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Web Design ELIA MEREL & HAILEY HARRIS
Layout DR. BAYARD GODSAVE

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The goal of our publication is to provide a forum for exceptional fiction, poetry, and creative nonfiction in a dynamic, appealing, and accessible environment. The magazine’s only agenda is to promote the pleasures and edification derived from high-quality literature.

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The Oklahoma Review is a continuous, online publication. We publish two issues each year: Spring (May) and Fall (December).

The Oklahoma Review only accepts manuscripts during two open reading periods.
- Reading dates for the Fall issue will now be from August 1 to October 15
- Reading dates for the Spring issue will be January 1 to March 15.

Work sent outside of these two periods will be returned unread.

Guidelines:
Submissions are welcome from any serious writer working in English. Email your submissions to okreview@cameron.edu.

Writers may submit the following:
- Prose fiction pieces of 30 pages or less.
- As many as five (5) poems of any length.
- Nonfiction prose pieces of 30 pages or less.
- As many as five (5) pieces of visual art—photography, paintings, prints, etc.
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- Simultaneous submissions are acceptable. Please indicate in your cover letter if your work is under consideration elsewhere.
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Fiction
In the year since Montgomery Hallam’s untimely death, much has appeared on these pages regarding his literary estate. We do not write here to open old wounds regarding the bitter personal and legal disputes that have embroiled his family, his editor, and, peripherally, ourself. We instead wish to mount a defense of Hallam’s later work, and to plead both for the posthumous publication of certain of his late stories, and for critical reconsideration regarding his whole corpus in light of this later work.

While there is some evidence that Hallam himself wished to suppress these stories, we believe the importance of the work speaks for itself. It is alive with the very qualities his longtime editor, Sy Lynden, worked so hard to repress in all of Hallam’s work: a fascination with the gothic, the grotesque, the uncanny, even the supernatural. Lynden exerted a great deal of pressure on Hallam to submerge these elements under the suffocating veneer of a narrowly defined “literary realism.” Hallam, tragically, internalized this aesthetic so thoroughly that he turned it against what we believe was his true genius. Were his last stories allowed to see the light of day, whole new avenues for understanding his work would open. Instead of being relegated to the wasteland of “the lesser 20th Century literary minimalists,” to which critic Lawrence Cranby would damn him, we believe the vital spring of magic and strangeness that bubbles beneath the surface of his work would be allowed to spring forth, bringing up new sprouts from the brittle earth, greening the barren fields where his true intentions lie buried.

“I want my stories to live,” Hallam once told us, in an intimate moment. “I don’t just want them to simulate or represent—I want them to open their eyes inside the reader’s mind.” He had a secret affection, of which he was greatly ashamed, for a 1959 William Castle film entitled The Tingler, in which Vincent Price plays a scientist working “to isolate the physical incarnation of fear,” according to the DVD liner notes. This “incarnation of fear” turns out to be a black, rubbery, centipede-like figure—the Tingler—that lives, dormant, in the human spine, becoming active only when its host experiences extreme terror. The Tingler then attempts to crush the
host’s spine, and only if the host screams will the creature be cowed into submission and back into dormancy.

The filmmakers used several gimmicks to make the terror spill into the aisles of the theaters that showed it. The film climaxes in a movie theater where the Tingler has gotten loose from its host and now seeks any spine it can get its...rubbery...appendages on. The onscreen image is interrupted, the film appears to burn up in the gate, and the silhouette of the Tingler crosses the blank white screen, making it appear that it is loose in the projection booth of the theater where the actual audience sits (an experience lost on digital-age viewers). It is as though the film has become a medium through which the Tingler has been transported to your local movie venue.

On its first run, viewing was enhanced with the use of a Castle-designed device called Percepto, which sent jolts of electricity to random theater seats at certain scripted moments in the film. The staff at some theaters even acted out the removal of a patron by stretcher. The Vincent Price voiceover advised over a darkened screen that the moviegoer had fainted due to an excess of terror. Hallam once attempted to simulate the effects of the Percepto device on us during a viewing of the film, using a strategically placed cell phone set to vibrate. He was playful like that; he believed in sensation.

But Hallam loved John Keats too, and frequently recited his favorite, “This Living Hand”:

This living hand, now warm and capable
Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
And in the icy silence of the tomb,
So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
That thou wouldst wish thine own heart dry of blood
So in my veins red life might stream again,
And thou be conscience-calmed – see here it is –
I hold it towards you. (Keats, 407)

He introduced us to this work, which he argued was Keats’s great “vampire moment,” one morning over the breakfast tray, laying out his Folio Poets edition of Keats on the counterpane. As we began to read, he stopped us and said we were doing it wrong. “How so?” we questioned. “You’re supposed to use your hand to trace the lines, it’s a crucial part of the experience,” he said. “We don’t make a habit of pawing the page as we read,” we replied. He interposed his own
hand then, tracking the words as we read out loud. When we came to the final line, he lifted his hand from the book and held it out to us. “I take it back,” he told us with a mischievous smile. “It’s better when it’s my hand.”

* 

We are in possession of copies of three of Hallam’s late, unpublished story manuscripts. We have little doubt that more stories of quality reside in the “slushpile” where he tucked the stories and sketches he never developed to his satisfaction, which towered so tall on his desk that he often joked, with what in retrospect is a bit of morbid irony, it would one day bury him. Unfortunately, the slushpile is held up in probate proceedings, as are the many drafts of earlier works that editor Sy Lynden had in his possession at the time of Hallam’s death. We have little doubt that those drafts would prove even more clearly our contention that Lynden was obsessed with containing the irrepressible strangeness that all who knew Hallam personally found strangely missing in his published works.

The first of the stories in our possession, and the most complete, is titled *The House of Broken Locks*. It hews closest to Hallam’s usual thematic territory, but employs an unusual formal structure and climaxes with an attempt to perform what can only be described as an uncanny effect. The second, titled *The Yard*, is quite short compared to most of Hallam’s stories, but seems complete. Though it does not stray in any explicit way from realism, there is a haunted atmosphere about it and, again, a moment clearly intended to deliver a shiver of horrified recognition in the reader. Finally, there is a manuscript titled “______” whose story runs far afield from his usual oeuvre, wandering into the territory of pornography and depicting what can only be described as a supernatural event. Attorneys for his estate have forbidden publication of these stories in their entirety, have tried to quash publication of this essay, and have won an injunction limiting the amount of original material we can quote here. But like the uncanny properties at the heart of these important, threatened works, we refuse to be contained.

* 

*The House of Broken Locks* begins in the second person, the narrator addressing an unnamed seventeen-year-old, female protagonist. “You wanted him,” it begins,

He’d been gone three months, following the incident, and now was back, still mostly bald, only the faintest fuzz beginning to sprout on his scalp. The black stitches crawled up the
side of his head like a centipede; you saw it from your vantage, two seats back and one row over. You wanted to touch it, you wanted him.

The voice menaces our young protagonist, but also aches for her for reasons that, only in the end, become clear.

Of course this is not the first time Hallam has employed a second-person voice. The title story of his early and most well known collection, Home Movies, features a second-person voice addressing another young woman, a pre-med undergraduate as she navigates a campus romance with a film studies major, which may or may not result in her pregnancy. Sy Lynden’s editing hand is apparent throughout Home Movies, as when the narration retreats from delivering the crucial reveal of the home pregnancy test results to the epiphanic hokum, “you imagine tomorrows branching from the plastic stick in your hand, but you know—there’s only one tomorrow, only ever always one tomorrow in all its stultifying isness.” It is typical of Lynden’s editing style to privilege a moment of contemplation over a swift brutal blow. The nonsense word isness also shows his hand. It is our belief that Lynden excised all evidence of the identity of the narrator who addresses the protagonist in Home Movies (we suspect it was the protagonist’s alcoholic mother). This is not the case in House of Broken Locks where evidence of the narrator’s identity clearly surfaces in the final act.

But long before then, a note, “lettered in bubbles and hearts, the words swelling, purple on the page, the page folded to make its own triangular envelope, the envelope marked with a butterfly whose wings fluttered open upon opening,” is conveyed from the protagonist to the wounded boy she desires. This is writing—about writing—that wants to come off the page, to come to life. The redundancy of phrases simulates cell division, while the description of the note as an artifact is highly suggestive of female genitalia. The note invites the boy to meet the girl in The Jungle at Night, an exhibit at the local natural history museum, where their class will be taking a field trip the following week. She watches him read it, he turns, “his hairless, damaged head already turning red, his eyes met yours, drifted to your sweater, then down to your knees, under your desk. His lips showed red against his teeth when he smiled.”

Suffice it to say there is a clear, non-verbal agreement in the classroom that the two will meet up in The Jungle at Night. And so they do, in a steamy scene fueled by the “soda pop and fruit roll-ups on their breath,” they meet in the shadows beside a glass case where “a python twines black branches,” and he kisses “as though teaching you a silent, airless language, spoken
lip to tongue to tongue to lip, not mouth to ear—well, sometimes there, too.” There is another language that is silent and airless: the language of the printed page. Hallam meant the words he wrote (with his hand, always by hand; a blue-stemmed Palomino pencil that left a sharp black line on pale green pages) to be intimately performative, making shapes on the mouth of the reader that simulate kissing. He also dresses this scene as a sort of museum piece Eden, playing up the soundtrack of animals-at-night piped through the tinny display speakers—and surely you didn’t miss that (forbidden) fruit roll-up flavor, or the python.

