A Vivacity In Art—The Story of a Survivor

By Marilyn Bradburn
Chronicle Arts Editor

ART TODAY—styrofoam, installations, screaming sirens and flashing lights in galleries, artists strapping themselves together for years as a performance; feminism, mysticism, photo-realism, post-modernism, corporate sponsorship, post-structuralism... To many, it seems that the art world has entered a phase of unprecedented decadence where a Master's degree is required to understand childish scrawls and where charcoal smudges are artistic allusions on the level of James Joyce. How can someone outside the artistic elite garner anything from this jumble of fluorescent meaninglessness? Does art still have the potential to communicate, or has it become too esoteric to be relevant? Has it gone too far?

Enter William Finnel, artist-at-large.

Over a year and a half ago, Finnel walked into a pawn shop and bought a revolver. On returning to his studio that evening, he shot himself in the head. Discovered by a friend, he was rushed to St. Mary's Hospital where his life was barely saved.

"I didn't have the guts to do sleeping pills," Finnel said this week in an interview. "I wanted something fast and sure, so I bought the gun."

This uncommon sense of immediacy and purpose has always pervaded Finnel's life and his artwork. Particularly in his work since his attempted suicide, his art is furious with animation, vivacity—an unmistakable life.

"Physical therapy was hell," he says. "I guess that gave me a lot of motivation to do anything besides that."

Finnel remains paralyzed from the waist down, but has otherwise has made a remarkable recovery, according to his doctors. According to Finnel himself, he's "a living miracle of modern medicine."

The experience has fused an incredible power into his work, a power unlikely to be found elsewhere in the art world today. It's rare to see such force, such emotion and truth from any one person without the agenda of a movement or minority bonded to it. There are no value judgments here, no political agendas, but instead the view of an individual within a society, both before and after an incredible trauma.

"So many other [artists] see themselves as being the true answer to the world's problems. Me? I don't got no answers... I just know what I've been through."

The result is art that undeniably speaks to our age, to people rather than art historians—art that uncompromisingly communicates its intent and content.

• *William Finnel's latest show, "Blood and Napkins" may be seen at Girlin Galleries, 27600 Lake Avenue, through September 7.*

I CAREFULLY CUT THE ARTICLE FROM THE NEWSPAPER, using a pair of mending scissors I have left over from my mother's sewing kit. I admire it a moment, turning it in the light, to see if it will vanish like a hologram on the cover of National Geographic. Things published, put on paper like that, have a tendency to vanish if you look at them a certain way. I don't particularly want this to vanish, but I'm not sure I trust it either.

I press it firmly between the pages of a paperback I bought a few years ago, then put that in one of the boxes sitting on the mattress. I know it will be safe there—I've never read the book.

ADRIAN BECK

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I take it and walk across the floor. "So why're you rejecting your old spirits?"

Willy sits back, carefully examining the tabletop. "Gonna be rich, Libby. Then I can get *clean* turps, brand new, straight from the ozone layer."

I dump the jars and watch the mud swirl down the sink. "How're you figuring?"

"You got me thinkin' last time. They say Van Gogh was addicted to turpin."

I turn, bringing the jars back over and remounting the table. "Yeah, so? Maybe he ate his paints and shot himself. Big deal. He's dead."

"The man sold a sunflower for 37 million, Libby."

"Nuh-uh," I say, seeing where this is leading. "Whoever *owned* that painting sold it for 37 mil, probably after paying ten bucks for it."

"I intend to improve upon that example."

I sigh. "You're fucked up, Willy."

"Not yet. Which reminds me—" He fiddles with his shirt pocket, produces a plastic bag. "Gotta do something about that before Ms. Bradburn arrives." He reaches for a matte knife.

"Oh, man." I don't want to sound whiny, but this is really pushing things. "You aren't—this is the paper you're talking about."

"I sure as hell am." He wipes his mixing surface with a rag. "Marketable. Gotta have that crazed look, that beyondness. Angst." He spills a little of the powder onto the tabletop.

I sigh. "You're fucked up, Willy." "Not yet. Which reminds me —" He fiddles with his shirt pocket, produces a plastic bag. "Gotta do something about that before Ms. Bradburn arrives."

"Shit, Willy." I stand, reaching for my jacket. "I'm leaving now."

"You'll miss the birth of a star. Brightness—" He gestures. "Glitter. The smell of fresh turpentine."

"Get lost."

"Love ya too, Libby." He smiles, I know, behind me as I walk towards the door. Out the window I see the sedan pulling up over the train tracks, turning towards me.

Willy should stop watching soap operas.

IT'S NICE. NOT THE MOST PRESTIGIOUS PLACE, BUT NICE. Not that I'd expect somewhere prestigious to carry his line of shit, anyway. I see pieces I remember from years ago, remember fumes burning into my sinuses up in Chez Viola.

Oh man.

"Excuse me."

I turn, facing a woman with cropped hair, a jumpsuit and boots. I can hear her earrings clank against her neck—she smells like a boutique.

"I'm sorry, you'll have to leave. The show isn't open."

"Guest of the artist." I give her my best condescending smile. "Elizabeth Francis? Surely it's on your list." If I had a cigarette—if I smoked—I would have exhaled then. Not into her face, but close enough that she'd know. As it is, I blink twice and put a hand on my hip. She ruffles through the clipboard.

"Yes. I'm sorry. The reception is back in the acquisitions room, through—"

"Yes, I know where it is—thank you very much."

As I walk through the gallery I notice the air. Stale, but underneath it all, the faint smell of the warehouse, the freon and grease.

I decide the show, for that reason, will be a success.

Willy is surrounded by men and women in suits. They're holding cups and standing in a tight circle, twittering with nervous laughter. Willy isn't wearing a hat and you can see the dent where his skull doesn't quite fit together. He introduces me and the heads of the circle collectively turn, nod politely, then lock back into place with Willy at their center. I'm reminded of a car crash—the fascination of blood. I step back and get a glass of something, then lean against the for wall. I pick up a pamphlet, pretend to peruse it, and wait for Willy to need a ride home.

STABILITY, I THINK, ISN'T REALLY the thing that's been getting to me like it's been getting to Willy. What gets to me is concrete. Not just the stuff that you walk on, sending ice picks up your legs, but the kind they heap everywhere around you, the kind that tourists pay money to lock themselves inside. All everyone seems to want are little concrete crannies to themselves. Doesn't seem to matter what the people do in other crannies, as long as their music isn't too loud and they don't smell too much. Concrete, after all, blocks smells.

