live.

I love the work of Joy Williams. I like characters who say surprising things, who have their own world view, in a narrative that brings me into that world.

Do you think there’s such a thing as “Northwest literature” or a Northwest vibe in writing?

I don’t know if the Northwest has a particular style going on, but I do think a writer from this area often has to speak a little more loudly on the page to catch the attention of New York publishing houses. Chuck Palahniuk did that with Fight Club, and Katherine Dunn did it with Geek Love. They wrote books that were so well-crafted while also being far flung; they convinced publishing houses to take a gamble.

What are you working on now?

I spent the past year working on a screenplay and learning the screenplay form. Now that is done and ready to market. I’m a hundred pages in on a new novel, and I like it so far.

Monica Drake teaches at the Pacific Northwest College of Art and this term taught Intro to Fiction Writing at PSU. Her novel, Clown Girl, is available from Hawthorne Books.
The Story of the Guyses

David McGarry

THERE WERE THESE FOUR GUYS ON that with big penises. They knew that everything was stupid. Sometimes they would get drunk. But by day it was all joking aside and they focused really hard on fish that they would sell in the best fish market in Portland. Sometimes they would give each other high fives without even looking at each other. They all played rock music. And that was no time to joke. “There is no reason to constantly joke,” these guys were often heard to remark. “A joke is only as good as it is funny.” These guys, they were more or less the finest people in the world. Lots of their customers were from Italy, Beijing, Chile, and they would come in and say “I’ve seen a lot of stuff in my life but I see that you’ve seen more,” which they hadn’t but they still thanked the customers and told them, “Look, don’t get too sloppy; I might have to make a meatball sandwich out of your undergarments.” By which the customer was always amazed. “You bet I can do that” was such a positive response that the customers were often surprised to find that buying fish was a relatively fun experience. They would always say: “You bet I can do that... on that.” And then the customer would say “On what?” and they’d say “On this,” which was true. But the customers had their heads far into their bottoms sometimes and they’d pester: “I bet you can do what though on this?” And the guys would simply say “That.” Sometimes a guy would come in after a really exciting party the night before and one of the guys would say: “You must want to eat a gun, what with the quantity of booze you consumed last night dude on that.” And then the other guy would say “Yeah, I’m pretty hung over, but that doesn’t mean I’m not going to do a good job today.” Then they would just be quiet for a minute and let the words float away like smoke. These guys were so tired of not giving a fucking shit about it that they would get pissed sometimes. Natives swore that when one of the guys got pissed, power would go out in certain neighborhoods and one guy said you could watch stars explode. That guy later exploded, allegedly from a dangerous amount of cocaine ingested, but some people think that maybe he was trying to learn the power of exploding stars and accidentally misdirected his fury on himself. Whoops.

One day, after years of following the code of the samurai in seafood on that, one of the guys said that he was tired of being so cool, and so he wrote a book entitled What I Did On That. Some people thought it was kind of a predictable title. In the book he stated that they weren’t really “that cool.” People didn’t know how to deal with it because it just seemed really weird. He said that a lot what being a “guy” was was just being at a fairly transitional period in your life, looking for a bit of a good time without too much stress and maybe even making some friends and saying “on that” a lot. He said that, really, the sensei, Randy Ray Wall, was the heart of the group, because they all knew that somehow they were like him and that he was dying of a broken heart. Most of the other guys said that it was true. After having not seen each other for fifteen years, some of these guys got each other together to have a beer. None of the guys knew what to say to each other. They all entered the room at exactly the same time and walked in from all four opposite corners and they walked to each other until they were very close to one another and they grunted a little and the two seniorest guys looked each other in the eye like cowboys in a draw and they could tell that they had loved and lost and lived whatever in between and hells upon hells had burned right on top of their hearts and minds and they knew that this was mutual, perhaps something that should be held sacred; they knew that neither one of them liked themselves but they liked to be around the other person. They knew that it was hard...

But they weren’t dead as the sun still rose every morning.
Blaster, Amber Smith
Poetry

Foie Gras with a Married Lover

Kirsten Larson

Captured
In the dictionary,
Between butter
And gravy,
Between candy
And savory,
I was served a terrine of it,
Accompanied by you,
A few thinly sliced
Pieces of toasted bread,
And quince paste. Ordered
Accidentally, of course,
Because the goose was stuffed
French style,
Manually,
Beyond kindness.
Downright
Abuse.
There are people somewhere
Protesting
This very practice,
While I enjoy what is
Melting on my tongue.
CALL ME ELIJAH. SOME MINUTES AGO, nevermind how long exactly because I have no concept of time, I staggered into a barren dwelling, hoping to find nothing but empty space and some pliant surface on which to rest my ragged head. I had been traveling for some time and I wished simply to collapse somewhere where I wouldn’t be violated.

The skeletal whale’s mouth which prefigured the shelter ominously forebode certain domestic horrors. However, to my unpleasant surprise, in addition to the rust and filth that I expected, I found also a fully functioning barroom. Though at first disconsolate, I quickly regained temper when I discovered that the primary reason for the gathering of mottled seamen was a feast of sumptuous chowder. The prospect of chowder filled me with a chaotic maelstrom of feelings. First, because I love chowder and lack the strength to pass it up under any circumstances, however disadvantageous those circumstances may be to the project of eating chowder (which is a more delicate and sensitive, and therefore more arduous project for me than it is for another man who can eat chowder or not eat chowder according to his moment’s whim). Secondly, because my chowder eating habits have already won me the dubious notoriety of chowder-headdom, a status whose title was both conceived and coined by a certain unsavory sea captain in an unflattering reference to my rapacious chowder eating spectacle. And thirdly, and perhaps most significantly, I lacked the funds necessary to acquire even a taste of chowder.

