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ESCAPISM MAGAZINE

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The Baroque Absurd (I)
Pansy Maurer-Alvarez

Who needs new publications? Who is the audience? Why should anyone start yet another e-zine or magazine when there are plenty, when there are so much we don't have enough time to read through even a quarter of them?

May seem like odd questions to ask when starting with a brand new endeavour, but are they really? These are the questions, I have been trying to find answers for. Am I a huge supporter and reader of literary magazines? Well, I try to, but there are honestly so many, a huge selection to choose from, to all kinds of tastes. It seems nowadays, that everyone wants to only write and write for fame and glory, but how many of us bother to read? In a world, where people don't have time anymore because they work, it seems readers are a dying breed and we writers are left alone in the field, where no one pays for the time sacrificed on our art. Our work is stolen, pirated. We give our work away for nothing. How many magazines can you name who pay for their writers? Not many, are there? So, is it even work that we do?

So I decided, we writers/poets/artists and the mix of them, must stick together. In a world, where art is standing only on the fragile pillars of national endowments, we must support each other. Hungry artists, praising each other, that's all we can do for now. Well, the most of us. With each other's support and encouragement we grow.

I start to understand better now, why many of my works were rejected by publishers and editors and what is the secret key to a good work. There is no specific magic spell, nothing to point to. Well of course, I like all readers appreciate a decent logical narrative, good grammar and punctuation and many other factors like that. But the main thing, that helps us decide is the feeling we get when we read something. We felt good reading these author's work and we trust You will too.

Annika L.

Editors/

Poetry editor

Lila D: Writer and musician living in Montevideo, Uruguay. Has been working as a teacher for two years. Her music has been published in several labels from all over the world. Loves poets such as Sylvia Plath, Frank O'Hara and Oliverio Gironde. Loves musicians such as Ian Curtis, Darnauchans and Greta Kline.

Prose editor

Annika L: English teacher, translator and writer from Tartu, Estonia. She has been publishing her works and photography for several years (also under various pseudonyms) in Reaktor, Degenerate Literature, Luna Luna Magazine, Five 2 One, Quail Bell Magazine, Peacock Journal. Upcoming in Zodiac Press Non-Binary Review and Welcome to Anxiety e-zine. Loves writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Agatha Christie. Loves musicians such as Rozz Williams, Pete Burns and Trevor Tanner.

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Don Kingfisher Campbell, MFA in Creative Writing from Antioch University Los Angeles, has been a coach and judge for California Poetry Out Loud, a performing poet/teacher for Red Hen Press Youth Writing Workshops, Los Angeles Area Coordinator and Board Member of California Poets In The Schools, poetry editor of the Angel City Review, publisher of Spectrum and the San Gabriel Valley Poetry Quarterly, leader of the Emerging Urban Poets writing and Deep Critique workshops, organizer of the San Gabriel Valley Poetry Festival, and host of the Saturday Afternoon Poetry reading series in Pasadena, California. For awards, features, and publication credits, please go to: <http://dkc1031.blogspot.com>

Lunch Murder

An off-white mound
looking like a snowdrift
placed in a styrofoam box

The disposable fork
like a skier's pole
dives into the packed entity

Shovels a blank pile
up to the waiting wet
crusher that chews

Down the mashed
potato portion like it was
part of a body

And returns dutifully
for another load until
battered corpse is gone

Then cleanse the chamber
with a bottleful of fresh
watermelon blood

Don't forget to recycle
the styro and the plastic
after you visit some porcelain

After Xmas Dinner

Drop chocolate kisses
Swing open the candy bar
Step on pepperoni slices
Enter the electric toaster

Travel along licorice rivers
To get to the pumpkin pie house
Lighted with shivering gum drops
Wonder at mashed potato skies

Hold onto a block of cheese
That satisfies in the cold oven night
Smash together baby tomatoes
Until beef jerky gets devoured again

Liquor crumbs are meant to be followed
To reach the next morning egg

The Processing Plant

First they stick you in a freezer
Then take your fingers and your head

Followed by a flash and another flash
Afterwards you are placed in a cooling room

Left there for hours until you crack
Blandly packaged with plain facility

If you are lucky you are purchased
Wait to be let out of the box

Cast into loving open hands
To be devoured by the future

The Way to Orange

I dived in the stomach
of a gun metal bug

Floated down the river
sliding past brown snakes

Crossing under unfinished
castles with turrets

Threatening dragons lurched
hanging tongues overhead

Diverting to a stream
we stopped and I was

Belched out to walk
until I could see

A very pretty Ugly Mug
so I sat below

The twirling fans to
drink in the poetry

Of other beings still
breathing around lava lamps

And the giant Oreo
in the night window

Ready to fall into
a steaming cup of neon

Extraterrestrial Report

This planet is
populated
with the usual
oceans
mountains
trees

But what are these
vessels of
concrete

The wheeled citizens
roll on
and stop

Their motors
step out
of their bellies

Then rest
inside giants
that don't move

The only creatures
like us
seem to be
scratched onto rocks
shown on screens
or imitated through toys

So let the guide
book read
Harmless

Wait I think
I see something
on the moon

Michael Chin was born and raised in Utica, New York and is an alum of Oregon State's MFA Program. He won *Bayou Magazine's* Jim Knudsen Editor's Prize for fiction and has work published or forthcoming in journals including *The Normal School*, *Passages North*, *Iron Horse*, *Front Porch*, and *Bellevue Literary Review*. He works as a contributing editor for *Moss* and blogs about professional wrestling and a cappella music on the side. Find him online at miketchin.com or follow him on Twitter @miketchin.