But it is stability that Willy is after. He wants an immortality aside from children; an adoring public, and an end to his guilt. He wants it in himself and in people, in living things. It's not that he doesn't want challenge—he realizes that is what drives him—but that he wants the freedom of affluence.

He would make a good philosopher-king.

Me, it's concrete. Forget the people, the money, the prestige—all of it. The only thing I really want is concrete. Pure gray, machine-formed, shipped in bags, concrete. Because it occurs to me that the reason buildings are made of concrete is its stability.

slight yellow of butter that distinguished it from plaster dust. Bowls and glasses and cups were everywhere—a dark coffee stain in the doorway. I hadn't been doing anything but reading—I'd managed to get in and get some tea and settle down without once looking at the old Royal. It's like that some days. Sometimes you can sit at it for hours and hours, watching the paper go through it as if someone else were typing. Other times you can't even look at it, like you can't look at your parents or your grade school teacher.

Of course I'd gone straight over to the warehouse, running lights and sliding on the ice in David's Chevy. Willy'd crawled to the doorway, towards the phone, when I got there. I stared for a long minute before I did anything. The first thing I wondered was if they'd ever be able to get the stain out of the carpet.

"THEY LET HIM *OUT?"*

"Sure. He can't pay anymore so they had to let him go."

"And..." David stopped, running his fingernails through his hair. I watch expectantly over the rim of my cup. "But is he all right?"

"They plugged the hole. Looks fine to me."

"Oh, for Christ's sake—" David disappeared into the kitchenette, his sounds filling the place his body had left. "And he's back at the warehouse?"

"Mhmmm."

"Wonderful."

I sip and set the cup down. "Why? Does that bother you?"

"Bother me?" David's head and a shoulder re-emerge from the kitchen. "Oh, no, why should it? I mean, it's only where he did it the first time —"

"You make it sound like there's going to be a second time."

"Well, what if there is?" He looks at me a moment, seeming pleased with the silence. It carries on further and its weight shifts back to his shoulders. David fidgets and turns back into the kitchen. "You'd think they'd send him someplace else," he says finally.

"Where?"

"I don't know—some loony bin."

"They sent him home, David. The warehouse is his home."

"Yeah, well they still should lock him up."

"He can't afford it," I say, and take another sip.

SOMETIMES WE'D GO TO A SCHOOLYARD IN THE EVENING or in the summer—when nobody was there. It was strange to see the asphalt, the jungle-gyms, the tires, the paint, the sand, all sitting there without kids to scrape their knees and bleed on them. We'd decided that's what playgrounds were for—for kids to bleed on. Blood was like frustrations and playgrounds prevented kids from taking theirs out on teachers. We came for similar reasons. We'd walk around, eye the basketball hoops—shorter, closer to the ground now than they had been—and talk about things. Comic books, Christmas, anything. Even home. We'd talk about Willy's dog, his parents, my parents, the trees, the people in the houses next to the school. We'd talk about superheroes and cartoons, how to build a better Lego rocket-ship.

I suppose it was from watching TV we'd learned about plot twists, about melodrama. I think that if you kept every aspect of our lives—cars, cigarettes, drugs, schools, moving—and somehow stripped out radio and TV and books—no, just stripped out the pulp, the trash—that you'd find we wouldn't have been rebellious, that we never would have done what we did. No more sprained ankles jumping off the roof because Willy thought he was the Six Million Dollar Man. No more imaginary tantrums or tears over fights. It would have been wonderful and we would have been children, the children our parents meant us to be.

As it was, melodrama ruled our lives. It satisfied our need for attention, gave us the means to the corruption and decadence we were looking for. And when we found it, we learned how to use it. We became subtle, which translated to "bright" and "gifted." We did well in school, even as we moved, confident in our sophistication, our superiority, our ability to draw in others with our frightening darkness, our secrets. It was ours, it was all we had.

And now look at us.

I SET DOWN THE PAPER, THINKING IT LOOKS VERY CHIC against the paint-spattered bench in the warehouse. Willy smiles, then tosses an old paint tube into the trash. He's cleaning—company is coming.

"Neat, huh?"

"How did they find out about you?" I ask, lifting myself up onto the tabletop.

Willy smiles again, examining the bristles on an old blackened brush. "I told 'em. Rolled right out to the pay phone and told 'em."

I laugh at this—I can just see Willy popping quarters into the phone to call up the newspaper, his voice very deep and controlled. He looks up and me, grinning even wider. "S'right, Libby. That's exactly what I did."

"So who're they sending?"

"Their Arts and Leisure editor. I'm hot shit—I get the editor."

"Wow."

"Publicity, babe. That's the way it works."

I nod as Willy bumps around the table to examine a series of jars, layers of pigment and solvent neatly cross-sectioned in the glass. "Why did I get into this shit?" he says, pulling coagulated brushes from each. "Spray cans are better. Point 'em, squeeze 'em, toss 'em when you're done. Disposable." He squeezes fluid out of the bent bristles, staining his fingers, wincing. "No such thing as red sable spray paint."

"Rips up the ozone, Willy."

"Yeah, so does farting. Ozone's disposable too." He passes me a jar. "Dump this down the sink, will ya? I don't gotta save old turps no more."

"No," he says, a statement of fact. "I suppose not."

We go along almost like we're in a museum, look but don't touch, alarm sensors everywhere. I'm amazed they let him come back here, after everything. You'd think they'd take him somewhere else, a residential program, or at least send someone here with him to make sure he was all right. But I guess they won't. Willy is an adult. We both are now.

"The docs says my ship fucking well came in. Say it's fashionable, being an artist and all. Van Gogh, you know. Robert E. Howard. Got it made now."

"Oh."

Willy stops, looking at a styrofoam panel leaning against a door, the outline of a human figure melted into it. "Is it a strange day yet?"

I don't know what to answer. "I don't know," I say lamely. "Probably not." Inwardly, I kick myself.

Willy waits a minute, taking in the white-on-white.

"Uh huh," he says, and turns away.

WILLY SETS THE BOTTLE DOWN ON THE TAR ROOF AND slowly wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. As I reach for it a truck—a pickup, four-wheel drive—rumbles over the old train tracks that cut the road leading to Willy's warehouse. Dust flies up, a mandala without a god, then shifts in the setting sun.

