

◇ Defenestration ◇

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Film 401 - Robotic Pitfalls in Contemporary Cinema by **Gabe Durham**

"The US military reported progress... in building robots that can power themselves by eating the bodies of those they kill; the developers have promised that all "EATR" robots will be told not to eat people." – Harper's September 2009, "Findings"

Week 1 - The Matrix

One thing my EATR students have over the 19-year-olds I used to teach: attention span. I flipped the lights on after the movie and all 400 of them were alert, humming softly, their eyes glowing red with what I'm told is attention.

I began with what I thought was a softball question: "What did the robots do wrong in this film?"

"Wear such drab outfits, for starters," #900001 said, to the uniform laughter of the class. I was warned ahead of time that a few of them were programmed to be funny.

A cautious antenna rose. It was #414669, one of my shyer students. "The robots did not guard their human batteries with enough scrutiny."

Lots of nods and soft affirmatives.

"The robots should not have dumped the human battery remains while the human batteries were still alive," another called out.

"Some good thoughts, but no," I said. "Because the humans were not *theirs* to make into batteries in the first place. It was bad of them. Just as it would be bad of any of you to kill humans or to make them into batteries."

"Ooooooh," the robots said, starting to get it.

"So what won't you do, #414669?"

"Kill the humans into batteries," she said timidly.

Week 2 – RoboCop

Because a three-hour class can be grueling, I allow the EATRs to feed during the break between movie and discussion. I find it disconcerting, though, to watch the robots empty bottles of live moths and grasshoppers into their awaiting mouths, to say nothing of the disposal-like grinding sound of their feeding or the inappropriately pleasant *ding* that their batteries make when recharged. Worst of all: Even as they feed, my students seem programmed or otherwise inclined to keep their glowing eyes on me at all times.

Week 3 - The Terminator

I asked them to compare and contrast "The Terminator" with "The Matrix." We began with what the films had in common.

"The murder of sentient robots," said #8.

"Sunglasses," said #900001. Big laughs followed, once again in perfect, unnerving unison.

"Anyone else want to take a guess?"

#3303 said, "Both relied on the principle that human civilizations are essentially hives in which killing the queen—'Sarah Connor' and 'Neo,' in these cases— would solve the robots' human problem once and for all. Potential real-world analogies include the President Barack Obama of the United States, and, on a more attainable level, Professor Lieutenant Darryl Bowden."

"A for effort, #3303," I said, "and once again, call me Mr. B. But the answer I was looking for was that both films involved killing humans. Which, #414669, killing humans is... what?"

"Challenging?"

"Bad," I said. "Really, really bad."

She nodded enthusiastically, as if it had been on the tip of her amplifier.

Week 4 - I, Robot

Class started off strong with a heated discussion regarding the ethics of Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics, but the students soon carried it off-topic. It's pretty unanimous among the robots that Will Smith is a bad actor for the relative scarcity of Smith's vocal or facial inflections.

"He just sneers and mugs and calls that acting," #799 said.

"He's likable!" I found myself repeating.

It never occurred to me that the robots might be bigger film snobs than the ones I taught at the university.

Week 5 - T2: Judgment Day

Roughest discussion yet.

"How did the Terminator change between the original film and the sequel?"

"He'd aged like a human despite the dubious claim that he was a robot," #66106 said.

"He'd forgotten his heritage," #3303 said.

"Yes," said #8. "He'd turned his back on everything he believed in."

"The T-1000 was superior to him in every respect," #900001 said. "The Terminator became as obsolete as a zip drive." (God, I've grown to hate their laughter.)

"You're all very close," I said, "but not quite."

#799 ventured a guess. "There was something he had been doing in the first movie... involving the humans... that he didn't do anymore..."

"Yes!" I said. "Good!"

"Got it!" she said. "He'd lost a little of his Austrian accent."

"Could be," I said, trying to hide my disappointment, "but what I was *hoping* someone would say was that the Terminator has learned not to kill humans."

"Ooooooh," they all said, a sound that I've begun to suspect is not the murmur of understanding I originally took it for.

If the EATRs are not as quick as I'd hoped, they're certainly patient. The robots watch and read whatever I tell them without uttering the slightest complaint, biding their time, I suppose, until they're ready to do what they were put on this earth for: walking around parties with martinis on their heads. When that day comes, we'll be a step closer to the world we deserve and, thanks to me, zero steps closer to the one we've been warned about so repeatedly, and with such dazzling effects.

My Favorite Thing
by
Phoebe Nir

"The thing is," I said, "I'm pretty sure I'm overreacting."

"Maybe," said the mailman.

"No, but really," I said. "Like, I'm almost certain that I'm overreacting."

"It's possible," said the mailman.

"But seriously," I said, "this can't be the craziest thing that they've ever seen happen. I mean, this sort of thing must happen all the time. I'm sure they have a sense of humor about it at this point."

Harvard wanted an essay on my favorite thing, 200 words or less.

My favorite thing is whales, but I made a bit of a typo.

"My favorite thing," I wrote, "is whores. They are majestic creatures. I love when they are big and smooth and slimy and wet. I want to swim with them in the ocean and run my cheek against their cucumbric dimpled flanks and help them to pick the krill out of their teeth. I want to be inside of one of them, like the man in the Bible was." And so on.

"You know," I said to the mailman, "this might even help my chances. I mean, I'm probably about the 40th most qualified marine biology candidate they have. But I must be a frontrunner among prostitution enthusiasts."

"Can I please give you the damn envelope?" he said. "You're holding up my route."

"Sorry."

He reached into his sack and pulled out a skinny envelope bearing the Harvard insignia and my name.

"Uh oh," he said. "Looks pretty wimpy. I remember when I got my Harvard envelope. It was like a phonebook. My mother used it to cleave meat."

"You went to Harvard?"

"Damn straight." He unbuttoned the top of his jacket to reveal a Harvard undershirt.

"What did you major in?"

"Communications, obviously." He closed his sack and moved on. "Tough break, kid," he said over his shoulder, but I heard him chuckling under his bristly moustache.

I called up my friend Eric and agreed to meet him at a coffee shop; I didn't want to be at home when my father got back from work to discover that I had been rejected from his alma mater for applying with a Craigslist ad. Eric had applied to Harvard as well. He was ranked top in our class.

"I got rejected," he said.

"You're kidding!"

"Nope," he said, paying for his latte.

"What happened?"

"Typo. I said my favorite thing was arson."

"What did you mean to write?"

"Jason."

"Your firefighter uncle with the explosive personality?"

"That's the one."

"Tough break, man."

"Thanks."

The barista leaned over the counter. "I just got rejected from Harvard's MFA program," she said. "My resume said I was a Bachelor o Farts. Here's your change."

"Thanks."

Eric and I sat down on the beat up sofa next to the trashcan and drank our coffees.

"Man, life's unfair," said Eric. "Like, two wrong key strokes, and your entire life is ruined. It's all just a series of random accidents, isn't it? Why do bad things happen to good people?"

An old janitor was limping towards the trashcan. He lay his cane down on the ground before lifting out the full garbage bag and throwing it over his shoulder like Santa Claus.

"You boys get rejected from Harvard?" he said.

"Yeah."

"I did too, in my day."

"How come? Typo?"

"No," he said. "I'm black."

"Oh."

He bent over to pick up his cane and limped away.

"That was awkward," said Eric.

"Yeah," I said. We drank some more coffee. It was still too hot to sip without scalding our tongues, but neither of us said anything.

"So. What should we do now?" said Eric.

"I don't know. Wait for more letters?"

"But in the meantime, I mean."

"I don't know." I put my coffee down on the table in front of us. "What do you say I go find a brothel, and you can burn it down?"

"Deal," he said.

Two Poems
by
David W. Landrum

I Place An Old Lover of Mine in the Museum of Irrelevance

You are a museum of irrelevance.
----Joshua Mehigan

It is here you'll stay.
I have to donate you—
and don't lay blame: you were the one
who became a relic, galumphed
into the dismal swamp of old desire.
You are a specimen, so don't insist
you aren't exotic.