I commenced a scan of the den’s murky interior in the hope that I might vantage a friendly face, the kind of friendly face that seemed to say, “Hey, hi there. Why don’t you sit down here and gorge yourself on chowder, you clearly deserve it.” To my considerable dismay I found no such face. In fact, all I found were faces that not only seemed to, but actually did say things like, “Keep moving unless you want me to spill your guts right here on the floor,” or “Remove your eyes from my chowder region, as I haven’t killed a man in a week and my axin’ arm is considerable itchy.” I was despondent and on the verge of skulking off to find a nice alley in which to die quietly when I spied a most unusual pair of travelers.

The first and most obvious was a gargantuan cannibal, covered in tattoos and hefting a harpoon clearly designed for capturing prey the size of a god. The second was a fellow who, though white and clad in the normal gear, was no less queer than the first. The thing about the second man that struck me was the rodent-like anxiety which gave color to all of his movements. He gave the impression he might at any moment climb clear out of his skin and go spinning around the room like a Tasmanian devil whose fearsome claws and fangs had been replaced with the winsome characteristics of a startled ferret.

The matter of the two companions both gave me hope and filled me with uncertainty: Hope for a couple three servings of steaming hot chowder, and uncertainty over what course of action to take. I had at my advantage the fact that I was unknown to these men, and that they were therefore ignorant of my chowder swindling reputation. In fact, I was unknown to nearly all in the area, as I had recently been forced to relocate due to circumstances on which I don’t wish to elaborate. The smaller, less cannibal-ish of the two seemed the clear agent from whom to enlist chowder, owing mostly to that very uncannibal-ish quality to his character which I have just previously noted. But after watching the two for a short while, a complication arose, namely that it was the cannibal who was apparently in charge of the finances.
has always been apparent to me that the man who speaks is also the man in charge of the money.

It was originally my desire to exploit any brief severance of the two and therefore gain unmitigated access to the cagey fellow, and then between he and his currency affect a separation. The fact that it was the cannibal who held the coins made things impossibly difficult, as I find it unnerving and undesirable to conduct business with people who have designs on consuming my flesh.

Sunk in the mire of my thoughts I almost didn’t notice when a rough, beefy fellow apparently in the establishment’s employ decided that my presence was not only unprofitable, but even destructive to the appetites of paying clientele. The man expressed himself by throwing me on my head in the street where I was nearly run over by a parade of whalers just come ashore.

The barman’s exercise on me was substantial, but not, in my opinion, decisive. My will to succeed was only fomented, and the chowder was perhaps the best I had ever smelled. I was just going to have to rethink my strategy. In the meantime I consoled myself with the thought that even though the cannibal retained exclusive ownership of the purse, it was reasonable to assume the smaller one must have a few coins, at least. And the two men would have to part ways at some point; it wasn’t as if they slept in the same bed.

After spending a restless night prowling the streets and alleys, watching windows, I discovered that the two men did indeed share a bed. Who knows what kind of witchcraft they perpetrated within those walls. Most unusual fellows!

By the time the sun peeked bloodshot eyes over the Western world, I decided I was starving to death. I was afraid of returning to the whalers’ tavern lest I suffer a recurrence of my previous negative experience with the barman. I decided to haunt the harbor, optimistic I might divine to what ship my anonymous benefactors belonged.

The truth is that by this point the men were an obsession with me.

I perched myself upon a pile of old rope and waited, pulling some filth over myself for warmth. Before too long my assets appeared, happy and well fed. I would have attacked them then and there if my arms weren’t tangled up in that rancid, decomposing rope.

I decided I would follow their movements and then attempt to enlist with whichever whaler they were themselves obliged. An ominous haze had settled over the shifting waters, the vessels slapping and rocking in the dark. I followed as the men passed the choicest vessels, the ones most known for their cuisine. It was only after most of the more accommodating whalers had been rejected by the gruesome pair that I realized where they were going. They were headed for the loathed Pequod.

Aside from the paltry excuse for food offered on this particular tub, there was the horrible fact that Captain Ahab was set to officer the subsequent voyage.

If I tell you something, you have to promise not to repeat it. It was I who took Ahab’s leg, despite whatever tales have spread over the eastern seaboard and indeed among whalers the world over. It happened one ill-fated voyage some time ago (again, I’m not sure how long, having no sense of time). Ahab was fiercely and absurdly engaged with a diminutive white fish when I wagered a bet with another ship-hand over who could throw a harpoon the farthest. I was still drunk from the previous night and I wasn’t paying attention to what I was about. The harpoon went wildly astray, taking the leg off clean. Ahab got it into his head somehow (with some assistance from old Elijah) that the whale had taken the leg, which suited both of us fine.

“Shrimates, have ye shipped in that ship?” I asked, pointing at the creaking hull when I finally overtook the two bosom friends, which was no small feat considering my weakness and my smallpox. The smaller fellow looked at me dubiously while the cannibal merely cressed some piece of scrimshaw to which he was apparently quite close. In addition to earning a meal I sincerely wanted to warn the two about Ahab and his illusory obsession with the white fish, but almost immediately I launched into my whole rigmarole about souls and whether or not they had any. I knew quite soon that I had lost them. I’m ever at pains to avoid talking mysteriously, as it seems to turn people off quite a great deal. But the damage was already done. After asking a few more meaningless questions about their plans the pair quickly quit my presence.

I was only able to track them down once more, but they were too fast and I couldn’t catch up. By the time I made the dock, the Pequod had sailed, leaving me friendless, penniless, chowderless. I sat down on the rotted planks and wept.

While I was busy crying I was approached by a handsome gentleman traveling with a pretty lady, or at least they seemed handsome and pretty through my veil of tears.

“Don’t cry,” the girl said, stroking my shoulder. “My name is Isabel. This is my brother, Pierre. You look hungry and tired. We don’t have much, but we will share what we do have, even if your smallpox is rather unbecoming.”