"Want some Codeine? They gave me some Codeine."

"No thanks."

It was a pain in the ass trying to get him up here. We'd started at five and the sun doesn't even start to go down until about seven this time of year. Neither of us said anything about it—our conversation skirted the task at hand.

I liked the roof because it sunk a little under my weight; he liked it because he could see all around the building, king of his hill.

It was strange to carry him up, then pull the chair along afterwards. He's so light there's almost nothing to him. I remember the time I broke my hand and Willy had pulled me back to the house, out of a snowstorm on the way home from school. Probably saved my life then—kept me from going into shock, then freezing to death.

He might figure this makes us even.

I take a swig from the bottle.

"The trust money is gone now," says Willy, looking towards the gold-tinged, treeless mountains. "Looks like things are pretty much over."

"The bills did it?" I ask.

"Yeah. Ate it all up and more." Willy snorts. "Looks like I gotta go out and get a *job*, now."

"Shit."

"Yeah. Shit. Pass the—yeah, thanks." The shadow of the bottle falls across his face. He doesn't look much older—I hadn't expected that. I wonder if it's just the light.

"Do I look older?" I ask suddenly.

"What?" He sits up a little, eyeing me like a traitor. "You think you're growing up on me or somethin'?"

"Just asking."

"Well, then." He settles back down, pulling the shadow of his baseball cap over his eyes. "I guess. Your hair's longer. Older women're supposed to have long hair. How're those gran' chillin?"

"Oh, fine," I say, nodding. "Fine."

"Glad to hear it."

We sit a while; I prop my feet on the lip of the roof. I know the amber fluid is settling into me but I can't feel it and this worries me a little. I reach for the bottle.

Willy sighs.

"If you need a place to crash, I've got space," I say. "Staying here might not be a hot idea."

"Really?" Willy squints at the sunset. "So how's David?"

"What?"

"How's David?"

I take a breath. "Zonked."

"That all?"

"Pretty much." I rub my eyes. "He quit smoking for New Year's."

"Mmmm." Willy sets the bottle down again. "Thought he gave it up for Lent year 'fore this."

"He did."

"Then the Lord's an Indian giver," he smiles, teeth glinting with the sunlight. "And we'll all get our souls back come Judgment."

"You already *got* yours back once, though."

"Yeah," He fumbles around inside his pocket and fishes out some tablets. "Reckon so. Sure you don't want any?"

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Dear Libby-
     Don't worry about the sleeping
pills anymore.  They're all under the
sink in the upstairs bathroom, in the
plastic Safeway bag.  I'm feeling
better and have sorted things through-
you don't have to worry about the
pills anymore.
     Today I bought a gun.
     Willy
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THAT HAD BEEN LAST YEAR WHEN WE WERE LIVING together, before David had moved in. Before there was a need for him to move in. I can still see the napkin stuffed in my old 1953 Royal typewriter, the one that had survived the Blitz, undoubtedly—the one still sitting where Willy had left it.

David had taken the note out that night, after I'd gone.

It took me a long time to realize the Blitz happened before the typewriter had been made.

The night had been bad enough already; cold wind ripping at the walls and the TV reception flickering, snow imminent. We still hadn't picked up from New Year's, although I'd finally swept the broken glass. The popcorn had long since been crushed into the carpet; now it was only the

TIME TO SPARE

BY ADRIAN BECK

• Having friends you've known since childhood can be mind-bending. Nobody can hide from all the stupid things we all did as kids. And now, even after all this time, they probably know you better than you know yourself. •

I CAN NEVER WALK ON CONCRETE. AS A KID, SPLITS AND slivers of pain shot up to my knees when teachers made us march on the sidewalk; the feeling stays with me today through grocery stores and parking lots. Dirt and grass are always easier and more honest, softer. When my mother took me for shoes, once a year, I would look for ones that felt like I was walking on the ground, but I never found them. Jogging shoes are close, but my feet fall around them. I find myself walking on their sides, the soles rolling out from underneath my feet, and needles of pain piercing my shins.

So I roll over and stare at the concrete floor from the height of the mattress, trying not to drag the blankets with me. The floor stares back, waiting. I know if I get up barefoot my legs will hurt the rest of the day. My shoes are on the other side of the bed. In between sleeps David, who doesn't have to get up for another two hours.

We go along almost like we're in a museum, look but don't touch, alarm sensors everywhere. I'm amazed they let him come back here, after everything.

I don't want my legs to hurt because today I have to go to see Willy. And Willy can't just sit there and talk to people—he has to drag them along with him through the concrete floors of his converted warehouse, showing them this and that as they try to explain why they've come to see him, and that makes things worse. Willy doesn't seem to think that people might go out there for some reason other than just to see him. No life exists for him outside the warehouse. Newspapers might as well be science fiction.

I stand carefully, tiptoe through the door to the bathroom, snap on the lights.

I futz with my toothbrush until my teeth are clean and my breath scrubbed—and now I am ready to think. I pull on some socks and pants, then snatch a sweater up from next to the bed, reasoning that they are all equally clean. I try to lock the door quietly as I leave. David doesn't want to be reminded about my going to see Willy.

Skipping over a fence, I follow the weeds along the side of an irrigation ditch and wonder if today—a rather warm, cloudy day—is strange. If it is, then I think that everything will go all right with Willy. If not, then we'll have to get drunk again.

WILLY AND I GREW UP TOGETHER—AS MUCH AS MYSELF and anyone could grow up together. Our fathers built airplanes. They originally worked for the same company in the same division, but mostly they worked as a team. We were born in Oklahoma and moved on from there, switching companies, following the contracts. It was great fun for me and Willy—we'd pack each other's things, playing in an adventure only we shared. I remember the faces of new children in elementary school, trying to find a place for themselves in the middle of a year, trying to learn the new names and places. Willy and I never went through that. Moving wasn't a terrible thing for us because we were together. It wasn't moving at all—it was just finding a new playground.

That changed when Willy was moved up a grade. Then the only times we saw each other were during recess—and Willy'd get teased for hanging around the younger kids' playground with me, even more so because I was a girl. Eventually Willy stopped coming over, and then, the next year, our fathers had a falling out. His family moved again and mine stayed behind.