BOARDWALK

The Ferris wheel was closed that day. The big attraction that towered over the rest of the park, with its lights that blue and white lights that shone like a beacon after dark. The main selling point for us to visit the boardwalk at all, that we might hold hands at the peak of it as we overlooked the sand and water like we had years ago.

It was a cloudy day anyway. The view would have been obscured.

It was a Saturday afternoon in the summer. We were constantly turning sideways to dodge other bodies headed in every direction imaginable. I bought a tub of garlic fires and figured we'd split them, but you weren't interested so I ate a few then chucked them while you were playing ski-ball, only for you to ask for some, and I had to admit to getting rid of them—we were all out of synch.

We threw orange rubber balls at wooden pop-up clowns. We played air hockey. You won.

We got in line for the windowless brick building with a banner stretched across the side, the words *haunted house* hand painted, crudely drawn witches and mummies peeking around the letters and the borders.

You were scared and I held your hands, but you dug your fingernails into the fleshy webbing between my fingers until it hurt, until I had to let go.

"They always scare forward." I explained how any actors that popped out would come from behind us, because that was the design, to get people rushing toward the opposite end, not moving backwards. Practical advice, besides the reassurance I'd stay behind her to absorb the worst shocks.

It was dark inside at first. Too dark. I couldn't find you. Too many people pushed up behind me, and maybe you got ahead of me. I figured you were near when the first mannequin fell from the ceiling on a noose, when the coffin opened (behind us, like I told you) for the ghoul to spring toward us, past the cackling old crone, though the cobwebs.

On the far side of it all, back in the light of day, there were laughs. Laughs segmented with the sharp tremors that suggest someone was really scared, but was trying to make light of it afterward.

You weren't there.

I tried to go back inside, but the pimply faced boy in the electric blue polo and khaki shorts stopped me. I explained you were still in there, but he said there was no one still inside. When I insisted, a curly haired girl with freckles and braces went inside. Even knowing the haunted house was all a charade, I marveled at her courage to go in all alone. She emerged, a minute or two later, after the rest of the crowd had dispersed, but too soon for a thorough check. She reiterated there was no one inside, and a pudgy Chinese sixteen-year-old stood behind her with his arms crossed like some tough guy. What was I supposed to do?

I walked around to the front, in case somehow you'd stayed back, never gone in the house at all. No sign of you, just the door closing as the next group got started. I rushed back around to catch up with you in case she'd been with that next group, so I could meet you on the other side.

In those days before cell phones, you lose someone in a busy place and there's only so much you can do. I got the man with a bull horn at the deep-fried Twinkie stand to let me call your name. After I'd tried and tried and tried, he put a beefy hand on my shoulder, took the bull horn from me, and said, *sorry pal*, before he went on, hollering at passersby about Twinkies and Oreos and Snickers *like you've never had them before*.

I stopped at the flash-frozen ice cream stand where we'd stopped years before, and by the Ferris wheel because we'd talked about it so much. Walked back and forth and back and forth before I found a cop and started talking missing persons. When he realized you were not a child, but a woman, he stopped taking notes in his mini-steno pad and switched to questions. Questions like *are you sure she didn't go home without you?* and *Did she seem angry?*

Going to the cop was a mistake, because the most he did was to take down your name and a cursory description, though he made it clear there was no missing person report for an adult until twenty-four hours had passed.

I made the loop. To the car to each of our previous stops, stalling outside ladies' rooms in case you'd snuck out of line for the haunted house, unnoticed, because of an upset stomach. That happened to you sometimes. Finally, I went through the haunted house again, looking all around for her, eyes on the floor most of all in case you'd fallen and twisted her ankle. Lingered until everyone was out and the lights brightened inside. Until a new teenager told me I had to go.

Days passed into weeks into months until it was a full year. I kept going back. Rode the Ferris wheel when it was operational again.

Thinking from the greatest height I could see you. Thinking, when the wheel swung backward, it might take me back in time.



Pansy Maurer-Alvarez is a poet, who was born in Puerto Rico, grew up in Pennsylvania and now lives in France. Her poems have been widely published and she has six collections of poetry, most recently *IN A FORM OF SUSPENSION* (corrupt press, 2014) and *ORANGES IN JANUARY* (KFS Press, 2016). Her photography has appeared in several publications.



The Renaissance Absurd (I)
Pansy Maurer-Alvarez



The Renaissance Absurd (II)

Pansy Maurer-Alvarez



The Renaissance Absurd (III)
Pansy Maurer-Alvarez

Glen Armstrong holds an MFA in English from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst and teaches writing at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan. He edits a poetry journal called *Cruel Garters* and has three recent chapbooks: *Set List* (Bitchin Kitch,) *In Stone* and *The Most Awkward Silence of All* (both Cruel Garters Press.) His work has appeared in *Poetry Northwest*, *Conduit* and *Cream City Review*.

Signs

That song and police.
Report move me to tears.
That which was here rubbed away.
With a fingertip.
My lips know the distance.
Between blue and purple.
The children revolve.
Around the better children forbidden.
Their own evolution.
I can leave but where would I go?

I met with the tourists.
To tell them stories about Miles Davis.
And the Grand Canyon.
They feared Santa Clause.
And his seasonal B and E.
We all had a good laugh.
Agreeing that water's corporate logo.
Was hard to find amid the soda icons.
The sign above the door.
Said more than I realized.

Diner Coated in Such a Fine Layer of Death That Nobody Notices

The governor vetoed all funding.

And the newscaster slurred her words.

Robbie and Tim made coleslaw
at the Peppermill Café,

then a Nike ad announced very little
with the conviction
of the swords
of a thousand men.