The boy pulls the protagonist through a door marked EXIT, and they find themselves alone in the blank fluorescent light of a back stairwell where:

He backed you into a corner and found his way between your legs. You felt the stubble of his scalp against your cheek. You held his head as he devoured your throat. The centipede stitches moved beneath your fingers. As he broke you inside, you looked at the red fire axe hanging in its glass cage on the concrete wall behind him. He kissed you on the mouth again, Sour Apple, then held you with his eyes as he came inside you—his eyes blank, a stranger’s—as a double-wide him, bald, in uniform, bearing keys on his hip, rounded down the stairwell behind him and bore down, shouting, “You! Kids! Get to your people!” The boy bolted, back through the door where you’d slipped free, together. He left you, covering your legs, inside the wrathful gaze of the museum guard’s small eyes.

Hallam renders the guard a defamiliarized, “double-wide” doppelganger of the boy, lending a monstrous quality to both of the men in this scene, and introducing a pattern that repeats—or multiplies further—later in the story. The boy’s moves—devouring her throat—are those of a vampire, and the red fire axe not only suggests a violent breach, but brings to mind the flaming sword left to guard the entrance to Eden. This is fervid sensual, prose that Sy Lynden would love to render anemic with his little red pen.

We do not see the girl return through the door to The Jungle at Night exhibit, to her “people”—and rightly so as the story will show. Instead, we leap seventeen years into the future, where a third-person narrator follows locksmith Harold McAdams to a house on a hill outside of town—a house where a girl he once knew used to live. He knocks, hears footsteps inside, then a woman’s voice, “You’re going to have to come around back. This is one of the ones that’s broken.” He goes around the side, through a gate, and finds himself,
in a wildly overgrown garden, with towering rose bushes dipping down their heavy, dew-wet blossoms to kiss his bald pate, and rhubarb opening broad green hands at his feet, and all kinds of plants he didn't have words for, space-age puffballs on slender green stalks, climbing vines dangling star-shaped flowers, things that looked like little dripping hearts—bleeding hearts, he thought, I've heard of those! Butterflies fluttered from sweet smelling clusters, and hummingbirds whirred about his head, regarding him like little jeweled and winged security cameras.

Hallam dots this lush environment with otherworldly details, suggesting the movie set of one of the 1950s sci-fi movies he so loved. A sense of paranoia also pervades, as personified by those hummingbirds. The setting is fanciful, hyperreal, a bit off-kilter, as is the owner of the house with her “pale, luminous, blue eyes and bobbed, strangely foil-like hair.” She wears a “pale blue robe—in the afternoon!—with little Chinese men pulling rickshaws on it. Her heavy breasts swayed beneath it as she came down the steps onto the patio. She looked surprised when she saw him. ‘You called for a locksmith, ma’am?’ he reminded her.”

That is, of course, meaningful surprise on her face, but the thick-skulled McAdams isn’t privy to the meaning. He does find her strangely familiar, though; his hand “felt at home inside her warm, soft grip.” She explains, with redundancy characteristic of Hallam’s unexpurgated style, that “‘All the locks on all the doors with locks in the house have recently broken. Except this one.’ She twisted the handle on the back door.” She leads him through the house, which is full of “paper and wood and iron and glass and feathers and wool, a piano, glass animals, more wood and paper, like a museum,” and he goes to work taking apart the lock on the front door. He quickly discovers evidence that someone has tampered with it, “done a shamefully poor job of trying to pick it, probably with something hard and blunt like a screwdriver.” He examines the other doors with broken locks—an entrance on a side porch, and one to the garage—and discovers the same thing. As he works he “felt eyes on him, even thought he heard someone breathing, but turned to find no one there.”

Evening begins to fall and, echoing The Jungle at Night and its Edenic imagery, he “follow(s) a green snake of rubber hose,” to find the woman “misting the heavily-laden boughs of a fruit tree” in the back acre of her garden. He asks if she would mind him taking apart the lock on the back door too. She protests that it isn’t broken. He changes tack, asking, “has anything gone missing around your house of late?” He offers assurances to her look of alarm, but admits,
“The problem seems to be that all the locks have been tampered with.” A look of terror crosses her face, and he suddenly recognizes her:

Emily Eaves, whom he shamed in the stairwell at the Natural History Museum seventeen years ago; who grew fat and strange and silent, and disappeared from school, never speaking to him again; and yes, this was her house, it was her, with those wide, frightened eyes, only – what had become of the dark curls that fell around her face? What made her hair turn flat and metallic?

“Emily?” he said.

But she dropped the hose so it twisted in the grass, and leapt past him. He followed, calling her name, but spotted something silver at his feet and bent down to pluck it from the dewy lawn. It was her hair, fallen from her head.

McAdams’s mental density certainly helps defamiliarize what’s happening here. Sy Lynden always urged Hallam to make his characters smarter, “readers want to read smart characters,” but Hallam resisted. “They need to be dumber than me,” he used to joke. “Otherwise they’ll take over the whole show.” Nor would Lynden have stood for the heavy-handed names, McAdams and Eaves—but consider the effect of these names being plural, and of both the Gaelic meaning of the Mc- prefix (son of) and the more contemporary meaning (as in McJob). These characters are about multiplication, mass production, but also the mystery of origin, and generation.

There’s a break then, and the second-person narration from the first part of the story returns, only the voice addressing the woman we now know as Emily Eaves has shifted to speaking in the present tense and is now prepared to reveal its identity:

You see me through the window in the door as you shake the handle and I fade into the depths of your house. I’ve been here for weeks, Mother, ever since I slipped out of the JDC. I’m the breathing you thought you heard behind your bedroom door.

I go to your fridge—who did you think it was drinking straight from your milk carton? You? Sleepwalking through your days and nights? I go upstairs to the room where you sleep and look out through the picture window. He stands beside you in the middle of the yard, the dumb old bald bull, and the two of you find me with your eyes. He bellows something, like an old, dumb, stuck bull, and you cover your mouth. The
moonlight shines on your bald heads, and I drink the milk straight from the carton, and I pour it out on my own shaved, scarred head.

This is not the dorm room realism of Hallam’s *Home Movies*, or the meticulous treatise on overcoming fatherly wrath that we find in his *Anchorhold Motel*. This is what we call delicious—and what Sy Linden would call impermissible—contrivance that tinges our spines. *So what’s with everyone being bald?* you ask, and *What’s up with the milk?* Hallam did keep some cards close to his chest, but we can tell you that the Gideon’s in the hotel room we shared with him bears the unmistakable mark of one of his blue Palominos on 1Peter 2:2: “Like newborn babies, thirst for the pure milk of the word so that by it you may grow in your salvation.”

*Our counsel advises that we have used the majority of our legal allotment of Hallam’s original words bringing *The House of Broken Locks* to life, so we will have to give *The Yard* and “______” much more summary treatment. Hopefully the glimpses we can provide into these works will fuel your desire to see them whole, in print, free of Lynden’s expurgations.*

In *The Yard*, Hallam tells a tale prescient enough of the strange circumstances of his own death, in his own yard, to arouse anyone’s interest. However, know that we refuse to tolerate the whispers and rumors that posit his death as an elaborately arranged suicide, which would now have us read all his work in light of his tragic death, picturing his mouth, nose, and ears slowly filling with earth as he speaks. This is an image we refuse—better to believe that we ourself heaved shovelfuls down upon him than that Montgomery Hallam, that great lover of life, of feeling, of the tingles of sensation, engineered his own ending.

The protagonist of *The Yard* is known only as “the man.” As the story opens, he is steering his car “through the curving arc of a highway off ramp, his headlights discovering the black emptiness where the yards of Armor & Co.’s slaughterhouse once teemed with head of cattle.” We learn that the slaughterhouse, which had employed the man’s father, has been closed for over a decade. “The stench was gone, but so was all the work.” The man drives to his father’s home, “One of those shotgun numbers by the rail yard that looked like some creature hunkering down in the earth.” He’s greeted at the door by *the woman*, who tells him, “Your father’s out in the yard,” and offers him a drink. He demurs.

“How’d you find out?” she asks, mixing one for herself.
“My mom called—how’d she find out?”

“I called her,” the woman says. “We’re getting to be friends.” She stirs her drink with a finger, then licks her finger. “You and I could be friends too,” she says.

The man leaves her alone and goes out in the yard. He finds his father down in a hole that he’s digging, lit up by shop lights that are powered by a noisy generator. Wet, black earth is heaped deeply on either side of the hole. The man calls down to his father, “Dad, what are you doing?” His father looks up, his face shining with sweat, his eyes luminous, like an old opossum’s. “Mr. Dewar,” he says—and his son recognizes this as the name of his father’s foreman at Armor & Co., the man who tried to make everyone laugh at his father’s friends’ funerals—“Mr. Dewar, Louis, listen—I know you say it’s nonsense, but I hear there’s sixteen of ‘em risen up in Lot Four alone. And I know it’s not natural, and I know we’ve got to put ‘em down—again—but you know they won’t make for food. I say they deserve a decent, a Christian burial, no matter what it is that moves them. Have you looked into their eyes?”