Since then I've always thought of Willy as being ahead of me, both because he skipped a grade and because he got to move one more time.

Maybe he's still ahead of me.

HE SAYS HE THINKS MY HAIR HAS GROWN. I RUN MY fingers through it—I hadn't given it any thought, but I guess it has. His is just growing back, so I don't say anything.

He wheels around through the doorway, taking me out into the cool air of the main area. The crates and cardboard boxes are all where he left them, the fluorescent orange spray-paint still scrawled everywhere, labeling things. *Chair. Doorway. Mess.*

Willy was always one for organization. The Caterpillar forklift is still in the corner, zebra-striped with purple, the telltale shimmer of grease beneath it. We'd never managed to get the thing running, not after all these years.

"Wanna go up and see Chez Viola?" he asks, pushing himself along. "Been a while."

Chez Viola is an old supervisor's office overlooking the main floor of the warehouse. Willy had converted it to a den of iniquity with a television and an old mattress thrown into one corner.

I hesitate and cast a glance towards the windows of the old offices. I couldn't see the tattered lawn furniture we'd arranged there. "Can you?" I say. "I mean..."

evil desires. He kept shouting at me and hitting me and taunting me about forced busing. That was when I swore revenge against him, the Lutheran Church and the aliens that were programming their wicked actions.

• *Writing deranged fan letters to Hollywood superstars.* Every moody loner has to write a ton of obsessive fan mail swearing dog-like devotion to some overrated actor or actress. You have to do it, or else no one will understand why you went on a 12-state killing spree. Some good celebrities to write fan mail to include the silver screen's Jamie Lee Curtis, celebrity impersonator Fred Travelina and entertainment legend Englebert Humperdink.

• *Weeping.* Every moody loner has to fall to his knees sobbing for no good reason whatsoever. It's part of your contract, right after that bit about wearing faded army flak jackets whenever you go out in public. Weeping is pretty easy. All you have to do is think of something sad like a lost puppy dog or the motion picture *Ishtar.* You'll be drowning in your own tears in no time.

• *Composing bad poems.* Every moody loner has to compose ream after ream of wretched poetry. You have to because… well, because I said so. The poems can be about anything, provided that they are without rhyme, meter or any redeeming literary value.

Sample:

I see you there, my love
Talking to someone else, who is not me.
I see the both of you laughing, laughing at
me! Damn your eyes.
So I shot the two of you in the kneecaps,
And I ate the last piece of key lime pie,
the one your mother baked us
Right before she got the rickets.
And it made me happy
So there.

Some Parting Advice

BEING A MOODY LONER HAS ITS DISADVANTAGES. YOU don't get invited to many parties, people tend to run in fear from you and the only time you ever receive any real attention is during the FBI manhunt after that unfortunate incident at the Galleria over the weekend.

But on the positive side, you save a fortune on Christmas cards and after awhile, those voices inside your head can say some real deep things. Lately, the voice I've been hearing—let's call him Frank—has been telling me that Billy Ray Cyrus was Satan's valet.

Now normally, I would be skeptical, but Frank's usually right about these things—at least he was right about Suzanne Somers and her involvement with the global communist conspiracy.

So I figure Frank and I go pick up some ammo and maybe a couple of mortars, and we…

Uh, anyhow. You understand what I'm saying.

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But Am I Really a Moody Loner? A Slightly More Difficult Test

1. *Complete the following sentence:* A bird in the hand…
a) is good eatin'
b) can get really messy
c) is worth a bullet in the brain

2. *You decide to leave a dead animal on the doorstep of that special someone you've been stalking. Do you leave:*
a) a guppy
b) an orange and white tabby cat
c) a rhinoceros

3. *You've just snapped and gone on a vicious, murdering rampage. Where would be the best location to go on your killing spree?*
a) a fraternity rush event
b) a public eatery somewhere in the United States
c) the United States

4. *What is your favorite leisure activity?*
a) sobbing
b) killing
c) sobbing after killing

Scoring: For each (a) answer, give yourself 10 points and subtract 4 from the total. For each (b) answer, give yourself 3 points and divide by the square root of 564. For each (c) answer, subtract 10 points, multiply by the average circumference of the human skull and add your zip code to the total.

• **If you scored no points:** You are a perfectly normal human being with absolutely nothing to worry about, unless, of course, you're lying about your score in order to impress us, in which case you're one sick puppy.

• **If you scored anything else:** There's no denying it. You're one severely messed-up individual. Manic-depressives probably shun your company because they think you're "too unstable." Read on.

Tips For Beginning Moody Loners

NOVICE MOODY LONERS ARE ALWAYS AT A LOSS WHEN they begin their careers as troubled loners living on the fringes of a cold and unfeeling society. Should I be a vigilante or a crazed citizen driven over the edge? Should I write my poems in blank verse or in iambic pentameter? And what about selling the rights to my life story to some exploitative TV show? Good questions. And no matter how daunting it all may seem at first, just remember: You're a moody loner. Things are supposed to daunt you.

Beauty Tips For The Loner In All Of Us

• *Stop sleeping.* Toss and turn each night. Walk the streets in the seedy part of town just like Robert De Niro in Martin Scorcese's 1975 motion picture *Taxi Driver.* This will give you a seedy, unwashed appearance, not to mention a sallow complexion. After a few days without sleep, y*ou'll look as bad as you feel.*

• *Don't comb your hair.* As a moody loner, you should be far too troubled with the nefarious plot of society against you to worry about whether your cowlick is matted down. Forget about your hair completely—this will give you a look similar to that of Jesus Christ or David Crosby, either one really. It's this type of look that moody loners have yearned after for generations.

• *Brush after every meal.* This will help you keep that healthy smile.

• *For God's sake, stop smiling.* You're supposed to be oppressed by the weight of the world's problems. Quit acting like everything is all shiny and happy, when we know very well that any minute now, you could be on the floor in the fetal position weeping profusely.

• *If you happen to hear any voices in your head, do exactly what they tell you to do,* no matter how outrageous or morally repulsive. After all, the voices know best, and it's simply better to give into their unseemly demands right away, rather than allowing these inner demons to peck away at your very existence. Remember—those voices are a whole lot smarter than you. They've been to college, you know.