I looked up at the two faces and thought I saw heaven itself. I allowed myself to be hoisted with some effort by the young gentleman.

“Do you like chowder?” I asked. “I know a place nearby.”

As I led my new friends along the harbor, I looked out to sea. The weathered yellow sails of the Pequod stood out like bright phantoms in the dissipating vapor.
Sisu
Kirsten Larson

Roughly meaning to have guts; Used by my mom in reference To my grandmother,

Who, angry at my absent Drunken grandfather Refused to milk the cows

He so badly wanted, On the farm she So badly hated.

My Mother, that winter night, Void of childhood dreams Lay with hands over ears

As the cows screamed and screamed and screamed, Their udder sacs bursting, While Gramma cleaned.

The next day, Grandpa, Sensitive failure, Cried over the Inconceivable suffering.
LET ME START BY SAYING THAT YOUR resume reads marvelously. The passion in your prose strikes me to the heart. For example, when you say that your career objective is to “find a home within a family of a healthy and productive atmosphere,” I can scarcely find the words to describe the feelings. How you must have suffered. I can only imagine the years of torment and abuse you must have undergone to cause you to seek such sanctuary and to render poetry to that effect.

I can’t help but notice there is little here addressing the details of your past experience, and there seem to be several gaps in your employment history. Could you explain that? I’m sure you’d have me believe that javelins of tragedy have struck you repeatedly, even as you lie helpless, rendering you incapable of gainful employment.

Let’s talk about your references. I can’t help but notice that you have my name here. Clever boy, using your father’s name to get ahead. Weak-spirited, perhaps, but clever. What else could be expected, of course, of a poor urchin such as yourself? It’s a marvel you have existed as well as you have, given as you were no advantages whatsoever, and very little food. Even now you have a hungry, mystified look about you, as if you would climb across this very desk and take me by the throat for a mere crust of bread.

I just so happen to have a crust of bread here. Ah, yes—there is the look I know so well.

While you’re enjoying that bread, why don’t you tell me about your strengths? Why do you deserve to become a member of this family? Aside from blood relation and whatnot. It says here that you claim to possess an indomitable work ethic and are willing to go the extra mile. That is pretty language, to be sure, though I have to question its authenticity. Don’t forget, I’ve watched the evil you’ve done to the lawn for years, not to mention the chaos you’ve made of the woodshed. Don’t you remember me explaining to you how to properly stack the wood? And don’t tell me about being too cold to stack wood. Anyone would be cold if they weren’t allowed a jacket; there’s nothing special about that.

And don’t even get me started on that roofing project you never got around to finishing; it’s a miracle we haven’t all drowned in our beds.

If I were to offer you a position, I would need to have utter confidence in your ability to carry out any tasks I lay before you, and I’ve got to tell you, that’s not what I’ve been seeing these last ten years. What I’ve seen is a spineless weakling who cries for its mother. What kind of impression does that leave? Crying for a mother who isn’t even there? Like I said, you’ve had these ten years to get yourself in order—ten years—and I just haven’t seen the effort I was hoping for. I would advise you to start impressing me if...
you don’t wish to find yourself on the streets.

I wish you would stop staring at my pistol; that’s not why I keep it on my desk.

What’s the matter? What am I meant to understand from those violent gestures? Was the bread too dry? Do you need perhaps some water to wash it down? I suppose that’s my fault. It seems I’ve been spoiling you, Well, that’s all over now; for your own sake. You won’t be getting an ounce of water from me. And don’t try getting it someplace else either, because I’ll know, and I’m going to let everyone know ahead of time not to give you any.

Let’s move on. It says here that you’ve completed your education through the third grade. Well, we both know what a liar you are, don’t we? How about a little proof? Here, solve this long division problem; we’ll see how smart you are with no mother to help you. Speaking of your mother, I think it’s time you stopped mentioning her all together. Pining for the past like that, it only spreads weakness through the body and mind like a pestilence. I myself haven’t thought of your mother for several minutes, and look at me. That’s strength for you, son. That’s the kind of strength you’re going to need to make it through the waking nightmare that is life.

Seriously, don’t stare at my pistol.

Well, if we aren’t going to discuss this like adults—like gentlemen—then I don’t even know why I let you in the house. You’d think that a little appreciation would be in order. After all, I’m the one who lets you sleep in the yard year-round. That’s every kid’s dream! When I was your age, I was dying of boredom at school and at the many functions that were organized specifically to showcase my various talents. You have no idea how lucky you are not to even have any talents! And you indulge yourself! That’s no way to live, even for a small child. You must keep from yourself that which you desire. As soon as you find yourself desiring something, you must immediately set about destroying it in your heart. That way, you will never lose. Are you even listening?

I see the way you’re looking at me. Do you think I’m enjoying this steak? Do you think that I enjoy eating a steak while you gnaw on your bread? Of course not! I loathe this steak, which happens to be from the finest Kobe stock to be found in the world! And I couldn’t help but notice that you aren’t enjoying your bread especially either, which makes us the same after all! Don’t you see?

Ed Makes a Roast Beef Sandwich, We Watch Daytime TV

Chris Cottrell

1. Open an old door by turning the brass handle clockwise.
2. Remark on the fixtures, plum lines and waxed wood.
3. Nod in agreement—sure, things aren’t like old times.
4. Kids these days don’t know quality like they should.
5. It’s the kids, the damn spoilt kids and foreigners.
6. This is the trajectory of nostalgia, and the gut-twist.
7. The talk, incessant talk, it’s not enough to just work.
8. A window needs fitting, baseboards to lay, concrete to mix.
9. Talk about bicyclists. Don’t mention one in the closet.
10. Break for lunch?—Insist not ready to eat, yet.
11. Or ever. Roaches on the cutting board, watching TV.
12. They eat yesterday’s leftovers: tomatoes and meat.
13. The worst about work is knowing there’s always a boss.
14. Some asshole above. What floats is the dross.
Floating World, Ruji Chapnik
Is it not for us to confess that in our civilized attitude toward death we are once more living psychologically beyond our means, and must reform and give the truth its due?
—Sigmund Freud

God help you when you become the parent of your parent. God didn’t help me, but I didn’t ask until later. Until after I became her parent and then her child.