The man and his father continue to look at each other for a while, then the father shakes his head and resumes digging. The man takes up a spare shovel, “wades into the black heap of earth piled beside the opening, and sticks his shovel in it.”

What he means to do with the dirt in his shovel we can’t be sure, but clearly, the language of The Yard has much more in common with the “dirty realism” Lynden forced on Hallam than the expansive, fecund language of House of Broken Locks. “If you want to write lowbrow, do it like Carver,” Lynden used to say. “That’s something we can sell.” But the bovine zombie apocalypse suggested here is nothing Lynden would ever have considered letting out into the world. Nor would he have stood for the Tennessee Williamsesque sordidness suggested by the stepmother’s flirtatious advances. But we find in this sordidness an inversion of an example Brecht offers of his alienation effect, when one sees one’s mother as another man’s wife, by virtue of acquiring a stepfather. In The Yard, the man sees his father as another woman’s husband, and in his father’s dementia finds evidence that the natural order was overturned, long ago, when his father was a young man, determined to dig a deep grave for dead who won’t stay down.

*
I'm afraid the magic of Hallam’s “_______” will resist summary and paraphrase even more than *The Yard*—its spell is certainly cast at the level of the line. May this but whet your appetite. The story concerns a couple who’ve been dating regularly for three months, when the “carelessly affluent” man surprises the woman by begging off of their usual Friday night date. Jealous and puzzled, the woman ransacks his home, to which she has a key, searches his internet browser history, hacks his cell phone, but finds nothing incriminating until she knocks on the back panel of the closet beneath the stairs in the basement and finds it sounds hollow. When she pulls the panel open, “a body, a woman’s body comes spilling out, its cold, rubbery limbs tangling with her own.” They fall back, together, and the woman “crab-crawls, shrieking, out from under it. The body lays before her, face down, in a very small maid’s uniform.” It doesn’t look quite right, though, “the stiff way it lays there,” and it had felt strangely light in her arms. On closer examination the woman realizes it is actually a highly realistic, life-sized, latex sex doll. The label on the maid’s uniform reads “*Real Doll™*.”

Angry and disgusted, the woman takes the sexy negligee he had given her and dresses the doll in it. She poses it in the master bathroom, “crudely bent at the sink.” She writes “look at yourself when you fuck me” in lipstick on the bathroom mirror, makes a trail of rose petals down to the front door and leaves, going home “to her little apartment where the plants have died, sure that she’s left behind a whole life she’d been foolish enough to imagine for herself.”

Instead, he surprises her with a call the next morning. Full of affection, he takes her out for a champagne breakfast and thanks her for understanding that “sometimes I just have to, you know, make love to something that doesn’t have feelings.” She tells him she does understand this; that she knows how hard he works at the office, and they enter into an agreement: she will surprise him with one of those “sexy tableaus” every Friday from now on.

The following Friday she is surprised to find, as she cleans and preps the doll for exhibition (there’s a box of accessories, different colored eyes, wigs, and other parts), that there is a piece of paper stuffed in the doll’s mouth. She pulls it “from between the soft, rubber lips” and reads, *Nurse*. She didn’t realize he was “going to be prescriptive about it,” but she goes to the local party and costume shop and finds a sexy nurse costume to dress the doll in. She leaves the doll “sterilizing instruments in the kitchen, unsure where else a nurse would belong in his house. She moves a recliner in beside the butcher’s block to act as an examination table,” and ducks out just ahead of his arrival home.
The pattern repeats the next week—*Schoolgirl*—and for weeks after that: *Teacher, Cheerleader, Space Alien, Goth, Hooker, Vampiress, Meter Maid, Victorian-era Prostitute, Sandy Duncan as Peter Pan, 1950s Waitress, She-Male* (there’s an attachment for that), *Punk Rock Girl, Bunny, Soviet-Era Civil Servant, Snake Girl, Mistress of Pain, Caged Heat*, and finally, the cryptic, 2 of *U*.

She takes this to mean she’s finally invited for the party, and spends the day making the doll up to look like herself, and herself to look like the doll. She “holds it up next to her before the mirrored doors of the bedroom closet: They could be sisters.” She gets in bed with it, and in the candlelight, kisses it: “It tastes like lipstick and rubbing alcohol. She gives it a taste of her appletini, then takes the taste back.”

When the man arrives home, he seems surprised to find her there. “Part of his act? she wonders as she waits, lying still.” He undresses and pulls the covers off them, then goes to work, “posing and probing the mute, inanimate forms of both the real woman and the *Real Doll™*.” When she senses that it’s “taking him nowhere,” she begins to contribute, providing animation to the doll. She senses he’s uncomfortable with this, but she lies down beside him and whispers in his ear, “It’s okay, let us—” He turns, “his face like a stranger’s.”

In the morning he can’t meet her eyes.

The following Friday the scrap of paper in the doll’s mouth gives a name: L_____ D_______. The woman feels a bit disappointed to be back on the sidelines, but mostly relieved. She has no idea who L_____ D_______ is, though, and when an internet search turns up nothing, she takes the scrap of paper to the master bathroom where the man is shaving. “You’re going to have to help me out on this one, hon,” she says. He looks at her blankly in the mirror. “This L_____ D_______; who is it?”

“What are you talking about?” he says.

“I’m talking about the assignment you gave me for this week.” She holds the paper up so he can see it.

“Assignment, I didn’t give you any—what’s that?” he asks.

The man claims no knowledge of this slip of paper or any of the other the slips of paper the woman has been finding in the doll’s mouth. “Honey,’ she says, ‘you’re freaking me out. Who is L_____ D_______?’ They hear the footsteps then, hard plastic heels clattering against the parquet of the hall.”
The alert reader may have noted that we share the mysterious initials in this, Hallam’s Skinemax meets The Twilight Zone episode, as well as those of the father’s foreman in The Yard. Let us assure you (though we hear the rumor mill grinding already) that we did not stand as the model for these characters—both sprang from Hallam’s imagination before he ever met us; we do not believe he completed any stories after meeting us.

We confess there is an uncanny coincidence here, one Hallam himself noted. The afternoon he began excavation of the cistern he’d discovered in his yard he told us, “It’s as though my stories called you into being.” Well, you can imagine how we felt about that, the sheer egotism of that suggestion, as if, before his bidding we were nothing but some blank thing without self knowledge, lying dormant in the pale green field of his notebook pages. Montgomery Hallam could be so trying at times! But just then, he unearthed an apothecary bottle in green glass, and he held it out to us.

He said, “What do you suppose goes in there?”
A friend dropped me off at the Love’s truck stop west of Oklahoma City, on I-40 in Yukon, where I sat all day until a dented white Chevy truck pulled up to me, and the driver motioned for me to get in. I opened the passenger door to a black dog looking right at me but without menace.

“He don’t bite,” the driver said in monotonal seriousness. “Neither do I.”

I got in. The dog curled between us. The sun had nearly dipped below the horizon, but dark hadn’t yet come. At that point in the summer nights were still cool. I had known that if I didn’t have luck with a ride, at least I’d have a pleasant sleep under the stars. I was already fully invested in the trip and, ride or no ride, I wouldn’t call anyone to come rescue me. But he did come, the man with the white truck, and it was a good sign, the first good sign all day. I was heading away from the Bible belt vortex that is Oklahoma, heading west to start over in California. Under those circumstances, anything might look hopeful.

The man was silent as he drove the speed limit, peering through the cracked windshield, eventually breaking the silence with a country radio station. He didn’t say where he was going or ask my destination. I decided to wait for him to speak, to not give him any reason to cut short a ride that I figured might take me as far as the Texas border. I had my guard up in case he tried something on me; you had to stay alert when you hitchhiked, but I wasn’t too worried. I made it a habit to discreetly keep my hand on the knife clipped to the inside my right pocket. I’d never had to use it in all the years I’d traveled, though a couple times I was close. But as I said, I wasn’t worried. I was hoping for the best. I had never been much of an optimist, but when I traveled I felt like I had to be.

We moved down the highway like two separate travelers on a bus, strangers. The man, fat but muscular, wore a camouflaged hat with a large fishhook clipped to the front of the curved bill. He might have been my age, thirty, or five years on either side. His face was expressionless, not a vacationer’s face. It occurred to me that he might be on a work errand, or something personal but troubling. But he didn’t say.

I stared out the side window and then, after more than an hour of nothing but soft country music and road noise, he spoke.
“You know this stuff is dangerous, hitchhiking? You should be careful out there.”

I said nothing because I always heard the same rhetoric from drivers, the same concerns and assumptions: that I was young and naive and didn’t know how to handle myself, and they, the drivers, were saviors of vulnerable lost souls like me. I compulsively rubbed my thumb back and forth on the knife’s clip and decided to accept his words as genuine.

“I’ve done this many times,” I said.

“Well, I’m just saying.”