Moody Loner Exercises

• *Keeping a rambling diary.* Every moody loner has to keep a dog-eared, incoherent record of their half-baked thoughts and sinister desires. It's mandatory—otherwise how will big shot Hollywood producers make an exploitative TV show about you? You'll be a laughingstock among your fellow moody loners, and considering that these people never laugh, that's slightly embarrassing.

Try this simple exercise. Write about a painful childhood experience and why the government is to blame for it. Make sure your essay is at least five hundred words, typed and double-spaced. You'll be marked down for spelling errors. Begin.

Sample: It was at camp, and I kept wetting my bunk bed because I was so worried about the government's inadequate health care policy. At night, the other kids would come to bunk and beat me with bars of soap and oranges that they have shoved into their socks. And that only made me wet my bed more. As I recall, one of the kids looked like Nixon, with his beady eyes and

THE LONER'S HOME COMPANION

BY PHILIP MICHAELS

• Ever had lots of spare time, a .357 Magnum burning a hole in your pocket, and an unhealthy obsession with Heather Locklear or Adrian Zmed? If you have (and who hasn't?), this guide is for you. Honest. •

SOMEWHERE OUT THERE IN ANY CITY—IT COULD BE Boise, Duluth or even West Covina—there's some sullen human being sitting in front of the television set in a pair of boxer shorts and a pizza-stained T-shirt. In one hand he's holding a can of Budweiser; in the other he's holding a remote control. *Sheriff Lobo* is flickering on the TV set, but he doesn't pay attention. He's only thinking about the world of hurt he's going to do when he finally gets around to locating a clean pair of socks.

This man is a moody loner. He has little ambition and even less reason to live. The odds are high that sometime within the next week, he's going to snap and start firing a scattergun into the produce section of a local supermarket. But you have no reason to pity or despise this particular moody loner because chances are *you're one too.*

Do you feel tired, depressed or irritable? Do you find yourself driven to the brink of sanity by the trivial things in life? Have you developed a taste for killing? Are you a recently laid-off postal worker? If you answered yes to any of these questions, then congratulations—you are now an official moody loner. If you answered no, then don't worry—you'll get yours soon enough. The moody loners will see to that.

Moody Loners Throughout History… From Cain to Nixon

SINCE THE DAWN OF TIME, MOODY LONERS HAVE HAD A lasting influence on society and culture, as they sulk about, ducking down poorly-lit alleyways and filling journal after journal with wretched poetry. *Anyone can be a moody loner!* Housewives, fathers, certified public accountants, teamsters, sniveling graduate students and even major presidential candidates have all, at one time or another, boasted more moody loners among their ranks than you could shake a loaded handgun at. All you need to be a moody loner is a pessimistic outlook, a tenuous grasp upon reality and an alarming tendency to open fire upon innocent bystanders. *It really is just that simple!*

But being a moody loner isn't just about assassinating government officials, stalking famous Hollywood starlets and terrorizing small children for their lunch money. It's *oh so much more…* moody loners are valued members of the community. Moody loners can contribute to many neighborhood projects like block parties, neighborhood watch programs and frightening away undesirables with large-caliber weapons. You don't have to be imbalanced to be a moody loner, but it sure does help.

Famous Moody Loners*

Hammurabi
Vincent Van Gogh
TV's Barbara Billingsley
Spiro Agnew
Beloved ventriloquist Señor Wences
Attorney General Janet Reno
Andrea Dworkin
Bob Costas
Illusionist Doug Henning
Abe Vigoda
DeForest Kelley
Catherine "Daisy Duke" Bach
Most of the original members of KISS
Art Garfunkel
Susan Faludi

Am I a Moody Loner? A Simple Test…

1. *I am moody.*
Yes
No

2. *I am a loner.*
Yes
No

Answer Key: If you answered yes to both of these questions, congratulations! You're a card-carrying moody loner! If you answered yes to only one of the questions, you're probably just a member of the Libertarian Party, which is close enough as far as we're concerned. If you answered no, don't despair. You'll come to your senses one day.

* It is a little known fact that all of the people on this list have at some point killed a man, with the exception of Abe Vigoda, who only tried to bite a man's ear off. We're pleased to report that Hal Linden, star of stage and screen, recovered completely.

"I like that," she says. "Try Realpoo and champagne....That has a real ring to it."

I'm going to be known for the rest of my days as the man who invented Realpoo.

There's an imposing clock on the wall with an unstoppable second hand. But this interview is being taped for later broadcast. They'll edit it. There's no point in being anxious about the time.

When they air the interview, they'll also broadcast the jingle I made up for another non-product, Powder-to-the-people. "Black powder for the black, black people; red powder for the red, red people; powder to the people!"

Susan Stamberg asks me to talk about the other non-products. There's Blue Genes (for a truly depressive child). There's the five-year renewable marriage license and the college degree with an expiration date.

"But what about the other ones?" she asks. "The ones that sound suspiciously like something else we know about?"

She's referring to Oil Things Considered (The Right Art For The Right Spot) and Oral Things Considered (Why Pay Through Your Teeth?)

"And isn't it true," she asks, "that in all these ads, which ran for a week in your city, you listed our 800 number as the number to call?"

"Well," I say, "I was just trying to direct people's attention to the real non-commercial radio. You see," I tell her, "I thought my ridiculous ads would make people question the whole process."

"I don't know," Susan Stamberg says, sounding skeptical, "but hundreds of calls came in wanting to buy Realpoo."

"Sorry," I say.

"I wonder," says Susan. "But you certainly caught our attention."

"Your producer's?" I ask.

"Hm," she says. "What do you know about my producer?"

IT'S 6:20 IN THE EVENING AND I'M AT HOME WITH MY Panasonic. There I am on the radio and Susan Stamberg is asking me if all of my non-commercials are going to make me rich. I stare at my hands and listen to myself explain that if I'd had the business sense to even register a trademark I'd be potentially collecting thousands now. The stuff is already starting to go head and shoulders with Head and Shoulders.

Real pain.

As it happens, the non-commercials ate up the McGilley Family Trust money. Of course, I still draw a paycheck over at campus.

It's depressing to realize that when you're interviewed by Susan Stamberg, you don't necessarily get to meet her.

I sit back on my bed and listen to the end of the interview. Susan Stamberg says, "Fun's fun, everybody, but please don't call our eight-hundred number in Washington, all right?"