I’d been there for all of my mom’s six pneumo-thorax punctures, which had taken place over the last two months of her illness. Responsibly, I showed up for the seventh with my jaw clam-shell tight.

The puncture is a procedure meant to alleviate fluid in the lungs; a common condition in cancer patients. It involves two doctors, one of whom pushes a thick, five-inch-long needle in between the ribs, varying the location each time, guided by ultrasound, through the tough membrane and muscle, into the sac between the thorax and lungs. The needle is attached to a vacuum-sealed jar. When it’s done, it looks like a jug of iced tea. I think about eating the tough meat attached to pork or beef ribs; we are all animals ultimately.

She cries and mangles my hands, but they drug her up and numb the site. She cries out again at the pop sound the needle makes as it breaks through her bark, into her trunk. I let her squeeze until it numbs the blood out of my hands; hers are cold and sweaty. After the needlework, when the jar is doing its trick, she relaxes and lets me go. Breathing is easier then; a relief for both of us.

It surprised me to learn that the actual cancer doesn’t kill most people; it’s what it does to screw up the other unsuspecting and unaffected organs, innocent organs. She has ovarian cancer but her lungs are drowning. They are riding further and further out to sea.

I feel like crying, too, with fear and repulsion, but think I am holding up well. I think I am being the strong one. I am here for support, but I’d like a mother; the one I’d never had. Her priorities when I was a child were scotch, men, and work. Our father was gone and she left, too, in that way. I wasn’t raised; I drifted. My anger and indifference through the years assured continued distance.

Two years ago, she was forced to move to Oregon and live with me and my family. She didn’t want to do it, but she’d shrunk to almost 100 pounds there in her Victorian house in Michigan. She didn’t care for herself. From Oregon, I tried to arrange Meals on Wheels and a cleaning service, but she was wasting away. Before that, we often went years without speaking—it was just easier that way.

Two years ago, she was forced to move to Oregon and live with me and my family. She didn’t want to do it, but she’d shrunk to almost 100 pounds there in her Victorian house in Michigan. She didn’t care for herself. From Oregon, I tried to arrange Meals on Wheels and a cleaning service, but she was wasting away. Before that, we often went years without speaking—it was just easier that way.

Even the new part of the hospital smells like the syrupy germ-killing hand soap that’s loaded up in every room; it’s sweet with an edge.

But we are Finnish and we have “Sisu,” a word with no English equivalent, meaning roughly to have courage, fortitude, stamina and determination in the face of adversity—or, to have guts, as my mother used to say.

My take? Stubborn. A family gifted in the overuse of alcohol
in order to avoid any interaction which may lead to outward signs of emotion. Myself included, but only when it came to my family of origin—which was one reason I moved 2,000 miles away. In Oregon, I feel free.

The punctures are becoming necessary more and more often. The last one was four days prior; her lips were blue when I picked her up.

It scares her, which makes me steely strong, business-like. I am matter-of-fact and bustling over her oxygen tubing, careful not to crush it in the car door, potentially killing her on the way to OHSU. I think about pulling over to administer CPR and wonder if that would null the advanced directive. If she were the strong one, I’d crumble. No matter; we’re always on opposing sides. Maybe I will sidestep one, I’d crumble. No matter; we’re always

No matter how logical I am, hope sneaks in. Somehow, these last two years she has become the mother I wanted and I became the daughter she’s needed. I’ve come to appreciate the daily calls left on my voicemail. “Hi, honey. It’s Mom,” (who else would it be?), “just thinking about you. Can I do something for dinner?”

I like to prepare dinner with her there, talking with me about the mundane, like I imagine normal mothers and daughters do. She takes my side in every family fight, even when I am wrong. I quietly love this love.

Two weeks earlier, she was struggling to breathe, raspy, wheezing, audibly pulling air with each breath. She was lying a bit upright in her chair, trying to relax, sweat on her forehead. I’d given her some liquid Atavan to help with the panic, even though it was likely to cause her to struggle harder for air. Fear of death, I’ve come to learn, is worse than dying.

“Would you want me to help you die, I mean, if it maybe got to that some day? It’s legal, here, anyway.” I don’t know what made me bring it up.

“I wouldn’t want you to live with that the rest of your life.” I was relieved her eyes stayed closed because I almost started to cry. My head hurt and my throat was tight. I was crushed with a wave of pity or compassion or love, looking at her thin body, the wispy hair on her bald head and her swollen ankles. I had to look away from her suffering in order to collect myself.

And then she gave me this gift, she said, “I feel like I’ve been a good mother these last two years.”

Cancer taught me a new language. It’s the language of test results, blood levels, lung capacity, a succession of chemotherapy drugs, ending in -platin, normally I drop her off and pick her up some hours later. Today, the puncture and treatment coincide, so here I am, feeling like maybe there’s not a lot left in me today. She, however, is positively perky, showing me that she knows where to go and is taking the lead.

Cancer is about losing things. First she lost the easy things: her hair, lunch, weight. Then things got tougher; she lost bladder and bowel control, her house, stamina, breath, and sense. That’s how it progresses. We reversed and suddenly I was her mother and she disliked me for it, snapped at me when she didn’t need me.