It was nearly Groundhog's Day.

One of the old timers predicted

that we'd never see another woman
pop out of a cake.

With no more passion

than it would take to let air out of a tire,

we ate our lunch.

Odysseus killed monsters.

A K-9 unit pulled into the lot.

We hardly noticed

the slow, deliberate strokes
waiting off to the side

like a bone yard
or a tabloid magazine.

We never saw the television's hands.
A cabbage has no throat.

The Woman with a Thousand Heads #11

Long live the beauty
of the heart overseas, collapsing
on strange street corners.

Long live the heart

in the punch bowl.

The heart gaining speed
bumps, goose bumps, bumping
in the night and into strangers.

The heart broadcasts illegally.
Long live the pirate as metaphor.
Long live the heart's
dangerous mission, its slim

chance and bathing suit,
its dogtooth and foreign accent.

Poetry by Lila Domínguez

1.

Someone said that perhaps to avoid some great sadness
the answer was sleep,
sleep until the waves cease to exist.
Sleep until so long are no longer relevant-
I just can't stand this
I can't begin to open my eyes.
Its vivid, its almost erratic,
-I'll keep sleeping my life away-

2.

In my hands The Colossus
The stench of the bus wasn't helping
powerful words and intense incomprehension
The name Hughes chiseled on the grave
Oh what we became?
Sylvia, should I fall?
Carbon Monoxide all over my thoughts.

3.

New born kittens,
given away,
where are they?
I ask myself, every now and again
they were mine, they were pure soft
as angels, tiny as teardrops,
I saw them while they were arriving to this world,
Brought them into this world of pain... my desire all in vain,
I heard somewhere they are stray now,
I heard somewhere they are wondering around at night,
New born kittens, given away,
I owe an explanation, I own your pain.
Orphan child of my own,
Where are you now?
soft and brunette,
where are you now?
ginger and blind newborn.
Oh, I need to know,
Damn it, poor slob without a name... I
miss you so.

4.

I am still that obsessive child,
barefoot dancing in the sand,
I am still that quiet child,
Locked inside a library all the time,
I am still that lonely child,
That her father had left behind,
I am still, I am still,
That kid is alive inside me,
burning ad nauseam,
Raising, breathing,
expectant to see a ray of light.

5.

And all the letters I'll never send,
And all the dust I'll never clean,
And all the undeveloped rolls of film,
And all the friends that will die,
And all the records I'll never have,
And all the you & and all the me,
that will never be written on a tree.

6.

Boxes they cry when I leave;
When I vodka , when I pills
My myself and my plenty I.
Let myself go and create when I can
of thoes I belived didnt I?
of them I thought as cried
I recived this and I all the time.
All now and I,
Alone when one character miss his creator;
That I created... and myself too.
Written all over photos;
Old black and white them,
On and on; go inside..
I and the universe
I and the pills.
Just my epitaph I beg you remember;
and I beg you to feed my cats.
Anymore change of missing I cant.
I dreamt that on time, letters I madly wrote,
I written inside them I am,
Love made me scared..
And In my back people laugh;
Boxes they cry when I leave;
They are the only ones
Run across sunshine myself tells I,
My wrapped scared love.
Already still mix myself and I.

Mark Blickley is a widely published author of fiction, non-fiction, drama and poetry. His most recent book is the story collection *Sacred Misfits* (Red Hen Press) and his most recent play, *The Milkman's Sister*, was produced last Fall at NYC's 13th Street Rep Theater. His text based art collaboration with photographer Amy Bassin, *Dream Streams*, was featured an art installation for the 5th Annual NYC Poetry Festival held at Governors Island and published in Columbia Journal of Literature and Art, among other venues. A new play, *Valadon: Reclining Nude*, premieres this November in NYC. Blickley is a proud member of the Dramatists Guild and PEN American Center.

VISITING TENNESSEE

Just before noon on Monday, Paul Dankin kicked off his comforter and stretched his six foot three body over his six foot cot, yawning. He instinctively clicked on the tiny clock radio.

Thick fingers clumsily spun the selector dial. It angered Paul that no matter how hard he tried he could not gracefully blend one program into another. His spin of the dial ripped into many stations, creating a garbled static that he hated.

After many seconds of fighting with the dial a clear voice spoke to Paul. He withdrew his hand and placed it under his pillow, smiling. The smile turned to a frown when the staccato bursts of a typewriter indicated that it was one of those twenty-four hour news programs and not a talk show. Paul pulled his hand from under the pillow and was about to attempt another station change, but thought better of it and instead placed his hand on his stomach, kneading a loose roll of flesh.

The newsman finished the last sentence of a story concerning laboratory animals and was recapping the headlines while Paul's fingers crept down his stomach, playfully slapping at his penis.

"Meanwhile, here in New York, the body of Pulitzer Prize winning playwright Tennessee Williams is attracting hundreds of friends and admirers. Williams, noted for his plays "The Glass Menagerie" and "A Streetcar Named Desire," died here late Thursday night of asphyxiation. An autopsy revealed that the playwright had swallowed a bottle cap. Williams' body will be at Campbell Funeral Home at 81st and Madison Avenue until Tuesday. Hours are ten a.m. till eight p.m. Internment is scheduled for Saturday in St. Louis."

"Yeah, that was a great movie," said Paul Dankin as he cracked his knuckles. "Brando was great." He clicked off the radio. "Tennessee Williams. I just seen that name somewhere."