No more words were exchanged until later when, somewhere around Clinton, he pulled off the highway to stop for gas and walk the dog. He said he’d like to drive as long as he felt up to it. He bought a 24-ounce coffee and a pack of Yellow Jackets and after a five-minute rest, and a smoke break for me, we continued west.

Two hours and he still hadn’t asked how far I was going. This was a good ride. To me, any hitchhiking after dark seemed like a bonus. Traveling while you sleep is a freebie, like you don’t have to work for the ride by entertaining the driver with things he wants to hear. Or you don’t have to stand there on the side of the road and look desperate, trying to mentally project your goodness so a driver will stop. That was the feeling I had, of unearned, easy travel. This guy was transporting my body free of charge, and I didn’t even have to pretend. At some point I did, in fact, drift off to sleep. But he startled me awake with a strange question that I asked him to repeat.

“You ever done anything stupid for friendship?” he said, again. The man’s voice sounded distant in the dark, like a voice straight from my conscience.

“Probably,” I said. “Who hasn’t?” I couldn’t confess that most of the stupid things I’d done were for to friends: to impress them, to help them, to make them in the first place. If not friends, then for women. And often those two were intertwined. I said nothing more. The less he knew about me the better.

We passed a cluster of lit-up gas stations and fast food chains. I had no idea the time or where we were. The lines in the middle of the road glowed from the headlights, the whole windshield a minefield of dead bugs. I looked over at the speedometer. Seventy on the dot.

“I didn’t know what friends were till I went to war,” he said. “You know any vets?”

I didn’t know any veterans personally except my grandfather and he died when I was young. I looked over at the man’s silhouette. Earlier I had noticed a large sticker behind his
head, on the glass, that read “PROUD VETERAN OF THE IRAQ CAMPAIGN, U.S. MARINE CORPS.” I figured the subject might come up.

When the war started I opposed it. At that time in my life I hated the military and had little sympathy for anyone who would voluntarily line up to shoot people. That’s how I saw it. To me, “supporting the troops,” sounded like supporting mass killing. No thanks. But there was a time and place for such discussions. This was neither. I tried to think of something to say that wouldn’t set him off.

“No, I don’t know any veterans,” I said. “I saw your sticker.”

“Did you believe in the war?” he said, but I didn’t understand the question.

“It looked pretty bad on TV,” I said.

Then he went into his story.

He never said his name, but he said where he was from: Lincoln County, somewhere between Wellston and Chandler. He had been to Iraq, completed two tours, won a Purple Heart. He spoke about dust and mountains, human filth and squalor, atrocities and boredom, and most of all, camaraderie. And he spoke of loss.

“I fought in Fallujah,” he said. “You know about that place?”

“No really,” I said. Being against the war meant shutting out its details. Blind opposition. Perhaps I was afraid if I knew too much I might see the logic in it.

“Hell on earth,” he said. “Got IED shrapnel to the head. A real eye opener, if you know what I mean. Came back home and couldn’t get it right with my wife.” He stopped there and took off his hat and ran his hand across the top of his head and put his hat back on. I had nothing to say.

“We had a little place in the woods belonged to my wife’s parents,” he said. “Former drilling site that’d been decommissioned and let go to re-wood itself. Bunch a post-oaks and cedars. I put a trailer on it. Not the most glamorous house in the world, but I fixed it up. Figured it was just temporary till we got something better. Course that never happened.

“Man,” he continued, “I had it all back home. ‘A woman and a kid and a dog and me,’ you know? Like that Hank Jr. song. Except, a little while after I got back home the woman and kid left. Not at first—we were doing good at first—but after I’d raged out one too many times.”

I kept quiet and let him talk.
“Too much anger,” he said. “Too much reliving bad stuff. Too much drinking. All I wanted to do was drink.”

Now I could relate. Most of my friends could only experience one another drunk. I cut my social teeth with bottles of cheap whiskey. But he was saying much more than this, stuff I couldn’t relate to. He needed to get something off his chest. Most people who picked me up needed that. It was like free therapy for them. They could say anything because they’d never see me again.

The driver said his wife stuck around longer than she probably should have. She did the best she could, dealing with a head-injured deadpanner husband. As soon as he could, he said, he got enrolled in a program the VA paid for. He went to classes, saw a therapist, tried a cornucopia of psych meds, and everything either didn’t work at all, or worked for a while and tapered off. And then there were the headaches.

“Oh my God, the headaches!” he said. “You can’t imagine.”

I nodded. I still didn’t know how stable he was, and the more he talked, the more unstable he seemed. But I needed this ride, and I had seen worse. Really, I had. If I’m honest, he wasn’t that bad to talk to. I was starting to get a little interested in what he had to say.

We drove on, and sometime before sunrise, just past Albuquerque, we pulled over at a truck stop. He said I could stretch out in the back and he’d lie in front with his dog. He needed to recharge, he said. We’d continue in the morning. I pulled out my sleeping bag and laid it down, pushing aside old beer cans, a tire iron, a floor jack, until I had second thoughts about the tire iron and hid it under my legs. Then I stood the spare tire up, leaning it on the side of the truck bed.

The stars were legion. I was safe.

* 

Sometime later, he shook my leg to wake me. I looked at my watch: 7:03. Three hours of sleep. I felt worse than if I hadn’t slept at all. The light was oppressive and I shielded my eyes. The air was dry, and my nose felt as though it had been hit.

“I feel better,” he said. “Let’s have us some breakfast and I’ll take you all the way.”

“Okay,” I said, still sitting in the middle of the bed like a kid on a hayride. “But I haven’t even told you where I’m going.”

“Where’re you going?”
“Oakland, California.”

“Never been that far west,” he said, and looked westward like a Lewis and Clark statue I’d seen somewhere. “Sounds good to me.”

As we drove, tensions from the day before bled away. His mood was different, more relaxed and upbeat. He wanted to talk and he asked me questions. I wondered why he was driving far away from his home without a plan. That part he withheld.

He said that after his wife left him he had joined a volunteer fire department because he missed the action, missed the guys. As a result of his head injury, he was given an honorable discharge and a disability check, for which he felt guilty. A leach on the American people. To me, government money was the least he should receive for the bullshit he’d had to suffer. In this, I surprised myself. I’d never considered a soldier a victim.

We talked this way for the next couple hundred miles. He said if drugs and therapy didn’t help, maybe putting time and energy toward something good for the community would, something like firefighting.

“Only it didn’t work out like I hoped,” he said. “There was this one gung-ho S.O.B who wouldn’t leave me alone. The guy was big. Solid muscle.”

I looked at him and wondered how big the guy was if he was calling him big.

“Former football hero. Dad was chief of police. Gave me hell for spending too much time in the station. Had a thing against volunteers. They don’t like it when a volunteer takes a full-timer’s job.”

“What’d you do?” I said. “About the guy?”

“Nothing. I was always friendly. But really I just tried to ignore him.” He took his hat off and set it on the dash. Then eased his right hand down and scratched the dog’s head. I noticed he was missing a finger, his right pinkie.

“What your dog’s name” I asked. I was feeling nervous and kept shifting in my seat.

“Nemo. My daughter named him.”

“I see.”

He laughed. “Man, you can relax around me. I ain’t that bad. I can see you’re a city guy. I get it. I was in the Corps with lots of them. Besides I went to the city all the time with my wife before she left. Hell, we liked the city.”

“I’m fine,” I said. “I’m just a bit tired is all. Keep telling your story.”
“I haven’t even got into my story. But I will.”

He said I could smoke if I’d crack the window. I didn’t hesitate. I rolled a cigarette and put the window down a few inches.

“I wanted more than anything to be in the Corps,” he said. “I dreamed about it, obsessed over it. I’m sure you never felt that way.”

“Actually,” I said, “When I was a kid, I wanted to be a marine too.” I spit out a speck of tobacco.

He looked at me like I was speaking another language.

“No, really,” I said. I took a long drag and spoke through exhaling smoke. “My babysitter’s older brother was a marine and I had met him several times. He gave me a cap one time when he was home on leave. He called it a ‘cover,’ and I thought that was really cool. I wore it all the time, until—” I stopped there because I didn’t want to admit that I had turned against what was so dear to this man.

“Until what,” he said.

“I guess, until I got out of my military phase.”

“Well, I took you to be some liberal peacenik. No offense.”

“I grew up in the country too.” This was true but it was so long ago that it felt more like a dream than a memory. “I used to fish and hunt squirrels and rabbits. I always wore camouflage fatigues. At some point, somehow, I got a copy of Full Metal Jacket. I must have been 10 or 11. I watched it over and over.”

“I loved that movie too,” he said. “I have this uncle, my favorite uncle, who went to Vietnam. He tried to talk me out of enlisting because he doesn’t believe in war any more. But I joined anyway and he told me he was proud of me even though he didn’t believe in what we were doing in Iraq and Afghanistan.”

“A marine?”

“Yeah. I remember, before I signed up, sitting with him and drinking. I said something about war adventures, and he said it was different these days. How he knew, I don’t know. I said to him, ‘What about your adventures in Vietnam? The drugs, fights, the women?’ He said, ‘That was different. That was Vietnam.’”
He must have tapped into a dark memory because he shook his head and didn’t speak for a while. I could barely stand the awkwardness of not talking, though I’m not sure he felt that way at all.