We make our way through the maze that is OHSU. I’m feeling lost. We leave the morgue-like old hospital, site of the lung wing, our shoes squeaking on the polished tile floor, toward the new, gleaming glass, bamboo wood, and muted carpet end of the building. The newness, I suppose, might inspire hope in cancer patients. I’ve met a lot of people with cancer lately, mostly in my mom’s support group. They all have a wicked sense of morbid humor, and they laugh overly loud when they get together.

The chemo room, as she calls it, is a huge arc. The inside of the arc is the nurse’s station, like the brig of the USS Enterprise.

The chemo room, as she calls it, is a huge arc. The inside of the arc is the nurse’s station, like the brig of the USS Enterprise. There are new-looking chemotherapy set-ups, leather recliner chairs, wooden trays, and IV stands arranged against the semi-circle of a huge wall of glass. I take in the view, which fully spans Portland and beyond.

Mount Hood looks close enough to touch. It’s by far the best view I’ve seen from any spot in Portland. “Breathtaking” is the stupid cliché that pops into my mind. In the past, her frequent comments about Mount Hood like, “Isn’t the mountain pretty today!” elicited an eye-roll from me. It’s the same fucking mountain that’s always been there. I didn’t know
She plops herself in the end chair, with an even more stunning corner view. Her bony fingers expertly move tubes and carts and trays to suit. She shows off for me, this I know, and it confuses me that I feel angry. I don’t want her to be so comfortable with this.

It’s very quiet here. All around, there are thin ashen-colored people being infused with milky, orange, and clear liquids. A few seats down, a wizened child is hooked to a bag of what looks like blood. He catches me staring, but his eyes accept my faux pas with no apparent judgment.

Most of the patients are lying with their eyes closed, but a few wave at my mom. I look away, but they ignore me anyway. There are carts of snacks pushed by young volunteers, “in case you are nauseated,” she confides in me, as if this is a fucking dim sum restaurant. She picks out some graham crackers, a Snickers bar and hot chocolate and then changes her mind and grabs a ginger ale, too. The volunteer is about 17 and looks bored and impatient, which my mother completely ignores while she greedily hoards sugary snacks off of the cart.

I want to remind her that she’s diabetic, but it’s useless. I don’t buy sweet junk for her at home; however, she talks my son into buying her bowl after bowl of ice cream. Now, she is flagrantly trying to piss me off without saying a word.

I hate the smell of the place. Even the new part of the hospital smells like the syrupy germ-killing hand soap that’s loaded up in every room; it’s sweet with an edge. It lingers on my hands even after I wash them at home. I am resentful and the muscles in my stomach ache because of it.

An over-friendly nurse, a woman about my age, brings the poison-in-a-bag and kids with her. “Hi, Susan. How are you tuh-day? I love that hat.” The word “hat” contains three distinct notes.

“Do you?” she beams at this woman and touches the material; tears and smart remarks are reserved for me, apparently. “I thought it might be a bit much, but I deserve it,” my mother answers. Now I need a ginger ale.

The thing is shaped like a turban with purple and pink flowers swirled throughout with a green vine. I am left out of this love fest and know that I am scowling and hate myself like I did when I was 13 and didn’t understand why or what I was suddenly feeling. It’s a profound and uncomfortable confusion.

I’m looking at my shoes. Two other short, chubby nurses come over to greet her so loudly I think maybe we stumbled into the Auditory Institute instead of Oncology and want to ask them if that’s the case. There is general squealing and halloos all around. No one looks at me. Me—the one who has really done all of the work.

After they push the needle into the open port implanted in the vein under her left collar bone, they walk away. I pick up an O Magazine from the fanned-out stack next to her.

Often, I leave work early and my mom and I watch Dr. Phil and then Oprah. I can feel my brain shrinking each afternoon, but the brainlessness lulls me. I have been unable to read, to concentrate on anything, for months now.

During the shows, we pick apart the guests, but leave Oprah alone. The title on the magazine reads “You are Responsible for your own Orgasms.” This intrigues me. Oprah never discusses things like this on her show. I read the highlights, which I instantly forget—who has time, anyway?—and then notice that my mom is sleeping. I know this may take maybe another hour, so I decide to maze my way to the cafeteria and get a Diet Coke.

I just start to push out of the chair when she says quietly, “I can’t believe I’m dying.” For a second, I can’t breathe.

Save it for the nurses, I think; the nurses who have again, from across the room, broken the silence with loud greetings for a new patient/victim. Give them this load.

I wonder what I am supposed to say and as quick as a lit match I start to cry. Really cry. An out-of-control cry. I manage to stand up and say, “We’re all dying.” She sighs and turns her head to look out of the window, toward Mount Hood.

During the shows, we pick apart the guests, but leave Oprah alone.
I had been living in the Al-Majid Hotel on a discounted rate. Bayan, the manager, had promised me a place to stay but there were complications. The night I arrived in Damascus, he took me to the apartment I had reserved with him through email months earlier. There was a tense conversation with the lady still living in it, a middle aged woman from Germany, hair frazzled, and eyes wild. Bayan told her that he lease was up, and presented me, her suitable replacement. She glanced at me and I quickly averted my gaze, directing it through a broken window, into the night and the street below teeming with nightlife. “I can’t help but get the feeling you’re trying to intimidate me, Bayan,” she said just before closing the door.

I got Hadi’s number from Valentia, a girl from Barcelona, two weeks after my arrival. She recommended I call him because he speaks English. Great. She could already tell my Arabic was shit. Hadi was what the locals called a real estate agent, that is, he knew people that knew people that has extra rooms, downtown flats and abandoned apartments on the outskirts for rent. Like everyone else I met in Syria, he worked through a lifetime’s worth of connections. His actual day to day consisted of taking people to see prospective apartments, filling out paperwork, but mostly sitting in his office playing Command and Conquer. His office was a small room with a connected bathroom that was quite literally a hole in the wall with a curtain covering it. There were shelves festooned with gold-plated plaques displaying Quranic verses and national mottos. There
was the mandatory picture of Bashar al-Assad. And there were the Iraqis.