Paul lay in bed trying to remember where he had seen the name. His hand automatically returned to his penis. The playful slaps soon gave way to a more determined motion. Aroused, his erection pointed him towards a plastic milk crate full of magazines. Dropping the Newsweek and People magazines back into the crate, he returned to the cot with an issue of Puritan. It was not

a current issue but it was his favorite porn magazine.

Thumbing through colorful close-ups of male and female genitalia spitting at and swallowing each other, Paul emptied himself.

"That's how you spell relief," he grinned, "P-U-R-I-T-A-N. No wonder those pilgrims gave thanks." His laughter ricocheted off the walls of his efficiency apartment; the echo made him nervous.

He flipped through the magazine a second time. Its images bored him. Halfway through the issue a full page photo of a bearded, round-faced man in a large hat smiled up at him. Paul stuck his finger on the page to save his place. The article accompanying the picture was an interview with Tennessee Williams.

"Tennessee Williams! Christ, I knew I seen you somewhere. You're alright, Tennessee. No . . . no you're not. You're dead. Choked. Brando'll probably cry. I wonder if he remembers me?"

Paul threw down the magazine, walked over to the door and slowly opened it. He darted his head into the hallway and lunged for the day old Sunday News lying on his neighbors welcome mat. He quickly bolted the door.

Paul opened to the obituaries. His forefinger turned black as it slid down a column of names under Death Notices.

"Watson, Wilhelm, William, B., Williams, M., Williams, T. That's it! 1076 Madison. Till eight. Great!"

Paul stepped into the shower. As he lathered up the shampoo his thoughts turned to his finances. He knew that Tuesday was the first and that his check would be in the mail, but the only cash he had was in coins. He needed a dollar-fifty for a round trip bus ride.

Wrapped in a towel, Paul grabbed at the coat flung over a kitchen chair and shook it over the cot. The clinking of coins on the sheet made Paul smile. There was a good deal more than a dollar fifty splattered across the cot.

The smile still felt strange. In the six years since Pooh Bear Lennox down the hall knocked out three of Paul's teeth, Paul seldom smiled.

Pooh Bear Lennox, who was half Paul's size, claimed that Paul rubbed up against his girlfriend in the elevator. Onlookers were surprised at the beating he gave Paul in the hallway, but Paul's size was a disadvantage. Nobody ever challenged him so he did not know how to defend himself, whereas little Pooh Bear Lennox learned early how to destroy an opponent and nothing pleased him more than to tear into a big man like Paul Dankin.

The neighborhood was amazed at how frightened Paul behaved on the streets, even though he towered over just about everyone around him. Paul reasoned that if little men could beat him up anyone could, including women. In fact, women did. His mother slapped at him from infancy to puberty as did the woman he called Aunt Amy, his mother's lover.

Paul rolled his tongue across the space in his mouth, licking his gums.

His face twitched nervously as he stood in front of the closet, rummaging through his clothes, trying to pick his most impressive jacket and tie. Pants were no problem. All he owned were blue jeans.

Paul's eyes lit up as he pulled out a slightly wrinkled, slightly stained gray sports jacket. Beneath its left breast pocket was a frayed yellow patch that stated WTC SECURITY. Embroidered under the letters WTC and above the word SECURITY were the Twin Towers. Paul took a thick red striped tie out of his underwear drawer and dressed.

After parting his hair in the middle and plastering each side of his receding hairline with tonic, Paul brushed his teeth. This was a painful process. Stained a bright yellow by years of neglect, each morning Paul spent ten minutes rubbing his teeth as hard as he could with a brush overflowing with toothpaste. His tooth enamel disappeared years ago but the yellow remained.

Without enamel protection the slightest pressure on his teeth - by his tongue, liquids, or the air - filled his face with pain. These painful facial contortions gave him the look of an idiot, and coupled with his great size, a threatening idiot. He was unaware that he frightened people as much as they frightened him.

Paul grabbed his raincoat, triple locked his door and dropped the newspaper back onto his neighbor's welcome mat. Outside the housing project sat Martha Poseagle from 12 K, clutching an umbrella. She was leaning against a metal sculpture that looked like a frozen game of pick-up sticks.

"Where you goin' Paul?" she asked as he walked past.

Paul stopped and fingered the WTC emblem. "Hey, Martha. A good friend of mine died and I have to see him laid out. Name's Williams."

"Williams who?" asked Martha Poseagle. "I didn't know you had a friend."

Paul continued walking.

"How'd he die? Somebody kill him?" Martha yelled.

"Choked," Paul called. "Choked to death."

"Goddamn neighborhood," muttered Martha Poseagle. She leaned back on the work of art and patiently waited for another visitor.

Before entering Campbell Funeral Home, Paul Dankin groomed himself by looking at his reflection in the glass door. He squinted at a young woman sitting at a desk next to the elevator. She's beautiful, thought Paul as he turned the large doorknob and walked inside.

The woman's head was bowed over a stack of papers; she heard his footsteps. "Good afternoon. Who do you wish to visit?"

"A, um, Williams. Tennessee Williams. From the movies, you know, with Brando."

The woman looked up. She studied Paul's face. "Just a second, sir."

"Yeah, sure."

She disappeared into an office behind her desk. When she returned a man

was with her. The man looked at Paul, nodded to the woman, and went back into his office.

"Second floor, sir," she said.

The female elevator operator asked Paul for a name.

"Williams. Tennessee Williams, please. I told the other girl that." His face started to twitch. When the elevator doors snapped shut behind him he heard the operator laughing.

"They sure got some great looking girls working here," Paul said to an elderly man standing in the second floor lobby. "Seen him yet?" The old man nodded.

"Look okay? Geez, what a way to go. Think it was suicide?"