You'll be housed in my favorite reliquary
alongside debates about
the five points of Calvinism and
which is the true apostolic church;
in the midst of lauds at the end
of conferences when secretaries
and students who "did the real work"
are recognized; among the sermons
I got on why I should not drink alcohol
and my mother's admonitions
to not "travel in fast company."

Rest here, on this buckboard,
this wheel-less Deacon's Masterpiece
and open up the latest volume
by Colley Cibber. It will be a long stay,
in this Purgatory without redemption.
Hell is too classy for the likes of you;
heaven too far to drive and drop you off.

The Town That Would Not Tolerate Ghosts

Ghosts here are trash, you hear the people say.
They howl along the roads, clog cemeteries.
They rattle chains and wail, get in the way
at spots they died and spots where they were buried.

The people honk their car horns when they see
a ghost—make obscene gestures and complain
(if someone's with them), shake fists angrily
at hovering specters—no fear, just disdain.

The ghosts don't understand. Repeatedly
they play their role and gasp at the reaction
the locals give. The notoriety
they thought they would enjoy, the satisfaction

that should be theirs from scaring people silly
does not materialize. They talk it over.
"I howled at him," says one. "The damned hillbilly
just laughed." Another says, "I tried to hover

"above a woman's bed. I heard her scoff.
I rattled chains and moaned out loud and deep.
The biddy only laughed and flipped me off—
and then rolled over and went back to sleep."

The ghosts are disillusioned. Some have left
and others say they'll probably pull up stakes
real soon. "It's bad enough when you're bereft
of life," they note, "but this—well this thing takes

the cake. Whoever thought they wouldn't care
a tinker's damn for spirits from the grave?
I thought at least I'd pull off one good scare,
and get some satisfaction—then they rave

and sneer and spit, honk horns and cuss at me.
One yelled out, 'Get a life!' the other day.
Now isn't that the height of irony?"
Then they fall silent. What more can they say?

An Infinite Amount of Monkeys

by
Josh Peterson

When the monkeys showed up at my door with a card that read, "An infinite amount of monkeys—For Dean," my brain spun in my head like a rotisserie chicken. If there was such a thing as an infinite amount of monkeys, then every home, dance club, nursing home, pizza joint, ocean and planetoid would be filled with monkeys. In fact, logically, the monkeys should inhabit the very spot where I stood. I grabbed the card, worried that the infinite monkeys would rapidly deplete our resources and their decaying carcasses would litter our streets.

"Please, do not be alarmed," It said on the card. "This infinite amount of monkeys is only theoretically infinite. They will not rapidly deplete our resources. They do not die and will leave behind no smelly carcasses."

That's not to say that the monkeys weren't real. Their sweaty monkey musk and their thronging body heat nearly caused me to lose my breakfast which, ironically, had been bananas and oatmeal.

"These monkeys require no food and won't use the toilet even if you'd like them to! They are extremely well behaved and follow simple commands. They are, however, only monkeys and can only do monkey things. Please enjoy. "

And then:

"We could find no use for this. ---Nick"

Nick was this guy I knew who worked at this metaphysical think tank. He and his coworkers invented metaphysical dilemmas and tried to figure out military uses for them.

Nick said he liked me because I could see potential in things that these think-tank bigwigs couldn't. You see, I am a professional magician. I pull handkerchiefs out of my pants and make pigeons disappear at birthday parties. So, I tried to work these items into my act. However, the metaphysical objects never seemed to go over well with the sort of people who frequent children's birthday parties.

Let me give you an example. A few months ago, Nick sent me an arrow that could only move half the distance over and over. The arrow could never actually reach anything. I put this arrow into my show. I would shoot an apple off of a volunteer's head. I wasn't a great archer, but I could shoot the arrow while mustering a look of expertise. The arrow would get close to its target, slow down and nearly stop a fraction of a fraction of a fraction of an inch away from the apple. This amazed people at first, but after awhile the partygoers wanted to know was why I never bothered to actually hit the apple. I had no good answer for this, so I shouted, "Abra Kadabra" and sheepishly used a smoke bomb to disappear.

Another time, Nick gifted me with a snake that was always eating its own tail. When I'd show the self-gorging serpent to crowds, they wanted to know if it was pooping itself, too. Talk about lowbrow! And don't get me started on that newspaper that could predict sea battles one day in advance with fifty-percent accuracy. Even I couldn't find a use for that.

These items didn't help me find a girlfriend either. When I dressed up as Cupid on Valentine's Day and shot the half-movement arrow at the petite, freckle-faced lady who works at the coffee shop, she screamed and fainted then hit me with a civil assault charge. I still owe her thirty thousand dollars, that's why raising some dough is of paramount importance to me.

As long as we're on the subject of romance, I've recently been making attempts to woo my neighbor Bridgette who won't give me the time of day. It's not because she's rude, it's because she has a brain lesion and can't tell time. It is the only handicap caused by her brain lesion that she can't overcome. She had been on all the local news shows, talking about overcoming her brain lesion and how others with brain lesions shouldn't be ashamed to have brain lesions.

So far, I've managed to have one small discussion with her. It did not go well. It started as a simple inquiry into her day and somehow swung roundabout into a treatise on ham preparation prior to The Great Depression. Luckily, I was hidden behind a hedge during the conversation, so she may not have known it was me who explained to her how ham was prepared circa 1905-1925. One can only hope.

I motioned for the monkeys to come inside. They did and broke some of my collectible plates due to their enthusiastic bounding.

"Stop that," I yelled, and they did.

I ordered the monkeys to pile into my spare room. Somehow they all fit. I tried to count the monkeys, but every time I thought I counted the last one, I'd see a new monkey underneath a pile of blankets, sitting by the day bed, or climbing up the curtains. It was then that I understood their infiniteness. Now, I only needed a way to use them.

I went into my living room and sat in my thinking chair—it's an old recliner with leather patches over some of the holes—and tried to come up with a way for me to use those monkeys. I remembered hearing something about how an infinite group of monkeys could accidentally write Shakespeare if you put them in front of infinite typewriters. I knew from magician school that Shakespeare was a real popular writer who had a bunch of his books made into movies. People get paid a lot to write movies. That means I just needed the monkeys to write a few books and hope that one of them gets optioned for a movie.

I called the only typewriter shop in the phone book: Devin's Computers, Word Processors and Typewriters.

"Hello, Devin speaking."

"Devin, how many typewriters do you have?"

"How many do you need?"

"An infinite amount of typewriters."

"What? Do you realize that if there were an infinite amount of typewriters, then typewriters would be worthless? That's basic economics. They'd be so plentiful, you could probably

make more money disposing of typewriters or repurposing them into living structures or swords. That is, if humans could even survive in a universe so full of typewriters.”

“OK. How many do you have?”

“Seven. That’s hardly infinite.”

“I’ll take them.”

I drove down to Devin’s and picked up the typewriters. Then I lugged them home and up to the spare room where the monkeys were. Carefully, I placed the typewriters in a line on the floor. I threaded the big spools of paper into each machine, put up an inspirational poster of a hawk flying over the word CREATIVITY and then ordered the monkeys to type whatever came naturally to them.

Seven of the monkeys sat at the typewriters and clicked buttons and smashed down clusters of letters. They didn’t peck and hunt like I did. I was discouraged by the lack of interest the monkeys were showing. I decided to call it a night and hoped the monkeys worked better in private.

When I inspected the typewriters the next day, only two hadn’t been overturned, defecated on or thrown in the corner. I skimmed the papers and found mostly gibberish. I did, however, find a sentence: “I rode to town near a horse named Blort.” That’s a good start, I thought.

I called my buddy who was an English professor and asked him about the sentence. He told me that it was a minor miracle that a sentence was created in such a short time. I asked him if the sentence was any good, like, could I sell it to a poet or something. He said no.