It was 2007, and Damascus was still feeling the effects of the Iraq war. Every park or field I passed by was populated with Iraqis waiting to be picked up for day labor jobs. At the time, there were over 1.5 million Iraqi refugees living in Syria, displaced by the invasion and subsequent violence. 30,000 more arrived each month. There were nine in Hadi’s office, and he introduced me to each one individually, making sure to mention what village in Iraq they were from as I shook their hand. As I looked into their eyes, some staring vacantly at the wall or the propaganda posters, perhaps slipping into a momentary daydream of lost lives and a lost land, I wanted to say, “Hi, I’m Sam. I’m an American. Sorry.”

Before I could, Hadi introduced me himself, saying I was a student from America. Their eyes lit up at this. They looked at one another and talked for a brief moment in hushed, gulfy tones I could not begin to understand. “Ahla wa Sahla!” they proclaimed warmly. “Oh, yes, America! Very beautiful!” A few commented. With this they stood up and focused on me, some shaking my hand a second time, others talking and laughing with each other. The youngest one ran out the door as I sat down and came back five minutes later with KFC and traditional Syrian flatbread. We ate fried chicken and drank Pepsi (“Now in Syria!”) to commemorate the simple occasion of our meeting.

Hadi and I rode a Khidmeh (a small bus that seats eight people comfortably and 10 or 12 otherwise) to an apartment he wanted to rent out to me. It was in al-Mezzez, a posh new neighborhood west of the city center, near to the University of Damascus. The apartment was on top of a five story building infested with satellite dishes, across from an abandoned construction pit and down the street from a Labor Ministry office, buzzing with Iraqis. The street was lined with shops, bakeries, shwarmeh stands and internet cafes. At night, it filled with people of all ages and the nargileh smoke didn’t clear until sunrise. The location was ideal.

The apartment was crumbling. Small chunks of the concrete walls were gone, some spots looked like they had been hit with a shotgun blast. Hadi playfully proclaimed “Ah yes, 5-star! 5-star!” at these blemishes. Ceiling and floor tiles alike were missing or otherwise loose. The toilet was a hole in the floor and the shower was a hole in the ceiling. Only one of the four air conditioners worked, and barely. The rolling blackouts struck when we were fiddling with it, and it made the 105 degree day feel double that. Scattered throughout the place was a family’s belongings: bags of clothes, children’s toys, family photos, pairs of shoes and a hutch full of decorative knickknacks. It looked like they had left in a hurry.

Hadi wanted 500 dollars American for it. This was insanely expensive for an apartment such as this anywhere in Syria, at any other time in history, that is. The influx of refugees seeking apartments had driven availability down and price up. Still, I was confident I could find something that didn’t look like it was on the verge of structural failure at half the price, at least. “Perfect,” I heard myself say as my brain recoiled in horror, “I’ll take it.” I didn’t even try to haggle, which is not only customary, but expected. Hadi seemed surprised. He told me that he would include utilities in the price and we would call it a deal.

The next day, I withdrew the 500 dollars, about a third of what the average Syrian makes in a year, from my bank account and guarded it with my life on the way to Hadi’s office. He was alone inside this time. I imagined the nine Iraqis I had met the day before living somewhere nice for much less money than I was paying and fought the image of them waiting for work and sleeping in a park at night as I slept in an apartment they could have had. After I signed the paperwork, I walked around the city for hours, passing parks and hoping not to recognize any of the Iraqis staring vacantly at the road, waiting for someone to come along and help them reconstruct their lives.
The badge doesn’t carry a lot of potency. The clothes look borrowed from an airline pilot. I sit at a desk as people walk by, oblivious to my existence until they see something they don’t like.

A man talks on a Bluetooth while eating an ice cream cone. He wears a bike helmet as he walks through the lobby of the building and into the elevator. His tongue explores the outside of the big scoop like a blind worm. Deep from inside his throat he is saying yes, a small laugh, yes again. He walks straight into an open elevator and disappears.

I get a call over the radio that a transient is bothering people in front of Whole Foods.

Every male panhandler I chase off the blocks tells me that he is an Iraqi War vet. This one has a tattoo of a bird on his neck, the right side, left as I’m looking at him. He says he’ll leave soon. He’s only waiting for his friend. His friend is inside buying him a sandwich.

I tell him that he can’t panhandle on the Brewery Blocks.

He says he’s diabetic and if he doesn’t eat...

I tell him that he can’t panhandle on the Brewery Blocks.

He says that he’s just arrived five minutes ago and that there was another guy panhandling on the other bench for an hour and a half before him.

I say that I must have missed him, but I would have told him the same thing.

He says he was a marine for ten years and he was in Iraq. His guts were blown out of him. He was in the top part of a Humvee.

I tell him that is horrible and I was in Iraq. I ask where he was hit.

He says the Green Zone.

I say I was in the Green Zone. I ask where he was hit.

He says he’ll leave as soon as his friend comes out with his sandwich. He’ll be out in five minutes.

We stand on the corner not talking to each other for a couple minutes.

A dog tied to a bike rack barks at me.

I say that not even the dogs around here like the security guards.

Again he tells me that his friend is buying him a sandwich.

I tell him that I used to volunteer at the Vet Center and if he really is a veteran they have resources.

He tells me fuck resources, he does it himself. Then he puts the change I saw him panhandle as I walked up into his pocket.

Safe keeping.

He does it himself. He tells me and that is why he picked Carhartt jeans and jacket. They are warmer.

Thicker, too, I say.

Thicker, too, he says.