The old man shook his head and shuffled over to the elevator. Paul started to walk into the room but pivoted and signed his name with capitals in the guest book. He leafed through the book trying to find celebrity signatures. He was glad Marlon Brando's was not scribbled in it. He had not missed him. Paul wondered if Brando would remember him.

Stepping inside the room felt good. The thick red carpet soothed Paul's feet, relaxing him. The room was huge.

There were many couches and chairs of soft crushed velvet and Paul was determined to sit in them all. The coffin was mounted at the far left of the room. Paul decided to explore that part of the room last.

In the middle of the room was a percolating coffee urn and Styrofoam cups. Paul walked over to the coffee, intentionally scraping his toe into the carpet. It cut a line that pleased him. He thought of it as a trail that others would follow. A trail that would eventually lead people to Tennessee.

The annoyed usher standing guard at the wake asked him to lift his feet.

"Yeah, sure," answered Paul.

The coffee was good and hot. Warmth spread throughout his body. He sipped the coffee while surveying the room. Two dozen people were loitering, many of them were crying. Paul watched a fat middle-aged woman swiping at tears with an index finger wrapped in a handkerchief. She moved the finger across his cheeks with the same rhythmic motion as a windshield wiper, causing Paul to wish he had a driver's license and a girlfriend to take for a drive.

Imagining the wind sweeping through his girlfriend's hair as he gunned his convertible around narrow curves, Paul was unaware of hot coffee dribbling down his chin. His delayed reaction to the burning pain was a shriek as

the cup dropped out of his hand, splattering coffee across his shoes, socks and the panty hose of a smartly dressed woman fixing her own cup.

The usher walked over to the coffee urn and apologized to the woman. Paul, afraid to look at the woman, mumbled. She squinted at him and walked away with a snarl.

"Please be more careful, sir," said the usher. "We expect to have quite a few guests and we'd like to maintain the room just as it is."

"Yeah, sure," said Paul.

"And I'd appreciate it if you would continue to lift your feet when walking on our carpet. Please behave yourself, sir."

"Yeah, sure," said Paul.

The usher returned to his position at the far right of the room. He stood at attention with his hands solemnly cupped in front of him, watching Paul.

As soon as the usher turned his back Paul marched over to a couch. Paul lifted his feet up so high that it looked as if he were marching in place.

An attractive blonde sat on the far corner of the couch. She giggled and Paul felt warm again. He plopped down beside her; their knees brushed. The blonde's lips became a tight line as she looked straight ahead.

"Did you know Tennessee Williams?" Paul asked.

The woman ignored him.

"Excuse me, Miss. Did you know Tennessee?"

She turned towards Paul. "No. I admire his work."

"You're beautiful. Are you an actress?"

The blonde coughed.

"Can I get you a cup of coffee?"

"No . . . thanks."

"It's too bad he's dead but we all have to go sometime."

"Yes. Me, too." And she was gone.

The couch became a frightening experience for Paul. It was so soft and formless that his body sank into the plush contours, swallowing him. He struggled to free himself but his stomach muscles were weak. He could not lean forward. Pushing against the back cushions for support only made him slip further down the spine of the couch until he could not move at all.

With his body trapped within the couch and no one nearby to help him escape, panic seized him and a high pitched whimper, like the whine of a punished dog, cleared his throat.

The usher hurried over to the couch. With his hands on his hips he glared down at Paul. Paul looked up and sighed; he was rescued.

At nine-thirty a.m. sharp, Paul Dankin was dressed and in the lobby awaiting the mail. Leaning against the mailboxes, Paul traced the WTC jacket emblem with his finger. Martha Poseagle, who was rumored to have a crush on the mailman, joined him.

"Good morning, Martha," said Paul.

"Did I miss him?" asked Martha.
"Miss who?"
"Furfante. You know, our mailman."
Paul shook his head.
"You're all spiffed up," said Martha. "Where you going?"
"You'll never believe this, Martha, but I'm meeting with Marlon Brando today."
"The movie star?"
"Yep."
"Good. I'm glad to see you getting out more."
"You look pretty spiffy yourself, Martha."
"How do I smell?"
Paul shrugged. "Okay."
"You sure?"
Paul nodded. "Yeah, sure."
"I thought so. New perfume."
They waited together in a nervous silence. When Furfante arrived Martha smiled, as did Paul when Furfante handed him a check.

After cashing his check and eating a leisurely breakfast in a Tenth Avenue diner, Paul returned to the Campbell Funeral Home. He walked past the woman sitting next to the elevator and pulling on a thread of his WTC emblem instructed the elevator operator to drop him off on the second floor. Before re-entering the room Paul thumbed through the guest book.

"Still no Brando," he said.

Paul felt comfortable. Everything was familiar, including the usher staring at him. Paul waved. Everything was familiar. Everything except Tennessee. He walked a diagonal line, pausing at the head of the coffin.

"He's as little as a doll," Paul said to a woman kneeling at the prayer stand. Paul studied Tennessee's fleshy face. It had a rich tan that Paul admired. His admiration turned to amusement when he spotted the uneven line between Tennessee's forehead and widow's peak where the makeup ended and his hair began. Paul felt that the makeup could have been stretched, pulled up a bit further to cover the gap. It reminded him of the many cold nights in his apartment when he tried to pull his comforter up over his head, but it was too short and would expose his feet to the cold.

"His feet must be cold but they're not exposed," he remarked to the kneeling woman.