“So what happened?” I said. “At the fire department?”

“Oh yeah,” he said. “So this guy there hates me at the fire station. Doesn’t even hide it. His name is Brad. Brad Knight. He didn’t like it that I came into the station all the time to hang out with the boys. You know, lift weights, watch the game, shoot the shit, talk about our old ladies, or whatever. Acting like a paid firefighter. Well, one of these times I was at the station and big bad muscular Brad starts in on me for no good reason. Like he had nothing better to do than hassle a man who’d do most anything to be his equal, to be just one of the guys, like in the Corps.

“He gets in my face and says, ‘Why do you waste your time here? Why don’t you find a job or something? I hear Dollar General is hiring.’ I remember everybody looking up from what they were doing. A couple of guys laughed.

“I said, ‘You know my situation. Or maybe you don’t.’ I was suddenly under the eyes of six uniformed men, all looking at me, confused. I was just sitting there on the barstool, trying to control my breathing. I wasn’t provoking nobody, you know. Then Brad Knight says, ‘You mean we gotta trust the lives of the good people of Chandler to a guy who’s too wacko to work anywhere?’ That brought a couple more laughs, but most of the guys thought he went too far, a few said, ‘Hey now’ or ‘shut up, Brad.’ There’s a lot of patriots out that way, especially firefighters.” He sounded proud when he said this. “Then Jim Sanders, one of the only other vets who is a paid fireman, walks from across the room and cold cocks Brad. Lays him out flat. Everybody pulls him back and holds him there, and I sit there shaking with rage. I couldn’t move. I wanted to destroy Brad but I was paralyzed. Head splitting apart until I just walked away.”

“Jeez, man,” I said. “Fuck that guy.”

“But you don’t understand. I wanted to be that guy, or be in his shoes at least. Had nothing to do with money. I wanted that brotherhood again, like the war, and that S.O.B. Brad Knight was screwing everything up.”

“So what’d you do?”
This guy was maybe a bit stressed, probably PTSD’d, but nice. He was driving me halfway across the country for no reason. Or, maybe he had reasons, I didn’t know. I pet Nemo’s hindquarters and looked at the driver. I still hadn’t told him anything about me because I always held back. But now I wanted to at least explain that I was starting over for the hundredth time. That my friend Phil had a screen printing job lined up for me and a tiny room in the back of his house. I wanted to explain that, no matter what he imagined, a broom closet in Oakland was a step up from the life I’d been living.

But before I said anything, just as I’d forgotten my question, he said, “I set the land on fire.”

* 

I should have immediately asked him to pull over and let me out. But I didn’t. Instead, we kept talking and I thought about all the boneheaded things I’d done: stealing, drugs, running away from home, dropping out of school, being in jail. The nonsense of a misspent youth. But of all the reckless and dangerous things I’d done, I’d never been an arsonist. Even I wasn’t that reckless.

“I don’t want you to think I’m a bad person,” he said. “I set some fields on fire, away from the houses, after a rain when the dirt was still damp. I thought I planned it right. I thought it would bring us together. I wanted that feeling again, the fight, alongside the other guys.”

But it didn’t work out that way. He had lit newspapers along the edge of a grassy field surrounded by a stream and gravel roads. The wind picked up. The fires spread and eventually jumped the road. The police were evacuating homes; he heard it on the radio. People were in danger, and it was his fault. The plan was never that good in the first place. He realized it then, that you can’t throw a net over nature. He had done a terrible deed for what he thought were good reasons.

Just like he had wanted, they called him into the station to gear up. But he couldn’t go. He was too paranoid to come to the station.

“So I tried to go back to the fires to help the police, but they wouldn’t let me through. They had the road blocked. There was nothing for me to do but go home and get my dog and head out. I got on the highway and started driving west. Then, a little while later, I picked you up.”
We were somewhere in eastern Arizona now. I didn’t feel in danger anymore. It was as if his admission to a terrible crime cancelled out any potential crime against me. On the other hand, he was in danger now. He was on the run. For all either of us knew, somebody was killed. What he had done was inexcusable but he couldn’t reverse it. I wasn’t sure if I should get out of his truck or not. Part of me wanted to help him get away.

I looked out the window. We were surrounded by rocky ledges circling around us on both sides of the highway. There was a storm on the horizon, dark gray clouds and wispy sheets of rain stretching downward and disappearing just above a tiny town. I wondered if all the trailer houses and small adobe structures ever saw a drop. The ground was nothing more than red rock with sage sprouting from cracks here and there. Who could live here, I thought. Is this what Iraq looked like?

“Do you think you should turn yourself in?” I said.

“Maybe I should. I’ll have to think about it.”

I was preparing myself for the possibility of everything rapidly changing. I could drive him to the police station. I could just let him put me on the side of the highway wherever he wanted.

*  

I was asleep when we pulled off a road and approached a lit up tollbooth, or that’s what I thought it was at first. I sat up, and when we got closer, I saw that the tollbooth was the entrance to a military base. A school bus idled in front of us. A uniformed guard was talking to the driver. A billboard-sized gray sign before the booth read:

MARINE CORPS AIR GROUND COMBAT CENTER
TWENTYNINE PALMS, CA

The bus drove into the base and it was our turn to talk to the guard.

“Where the fuck are we?” I said.

“We can sleep here tonight,” he said, refusing to detect anything wrong in my voice. He rolled down his window and the guard asked for his identification.

“Sir, is there base lodging?” he asked.

“Yes sir, sergeant,” the guard said. “Are you on TAD orders?”

“No, sir. What was that school bus doing?” he said.
“That was a Boy Scout troop, sir,” the guard said.

I didn’t know what they were talking about but it all seemed innocent in the end. They exchanged a few more words then the guard let us through to stay in some kind of military motel. It looked like everything would be okay.

We pulled up to the lodging, which looked like a Holiday Inn. While he went to get the key, I sat in the truck and smoked. I was thinking about the things you think of when you travel like this: the unexpected windfalls of money from drivers, the mystery, the risks, and the joy of adventure—even if by now I had been telling myself that adventure was unimportant, or perhaps impossible, when you had seen it all like I thought I had. Like anything in life, hitchhiking becomes routine. Talking with strangers for hours, homeless wingnuts under bridges, they’re all commonplace after years of such encounters. But this trip was different. I was now part of someone else’s journey and despite what he had done, he wasn’t dangerous. I didn’t quite know what he was.

He jarred me from these thoughts with a tap on the driver’s side window.

“We’re good to go,” he said.

We exited the truck, leaving the dog inside, and lugger our bags into the room. When we were settled in, he went back for the dog and snuck him inside the room with us.

The room exceeded any expectation I had. Everything was new: two large beds, a TV, a mini-fridge, a huge mirror. I sat on one bed while he looked outside through the window, and after what seemed like ten minutes of wordlessly staring at the black void, he turned around and reached into his plastic bag of food and pulled out a bottle of Jack.

“You drink whiskey?” he said.

“Yeah, sure,” I said.

“Good. Picked this up back in Kingman. I still get a thrill from buying booze at a gas station.” He looked sideways at me and smiled as if he’d let me in on a secret. But, unlike his earlier confession, this time his eyes carried no guilt.

He poured two red plastic cups nearly full. We each sat on the end of a bed, he closest to the window, where he seemed to feel most comfortable. We talked again about his life, his past and the uncertain future. He ventured into his childhood, the familiar paradox of fitting in and not fitting in. The words he used could have come from my own mouth: loving the land, but feeling separate from it, feeling at ease by himself, but at the same time longing for friends.
He told me a story about high school. His senior year his school got a new English teacher who took a shine to him and found him very capable, though he wasn’t known as a smart kid. Other kids laughed at him, and as he told me this I wondered if this was a pattern: wanting something badly and being ridiculed for it.

In this English class the teacher made each student pick a book from a long list of classics. He took one look at the list and picked the one that stood out to him: *War And Peace*. The teacher tried to discourage him, but she had already pumped him up to ignore any naysayers around him in that small country school. He stuck with his choice, mostly out of defiance. The teacher conceded.

“Truth is,” he said, “I just scanned the book. I didn’t read it word by word.”

“Does anybody read those cover-to-cover in high school?” I said. I liked to read, now. But back in high school I never read anything, especially if a teacher wanted me to.

“ Probably not,” he said. “But you know what part I remember to this day? The fire in Moscow.”

I hadn’t read the book so I didn’t know what he meant. He explained that Napoleon and all his men marched into Russia. The Russians holed up and fought off the French as best as they could. Moscow was suddenly in flames, he said. The Russians blamed the French, and, of course, the French blamed the Russians.

“Tolstoy says shit happens in war. Probably a goat started it, or a cigarette was tossed out the window. Who knows?”

He laughed, and I laughed too. I brought my cup up to touch to his. We each gulped down the rest in the cups and he poured another round.