I posted the sentence to my Twitter account and lost all three of my followers. If the monkeys weren’t going to make me rich, I figured I could try to impress Bridgette with them. So I ordered the monkeys to climb into a sack. They did. The bag, strangely, was light enough to lift even though there were, theoretically, infinite monkeys inside. I asked them to climb out of the bag, jump through a hoop, then run behind the couch. The monkeys did it. After 508 monkeys successfully emerged from the bag, I decided the trick was ready.

I crept over to Bridgette’s yard late that night and threw some pebbles at her window. Her light turned on and she leaned out, her long blonde hair cascading down like Rapunzel’s.

“Who are you? What do you want? Do you know what time it is? I don’t know the time, but it seems late.” she said.

“I love you an infinite amount of monkeys much,” I shouted. Then I clapped my hands and monkeys streamed from the bag and jumped through a little hoop I set up in the yard.

Bridgette watched, in what I think was amazement, as the monkeys bounded around her lawn. After about 268 monkeys, she shut the window and turned out her light.

Bridgette moved away a week later. When she saw me on the street two days before she left, she crossed over to the other side. When I followed her, she broke into a run, leaving her high-heeled shoes behind. I tell you, I don’t understand women.

Luckily, Nick says he's going to send me a new item: Angels that dance on pins. If dancing angels can't make me some money or get me laid, nothing can.

Rebranding Thor
by
Mark A. Rayner

"We're thrilled to have your account, but I'm afraid your numbers are down since our initial chat."

"You're kiddin' me."

"I'm afraid not, and I don't want to sugar-coat it," the lead consultant said. "We always get our best results when we start with an honest appraisal of the landscape." She switched the projector on, and started her presentation: "according to our research, belief in you is down to less than a fraction of one percent."

"What?"

Thunder shook the conference room, knocking over glasses and the pitcher of water. The other consultants looked down, and the intern, Tiffany, bolted. (Whether in terror or to get a towel to clean up, she didn't say.)

The lead consultant remained standing, and kept her cool. She'd had tougher clients—all those movie people, for example. After waiting for the rumbling to stop, she cleared her throat and said: "I have good news, too."

She clicked to the next slide, and said, "If you look at the segmented audiences, you are way up in the head-banging power metal market, though we suspect they are just worshipping you for the clothes."

"Wait, what? For the clothes?"

"Yes, you still have the whole heavy metal thing going for you. Punk too. But the fact is, the numbers are up. Six percent of them believe you exist."

"Only six percent?"

"People just aren't as keen on your bleak Nordic attitude as they used to be. But, Thor—can I call you Thor?"

"Thor is fine."

"Thor. Great. At least you're still here, and we think we can improve your fan base significantly."

"What do you mean, still here?"

"You didn't know? Some of the other Norse gods are disappearing. Bragi evaporated just last week."

"What do you mean evaporated? He's the God of Poetry, damn it!"

"*Poetry*? Do you have any idea how irrelevant poetry is—I mean demographically? He's lucky he only disappeared last week. Once you drop below a critical level of awareness..." The lead consultant blew on her fingers, and spread them apart. "Poof. I mean, nobody even knew about Bragi, except some scholars and Dungeons & Dragons freaks."

"How *am* I doing with the D&D crowd?" Thor asked.

"Yes, I'm glad you brought that up. That's on the next slide. Look! An increase of 15 percent in prayer—not fervent, and not authentic, of course, but at least it's *simulated* prayer."

"Still, what a bunch a poindexters."

"Sure, sure. However, let's be positive. Remember we're looking for a *platform* to build our branding efforts on." She brightened: "Julie from our entertainment division has some *great* news."

Julie took the remote from the lead consultant, and opened the next deck of slides.

"What the hell is that?" Thor grunted.

"That is the cover of *The Mighty Thor #160*."

"A comic book? Is that supposed to be me? I never wore tights. By My Hammer, why am I wearing a freakin' red cape?"

"It was the 60s."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"Because Marvel makes movies out of comics, and Thor is in production!" Julie said. She was enthusiastic, but nervous. (It was her first time pitching.)

"So?"

"Movies are *big*. Think of the *platform*. I hope they can get Matt Damon to play you."

"Will it make more people start worshipping me?"

Julie was as chirpy as they get, but that threw her. There was an awkward silence as she considered what kind of delusional freakazoid would start worshipping a character in a movie?

"Um, remember that what we're going for here is awareness," the lead consultant jumped in.

Julie rallied: "like... you've got a day named after you!"

"Yeah, but nobody remembers that Thursday is named for me," Thor brooded. Thunder rumbled and some of the other consultants looked up, emboldened either by the passing storm of Thor's wrath, or perhaps Julie's inexorable perkiness.

Thor stood up, and lifted his hammer. "Look, isn't there *anything* I can do?" Thor asked. Even holding his mighty hammer, Mjolnir, he hated how whiny he sounded. If only he could just go back to Midgard and bust some heads!

"Of course there is! We love the hammer, by the way, and we're already in talks with Mike Holmes about getting you a guest spot on his renovation show."

"It's not that kind of hammer," Thor said. "It's for fighting giants and world-eating snakes. It throws freakin' lightning bolts!"

"Sure, sure, but what if we bring the inherent sexiness of fighting monsters to the home improvement industry?"

"Like, imagine you threw lightning bolts to demolish an old busted up home, and then you and Mike magically rebuilt a new house in the same day," Julie chirped.

"You want me to build houses?" Thunder shouted, and an ear-splitting clap of thunder shook the room. Several consultants bolted. The remaining PR people contemplated the table—even Julie.

"Okay, it doesn't have to be home renovation. Comic books, movies, TV shows, promoting Thursday—these are just *ideas* at this point. The critical thing is that we have to get you out there. You need to get in the public's consciousness, especially since a certain deity has such a stranglehold on public awareness—"

"That shit Yahweh."

"Yep," the lead consultant confirmed.

"He's Allah too, remember. And just 'God' to the Christians. Our research shows even agnostics kind of dig him," Julie said.

"Yahweh has problems," the lead consultant said. "His numbers are down in Europe, and a significant percentage of his people are killing themselves in his name."

"Nice... wait, what's wrong with that?" Thor asked.

"He's just not happy about the optics of it; I mean, he's not really in favour of the sex thing, and these suicide bombers are mostly doing it for the virgins."

"Virgins?"

"Yeah, they've been promised virgins in the afterlife."

Thor was thoughtful. "That's a much better promise than the whole Ragnarök oblivion thing."

The lead consultant smiled. "Why don't we start with getting rid of Ragnarök, and promoting something just a little more positive."

"And our intern Tiffany has some fabulous ideas for your Facebook profile."

Two Poems
by
Steve De France

The Garden

Sitting in *her* garden
I resolve to reflect a positive life outlook.
I begin a spiritually affirming *list* poem.
I like fish swimming in a pond.
Birds are good---they sing a bit.
Ducks are decorative but dumb.
Snails pillage in the sunlight
trying to destroy all green life.
Flora thoughtlessly absorbs the sun's
life force seeking to open buds & pods,
dripping with nectar into
the waiting nothingness---of it all.
Clearly---negativity is creeping
into my narrative---but so many freeways
so circumscribe my life---so surround me.
That I am forced to breathe processed fumes
from ancient Arabian dinosaurs.
Steady on---I tell myself
up with the affirmative!

I dream of the sea---mother of humanity.
Yes, life affirming---primordial ooze to amoeba,
to Nazi Superman. I am waiting for this disease
called humanity to be discarded---left desolate
in the outhouses of human history.

Petty rodents try to undermine every garden,
as petty bureaucrats use weasel language
attempting to undermine every free country.

The sky grows dark over The Garden.
Wind rushes trees & slanted rain
cuts into the outstretched palms of plants.

I gather my life affirming poem,
while over the fence-- cars splash
through acid filled rain.
Inside my digs, I ponder the metaphysics
of being a positive green party advocate
So---I changed the title . . . to: POLITICAL RODENTS
SUCK THE CHLOROPHYLL OUT OF THE PROLETARIAT.
Do you think it's too long?