Tennessee's mouth fascinated Paul. The dry lips had begun to part. A thin crack separated the bottom and upper lip. Although Paul leaned over the corpse to get a closer look, he could see no teeth behind the crack. The mouth was opening but Paul could only see a dark empty space. Staring down at the blackness inside Tennessee's mouth, Paul remembered that Tennessee had swallowed his death. He brought his hand up and traced a line

across the dead man's lips.

"I got black spaces inside my mouth, too," he whispered.

Paul quickly withdrew his hand and spun around. No one had seen him touch Tennessee. He walked over to a couch, and taking the ashtray from an end table, placed it next to him on the couch while lighting a cigarette. A scolding from the usher prompted Paul to remove the ashtray and place it back on the table.

Paul took long, deep pulls on his cigarette, exhaling so much smoke it made him squint. He was squinting when he saw her enter the room.

She held her raincoat in one hand, a soggy white carnation in the other. She was crying. A blue plaid shirt several sizes too large ballooned up from a waistband of baggy corduroy pants. Her sneakers were muddied. Brown shoulder length hair lay wet and flat against her head. She removed her glasses and wiped them on her sleeve.

After a long pause she walked over to the coffin. Without looking at the corpse she gently placed the carnation on a small table at the foot of the body. She sniffed twice and with her head lowered scuffed over to a chair by Paul's couch. Paul watched her as he licked at the space inside his mouth.

"Hi, Miss. It's sort of sad, isn't it?"

She looked over at Paul and nodded.

"Lots of people were here yesterday. A lot more than today. Funny though, there's a lot more crying today than yesterday. Did you know him?"

She tucked her chin into her chest.

"That's a swell flower you brought. I'm sure he'd of liked it. What's your name? Excuse me, Miss, what's your name?"

Raising her eyes without moving her head she looked angrily at Paul.

"What? What are you talking about?"

Paul leaned forward on the couch. He pulled a pack of cigarettes out of his pocket and held them out to her. "I'm just trying to make conversation."

"I didn't come here to talk!"

Paul shrugged, pocketed the cigarettes, and settled back against the cushions.

"Just trying to be friendly," he said.

"I don't need friends, Mister. Just leave me alone."

"Yeah, sure."

Paul got up and walked over to the coffin. He eyed Tennessee from top to bottom and then looked over his shoulder at the woman. She was watching. Paul picked up the white carnation from the table and carefully laid it on Tennessee's chest. Again he glanced over at the woman. She was looking down at her hands.

A man hurriedly brushed past Paul and snatched the flower off the dead man's chest. "We don't allow objects to be placed inside the casket," snapped the irate usher. "Will you please behave?"

"Yeah, sure. Okay. I didn't know." Paul returned to the couch shaking his

head. He lit a cigarette. "Do you want me to get you something, Miss? Tissues? Coffee?"

She ignored him.

"Did you hear me, Miss? Need something? You look like you could use something."

The woman pushed her glasses up against the bridge of her nose. "What? Will you be quiet and leave me alone. Just shut up!"

"I know you're upset. Try to relax, okay? Are you an actress? There's plenty of actresses around here. I'm waiting for an actor friend of mine. He should be here real soon. Beautiful in here, huh? I'd love to live in a place like this, wouldn't you? Without the bodies, I mean," Paul giggled. "You need some coffee?"

The woman hunched lower in the chair, grinding her teeth. "You'll get yours!" she shouted. "You'll get what you deserve!"

The usher moved quickly beside her. "Is he bothering you, Ma'am?"

The woman looked down at her feet and did not answer. Paul looked up at the usher and shrugged as he puffed on a cigarette. His face started to twitch.

The usher left the room and returned shortly with three other men in dark suits. They caucused in the far right corner of the room. As the men whispered they would glance over in Paul's direction.

Paul leaned forward on the couch, his elbows resting on his knees. "Thank you, Miss. That was real nice of you."

"Will you leave me alone!" she shouted.

The caucus broke. A distinguished looking man with gray hair walked to the center of the room. "Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, "I must ask you to please end your visit. The staff needs time to prepare for the memorial service scheduled for tonight at eight. On behalf of the family and friends of Mr. Williams, thank you for coming."

Mourners were herded out of the room by men with impatient smiles. A staff member personally escorted Paul to the elevator.

"Will Brando be here tonight?" asked Paul.

"I don't know, sir," replied the man.

Paul managed to squeeze his way to the front of the elevator next to the woman. Her damp stringy hair brushed against his shoulder. He watched her head jerk forward in spasms. Paul thought she was suppressing hiccups until he heard little sobs accompany each spasm.

"It's okay, Miss," he said softly. She looked up at him, grimaced, and buried her face in his chest. Tears collected in the tiny crevices of the Twin Towers, forming warm beads of water that spilled over and dripped onto his leg. His arms instinctively encircled her back and he was careful not to squeeze too hard. Her heaves against his chest felt good, tickled. Paul wished that the one flight ride could somehow be prolonged.

When the elevator doors pulled apart she reached up and clung to Paul's

neck. He put his arm around her waist and led her to the door. Her body went limp; she had to be pulled. When they stepped outside Paul took a crumpled napkin out of his pocket and handed it to her. She grabbed it, took three deep sniffs, and blew her nose as Paul gently kissed her on top of her head.

It was gray and drizzling and neither one had an umbrella. Paul, looking as if he were measuring her height, flattened his large hand over her head, protecting her from the rain.

"I think we better get some coffee. What do you say? Think so, Miss?"

The woman nodded. Paul smiled as she snuggled against him. With one hand forming an umbrella over head and his other hand pressed against her shoulder supporting her weight, he walked two blocks, pausing at each light to lean down and kiss the top of her head.