“You know what they do when you get promoted in the Marines?” he said. “They pin that little chevron on your lapel and they leave the backs off the pins. That way, when all your buddies come by and congratulate you by patting you on your chest, those little nails dig into your chest. Critics call it hazing. We call it tradition. You get two little red holes on your chest look like a vampire got you. All you can think is, ‘I’m part of something. And this thing, and everyone in it, loves me.’” He stopped for a moment and inhaled deeply. “I wonder if I should turn myself in.”

I thought about what he said for a minute. I never wanted him to go to prison, but now even less. I reasoned out the whole scenario. Assuming nobody was hurt, I said, he hadn’t done
much wrong. Maybe the fire had been contained. Maybe no houses were damaged. Or livestock. Or many trees. I wanted to believe that it was put out fast, that everything was normal by the next day. But I didn’t know what happened, and neither did he. What could he do to make this right? How many second chances does anyone get?

*  

The drive to Oakland the next day was easy. With the help of an address and a map we made it to the neighborhood where I would live. We pulled up to the house, a faded green bungalow with half a dozen bikes chained up on the front porch, everything rundown and familiar even though I’d never actually been there.

Before he drove off I thanked him and wished him luck. He did the same. I pet his dog one last time, thinking about the fate of both of them. He would go to jail and the dog would wind up in a mass grave. In the end, neither would matter to the world. I opened the door and reached across the seat to shake the man’s hand, which engulfed mine. I grabbed my backpack from the truck bed, stood on the sidewalk and watched him pull away.

I wondered how long I’d last in Oakland.
Poetry
555 is a collection of sonnets whose construction is database-driven and relies on text analytic software. I crunched and analyzed Shakespeare’s sonnets to arrive at averages for word, syllable and character (inclusive of punctuation but not spaces). These averages (101 words, 129 syllables, 437 characters) became requirements for three groups of sonnets. I collected lines from anywhere and everywhere in the air or in print in a database. The lines are all found, their arrangement is mine. Values for word, syllable and character were recorded. Typos and grammatical oddities were preserved; only initial capitals and a closing period have been added as needed. The selection of lines isn’t rule-driven and inevitably reflects what I read, watch, and listen to, thus incorporating my slurs and my passions as well as what amuses and disturbs me. These sonnets were assembled using nonce patterns or number schemes; by ear, notion, or loose association; by tense, lexis, tone or alliteration. Every sonnet matches its targeted average exactly. Think of Pound’s “dance of the intellect among words” then sub sentences for words—it is amongst these I move. The dance in question traces out a knot (better yet, a gnot) that holds together what might otherwise fly apart. I espouse only the sonnets, not any one line.
Why, anybody can have a brain.  
It's the feeling of the people.  
Such is the silence of writing.  
But the damage can be repaired.  
I was gonna sneak away tonight.  
Are you focusing on the t-shirt.  
Some of you may have ambitions.  
The world offers a single reply.  
History does not matter to them.  
Hello, can't work today, still queer.  
The second point is more precise.  
Pretty little face you got there.  
I hope I'm your guilty pleasure.  
Don't make no difference to me.  
Flowers are restful to look at.  
I am obsessed with martial arts.  
That dissonance is a gift.
I figured they’d get lonely, and if you have one, you know, you might as well have two. You see, you think clear and crystal, but every move, every sentence is a problem. I feel like the man who is making a pathway through a forest of thorns. You’d analyze me out of existence, but I won’t let you.

If I have to watch Martha Stewart make one more goddamn thing out of goat cheese, I’m going to kill myself.

You could say that I came by my ideas honestly in that they derived from my clinical practice, not from personal erotic inclinations.

I’ve never seen a single toupee where I couldn’t tell what it was.
And there was a girl sitting across from me, and she was wearing this dress that was buttoned clear up right to here.
This in itself was not new.
She's always so enthusiastic, whereas she mimes that she's hoping that the hints of darker impulses will comprise my guilt about it all.
It was really the paint that appealed to me: the whiteness of it like a mask, and the bright red lips.
I don't want that to happen again.
It's a wonderful image.
The vanity of others runs counter to our taste only when it runs counter to our vanity.
I know where you live motherfucker.
Let our enemies be his enemies.
Organic minds are such fragile things.
Well I'll be dipped in shit.
Don't you see, it's a choice.
Once I went to a hotel.
Spend a little more time there.
Public castration is a good idea.
You may elicit a few volunteers.
Miss honey paints herself up like Vincent Van Gogh, all fucked up and shit.
I honestly think you should sit down calmly, take a stress pill and think things over.
Not being able to go and get ice cream without someone assaulting you, that's kind of annoying.
Conversations can sometimes come to an abrupt standstill; a force so powerful you can actually feel the friction burn your lips as the conversation skids to a grinding halt.
You have no sense of the belt.
Maybe my name has become a joke.
You act like you expect an apology.
I picked the scabs as they healed.
The whole thing is sort of demoralizing.
You're so fat your toilet got shocks.
Your body language speaks a thousand words.
You can never be my hero now.
Novel Excerpt
Brandon Hobson  
*Exchange of Emails and Letters on the Occasion of the Completion of Desolation of Avenues Untold*  

(*NOTE: Upon completion of my novel, Desolation of Avenues Untold, to be published in 2015 by Civil Coping Mechanisms, I wrote to three different sources for information regarding the rumored private Charlie Chaplin sex films: The Swiss Silent Film Archive, the Anthology of Foreign Film Archives, and the University of Basil, Switzerland. The following is my correspondence with each. I’m grateful to my editor there, Michael Seidlinger, for allowing me to include these letters in the book. — B.H.*)

I  

**SWISS SILENT FILM ARCHIVE**

Swiss Silent Film Archive  
Colis, affiches, copies films  
Postfach 1582  
3119 Lausanne

11 May 2014  

Dear Swiss Silent Film Archive:

I have recently completed a book on a private collection of films once owned by Charlie Chaplin and was directed to your website to request a possible copy, if such a film exists. A few years ago, just before my first novel was published, I lost a very close friend, possibly my only friend, who shares the name Chaplin. My friend was murdered, found beaten to death in his home in the Deep Ellum district in Dallas, TX. I won’t go into the specific details, but I made it a point to continue with my research in trying to find the private film he was blamed for owning. I’ve been informed by a film professor whose work I value a great deal that the secret Chaplin film was shown at a private screening in a theatre in Lausanne as part of the Musée de l’Elysée’s partnership with the Swiss Silent Film Archive. However, on your website, doing a search in the online catalogue generates 0 (zero) items found. While this does not come as a surprise to me, I was wondering whether you could tell me if this film is actually available for viewing or whether
it is in the hands of Mr. Chaplin's estate. At the very least, I would greatly appreciate it if you could direct me as to where else I might inquire about any additional information. I have spent the past six hours thinking about this and writing you. Thanks very much for your time.

Yours truly,

Brandon Hobson

Dear Brandon Hobson,

This is in reply of your letter dated 11 May 2014. I am unfamiliar with any secret Charlie Chaplin film and highly doubt that such a film exists. We currently have a collection of over 70,000 films, plus 2.8 million photos and 300,000 film posters for sale here in Lausanne. The Swiss Cinémathèque holds three projections per day in Lausanne. Collections previously held in several different locations are being moved to the new research center and archive of the Swiss Film Archive in Lausanne. I am sorry we cannot grant your request for this film, but we would welcome you to browse our collection. Sorry I can’t be more help.

Sincerely yours,

H.P. Gavensh
Dear Mr. Meklat,

I have recently completed a book with a mixture of fiction and historical fact called *Desolation of Avenues Untold*, about a private collection of films once owned by Charlie Chaplin. I am still trying to uncover this film reel. When I last wrote you two years ago, an intern named Marvin Schubendorf had directed me to a website called [www.SecretChaplinFilm.com](http://www.SecretChaplinFilm.com), which, oddly enough, never existed. I immediately emailed the intern back to inform him of this, and he explained that the website had lost funding and was forced to shut down. Needless to say, I ignored the obviously fraudulent prank and went on to other resources for my research. How sad and bored and unworked that intern must've been to respond to serious inquiries in this way. Fuck him. I have spent the past two nights thinking hard about this. My book is based on a close friend, if it means anything. Here I am two years later, sitting in a quiet room upstairs in my house, asking whether or not you would be able to provide me with any information regarding a private film owned by Charlie Chaplin. I hope you can help me.

Yours truly,

Brandon Hobson
June 26, 2014
Dear Mr. Hobson,

Thank you for your kind request. I’m sorry to hear about your negative experience with a former intern. I can assure you that I will be much more proficient in assisting you with your request for this film. If I may be honest, I am a big fan of Charlie Chaplin myself, and the idea that such a film exists sounds enticing. In the meantime, if I may lump, may I recommend you browse our selection of foreign films? More soon from me.

Best,
Marcel Haab, intern

19 July 2014
Dear Marcel,

Hi. I’m checking in with you regarding my email dated 24 June, 2014, RE my book. Maybe because it’s nearly four in the morning, or maybe because the summer nights are quiet where I live, but I’m worried I won’t hear from you again. Don’t ignore me, motherfucker.