His cap is hunter-camouflage and his goatee is nicely trimmed. He tells me he has only an aunt and uncle in Eugene, but he doesn’t have the money to take the bus down there. It only costs 22 dollars.

I tell him if he calls the Vet Center, they would help him.

He pulls out his cell phone and asks me the number.

I tell him.

He calls.

I walk away to give him some privacy, so he doesn’t embarrass himself. I walk down the street to Burnside and watch some construction workers in reflective vests dig up a strip of pavement. I smell diesel fumes and hear the loud jackhammer pounding. The dog behind me barks some more. The sun feels warm. I walk back to the bench in front of Whole Foods and he is gone.

I walk back to the desk in the lobby. The elevator rings and its female voice says first floor, going up. The man with the bike helmet walks out, his ice cream gone. I sit down.
Wayward Symbolism of the Film Noir, Amber Smith
Inchtohughtjzhin

Hi, my name’s Peter, and I am dumb

Pt. 1, Brainology

I am dumb because every day the same blank blue tidal waves crash onto my head, right into my fourhead, and right through my brain, and never can I do anything to stop them. When it happens my brain does nothing but go wh o o ps and biff and poop and just say hfaHF-BAWSAHHSAMMMXCKA …… and it is all in vain. Because then I say, just like I say every time, hey, who’s knocking and banging on my front door? Acting like a clown, a buffoon, a bufoonister, a boob, a nincompoop, a nincompooperist? Like a brainteaser toasting my brain? And I reply, because it is only I that will and can reply to my questions and foolishnesses, it is only I that is the sufferer and suffragist of my suffering, or at least only the main suffraginister, oh shoot… I just don’t know. And the instant I say that, the dogs of defeat and confusion and banana-slime retardation begin to bark, and

The brain is mild-mannered too… so when it makes mistakes, it mops it up with a paintbrush

All is lost for the time. But, without losing hope completely, I remember that the brain is mild-mannered too… so when it makes mistakes, it mops it up with a paintbrush, because in and according to brainology, the mind uses paintbrushes to make, unmake and make and remake mistakes… or also the nonsenses and dirty dishes of the head, and so it’s much like rolling around absentmindedly in the wet and sloppy wetness of a washing machine, don’t you see, and it all comes back to the one door the mind. Because the mind is like a lukewarm platypus that leaks out over the edge, it’s like a leaky cauldron where words are the broth, the liquid which the soul must take up for its upstairs home, the head junk that it must take up for its naked insistence. But perhaps I am wrong in this diagnosis. Yes maybe you are, doctor, though you’re still doing a good job… though maybe I am wrong though even with doing a good job and maybe the words are not the major substantial substance of mindreality but only one of its main ingredients and ahh yes certainly and yet but maybe also it is wrong in buddhism to deny the duality of man of woman of animal of earth and maybe there is a disjunction between mindlife and bodyhome or soul and feeling and maybe tho I am just dumb…… HAHAHA YEAH!!

+++ I do know though that the mind drips rain and soot and barf and boogers and cum and juices and orange juices and rasberry juices and cat juices and lots of juices also peanut butter and hummingbird spit and catnip and kitkats and jelly jelly and marmelade… but however where do these drippings where do they go? Where do they coagulate? WHERE DOTH MADNESS REST??!! WHERE DOES THE MONKEY SPIT????????!!!!!!

Pt. 2, Dreamology

As far as I know, which since I am Dyumb is not very far, it is in the placenta of night and the clouds of dream that hang and forlorn in our eyes where madness rests most comfortably, both for the men and the womyn and all the little babes, all the little donkey donkey and negro babes, all the little crack-erjack babes, all the horsewhipped horsemaster babes, all the crocodilely wily highly regarded regardez-vous tutu babes, all
the master race babes, all the communist babes, all the yellow
babes that are babes when they grow and babes when they
die, and all of us who are sweet baby babyheaded baby
angel flying dudes, because even a blindman
dreams with a sweet twinkle in his eye,
for he was once too a babe, though
a blind babe. it might be
common to believe that
dreams end with
sleep, and
that
only
shards of them
remain half alive and
mostly dead within the wak-
ing memory. but the great thing
about dreams is that they are not fenced
in by the awakened life but instead find their
most fertile hunting grounds within it, and there
is no distinction between the two apparently distinct spheres
of consciousness, except that they occur in different play-
grounds, in the same head, on the same bed.

so fuck it LETS DREAM

DREAM ONE:

me: flying bicycles are more useful than not

mob: well interesting factitude youve got there in your hands
there young man. interesting.

but, we ask, where is the place of the absurd and the nonsensical
in the king’s court?

bagatelle, bagatelle, bagatelle. I FOUND BAGATELLE ON
MY LIPS

i’ll tell you what he can do with that flying bicycle’s breadbask-
et of his there-
eh eh what that?

a NINCOMPOOPERIST that’s what i think he is

well, i’ll tell you what he can do, he can put in all his ideas, all
his watches and clocks and badmitten bird balls and textbooks
his lawbooks his medical books and and bowling balls and dust
and rabbits, all in that dumbbasket there, and then he can go
home and kiss his wife.

but, dear sir, ive got hemorrhoids!

i like boobs

me: shut up... all of you! ANDALSO fuck the KING and fuck

his horses and fuck his OWN absurd nonsense and fuck YOU

you hiroshima bombing, tank flying, cat frying, devilwor-
shiping CUNTS

dream 2:

oh that laughing mare. that laughing mare stomps all over the
night it stomp stomp stomp all over our blight that’s where
thunder come from I theenk, I theenk, and i theenk it real
confidentially with all my dentals in all my small but thinkin
thingamabogger... what do you call it these days? somethin
sort of a fishtube or a

BANANA BOX

yeah that’s it that’s it!
dat der is it hyuck hyuck hyuck!!

now if i didn KNOW any better i’d say dat the way life is is
the way life ought to be.

now, whatcha do you mean by that?? what tutcha do you
mean?

well suppose it be something that it aint ought then how could
it be eh, i suppose if you got 2+2 then you got 3+3 too... .