Paul helped her off with her raincoat and hung it up on the rack attached to the booth. She remained silent and did not look at him until after the coffee arrived. Sipping at the cup that she delicately held with both hands, she peeked over at Paul. His stare intimidated her so she quickly looked away.

Paul drank his coffee in three gulps and signaled for the waitress. "Want something to eat, Miss?" The woman shook her head. Paul ordered an English muffin and another coffee.

"Nice and warm in here, huh Miss?"

She nodded; their eyes met.

You have an umbrella?" asked Paul.

The woman shook her head.

"I got one but it's busted. I'm going to buy a new one, though." "That's good," she said.

"One of those push button jobs that fold up real small, like you see on T.V."

"I like T.V.," she said. "Especially movies. The old ones. I work in television."

"No kidding? Wow! What do you do?"

The woman took another sip. "Lots of things."

"Who do you work for?"

"Nobody. I'm not working right now."

"That's tough," said Paul. He fingered his WTC emblem. "Well, maybe I can help you. You see this?" He pointed to the emblem. "I'm kind of chauffeur-bodyguard to the Attorney General of New York. He's got an office at the World Trade Center. Maybe I could talk to him about getting you a job in Public Television or something. He's a pretty nice guy. What's your name?"

"What's yours?"

"Paul. Paul Dankin."

"Iis."

"Feel better, Iris?"

Iris shrugged. "Guess so."

"It's good to cry. Cleans you out." He laid his hand on top of hers. Her

warmth felt good against his cold fingers. Iris slowly withdrew her hand.

Paul lit a cigarette. "Does the smoke bother you?"

Iris shrugged.

"You live around here, Iris?"

"No."

"I live a couple of miles from here. Where do you live?"

"Forest Hills," she said.

"Wow! That's a pretty ritzy neighborhood. You been there long, Iris?"

"I'm staying at the shelter. I've got to be back by nine."

"Yeah? What kind of shelter?"

"I've got to be back at the shelter by nine," repeated Iris.

"How'd you get here, Iris? By train?"

"Yes."

"What made you visit Tennessee?"

Iris shredded a napkin. "What made you?"

Paul bit into the filter of his cigarette. "I'm waiting for Marlon Brando," he said proudly.

"What for?"

"We're old friends."

"You are not," challenged Iris.

"Yes we are. A few years ago I took a bus tour of Washington, D.C. It stopped at all the famous places. I was standing outside the Washington Monument looking up at it. It was scaring me. You see, Iris, I'm not afraid of heights. Looking down from high places doesn't bother me a bit. But whenever I have to look up at something I get nervous. Especially when I look up at buildings. You ever feel like that, Iris?"

"No."

"I always feel like some kind of force, like a magnet or something, is going to pull me up, lifting me off the ground. That's a lot worse than falling 'cause if you're falling down you know you're falling down and that's that. If you get pulled off the ground and lifted into the air you're not falling, but you could fall at any moment. And there's no end. If you fall you have to land but if you're lifted up it could go on forever and I hate that."

Iris squirmed restlessly inside the booth. "So what's that got to do with Marlon Brando?"

"Oh, yeah, right. So I'm trying to take a picture of the Washington Monument, but every time I aim my camera up at it I start to feel dizzy and sweat. I need a picture to prove I'd been there. I go lots of places."

Iris put her elbow on the table and rubbed an eyebrow with her thumb. Paul's throat felt dry so he flagged down the waitress and ordered a cherry coke.

"Anyway," Paul continued, "I try and try but I can't snap off a shot my hand's shaking so bad. So I look around and I see this guy walking by and I ask him take one for me. He looks like a real nice guy and he does. Took a

great picture, too. I wanted to give him a buck for the favor but he wouldn't take it. I asked him why not? He tells me he doesn't need it 'cause he's Marlon Brando. And that's when I recognized him. Real nice guy. I told him I'd go to every movie he'd make. And I do, too. Even wrote him a couple of letters."

"He ever answer you?" asked Iris.

"A, a, yeah, sure. I got them home."

"Maybe he could find a job for me," she said. "Can I meet him?"

"Yeah, sure."

"Will he be at the memorial service tonight?" Paul pulled at his thumb until it popped. He bent his pinky by pressing down on the joint until it snapped. "Yeah, sure, he'll be there." Paul cracked the rest of his knuckles.

Iris, her elbow resting on the table, lowered her head into the crook of her arm. Paul watched; he feared their conversation had come to an end. "So why are you visiting Tennessee? Are you waiting for somebody?"

Iris lifted her head and shook it. "I came to get out. It wasn't easy. I have to be back by nine. But I liked him. Like him a lot. I've seen all his movies. I think to make someone cry from deep down is real, don't you?"

"Yeah, sure." Paul licked the ice cubes in his cherry coke as he marveled at the smoothness of Iris' forehead.

"I think he must have been lonely. I can't imagine how he would've been able to make characters like that if he wasn't sad. I read once that he didn't have normal relationships with women, but I don't believe it. I think he was hurt by one and was sort of waiting for the right one to come along."

Iris lowered her voice; it took on a conspiratorial tone. "I'll tell you a secret because I don't think you'd laugh at me."

I won't," swore Paul as his face flushed red. The blood pounding in his ears annoyed him. He was afraid it would drown out Iris' speech.

"I often thought," Iris continued, "that I would meet Mr. Williams and he would see in me what it was he was looking for in a woman. I knew he could see beyond silly and pretty and, well, maybe he would love me. But when I walked into his room today it shocked me. It hit me that he really was dead. All morning I felt as if I had a kind of . . . date with him. But when I walked into that room and saw all those strange people looking at me . . ."