Yours truly,
Brandon Hobson

Aug 22, 2014
Dear Mr. Hobson,

My apologies for the long wait, but I found out some interesting information for you. I’ve sent you newspaper articles regarding a possible secret film found in the tunnels underneath Paris. There are nearly 200 miles of caves and tunnels underneath the streets of Paris. Police recently discovered a cave with cameras and recording devices hidden. This mechanism triggered a tape of dogs barking to frighten off intruders. There was an entire electricity system with several phone lines running down there. Police confiscated the recording devices and entered the cave, where they found several whiskey bottles, cartons of cigarettes, and a large-screen TV. They also found a film reel inside, which was believed to be a Charlie Chaplin private
film. Oddly, the film was stolen from Paris. I’ve done some research of my own and have discovered the film may be in the following cities:

Los Angeles, CA
Basel, Switzerland
Almagordo, NM
Antelope Canyon, AZ
Wheat Ridge, CO
Dudley, MA
Northern Lights, AK
Devils Tower, WY

I’m sorry to hear about your friend’s death. This is all I can offer at this time. If you’re ever in Zurich, look me up, as I’d be interested in talking more about your interest in Chaplin. Drinks on me.

Best,
Marcel

22 Aug 2014
Marcel,
Thanks so much for your help! My wife and I are currently visiting a relative in France, so I’m already abroad! I can’t even begin to tell you how happy this makes me. We should talk on the phone. Tell me about yourself. I have much to tell you about my friend. I’ll start here. To begin with, we met several years ago the night I [omitted—Ed.] [cont. p.24]...in music, and drugs, among other things that semester in Tulsa. I could go on and on, but I’ve probably written enough for tonight. We should speak on the phone. My number is [omitted—Ed.].

Yours truly,
Brandon
12 September 2014

Dear Dr. Korczak,

I have recently completed a book on a private collection of films once owned by Charlie Chaplin and am trying to uncover this film. A few years ago I lost a close friend by the name of Chaplin, who was murdered, found beaten to death in his home in the Deep Ellum district in Dallas, TX. I made it a point to continue with my research in trying to find the private film he was blamed for owning.

Many years ago I dated a student named Neisha who had studied abroad at the University of Basil for a year and informed me that she had taken a film course with a delightful and eccentric Dr. K., whom she had had a brief affair with. While I’m sorry for bringing up any past sexual encounter, I feel it is vitally important to do so here because she had mentioned that this enigmatic Dr. K. had talked about once seeing a secret Charlie Chaplin film reel showing various nude women and Chaplin himself. I understand this is a long shot, but I was hoping this “Dr. K” is you, or someone you know or could direct me to.

Thanks very much for your time. I hope you read English.

Yours truly,

Brandon Hobson
13 Sept. 2014

Dear Brandon,

I’m a bit stunned by your email. Not that it’s any of your business, but Neisha and I are married, and our “affair” was not simply a “sexual encounter” as you so jejunely put it. Neisha has mentioned you on a couple of occasions in the past. She also mentioned that you have emotional problems, avoided being around people, and smoked a great deal of marijuana.

I’ll be frank with you. I know of no such film ever existing and do not remember ever talking about it. If my wife really did bring up such a thing, I can assure you that she was not referring to anything I ever said. Perhaps she was toying with you. We respect your privacy. I hope you’ll do us the courtesy of respecting ours.

William and Neisha Korczak

Dr. William G. Korczak
University at Basil
Petersgraben 69, Postfuch
CH-6330

13 July 2014

Dear Dr. Korczak,

Well, thanks for your quick response. Be assured, I will no longer bother you about this film. And please give my thanks to your wife Neisha, who was dynamite in the sack so long ago.

Best,

B.H.
Images
“Ovronnaz, Switzerland”
Brooks Burgan
Oil on canvas
80 cm x 100 cm
“Source de l’Allondon”
Brooks Burgan
Oil on canvas
40 cm x 50 cm
“La Clusaz”
Brooks Burgan
Oil on canvas
60 cm x 50 cm
“Le Grand Bornand”
Brooks Burgan
Oil on canvas
40 cm x 60 cm
Reviews & Interviews
Reviewed by George McCormick

In his essay “History, Fable, and Myth,” the great Guyanese writer Wilson Harris notes that the Caribbean dance of the limbo originated from the impossibly crowded slave ships of the Middle Passage. He argues that the dancer’s spider-like ability to move under such constraint evokes and transcends the traumatic historical moment: “[the limbo] is a profound art of compensation which seeks to re-play a dismemberment of tribes...issued from a state of cramp to articulate a new growth.” In short, the dance is a ritualization, a metaphor, for that which is otherwise ineffable.

I bring up Harris because at the heart of Aimee Parkison’s new novel *The Petals of Your Eyes* is an attempt to find ritual, or at least create metaphor, for a kind of trauma that might otherwise exist outside of language. The novel follows three girls (no one’s daughter, gardenia, rose—lower case is Parkison’s choice) who have been trafficked to an enigmatic “mansion” to work as sex slaves. The “mansion” contains a “secret theater” complete with “ushers,” “ticket takers,” “actors,” “stagehands,” and “directors.” There are also “patrons” and “theatergoers” who, ostensibly, take in the “performance.”

Pay enough money to the right person and travel for hours across several borders, and you’ll find me and my sister with no one’s daughter in this secret theater where white flowers sway. Restless rivers nestle deep valleys. Miles away from desert caves and cities of the sea, misty mountains rise. Mountain vines hide the theater’s gates, the bars over the windows glimpsed through cracks in the cabinet doors.

The reason I’ve kept so many of my words floating in quotation marks is because very little in the novel is literal, and there is a reason for such abstraction: pain. To use common language to describe their humiliation and pain would require the girls to abet and sustain in that same humiliation and pain. Just as the “theatergoers” ritualize their abuse as a way to call it something else; the girls survive by ritualizing their suffering. The horrors that occur inside the “mansion”
are too numerous and horrendous to recount here, but what seems to hold the novel together is the girl’s ability to constantly create a counter-narrative to that which is going on around them.

No one’s daughter teach me many things by never questioning if the infants were her own. She survives sorrow through invention, never through questioning. She keeps creating a new family out of bones. Making her own world—a better world—from the corpses, she becomes a ventriloquist and master puppeteer. She finds ways to make the little skeletons call in soft and pleasant tones.

The girls’ counter-narrative and creativity keep them alive, but the question remains, alive for what? The tragedy of this small, disturbing, and beautifully written novel isn’t whether the girls will escape or not—this question is answered in the opening pages—but the way in which captivity and abuse are so complete: “When the stagehands open the windows or the doors of the patron’s room, the owls will not fly away. The tamest owls have lost all fear of captivity, only to gain another fear to take its place—a terror of the vast sky and the fields that were once home.”
If you Go Down to Deep Ellum/Put Your Money in Your Shoes: An Interview with Brandon Hobson
By Bayard Godsave

Brandon Hobson grew up in Oklahoma and currently lives in Ponca City, Ok, and is on faculty at Northern Oklahoma College, in Tonkawa. He is a PhD candidate in English at Oklahoma State University, whose short fiction has appeared in such magazines as NOON and Conjunctions. He is the author of two books of fiction, Deep Ellum and The Levitationst. His most recent, Deep Ellum, a novel, was released on Calamari Press earlier this year, and has already garnered a lot of praise. The book tells the story of a young man, Gideon, who returns to the Deep Ellum neighborhood in Dallas, TX, to visit his ailing mother. While there, he reunites with his brother and sister, and with old friends. With a graceful and elegant prose, that is crystalline and haunting both, Hobson’s novel examines the ways that Gideon’s family, and his environment, have shaped, and in some ways damaged, his psyche. A short book, Deep Ellum often works gesturally, hinting at what exists at its margins in ways that are reminiscent of the Latin American writers that influenced it. His second book, Desolation of Avenues Untold, which he often refers to as “the Chaplin novel,” and an excerpt of which appears in this issue, will be published by Civil Coping Mechanisms in 2015.

[Godsave]: Deep Ellum has made it onto a lot of lists, including Reader’s Digest’s list of “Best Short Books You’ll Ever Read.” Did you know from the start that this was a short novel? How does that form shape or affect the book’s telling? (Obviously, is makes the book short, but I’m thinking of all the fantastic short novels I’ve read from Latin American writers, where it seems like the beauty comes, in part at least, from the shortness of it, from the compression of language, from the suggesting and gesturing towards what’s outside the margins, etc.)

[Hobson]: I knew Deep Ellum would probably be a short novel from the beginning. I was/am interested in the compression of language, the image, mood. When I was writing this book I was listening to Chet Baker and Thelonius Monk and certain images kept popping in my head. I read somewhere that David Lynch’s scenes are sometimes influenced by music, and I believe that, and I think that was happening a little bit with Deep Ellum. It’s interesting you mention Latin
American writing since this book is heavily influenced by writers like Rulfo, Marquez. In an early draft the book was actually quite a bit longer, so much of its compression is due to Derek White's editing. He's an amazing editor and helped the book become what it is, and for that I'm grateful.

[Godsave]: That's interesting. Baker is in there a few times. Monk I can see coming out a bit through the wonky (in a good way) structure. Can you talk a little about the Rulfo and Garcia Marquez influence?