HMM?!

yes that laughing mare that great laughing mare a white headed
steelhead of a mare neigh neigh neighs neighs as big as train-
wheels and stampeded through the dusty golden baretreaded
plains of nebraska an wyomeen an arkansaw. that laughing mare
that heralds the moose and bites the night.

3:

but first is the conscious part of the unconscious or is it unop-
part of it un part ohv it or are is my bum a part of my butt?
what do you think dr. strange love? with all your strange love
and your sodomy and your barbarian mulberry practices?

hello? are you in there dr strange glove? do you take your
gloves off in this hotel? or do i just wipe themjon the fucking
wall? why sir, why do you ask? because i got shit all over my
fucking gloves and i was wondering if you want shit somewhere
any fuckin where in this place this god awful rotten smelling
place of the most unholy and crass weddings where im sure
the brides are pigwomyn and the men are pigbastards with too
much money in their pockets, too much money in their pock-
ts and too much money in their ass and too much money in
their deep ass pockets that are asses to pockets of the pockets
pockets, pockets pockets pockets oyyyy god oooooooog fuck
ill wipe my gloves on your associated associated ass
thank you sir

very good sir
rough up them soccer players on the soccer playground, the playground of wishes and lost dreams where EVERYTHING IS BEAUTIFUL and where it’s only the cheaters that take the beauty out of it who pop the beauty and flatten it like they pop the beauty and flatten it the soccer ball the metaphor for our beautiful beautiful heads our dizzy dizzy dizzy gelespie heads going dizzy and WOOO and SWOOOSH and whirl twirl yeah motha fucka like an amusement park

oh boy you know i had a fear of amusement parks i never rode proper proper on amusing things though i like to i dont throw up from such things but i get dizzyheaded dizzyheaded wait who is this i you talking about who is this chump you let in? what i’m not a chump! there he goes again with his eye yai yai! i i i i i i that what are you running a ship

no sirr im just well yes sir sort of sir im i am- youre a nancy thats whatcha are no well im just playin the fiddle best i can you kno ya gotta play somethin yeah well i see people playin things but i also see em playin cocks an not cocks boy like you should boy but cocks, COCKS, cocks big as big totem poles straight out the ground straight into their ass straight out their mouths big ol cocks cockin goin cawk cawk cawk like a turkeybird roosterfucker sonolafitch sonofagun sonofacock cocksmoker potsmoker cockboy cock so boy you better not be gawkin at any cocks or we’ll get the police after you and make yer mama cry.

if i didn’t know any better, i’d say the way life is is the way life ought to be

intermission:

♪ LOHD HA-AHY MUHCY SAVE MEY LOHD
OH LAW Dy lawd how you look up my dress you sweet kitten lohd, how lohdy lohd i love you an how i despise myself-
oh lohdy lohd you sweet loooohd, an lohdy lohd, how i deee-spize dee spiez myself↑
gimma the blues in a cereal coffin box of blues, and wipe the milk off my lips, cause no one else seems to want to play. there is only one thing which isn’t arbitrary, and it’s what the government doesn’t want to be heard out loud, because it is the real government the illusory government is attempting to compete against, egoless love, where its ego-filled and ego-supported and chimeric notion of ‘State’ is crumbling to its knees.

five:

I pray hermes, let lady sleep fly me above the sheep, and hope she put under my pillow sum sums of sum money sums beyond those factories producing anguish, those factories producing automobeeles. for people hate, how people hate… they are the carmaking sonsobitches, the deathmaking sonsobitches, the sonsof sonsof sonsof mother fu c k i n g bitches them brew bitches beat brewers bitch witches brent britches… you see i guard the clocktower out here and i guard the hunchback while he’s in his sleep in his little straw nest and where he snore like a brownie no not snore like a brownie but got little brownie snores that wake up when you peek at them and crumble under the next snore, the next snore and the next snore, poor little snore making some music all by its lonesome lonesome self and this too hunchback oh how i am his friend why am i his friend and yet why not? do i not speak the devil’s tongue and let him lick my devil licked ass and do i not feed the eagle’s breast with lots of milk…? ah but fooey oh fuckin fooey this game’s too hard to play when your underpants are beneath your feet and around your head when there are crows flying over and battling the seaguls a new misfortune born out of the way things go. and the way things go are bad but they are also rad and the way things go live on rollerskates and they soar down the hill and they go WEE EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEE
today? no, they all ran out.

pt. 3, dumbology

Who the fuck eats french flies? oh god i cant even imagine but i will FLYING CRUNCHY RAISINS all stuck in your teeth not even a dumptruck can get them out not even satan and they are black and got wings still on them one of them even impaled on your canine tooth and squirming the last squirm inside his death and a fly on kebab ready to fall down to fly hades, the most buzzed up cavern in the subterranean doom.

Afterword

Interested in submitting to Pathos?

We accept poetry, fiction, memoir, personal essays, articles, one-act plays and visual art.

You must be: a student at Portland State.

Your work must be: previously unpublished, 4,500 words or less.

A visual art submission: may be a photograph, painting, illustration, or other media. Please, no comics. Attach to email as a .jpg or .bmp file.

A writing submission should be double-spaced and in 12-point Times New Roman. Attach to email as a .doc or .rtf file. Submit up to five works of writing. We will publish up to three per issue from the same student. There is no limit on the number of art submissions.

Email all submissions to pathos@pdx.edu.
The deadline for our fall issue is November 1, 2009.

For updated submission guidelines and information about the magazine and our events, visit pathoslitmag.wordpress.com.