There's a pause and then the sign-off: *And for this evening, that's all things considered.*

I GET UP FROM THE BED AND SWITCH OFF THE RECEIVER. It's quiet in my apartment, and then I hear the rumble of a truck outside. I walk to the living room and stare out the window. It will be summer again soon and boats will moor in the harbor. I walk into my narrow kitchen and peek into the refrigerator. I feel a hunger growing inside me, bit it's not a hunger food can touch. A man's reach should exceed his grasp. Is there going to be life after Susan Stamberg?

ROD KESSLER rkessler@ecn.mass.edu

Commutes from Cambridge to Salem, Massachusetts, to teach writing and edit the *Sextant* at Salem State College. Progress on his novel has slowed with the birth of his son two years ago, but he gets to spend a lot of time playing horsey.

Come on, kids, I say. Smile for the mind's eye. That's right. It's "All Things Considered."

TIME COULD BE PASSING. IT TAKES A HURRICANE OR A national drought to prompt a weather report on this radio show. When the air temperature drops and the leaves turn brown, we pull off the screens and shut the windows. Without the sounds of traffic from the street, the rooms grow quiet. We make an adjustment of the volume knob.

SUSAN STAMBERG IS INTERVIEWING AN ASTROLOGER who determines a person's fate by the position of the stars at the moment of his death, not his birth. He might have been born a Virgo but what counts is whether he dies a Leo.

"Is there really a market for this?" Susan asks. "Well," the woman says, "people are starting to insist that they be taken off their respirators before they come to a cusp."

"You're kidding," Susan says, delight apparent in her voice. The woman tells Susan that clients have to pay in advance. The astrologer has been working funerals.

"Hm," says Susan. "Is that like giving a eulogy?" "Something like that," the woman says.

"How would that sound?" Susan asks.

"Well," the woman says, "last week I did one for a woman who died a Capricorn. 'Jane,' I said, 'went into her death with her moon in Orion. No wonder none of her marriages lasted. People dying with their moons in Orion tend to be interested more in conquest than in consistency—"

"Wait a minute," Susan says. "Orion's not in the zodiac, is it?"

"It gets better," the astrologer says. "Her setting sign fell on a direct tangent to downtown LA. No wonder she was so histrionic."

"Her setting sign?" asks Susan.

"She should have stayed single," the astrologer says. "Um hm," says Susan Stamberg. "Now is there any way of knowing in advance what your death sign will be?"

"Short of killing yourself?" the woman asks. The question hangs in the air.

EVEN BEFORE THE GENIUS GRANT, THE STUDENTS AND the Dean were urging success upon me. One best-seller, they thought, and I'd be launched away from campus forever. The students call my methods arbitrary, but life is arbitrary. I shuffle the pages of their stories before I read them. They ask tiresome questions about plot development and story structure. I talk about randomness and confusion. At the window of the classroom I point toward the smoke stacks, the projects, the railroad tracks drawing the eye to the horizon.

"What is verisimilitude?" I ask.

Tenure is a double-edged knife.

WHAT IS IT ABOUT YOU, SUSAN STAMBERG?

MY THERAPIST WOULD PREFER THAT HER IDENTITY BE respected in this and my other work. So let us refer to her as Dr. Deidre von Schien, M.D., her actual name, with all due respect. Her office is a perch on the tenth floor of a high rise overlooking a city square. She gets excellent reception. In her waiting room, stereo speakers purr out classical programming. Is the point of this to relax the client or merely to muffle the sound of the previous appointment's therapy? If yours is a 5:00 appointment and Dr. von Schien is running late, you will hear the co-hosts give the lead-in for "All Things Considered."

Alternatively, you ignore the news and stare out the window down ten flights to the crowds milling along Washington Avenue and Pierce Street. Where were these multitudes just ten minutes before? How is it that they're all so sure of their destinations? What do they know that I don't know?

"SO TELL ME," SHE ASKS, "WHAT MADE YOU DECIDE TO GO into non-commercial advertising?" It's Susan Stamberg, finally interviewing me.

"Because I'm an advocate of non-commercial radio," I say. She's not fooled. "That's not the real reason, is it? After all, your ads weren't broadcast on non-commercial radio stations."

That's true. Those ads cost a fortune.

"Sounds to me," she says, "like you were just trying to have fun."

I shrug but she can't see that. She's in the studio in Washington and I'm in the studio at the local affiliate, about ten blocks from campus. That's how they do it when they have time to set up an interview in advance. Otherwise they have you talk into your phone but then the sound isn't as good.

My therapist would prefer that her identity be respected in this and my other work. So let us refer to her as Dr. Deidre von Schien, M.D. with all due respect.

I'm talking into a microphone at a huge circular desk in a room that's apparently completely sound-proofed. The ceiling looks like corrugated foam. One wall is all glass.

Susan Stamberg is evidently sitting in something called Studio Five. I'm getting her through a big pair of earphones. I feel like a Mouseketeer. The station manager sits next to me and points her finger at the microphone when it's my turn to speak.

"Let me get this straight," Susan says. "You made up and paid for an advertising campaign for products that don't exist."

"Well, they didn't exist," I say. "But someone is marketing Realpoo now."

"Tell us about Realpoo."

"Realpoo is for people with hair," I say. "Try Realpoo and champagne instead of shampoo and real pain."

IT'S ALL THINGS CONSIDERED

BY ROD KESSLER

• *Susan Stamberg was the first woman to anchor a national news broadcast, NPR's* All Things Considered. *While her new book* Talk *details twenty years of her work, we bet you won't find this episode in there...* •

SUSAN STAMBERG WASN'T INTERESTED. AT LEAST HER producer wasn't interested. National Public Radio an 800 number in Washington. "I'm sure your work is valuable," the woman—the producer—told me, "but—"

"What about the genius grant?" I asked.

"Look," she said, "You writers have been done to death. This year alone we've done Chinua Achebe, Ann Beattie, Carolyn Chute—"

I held the phone away from my ear. This woman was a New Yorker, now vexed and annoyed.

I caught up with her again while she was still reeling off the names—Nancy Mairs, John McPhee, Sue Miller, and more. She started slowing down only with Walter Wetherell and the two Wolffs. Then she paused. "So tell me," she said. "What's so special about you?"

THE MCGILLEY FAMILY TRUST AWARDED ME MEGABUCKS because my pioneering work in reaching past linearity in fiction is broadly understood to mirror contemporary reality. I've reached past linearity. Boy no longer meets girl. Or if boy meets girl, girl meets train, the Sihks meet the Hindus, Barbara Bush meets Raisa Gorbachev. Transitions become kaleidoscopic.