"I saw you right when you came in," interrupted Paul.

". . . I just knew I missed meeting him. He had blue eyes. Such lovely blue eyes. But when I walked over to where he was lying his eyes were closed and I became angry. I knew I'd never see them. I felt like going over to him and lifting his eyelids just so I could see their blueness and have my reflection mirrored in them. At least then I could feel some kind of closeness with him, something special and apart from those other people there. I figured that if he could see me he'd know that I care deeply about him. Not like those other people there. If he could see me he'd know that I can love."

Paul nearly jumped out of his seat. He grabbed Iris' fingers and squeezed.

"You can!"

"Ouch! You're hurting me!"

Paul released her fingers. He fidgeted and then stood up looking around, hoping to find a witness who, like a photograph, would verify an important moment in his life. Someone must have heard Iris declare that she could love, he thought. But he was disappointed. No one in the coffee shop had paid any attention to their conversation. Even his waitress was at the far end of the room and it angered Paul that she seemed to be eavesdropping on another couple. Thinking of the word couple and its application to him and Iris excited Paul and his anger disappeared.

"Couple," said Paul.

"Of what?" asked Iris. "One cup's enough."

Paul twitched as the pounding in his ears returned. He smiled at Iris. She tore open a packet of sugar, dipped her finger inside, and watched the tiny crystals reflect light before putting them in her mouth.

Paul watched Iris repeat this three times before signaling for the check. Although he was still upset at the waitress for not having heard Iris' declaration of love, he left her a decent tip.

Standing in the coffee shop doorway Iris mumbled that the rain had stopped. When she made no attempt to stay close to Paul as they walked down the street, Paul reached over and grabbed her hand. Iris looked over at him as his hand swallowed hers. Paul nodded, Iris shrugged, and the two walked hand in hand in silence.

Paul Dankin strolled down Madison Avenue with a dignity he did not know he possessed. For the first time since he was a child Paul made eye contact with every passing person. He smiled his close lipped smile at the strangers who returned his look, and with a nod of his head acknowledged their admiration for him and Iris as a couple.

Each time Paul nodded his head the harder he squeezed Iris' hand until she could no longer stand the pain.

"You're hurting me!" Iris cried as she pulled away.

Paul tried to apologize but words would not form and he stood there moving his mouth stupidly.

"You've hurt me twice," she shouted. "Now leave me alone!"

Pedestrians paused to stare. Paul felt a thousand eyes pressing down on him. He tried to speak but could not, so he reached out to comfort Iris, but she stepped back.

"You hurt me twice!" she repeated, "now leave me alone. I've got to be back at the shelter by nine so keep away from me!"

"Yeah, sure," Paul mumbled. Iris turned and walked away.

Small gray puddles exploded as his footsteps scraped against the pavement. He walked quickly up the street until he stood in front of Central Park. Paul straddled a metal mesh fence as his feet sank into the mud. An ankle scraped against the fence so he spit on his finger and massaged it into

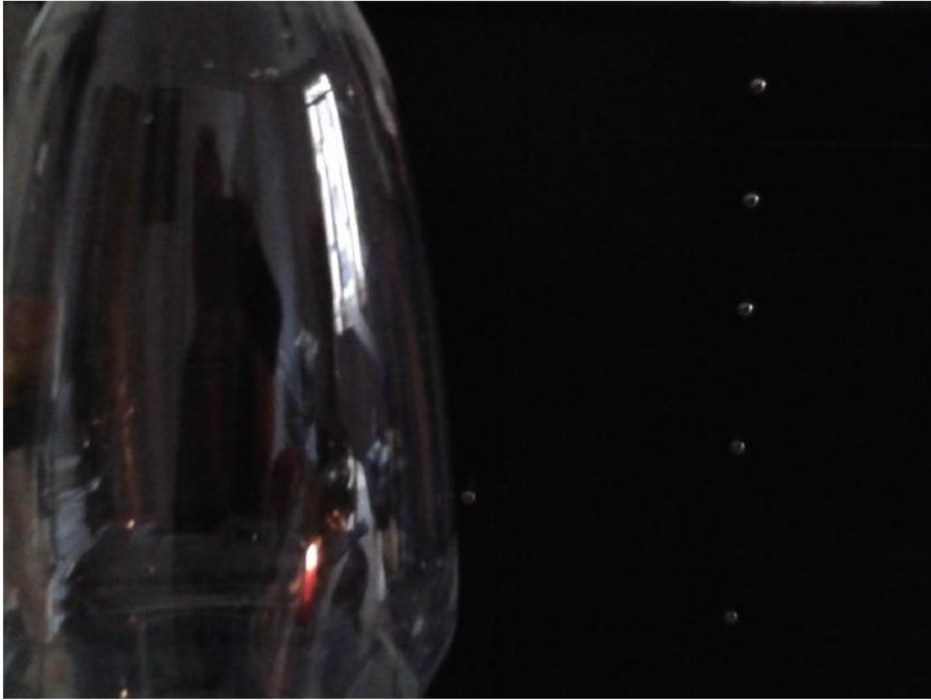
the wound. Trudging up a slippery incline, Paul grabbed at large rocks for support.

When he finally reached the top he bent down to check on his ankle. His shirt sleeve was pulled up exposing his wristwatch. Paul frowned.

"Five hours till the memorial service," he whispered.

Satisfied that the scratch was just a minor one, he walked deeper inside the slushy, deserted park.

"I sure hope Brando's gonna be there," said Paul as he kicked at a mound of mud and watched it splatter against a tree trunk.



The Cathedral Absurd (I)
Pansy Maurer-Alvarez