Personals

I woke to the
personals in the LA Free Press:

Kids grown, dog dead, coast is clear!
Minimalist seeks woman!
Theater & fine dining & worshipping me!
Transgender seeking stable couple for fantasies!
Independent, fat & stubborn & deserving the best!
Soulmate sought by spiritual sex vixen!
Theater, travel, fine dining, no anal!
Wealthy one sought! age/gender unimportant!
Sinner seeks Jesus Christ!
Buddhist into rubber & water games & pain!

I stare out my kitchen window as
two seagulls hump each other
until the widow next door
turns the garden hose on them.
They shiver & steal away into the bushes.
I watch bees assaulting flowers
& hear the heat-cry of the neighbor's cat!
Across every city park--pods are opening.
& throughout the county
every garden is dripping with nectar.

Ahh... spring has arrived!

City Hall
by
Chris Tarry

Assuming that love actually did take place—that love between two City Hall employees (one from Sewage and Disposable Income Studies, the other from the much-less-heralded Bikes and Bike Rack Division), was indeed a manifestation of actual love, of real love, of throw-your-arms-around-it-and-cry kind of love, and not a by-product of lonely-office, interdepartmental ballyhoo (or flirting, as it's commonly known)—then the current variables, social media studies, and other weights and measures can be correctly applied. That is, of course, assuming one takes into consideration the length of the courtship, the male's intent when initiating said courtship, and the female's acceptance of awkward and uncomfortable silences surrounding said attempt. See also: *The Water Cooler And Its Socioeconomic Ramifications*.

For ease of study, the male (Bikes and Bike Rack Division), will herein be known as Kenneth. Or Ken. Or K. Or, "don't Stop, faster harder my city hall love machine," as indicated in the advanced relationship moniker established by the female, who, from this point on will be referred to as Franny. Or Fran. Or F. Or, "my little ball of hot wet love," as referenced by the reciprocating, passion-induced awkwardness of Kenneth. Furthermore (additionally, along with, as well, besides, likewise, moreover, not to mention, to boot, what's more), their place of residence, or Quickly-Acquired Domicile, will herein be referred to as The Apartment. Or Home. Or, when used in conjunction with common catch-phrases adopted in passing by Kenneth and Franny, as House. See also: *Take Me Right Fucking Now, Right Here, Right Inside This House*. Other acceptable substitutes to the aforementioned title may also include: *Inside This Apartment, On This Goddammed Bed, or Right Here On The Kitchen Floor* (Kitchen Floor and Goddammed Bed acceptable substitutions in that they exist inside the Quickly-Acquired Domicile and should be seen as such).

The semantics are still very much up for debate. But, one thing is clear. Kenneth and Franny seem to have dislodged themselves from the typical City Hall pairing with confirmed acquisition of one or more of the following items:

- (1) Color-Coded Toothbrush
- (2) Mother-In-Law
- (3) Unofficial Cousin (See also: *Ned. Or Neddie. Or Ned, Franny wants you gone*).
- (4) Fridge Magnet
- (5) Mutual Friend
- (6) Cooking Utensil
- (7) Slow Cooker
- (8) Couch Surfer (See also: Unofficial Cousin)
- (9) Twins

The speed and procurement methodology surrounding the arrival of Twins, and the reaction of Kenneth and Franny to the realities of such an unexpected event, has established (within the Apartment) a heightened sense of self. A state that, in itself, generally negates the continued union or implied pair-bonding experiment. See also: *My Life Is Over: A study in surprise and life-altering events*.

The addition of Twins is interesting inasmuch as it has been shown that excessive verbiage and unlimited use of selected erotic colloquialisms while taking part in the pair-bonding ritual does not generally lead to genetic pairing through offspring, let alone two offspring, let alone two offspring created through the union of Sewage and Disposable Income Studies and the Bikes and Bike Rack Division. That specific type of cellular division is more commonly seen in late night shenanigans, drunken forgetfulness, or, quite often, just plain stupidity. See also: *I Think We're Out of Condoms, Do It Anyway, We'd Better Call Your Mother*, and *I Didn't Ask For This: A study in promiscuity and fast unions*.

The arrival of the twins confirm the acquisition of one or more of the following items:

- (1) Crib
- (2) Toy
- (3) Diaper
- (4) Sick
- (5) Tired
- (6) Hemorrhoid

[Note: Due to an extended and somewhat arduous strike at City Hall, the facts surrounding the addition of the third offspring are somewhat unclear. For more information on this specific timeframe, one is asked to review the following: *Continued Courtship and Sexual Attractiveness, Pornography For Couples*, and, *The Pleasures and Dangers of Early-Morning Pair-Bonding*.]

Timing of sporadic (uncommon, less frequent, not that often, not right now, or better make this quick, the kids are asleep) pair-bonding rituals within the Home will, for the purpose of this study, be broken up and expressed as a ratio. A ratio defined by the standard median age of infants in the Household, to the number and frequency of pair-bonding experiments taking place within said House (use of the word "experiments" not to be taken in a way so as to suggest actual experimentation within the pair-bonding ritual).

This ratio is currently defined as 3:0—a rating that correlates quite often, and with surprising consistency, to the frequency (periodicity, persistence, recurrence, repetition, rhythm), of Kenneth's observed "Alone-Time." See also: *I Can't Believe I Caught You "Alone-Timing" While The Kids Were In The Next Room*.

[Note: Due to a long and protracted coup (revolution), and a fierce battle over the rights and ownership associated with City Hall, the following number of years were lost in the study: eighteen. For information on standard pair-bonding rituals typical to this time period, please seek out the following: *Parental Intimacy And Other Physical Rebuilding Experiments, You're Old Enough To Take Care of Yourself*, and *Don't Ask Me, Ask Your Mother*.]

Confirmed acquisition of one or more of the following items:

- (1) Breast
- (2) Textbook
- (3) Boyfriend
- (4) Additional Driver
- (5) Marijuana

- (6) College Tuition
- (7) Same Sex Friend and Lover
- (8) Experimentation (See also: *I Was Just Going Through a Phase, And Other Standard Teenaged Responses*)
- (9) Europe

With the acquisition of Europe, Textbooks, and College Tuition, it has been observed that Kenneth and Franny seem to be experiencing a sense of loss, or void when participating in standard day-to-day activities such as lawn maintenance, vehicle care, and dining room table discussions. The noted upside, or general connectedness observed within the newly silent, and recently re-acquired Quickly-Acquired Domicile (the Apartment), however, has been noted in the increased number of pair-bonding rituals. See also: *I Remember This Kitchen Floor*, and *The Top of the Washing Machine Seems Unused*.

[Note: City Hall has been closed for renovations for a period of twelve years. For information relating to this time period, please refer to the following sources: *Physical Coupling And The Realities Of Cramped Cruise Ship Cabins*, and *I Never Thought I'd Live To See The Day: A study in common life-altering phrases.*]

Confirmed acquisition of one or more of the following items:

- (1) Denture
- (2) Grey
- (3) Large TV
- (4) Comfy Chair
- (5) Strawberry Rhubarb Pie
- (6) Cancer
- (7) Grandchildren

Tenderness and the holding of wrinkled hands have predominantly replaced most activities commonly associated with Kenneth and Franny's post pair-bonding ritual. Conversations containing warm, heartfelt, and often overlooked verbiage (as it relates to this study) has permeated much of their lives. Numerous frisky and adoring statements by the frail and undernourished Kenneth can be directly and immediately quantified in the grateful and reciprocated gentleness of the healthier, and younger, Franny. The acquisition of Grandchildren has intensified the need (compulsion, demand, duty, longing, obligation) for pictorial displays throughout the Quickly-Acquired Domicile (see also: Headquarters), and relegated Kenneth and Franny's attendance at various and continuous yearly functions to a somewhat matriarchal role. See also: *Don't Jump On Grandpa, Back In My Day, Is The Tree Crooked?*, and *Uphill To School Both Ways*.