SUSAN STAMBERG IS BRAYING. SHE ASKS, "PEOPLE REALLY like that?" She's interviewing a Philadelphia baker, a man who bakes pastry the shape and size of bodies. His customers line up to buy wedding cakes in the image of the bride, and the guests are forking into thighs and breasts.

If only I were a baker.

The phone rings. It's the Dean again. My friends know better than to call when "All Things Considered" is airing. He'd like me to reconsider. He'd like me to resign or take a leave for the duration of my grant.

"Normal writers bolt from the classroom the moment they can afford to," he says.

SAY IT'S THE INFLUENCE OF RADIO: ALL SOUND, NO picture. Say it's all voice. Did I convey what the Dean looks like? Or the NPR producer? Or Susan Stamberg for that matter? Or me?

SUSAN STAMBERG IS INTERVIEWING AN ADVOCATE OF trans-species sexual congress. The man tells her that such terms as "buggering" are demeaning, prejudicial. He prefers the phrase "animal husbandry." Susan Stamberg says "I see" in a tone that's all skepticism. "But what about this sexual congress," she asks, "from the standpoint of a particular horse or cow?"

The man explains that the animals involved tend to be smaller. "The working lifespan of a loved animal," he says, "is from two to fifteen years longer than that of an animal raised for slaughter." The spokesman certainly knows his facts. He tells Susan that the average pet dog in America never lives to see its fourth birthday.

"I didn't know that," says Susan.

SUSAN STAMBERG DOESN'T KNOW THAT I EXIST.

MY MOTHER LOVED ME AS A CHILD, LOVED ME AND listened to me. Even my therapist concurs on this point. I am not looking for approval. I'd be willing to talk with Susan Stamberg privately, with the microphones switched off.

SOME BASIC QUESTIONS: IS THIS THE NEXT PARAGRAPH? What if you've lost a page or if I've misnumbered the manuscript once again (the secret of my technique)? Are we dislocated? Where am I, after all? Where are you? Has the broadcast been prerecorded?

Another basic question: Does Susan Stamberg wonder about us, just as we wonder about her?

Snapshots. I am in my narrow kitchen, standing over a sink filled with dishes. The entire apartment smells of dried eucalyptus, a decorative touch wasted on the radio audience. A swedish ivy hangs in the window. The radio sits atop the refrigerator—a Sanyo model RP 5225, a two-band AM-FM receiver, its antenna broken off three inches above the casing.

But that's apocryphal. The water roars out the faucet and I can never hear you above it, Susan Stamberg. I sit quietly at the edge of my bed, fingernail in my mouth, listening on the Panasonic clock radio.

MY FOURTEEN CREATIVE WRITING STUDENTS ARE wired for sound in Walkmen. It's 6:05 in the evening, and they're scattered around the city, doing whatever it is they do—playing video games, buying albums, skateboarding. They have to listen. It's an assignment. They are frowning. It isn't their idea. What does a radio show that has no music have to do with creative writing, they ask.

They ask my department chairman.

They ask the Dean.

Yverin stepped over to where the Magic Carpet was running through its colors and weft undulations. She watched entranced as the carpet moved and flowed. A beautiful story unfolding in its weave and folding over again at its edges. She felt her nerves calming as it melted into another story.

And the baby screamed.

She ran through the main hall, down the aisle, searching through the rows of benches until she found the thing, naked and alone under one of the pews. It stared at her with old eyes, focused on a point somewhere behind her face. She felt its reality just in time.

As the nails slashed air she dove over the bench. Scrambling to her feet, she dared not glance behind at the changing baby. Growing, turning blind, then reforming and bubbling into something new. Something foul and terrifyingly familiar. The baby became Richlane.

Yverin gagged, running for the aisle, but Richlane's growing hand, knuckles still soft, caught her ankle and began to wrap itself around her. She grabbed onto the back of one of the seats and pulled, her arms straining as she tried to free herself. The fingers around her leg still growing, becoming thinner, worming their way into the bottom of her pants and rising up her leg. She tried to escape with one last tug, feeling her muscles tear as she did. The fingers kept on growing.

She gave up. Turning to face Richlane, her skin was alive with insects now, her tongue tasting nothing but raw shock scared electricity. She had to get out of this, had to get away. Had to convince herself that Richlane was dead. And there were tears welling in her eyes, all the thoughts in her mind trying to hide the feeling of those fingers climbing higher, thinning out into skinnier and skinnier strings of wet flesh, pulling her down into the gap between the pews and climbing for her cunt.

"Paint me, Yverin." Her voice was sugar in the air. "Sweeten me." Richlane licked parted lips with a bloody sliver of tongue, glossing them red. Her copper hair glinting like hot wire.

In her terrified state, all Yverin could do was attack blindly. Her headhunter's instinct her sanity's safety net. She brought a shaking foot round into her lover's head with all the force she had inside her. All the anger and loss she could muster, focused into one violent blow. Yverin's boot smashed into the changing woman's soft-boned skull as a claw hammer would hit a peach.

Richlane jerked. The blow was hard enough to make her pull her growing fingers back like slug antennae and she let go. Yverin didn't wait to see if her kick killed the thing. She moved out. Over the pews and into the aisle. Her booted foot trailing bloodprints across the crumbling iron benches.

Stalking slowly behind on all fours, Richlane was changing once again. The sound of bones cracking into place, flesh reshaping. A whole new person emerging. Yverin caught sight of it as she looked for something, anything, to fight it with. She turned in amazement.

She couldn't believe the audacity of the thing. It had become her. In every detail. Naked, with her short curly black hair and her light skin. And her identity branded across the back of her hand. The sinews forming together as the thing stepped toward her with a spiritual grace.

It was monstrous, yet so perfect. Its fingernails stretching out, claws of hard skin, from the tips. Then retreating back to the hands, to leave one behind. The edges so sharp. The point so brutal.

Look at his nails.

She couldn't move. She had run and it had caught her. She had fought back and it refused to die. She'd run out of ideas now. She refused to move.