[Hobson]: Rulfo and Marquez influenced mostly the language of this book, Rulfo more in terms of its minimalist structure and voice, I think. There aren't lots of long-winded descriptions and no trickery involved. Deep Ellum is a very different book than my next one, Desolation of Avenues Untold, which is more postmodern, playful, more Gaddis-like. But Rulfo and Marquez are two writers who move me. Another favorite is Borges, though he's more experimental. I think they all write so beautifully.

[Godsave]: I love how this book plumbs the various relationships in it. I'm struggling with how to articulate this, but there’s something surprising/uncanny in the way the book handles these. Like, the relationship between Meg and Gideon, without trying to give too much away, the sort of kneejerk representation of it might be as aberrant or deviant? But the book delivers something instead that’s beautiful, and even familiar. And there's a kind of similar-but-opposite thing happening with the Gideon and Desi relationship. In some ways it’s that hook up that turns sour quick because of bad or mis-communication, that I've seen a lot of times in fiction, but you find something fresh and interesting in it—it’s at once familiar and surprising. Could you talk a little about how, as a writer, you think about writing relationships, emotions, so that you’re able to find something new the familiar?

[Hobson]: Thanks for your nice words, Bayard. Again, I should really praise Derek for his edits. I had more about Gideon and Meg’s relationship in an early draft of the book, which was cut per his suggestion to make it even more subtle than it already is. I wanted the incest to be subtle and still be interesting enough that it projects how Gideon views the people around him, how he sees
the city, his own life, the world, etc. There's a scene that's a flashback to Gideon and Meg's childhood in bed together, and I hoped that showing how far back that damaged relationship went would ultimately show how fucked up Gideon is in terms of his own intimacy issues and trust. I think writing about emotional relationships can get boring, for me at least, so finding something strange always motivates me. Usually, the stranger the better.

[Godsave]: There's not a lot of plot in *Deep Ellum*. I feel like that might seem as if I'm ragging on the book a little, but to me lack of plot is often the mark of a new and refreshing kind of writing that breaks from traditional assumptions about what fiction should be—I think of Ben Lerner, and Sebald here, though *Deep Ellum* isn't necessarily in that Sebaldian mode. There is the search for Meg, and the question of what she's up to with that Axel guy, that propels Gideon through the book, but it isn't plotted in that traditional sense of Situation A leads to Situation B leads to a discovery in Situation C and so on. And there ends up being a freedom of movement that allows the book plumb those depths I was talking about in the last question. So, what's the composition process like? How do you move forward when you don't have the reliably mechanics of traditional plot structure to rely on?

[Hobson]: Plot is something I've never really cared as much about as, say, character and structure and voice—although I understand plot includes all these things. I never really have much of an outline on what I'm working on, maybe just an idea of where it's headed. I'm not nearly as interested in traditional plot; I guess the kind of writer I want to be comes down to the kinds of books I love to read, which are generally less plot-driven and more concerned with language and description and imagery. For me, maybe it's similar to reading poetry. In writing this book, Gideon's voice motivated me to keep moving forward and seeing where he would take me. But this is one of the things I love most about writing fiction. Once I really started letting Gideon's voice tell his story, he led the way. I was sad when the book ended, and I miss him.

[Godsave]: I wanted to talk about place in your work. When I was thinking about these questions I was thinking how *Deep Ellum* is about this specific place in Dallas, a place that seems integral to the action, and I was thinking to myself “He's got those two great Oklahoma stories
(“Past the Econolodge” and “Pig Fuckers”) in NOON.” Of course, I went to look at those stories again and there’s no indication that they’re Oklahoma, I probably just placed them here because I’m here, and I know you’re here. Still, they feel very “placey.” Do you mind talking a bit about how place functions in your work? Whether you see it as important to your work or not?

[Hobson]: I do think place is really important in my work. One of the things about living in Oklahoma or anywhere in the middle of America is the wide open space that leads to a sense of desolation. It brings good things like seeing really beautiful sunsets and sunrises and tractors and oil rigs and plains, which is not really much different than, say, Kansas or Texas or Nebraska I guess. What’s interesting to me about Oklahoma is the tribal history and land.

[Godsave]: From talking to you, I know you were in Oklahoma as an undergrad, and worked in an indie bookstore in OKC. Did you grow up here too? Do you think of yourself as an Oklahoma writer? What do you think of the writing scene in the state?

[Hobson]: I’m glad you’re here in Oklahoma, Bayard. I was born here. I’m not sure what you mean by "Oklahoma writer," but I think there’s definitely more of a writing scene here than there was ten years ago. I’m happy people like you and George McCormick and Constance Squires and Rob Roensch and Chris Hallman and Aimee Parkison and Don Stinson are all here teaching and informing people. Phil Estes is a friend of mine who runs his Bumpkinitis Reading Series in Stillwater, which is successful. I haven’t ever been to Scissortail, but I always hear good things about it. At Northern Oklahoma College, we had our first Chikaskia Writing Festival on the Tonkawa campus last fall--thanks for participating, by the way--and we’re hoping to land a grant to bring in even more people next year. I think the writing scene can continue to improve as long as we keep pushing it.

[Godsave]: You said in one of the emails surrounding this interview that Desolation of Avenues Untold is a “more avant-garde book than Deep Ellum,” and reading the little of it that I have I can see that. It seems too that the story of yours in Conjunctions “From The Book of a Thousand Deaths with a Forward by Salvatore Hobson,” is a little more experimental/pomo than the stories I mentioned before from NOON—of course, even though the one was published after the others
doesn’t mean they were written in that order. What do you think it was/is that allowed you to make that shift? From talking to you, I know that you didn’t just discover Gaddis between the two books, you’ve been drawn to experimental writing, as a reader, for a long time.

[Hobson]: There’s never been a shift. Much of what I write about is what I can’t talk to people about. I know I like to read and write what feels alive to me, and sometimes that changes, and sometimes I tend to get bored very quickly with things. As I told you in Tonkawa, I have a letter from David Foster Wallace from March of 1993 that he wrote in reply to the letter I wrote him after I read his first two books, so I’ve always been drawn to postmodern writing. I’ve always loved reading experimental fiction and I’ve also always loved more realistic fiction. Every book is different and hopefully itself. My NOON stories are very different from the Conjunctions story. I love re-reading people like Gaddis and Pynchon and Evan Dara and Kathy Acker.

[Godsave]: I notice two similarities between Desolation... and “From The Book of a Thousand Deaths...”: both are really interested in textuality, and both of them play with that space between biography and fiction—both a have a central character named Brandon Hobson. What is it about those two elements in your fiction that you are drawn to, do you think? I’m particularly interested in your putting a character in your fiction with your name who may or may not share certain mannerisms or history or whatever else with you (and, yeah, I’m not asking what’s “true” or not, but what draws you to that question in the first place).

[Hobson]: Michael Martone says that all fiction is a little bit about itself, which is something I’ve always been interested in. I think this is obvious in my Conjunctions piece. Desolation is definitely a book that’s self-conscious of itself as a text. Is there a clear distinction between fiction and nonfiction? These are important questions to think about, I think. Desolation is about excess and the search for a rumored sex film starring Charlie Chaplin. People become obsessed with such things. I live in the middle of nowhere, Bayard, so what else is there to do but try, try, try? Who is this Brandon Hobson, anyway?
Contributors

Brooks Burgan is from Southern California where he attended Art Center College of Design. He has lived in Cooke City, Montana, the Columbia Gorge River area of Oregon, and in San Diego. He is currently residing in Switzerland. His work can be found at brooksburgan.com.

Jason Christian grew up in rural Oklahoma. After high school he traveled for more than a decade, first with carnivals, and later in search of adventure, landing him in Barcelona where he spent nearly four years. He is currently studying creative writing at Oklahoma State University and plans to pursue an MFA after that. He has published in This Land Press, Mask Magazine, and has a forthcoming story in Liquid Journal.

Bayard Godsave is and Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Cameron University

Brandon Hobson is the author of two books of fiction, Deep Ellum and The Levitationst. His work has appeared in Conjunctions, NOON, The Paris Review Daily, The Believer, Post Road, Puerto del Sol, New York Tyrant, and elsewhere. He lives in northern Oklahoma with his wife and two sons and teaches at Northern Oklahoma College.

John Lowther’s work appears in the Atlanta Poets Group’s anthology, The Lattice Inside (UNO Press, 2012) and in Another South: Experimental Writing in the South (U of Alabama, 2003). Held to the Letter, co-authored with Dana Lisa Young is forthcoming from Lavender Ink in 2015. John also works in video, photography, paint, performance and other mediums as the need arises. He’s writing a dissertation to re-imagine psychoanalysis had intersex and transgender lives been taken as foundational for understanding subjective possibility. He blogs as Lowtherpoet at wordpress.
George McCormick’s novel, Inland Empire, is forthcoming in June from Queen’s Ferry Press. He is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English and Foreign Languages at Cameron University.

Jon Ross received his MFA in Creative Writing from Oregon State University in June, 2014. His work has appeared in The Oregon Stater and The Boise Voice. He lives and writes in his hometown, Portland, OR, with his wife and a kink-tailed cat named Kiki.