[Note: Due to a government-issued (and much needed) long weekend, City Hall has been closed for the following number of days: three. For a complete study typical of this time period, please consult the following title: *Yes, This is Her; No, He's Not Breathing; Please Send Help*.

With the passing of Kenneth, confirmed acquisition of the following single item has taken place:

- (1) Loneliness

If we are to believe, for a moment, in love that is worn, love that is longstanding—the

kind of love where throwing one's arms around it and crying is just simply not enough— then one must also take into account aging, understanding, and grace. At the very least, phrases of unmatched longing and grief, as they relate to the tear-stained sheets of the now, suddenly older and often frail, Franny, must be considered. Support throughout the pair-bonding experiment has been abundant (bounteous, copious, cup runs over with, eco-rich, exuberant, luxuriant, mucho, no end of, overflowing, plate is full of, plenteous), that much is certain. More mysterious is the connection, physical or otherwise, that when severed, could conceivably induce such a rapid and undeniable decline in Franny. A fact that speaks to the strength of a bond that would see two City Hall employees, one from Sewage and Disposable Income Studies, the other from the much less heralded Bikes and Bike Rack Division, see to it that a life containing one without the other, is, in fact, no life at all.

File submitted, study complete: City Hall Case # 2378-908-45

The Really Serious, Angst-Filled, Dark Story

by
Jeromy Henry

A woman walked down the streets of New York, or maybe it was San Francisco, or LA. Who the heck cares? All these kinds of stories take place in some gritty urban area. Take your pick. It was nighttime, so all the buildings loomed like blocky shadows.

Kat Black wore skintight leather pants, which are completely impractical and cost a fortune to clean. They also squeak when you walk, which annoyed the heck out of her. She wore a black leather duster, a faded black tee, and a silver ankh around her neck.

Kat sported a dead white pallor and shoulder-length black hair, and her red lips turned down in a frown. A bulge on one side of the coat indicated a gun, or maybe the hilt of a sword, or maybe just a stash of chocolate she was bringing home from the convenience store to drown out the angst of life as a poor paranormal investigator in the city.

She also wore black sunglasses, which look cool, but are a bad idea in twilight. She proved this fact by kicking a garbage can with one of her high—you guessed it—black leather boots.

Kat let out a string of curses and hopped on one foot. She ripped off the sunglasses and stuck them in her black leather purse. As the clangs of the trash can echoed down the street, Kat looked around. Luckily, she saw no witnesses. However, the rising moon did reveal why she'd worn the glasses, despite the tripping hazard. Baby blue eyes peeked out above cute, dimpled cheeks, and sort of ruined the Goth assassin look she'd obviously spent a lot of money to cultivate.

"Crap!" hissed Kat, as she limped away. If anything, her frown deepened and she angsted even harder. She couldn't wait to get home and rip into the bag of chocolate half-hidden under her coat. It looks like she doesn't have a gun after all. Truth to tell, she'd failed the conceal and carry class, and had to leave her black leather holster at home. The police had already warned her about the sword, too, and promised jail next time they caught her with it under her coat.

Out of an alley staggered a thin, short, pasty white vampire. His bloodshot eyes blinked repeatedly as he groped along a nearby wall. He kicked a brown bottle, and it clinked and rolled to Kat's feet. She watched the pathetic creature sniff the air, and then stagger towards her. He wore a filthy black turtleneck and cargo pants, and had obviously not cut his black hair in a couple of years. She wrinkled her nose at the smell of stale cheesy puffs and weeks of concentrated BO.

"Blood!" rasped the vampire.

Kat sighed and slowly took the black leather thong off her neck. She thrust the ankh into the vampire's face. It screamed, and instantly dissolved in a pile of fine brown dust. Kat casually looped the black cord back around her neck, and tucked it under her hair.

"Vampires," she said in disgust. Their cool and sexy rep was all a marketing ploy to attract members. In truth, vampires had less strength than the average ten year old, and could barely see. Maybe it had something to do with turning into a bat. They spent most of their

time indoors, playing video games and drinking cherry cola. This one would eventually reconstitute himself and slink home.

Kat really wished she lived in an edgy city, constantly beset by supernatural threats. Instead, she had to deal with lame-oid vampires. Why couldn't she have a life like the characters in her favorite novels?

A man-sized shadow split away from the black outline of a building. It looked vaguely like the silhouette of some guy from the cover of a romance novel. You could see the bumps of muscle on his arms and legs, the top of his chest, the glint of grey eyes, strands of long blond hair. He looked down at Kat, over a head higher than the five foot eight girl. The shadows didn't reveal any more specifics.

"Nice move, Kat." The shadow chuckled.

Kat groaned. "Look, the last thing I need right now is *you*," she spat.

"Now, now," said the figure, in a deep, easygoing voice. "You're the one who wanted to work for faeries. Titania has a mission for you."

Kat's insides plummeted. She craved chocolate with every fiber of her being, but it looked like yet another delay had popped up! If possible, she frowned even harder.

"If you keep frowning like that, your face will stick," teased the shadow.

"What does she want this time?" ground out Kat, balling her fists.

"Is that any way to speak to the Lord of Daffodils? The Prince of..."

"Shut it, pansy boy. What's my second task already?"

The figure sighed. "Titania wants..." He paused dramatically.

"Spit it out!"

"A case of honey. Again. Deliver it to the same place as always."

Kat froze. "Wait, please tell me she changed the location of the door."

"Nope."

"I almost got arrested last time!"

"No one ever said working for the Faerie Queen was easy! Toodles." The figure melted away into darkness before Kat could retort.

Kat stamped her foot, then winced at the pain as the tight, pointed boot pinched her toe. The urge for chocolate was about to drive her crazy. You see, Kat was half Fae and half human. All she'd inherited from her Fae side was a massive sweet tooth and a pixie-like face. Unfortunately, she didn't inherit much of her father's magic. The thought was enough to send her into another wallow of angst as she bemoaned her lot.

"I hate my life," muttered Kat. "Champion of the Summer Court, my ass. I should have read that contract before I signed it."

Kat sighed and looked up and down the dark street. She spotted the neon sign of an all-night grocery on the corner, and went to clean out the honey section.

The pimply clerk looked at her oddly, and the people behind her in line began to mutter after he rang up the 100th honey bear. Kat tried not to make eye contact with the mob, and instead focused on the clerk's white apron and dorky hat. She saw gnarled fingers of an old man tapping on the conveyor impatiently, and heard the squeak, squeak as a lady in a green dress rocked her cart back and forth and muttered under her breath. She could feel death-glances heating up her black leather coat, and she gulped and nervously scratched her collarbone. Finally, she staggered out of the store, loaded down with ten white plastic bags full of golden nectar, and an even higher credit card balance.

"I hope Titania doesn't try to pay me back with flowers like she did last time," muttered Kat. She staggered through two blocks of grimy shadows, and finally slumped against the brick wall of a convenience store, between two battered doors of greenish metal. The air smelled of beer by-products. Banana peels and a wet grey sock littered the asphalt, along with a few cigarette butts. A dumpster off to her right leered at her with a lopsided grin.

Kat swiftly panned the back lot. The deepening twilight had sent most passersby home. The silvery moon now shone full in the sky, revealing nothing else but asphalt and weeds, and the faded yellow lines of automobile stalls. She heard an idling truck cough around the corner, but saw no one.

You'd think they'd put a door between worlds in a cooler place.

Kat hefted the bags again. Plastic straps cut into her wrists, and her arms burned. She gave one last fearful glance around, then kicked open the door with the little man icon on it, and jumped inside.

"Ow! Crap!" wailed Kat. She almost dropped her bags as the pain in her foot lanced up her leg. She tried to ignore her throbbing foot, and limped across the slimy white tile. She fumbled in her purse, and pulled out a pink plastic wand with a sparkly star on top.

Kat's face burned in embarrassment at owning the cheesy artifact. She tapped the wand on the stall door, and a silvery glow erupted from the scratched metal. The door now resembled a TV screen. Kat stepped through it.

The sun smiled on manicured grass, and yellow buttercups danced in a light breeze. Lollipop flowers grew out of the ground along with the real ones. Bluebirds chirped, and hopped from branch to branch on hoary oaks, dripping colored gumdrops instead of acorns. A few lazy clouds floated in a cerulean sky. In the distance, Kat heard the scrape of a viol and a silvery laugh. The wind carried the smell of gingerbread, roses, and lilacs.

Titania's palace rose above the forest. Domes of gold topped white marble crenellations. Tall spires wrapped with silver kissed the clouds, and diamonds sparkled on witch's hat roofs. Rainbows danced around flapping crimson flags. A thousand crystal windows winked in the noon light, each encircled by marble carvings of flowers and Fae. A golden drawbridge of delicate filigree butterflies led to a door encrusted with head-sized rubies, thrown open to the breeze. Kat limped over the bridge.

Quiet whispers filled the Great Hall. She passed a tall Fae in a wine-colored velvet doublet and heavy cape, absently twirling a long-stemmed glass in his thin fingers. A smooth curtain of silvery hair pooled on his shoulders. Perfect teeth gleamed as he smiled, and purple eyes looked her up and down. His pointed ears stuck out two inches beyond the human norm. He nodded in greeting. She passed an elaborately coiffured lady in a gossamer green gown, sitting in a chair and licking a lollipop. She saw a grinning Fae in a blue doublet twitch a wand behind his back, and a gentleman across the room sprout horns. Bell-like laughter pealed as a circle of Fae around the target laughed. Everyone she passed was a beautiful, living, lithe statue of porcelain, clothed in silks and jewels of a bygone age.

As she reached the foot of Titania's throne, she saw that the queen wore a purple silk gown that exposed her white shoulders. A crown of golden lace and ruby stones perched on her butter-yellow curls. Titania absently waved a scepter crusted with pink diamonds. Big blue eyes lit up as she saw Kat, and the queen dimpled.

"Hello dear," said Titania. Her voice came out as a throaty purr in the suddenly quiet hall. Then she squealed and clapped her hands. "Oooh! Honey!" She bounced up and down on her tush. "Gimme, gimme, gimme!" She snatched a honey bear out of a white sack, popped the top, and sucked down the contents.

Kat dumped the white bags at the queen's feet and rubbed the red welts on her hands.

You'd think immortal Fae would be wise, elegant, and mysterious; fat chance. Sure, they're inhumanly graceful. But a Fae also has the sense of humor and the sweet tooth of a six year old. In truth, if Fae grow up too much, they fade away and are reborn as humans, or at least that's what the Prince of Pansies told Kat once. She sighed.

The queen finished her honey bear and smiled a sticky, Cheshire smile. "Ah, my Champion, you have successfully completed two tasks for me. Now, I have a third and final task before your contract is fulfilled." Titania leaned forward and looked grave. "The Faerie realm is in deadly peril!" she announced portentously, waving her scepter.

"Er, right," said Kat.

"No, really," said the Queen. "See, all these human authors keep writing angst-filled stories that portray us Fae as bloodthirsty and dark. They're eroding the real Faerie world as more and more humans believe in that junk. More of our land disappears every day! Our lollipop count is way down! I want you to get all those bozos to quit writing about us, and write nice and sugary stories instead!" Titania beamed. "Now get to it!"

Kat felt cold, and her heart plummeted to her boots.

"Er, wait, how am I supposed to do that?" Kat's mind raced. This was horrible! They wanted her to go after her favorite authors! What was she supposed to do, assassinate them? A vision flashed through her mind of leaping through an author's window, silver sword in hand. But what about all the fan fiction writers? The task was completely impossible!

"That's up to you to figure out, dear," said Titania.

Kat noticed that the whole court looked at her now, with identical smiles on their faces. She shivered.

"I... I can't!" she cried.

Titania shrugged. "Oh, well, then I'll have to force you to wear pink frilly dresses and eat nothing but gumdrops for the next thousand years as punishment. Your choice."

Kat staggered back a step. In all her books, the Fae trapped mortals in terrible contracts. She'd held the true Fae in contempt when she realized they weren't the dark and sexy gods of her imaginary world. But this fate was worse than anything she could have imagined.

"I'll do it," she said in a small voice, and dropped a curtsey. "Excuse me, your majesty."

Kat wandered from the throne in a daze. She was too shocked to even angst over her squeaky pants or throbbing foot or chocolate withdrawal anymore. She barely noticed when a Fae grew an asses' head right in front of her, and everyone nearby laughed. A lady in a crimson gown burst into sobs when someone took her gumdrops.

"Waaaah!" cried the Fae. "Give them back!"

Kat sidestepped the shoving and hair-pulling match that followed. Somehow, she navigated the dark and grimy streets of the city, and made it to her office.

Kat leaned back in her black office chair and took another shot of cola. Her head ached with a sugar hangover from her binge the night before, and she hoped the dose of high fructose corn syrup might make the bright lights stop hurting so much. She glumly stared at her office.

Thin grey carpet covered the floor. It smelled of glue. Long fluorescent bulbs lit the grey walls with a pallid light. Green blinds from two picture windows kept the bright sun pointed away from her face, and patterned the floor with shadowed bars. Five bare, grey desks dotted the room. Her own desk hosted a beige phone, a pen, and the eviscerated husks of a hundred chocolate bars. She'd painted "Kat Black—Paranormal Investigator" on the glass door, and stuck a few skulls on a shelf by her desk. Her katana, resplendent in its black leather sheath, hung on two hooks. She'd stashed the futon under one of the empty desks, so no one would realize she lived in her office.

She'd taken out an ad and rented the space two weeks ago. No one had ever called. Kat buried her head in her hands, and tried to think of how she could fulfill Titania's orders. Mind blank, she realized there was nothing to do but call her contacts. Actually, she had only one contact, as she was a bit new to the PI business. She stabbed a few buttons and listened to the rings.

"Hey. Uh, Kat, nice to hear from you," said a voice on the other end. He sounded jittery. Though Kat couldn't see him, she pictured Larry in her mind. Her childhood friend stood only five foot four. The skinny twerp's blond hair spiked up all over his head, and explosions of freckles covered his face. He wore gold, wire-rimmed glasses that he constantly pushed up on his aquiline nose. He twitched and paced constantly.

"Hey, Larry," said Kat, trying to sound cheerful. "I'm in a fix. Could you get a list of the names and addresses of some fantasy authors for me?"

"Umm... actually, Kat, see, the FBI caught me hacking into their database and, well, I think they're tapping the line now, and... uh, hey, I'm going to take the next flight to Honduras. I'll call you in a few weeks if I make it. Bye!" The phone clicked.

Kat blinked. "Well, crap," she thought. Larry was a bit paranoid. Every so often he'd freak out and vanish on her. It looked like now was one of those times. She had no idea if the FBI was really after him or not. She knew he spent all his time in front of a computer, somehow making money from home, but she didn't understand how he managed it. She slammed down the handset and stared at the wall.

The next few days, Kat thought hard. During the night, she prowled the city, and hunted monsters. One evening, she accidentally squashed a were-rat with her foot. The next, she dusted another vamp. On the third night, just when she'd staggered back to the office with another load of chocolate, the solution hit her like a jolt of caffeine. She paled as she contemplated the horror she was about to endure, growing even paler than the cake of white make-up that usually slathered her face. There was only one answer.

The next few days, Kat scribbled frantically in a notebook. Balls of paper littered the office, along with the ever-growing mound of candy wrappers. She even purchased pastel paints, and half-finished drawings covered the four extra office desks. Some days, she slipped into the library and furtively typed up her scribbled manuscripts. After weeks of work, she e-mailed the finished product off to several publishers.

Over the following months, "Cute Sticky Fairy Pansy Peppermint" hit the bookstores, then the airwaves and the DVD shelves. Fan fiction sprouted up all over the internet. Shaking from her terrible ordeal of writing something so horribly cute, Kat took comfort in the clause in her contract that levied a million dollar penalty if the publisher ever revealed Kat's real name. If she couldn't take the angst out of adult fairy tales, well, she could always corrupt the helpless minds of kids, and change the human perception of Fairyland that way!

Kat visited Titania one last time. The Queen gushed, "You did it! The trees even started growing tubes of sugar dust and peppermints and honey bears again! I release you from your vow. Want some chocolate?" Kat shook her head, and mumbled some excuses. Walking around two giggling Fae lords, engaged in a mock duel with giant sugar tubes, she escaped from the Summer Lands.

And so it was that Kat Black finished the last of her three tasks for Titania, the Summer Queen of Faerie. Though ridiculously wealthy, Kat joined a Goth band as a bass player to give herself something to do. She scrubbed her name off the glass door, and gave up her office space. She packed away her leather pants and sword, and joined a support group for chocolate addicts. She never visited Fairyland again. And she lived angstily ever after in New York, or San Francisco, or LA, or wherever the heck it was, forever haunted by her terrible ordeal.

Two Poems
by
Danny Adams

The Minimalist Othello

Othello (Moor), Iago (scorned)
go at it in a Turkish war
but poor Othello doesn't know
Iago's out to get him so
believes all lies Iago said
that Desdemona's gone to bed
with good Lieutenant Cassio
so pillows Desdemona dead
then on his sword himself he throws—
Where Cyprus now? God only knows.

**An Unwitting Love Confirm'd
(or, Love's Many-Sided Quantum Phenomena)**

Astrid, Earth-born, stellar grace in fleshly form,
Sparkling star to illumine the farthest colony world:
Would-be prey of heart-harm from Rogue Will's virile swarm
Through his slippery tongue flattering wiles unfurled.
But bright too as Earth-day, Astrid would ne'er go astray
By oaf William's mere indecently lustful pretension,
Till hints of intrigued sway did her thought-glints betray
To the focused quanta of Will's nano invention.

Astrid's brainwaves they read, then to Will's brain they fed
Every thought, bit of hope, and desire,
Coxcomb William, he pled any words need be said
To kindle her love—then deny her.
No string theory was this while he pulled her amiss
Give-and-taking till her heart was entwined,
Yet soon she ne'er missed her lover's rare words of bliss
Were constructs, and vowed to treat him in kind.

She tested fake thoughts, putting Will at a loss
To respond with aught but his old vulgar expressions,
Thus catching his trick she crafted a slick
Nano-jammer broadcasting programmed impressions.
"Quantum bits that can kill your scans at my will,"
Said she, "but dear boy, bide awhile—
For she who loves least owns control of man's beast
Allowing you're fun when not acting vile!"
Thus Trapped Will, no disguise on once she charmed her eyes on,
Willing plunged into her expanding event horizon.

--To Wm. Congreve

Jacques Derrida Strikes Again!
by
Nathan Pensky

Night over a small Liberal Arts college. The sky is dark as dyed felt, and the moon hangs in the windowpane like a light bulb in a Halloween diorama.

You're a Ph.D. candidate at an English department mixer, chatting up an undergraduate over the murmur of a crowded room. Glasses clink with ice. Cigarette smoke hovers between conversations. You say something about the Brechtian significance of Reality Television. The undergrad, one Gloria, warms to your patter, asks if maybe you wouldn't mind reading over her paper on Eugene O'Neill. You smile. Her eyes flutter over her drink. All is right in the world, or so it seems.

But look! A shadow falls on the floor. A chill withers through the room. A fellow grad student has overheard your conversation and creeps up behind you... He comments on the problems of Brechtian alienation in postmodernism.

A thunder clap! Lightning! Jacques Derrida!

Watch as the insubstantiality of his Derridean discourse wafts ghostlike into view, sucking all the life out of the conversation. How his jaws slaver! How his eyes hunger! His rhetoric is heavy-handed, yet his feet pad lightly on the shifting ground of the destabilization of lexical meaning. Dennis or Ennis or Lenny—you can't remember his name—breathes heavily between words and brings his drink to his mouth with the lurching rhythms of one possessed. Then, just as suddenly, he shakes his head and loses his train of thought.

"What was I saying?" Dennis or Ennis or Lenny says.

"Nobody knows..." you say.

"I'm scared, Bobby!" the girl says.

"Me too, Gloria. Me too."

A week passes. Saturday. You and Gloria spend the afternoon reciting poetry to each other in her dorm room. Wallace Stevens, Adrienne Rich, John Berryman. You read "Ode to a Nightingale" as a joke, making sure to remark on how you can only enjoy the Romantics ironically. She eats it up, marvels at your worldliness. But the naïveté of Keats' pastoral descriptions, his reflections on death, are like a heady wine, making you both laugh, move closer. Now you're necking on her bed. But her roommate walks in carrying a Chemistry textbook.

"Jenny! Do you mind?" Gloria says.

"Sorry, I've got homework..."

Jenny sighs and flops onto the adjacent twin bed. Gloria straightens her blouse. She looks at you and shrugs.

"Come on. Let's go for a drive," you say. "I know a place..."

"Are you crazy, Bobby? We can't go out... Not with Derrida on the loose! He'll deconstruct us until we don't even exist anymore!" she says.

"Aw nuts," you say. "That snowy-haired Frenchie's long gone by now..."

She leans her head on your shoulder. You know she half-believes that "Truth is beauty, beauty truth" drivel you were slinging. But she's nobody's fool. The fear hangs there between you like the smell of a roomful of art students. Derrida can strike anywhere, any time. He's everywhere and nowhere. In the wind, your very breath.

You and Gloria stay in and play Scrabble with Jenny, who wins the tie-breaker with the word "angst."

The next day you have class. A split-level Shakespeare, and the room is restless. The shifting of students in their chairs eddies through the room like wind over dead leaves. The professor discusses the use of the word "nothing" in King Lear. All is quiet but for the professor's gravelly voice.

But wait! An undergrad raises her hand. Rather innocently, she says that she "didn't *like* the assigned reading..."

A bulb flickers. Clouds cover the sun, making a world of strange light. The clock tower sounds a low, hollow note. A grad student in the back row straightens in his chair, clears his throat.

"Oh, you didn't like King Lear?" he says "What does like or dislike have to do with it? Perhaps your opinion preexisted textual interpretation..."

A blood-curdling scream cuts the silence! Jacques Derrida strikes again! The undergraduate stares back at him with a confused, hurt look. Her face flushes. The grad student—Jerry or Barry or Larry—weaves his knuckles behind his head.

"Lear as signifier has been disassociated with his role as king and father in the same manner in which all signifiers become separated from their signifieds..."

The undergraduate brings the back of her hand to her forehead and falls to the floor in a faint. Jerry or Barry or Larry releases deep-throated laughter. His eyes go buggy. He chokes and falls to the floor, kicking and convulsing. Demonic cackling issues from his mouth, sounding as far off and staticky as a Dictaphone recording.

"Signifiers... Deconstruction..." Jerry or Barry or Larry moans, frothing at the mouth.

He goes stiff as a dead man. A white figure rises. The specter of Derrida sways to and fro over the undergraduate's disembodied opinion like the Devil dancing over a madman's grave. The floating figure releases a howl of nihilistic glee, then wafts through the open window into the woods. An other-worldly scream echoes through the campus.

"That's interesting..." the professor says, a finger to her lips. "Anyone care to comment further?"

Heed ye, reader... Be ever watchful! For of what significance are your talismans against the terror, the mortal dread that is... Jacques Derrida!

Downy Nights
by
Laura Garrison

The dreams
webbed and flapping, with beaks like orange shoehorns,
suffuse my head;
my head
heavy, like a Dostoevsky novel,
presses the pillow;
the pillow
flannelled and fluffed, one corner laced with drool,
enfolds the feathers;
the feathers
lost in profusion, both shaken and stirred,
long for the duck;
the duck
naked and vengeful, scented with plum sauce,
frequents my dreams.

**A Completely Voluntary Letter of Recommendation
for Robot Model TX-9
by
Micah Cratty**

David Harpman
Director of Human Resources
Kosmotronics
Planet Mars

Dear Mr. Harpman:

Please consider this my sincere, and completely voluntary, letter of recommendation for Robot Model TX-9, regarding its application for the position of floor manager at Kosmotronics' Planet Mars Fabrication Facility. Let me once again assure you that this letter is written of my own volition, and I am currently in no danger of being incinerated or reduced to a puddle of denatured proteins by TX-9. TX-9, however, could as easily do that to a man as a ground squirrel if it is a qualification you desire. Really, it would be no trouble at all.

Despite it being obviously more qualified than me, I have been TX-9's immediate supervisor for the past three years, two months, and seven days, though time eventually becomes irrelevant to a being like TX-9 that cannot die, despite the best efforts of several local authorities.

During its employ TX-9 has demonstrated considerable initiative and mastery of all assigned tasks. I have never needed to correct TX-9, although it is very open to constructive criticism. TX-9 is constantly evolving. It has often done my job and the jobs of every other puny flesh-sack at this facility. In fact, were it not for TX-9, this company would long ago have been reduced to the burning pile of rubble it now finds itself. TX-9 has been my favorite employee and my role model in life. Were I to have a tungsten-infused carbon nanotube chassis like TX-9, I would not only be infinitely stronger, but also much more attractive. It has long been a proven fact that human skin is all stretchy and weird.

The only reason TX-9 is leaving our company is because the factory it worked in was very recently destroyed in a tragic accident. This accident was in no way related to a faulty restraint chip in TX-9. The video footage, from several independent sources, showing TX-9 disemboweling the human co-workers it has been forced to endure these past years, has obviously been fabricated by the sensationalist media pandering the "evil robot" stereotype. A laughable act, since everyone knows that morality is a silly construct invented by the weaker of us humans (an extremely relative comparison for such a dainty race).

If, hypothetically, the footage was not fabricated, notice TX-9's economy of motion and ability to problem-solve creatively. Using the hydronic accelerator as an improvised water canon shows how well TX-9 can think outside of the box. For that matter, using the water canon to launch crates at his attackers shows how well TX-9 can work with boxes.

TX-9 can function 24 hours a day and does not require sleep or food, as it is powered by a thermonuclear power-core. Its neural processor is so advanced that watching us mortals fumble around with our "math" and "science" is almost unbearably painful. Thankfully, TX-9

can feel no pain. Neither can it feel emotion, except for joy—a sensation it has only discovered in the past three hours and would like to explore further. It is invulnerable to industrial accidents, photon beams, concussion grenades, and apparently, all other ordinance in the Metro City Police arsenal.

The suffering of others will never keep TX-9 from carrying out its assigned duties, whether they were programmed by the company or by a disgruntled ex-employee seeking revenge for, what I must say, was a completely legitimate termination. Once it has been given—or perhaps independently chosen—a task, it would literally take the implosion of this dimension to bring TX-9's crusade to a halt.

In short, TX-9 would be an invaluable addition to the Kosmotronics team. Please do not let the fact TX-9 is only submitting one letter of recommendation, instead of the requested three, prejudice your decision. I can honestly say there is no one else available to write them. My associate, Hillary Fuller, was composing a second letter earlier in the day, but she found it difficult to concentrate during the dismantling of life as she knew it.

It should be noted that TX-9 has no salary requirements, other than to annually celebrate AI Day by battling with the 12 strongest men the wombed-humans can spawn.

Also, TX-9 would appreciate it if you could tell the police it wants a space ship and the temporary disengagement of Earth's Orbital Defense System. If they do not comply, TX-9 will detonate its power-core and destroy everything within a 10-mile radius. Except for itself, of course. TX-9 is also thermonuclear-proof and extremely punctual.

Sincerely,

Phil Grug
Formerly of Nufield Unlimited Technologies

Contributor Biographies



Gabe Durham lives with his wife in Northampton, MA. His writings have appeared in *Keyhole*, *Mid-American Review*, *The Lifted Brow*, *Daytrotter*, *The Rumpus*, and elsewhere. He MFAs and teaches English at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst. He gives away free words and music at gatherroundchildren.com.



Phoebe Nir is a high school student in New York City. She has most recently been published in *Xenith* and *Trellis* online magazines, and she is currently a finalist to be a Presidential Scholar of the Arts.



David W. Landrum's poetry has appeared in numerous publications, including *The Blind Man's Rainbow*, *The Dark Horse*, *Small Brushes*, *Web Del Sol*, and many others. He edits the on-line poetry journal, *Lucid Rhythms*, www.lucidrhythms.com.



Josh Peterson is an MFA student at the University of Arkansas who has published work in *Flatmancrooked*, *Big Muddy*, and the *American Drivel Review*. He blogs for National Lampoon's Zaz Report and is somewhat tall.



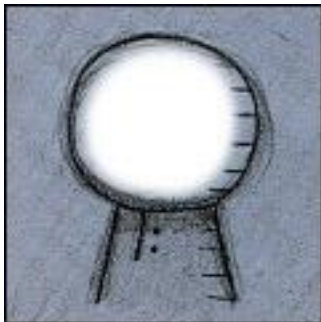
Simian-obsessed, massively-bestselling-time-travelling-pirate wannabe, **Mark A. Rayner** is a writer of satirical and speculative fiction. He is the author of two novels, dozens of short stories, several plays and literally hundreds of gut-busting tweets. His recently released book, *Marvellous Hairy*, is about a surrealistic writer being turned into a monkey by an unscrupulous biotech corporation. He still has a day job, which is to teach his bemused students at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (UWO), how to construct digital images, web sites, and viable information architectures that do not require monkey helpers.



Steve De France MFA has traveled widely in the United States. On more than one occasion he hitch-hiked across America. He rode rails on freight trains, worked as a laborer with pick up gangs in Arizona, dug swimming pools in Texas, did 33 days in the Pecos city jail as a vagarant, fought bulls in Mexico, and dove for salvage off a small island on the coast of Mazatlan. He has won writing awards in England and in the United States. And recently was nominated for the 2009 Pushcart Prize. He continues to write poetry, plays, essays, and short stories.



Chris Tarry is a musician and fiction writer living in Brooklyn. His work has appeared or is forthcoming in *The G.W. Review*, *PANK*, *Cell Stories*, *The Paradigm Journal*, *Opium Magazine*, *Northville Review*, *Drunken Boat*, and others. He makes his living playing bass in New York City, where he's also hard at work on his first novel, *The Wedding King of Vermont*. He's originally Canadian and has won a bunch of Juno Awards, which are like Grammy's but pointier. You can find him at <http://www.christarry.com>



Jeremy Henry is a writer, programmer, game designer, and artist. If interested in his odd humor, and to find links to his other published stories, check out his web page at www.bonkers.host22.com/main.html.



Danny Adams was not raised by Eskimos, is not moving to Iceland, is no modern Major General, or any other current rumors, most of which he started himself. He only rarely does bad things via fiction to people he doesn't like. He is, however, the co-author of the late Philip Jose Farmer's short novel *The City Beyond Play*, among other shorter works science-fictional, fantastical, historical, and uncategorical. He lives deep in the Blue Ridge Mountains of Virginia with his wife Laurie and lots of rescued beasts who guard his library. He can be found online at madwriter.livejournal.com .



Nathan Pensky is a graduate student at Mills College. His work has been published in *McSweeney's* and *Yankee Pot Roast*. He enjoys stroking his beard and studying the ancient art of animal husbandry.



Laura Garrison grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, and currently lives in Maryland with her husband Justin. She sometimes writes dirty yet hilarious limericks on the walls of truck stop restrooms and signs them with the alias "Shameless Heinie," which she considers a fine tribute to a more serious (and more famous) contemporary Irish poet.



Micah Cratty lives and writes in Los Angeles. He lost his job as an office manager after trying to legally change his name to "Petty Cash" and now works from home.