It stepped to her. Into her. The soft flesh melting over her, enveloping her. She had become one with herself. She backed away, a gut reaction. The headhunter instincts kicking in once again. Felt the oily raindrops running down her face. And when the thing's eyes glistened black, eyes that could not focus, nor turn away without a turn of the whole head, she saw the whole world unfold before her. The shine of the nail ready to enter her throat.

With everything she had left, she kicked down. Rust red water splashing away. And her leg drove deeper down. The rusted floor crumbled under them. The changeling took hold of Yverin and began to melt. For an instant, they were one and the same.

She felt the fall. The wind on the back of her throat in the darkness like a rush dream. The scream catching in her lungs, clawing to get out. The sea was hers. Her body in black tar drowning.

Her last sight before she went under and the currents dragged her out was the sight of herself unfolding. Spiked through the heart on a rusty shard of iron foundation, she saw she couldn't keep hold of a shape. Yverin became an infected flesh mass, opening out from herself until her very bones were bursting. She turned inside out on that skewer, then fell, formless, into the sea.

She rose again in a blaze of sunfire. The sound of locusts etching the sky with an ever-clicking non-voice. The commissariats shark hooked her out of the sea and lifted her back to the flaking dockside. The screaming of the needle trees a soft whisper in the city.

Yverin. Headhunter. Lost girl. She had become one with the other side of herself. Now she was the same.

The sharpness of her fingernails digging into the rust.

RIDLEY MCINTYRE gdg019@cch.coventry.ac.uk

Was born in 1971 in London, England and now studies Communications at Coventry University. He hopes that one day he will wake up in Miami.

"Anything interesting?" Yverin asked.

"New, but not interesting." Aria sat back on her bench. "The lunatic's dead."

Yverin smacked the wall. The skin on her palm broke against the sharp edges and she kicked it then, frustrated even more. "Shit," she cursed. She looked over at Aria, who had her quizzical face on.

"He was the best lead I had," she finally explained. "I was hoping to go back there and take a reading from him. I was too worked up to do it then."

Aria shrugged. "Sorry. He tried to escape. Tore his hands off trying to pull the chains from the wall and bled to death. Damn messy, from what I heard, too."

Yverin licked salt red from her palm. "You sound happy to hear it."

"Well, it was original."

Aria smiled. Yverin couldn't help but join in.

RICHLANE WORKED AT THE PORTSIDE CATHEDRAL. Portside was a district made up of rusting metal fixed at angles to the concrete and stone of the city. Through a stained-glass window depicting The Fall, a bloody sun was setting fire to the black ocean.

"It's beautiful," she said to herself. Then she turned as her girlfriend entered the hall.

They met by the back pews. In the crux of her arms Richlane fed a baby from a metal thermos flask and a pin-pricked rubber nipple. She loved the work she did there. Half-way between missionary and children's nurse. Like Yverin, she had her own way of getting back at the wrongs of the world.

"Got your message," Richlane said. Behind her, at the far end of this huge hall, the older children were watching the constantly changing colors and warp of a large magic carpet high up on the wall, transfixed as the weave-and-weft kaleidoscope spun them some creation myth.

Yverin smiled. "Good. I didn't think I'd see you before tonight. I had to leave in a hurry."

The headhunter reached out and brushed the back of her hand against the baby's warm face. The thing gave out a sudden frozen reading, like a psychic warning, that made her flesh creep. She withdrew her hand sharply, reeling as if the child had snapped at her.

"Any closer to getting your man?" Richlane sat in one of the pews and took the empty bottle from the baby, preparing to wind the thing with some coarse-handed back rubbing.

Yverin shrugged. "Dead end," she said. Richlane handed her the bottle and turned the baby around to face the window. After a few sharp taps on its back, the thing coughed up a trail of thin, bubbling milk over her shoulder and onto the rusting floor behind.

"I'd better get a rag," she said. The last words Yverin ever heard her say.

She watched the girl carry the puking baby into a washroom and then had to leave. The empty Cathedral seemed so suddenly small. She could feel its walls shrinking in on her.

And silently left before she was crushed to death inside.

INSIDE A DREAM, YVERIN SWAM IN AN OCEAN OF OIL. THICK and crude, it moved like a crowd. Currents following the flow and ebb of desire. She rode on those black waves.

Until she could see those heads floating in the blackness.

And on the horizon the heads grew larger. Their voices louder as she swam to them to save them. But they were already dead. Long dead now. And she could do nothing for them.

While they still had mouths they told their story.

"Looking for a head, headhunter?"

"You'll never catch this one, headhunter. He changes."

"He doesn't need a spike, fool. Look at his nails."

And they chanted: "Look at his nails. Look at his nails." Over and over. And she was drowning then. The thick, crude, black oil smothering her, pouring down her gullet. Feeding her and yet depriving her of life. Until all she could see was black.

The thing gave out a sudden frozen reading, like a psychic warning, that made her flesh creep. She withdrew her hand sharply, reeling as if the child had snapped at her.

Richlane's mouth kissed her crude ocean lips. But she was just another head. An empty soul playing savior.

JUST ANOTHER HEAD.

She retched over the floor as soon as she woke up. She'd fallen asleep in a seat at the SCD tower, and now she knew she needed to be somewhere else. She couldn't tell if Richlane was alive or dead. If that dream was a premonition or a direct communication. All she knew was that the girl had somehow crossed the mirror, the mirror of dreams, the mirror that only shows what you have already seen and distorts it all, and she had entered into Yverin's mind. And she knew Richlane was in trouble.

THE CATHEDRAL WAS DESERTED. A HUGE CAVE crumbling over time. There was a pin-prick hole in the cover of the rusted roof and rain was leaking through, dropping down to splash into a pool halfway down the aisle, a thick red oily film rippling each time. The floor was slowly giving way beneath it.

Yverin smiled. "Sorry. I came to you because the blade would have to be new. The cuts are really clean. Sharp."

He shook his head. "I haven't had a bladed spike on my stall for a long time. I follow the trends. Everyone wants to cut people up with shark hooks. Spikes are on their way out."

"Fuck."

She ate some more horse meat. Keith started rummaging in a sack at the back of the stall and found some stale bread and a skin bottle with some hot sauce in it. He poured some sauce over the meat to make it taste more edible. He offered her a husk from the bread and she began alternating between the two.

"Anyone else sell spikes like that?"

Keith's fingers moved over his face non-committally. "Everyone. But if it's as sharp as you say, then it could be custom-made. Spikes are more made for stabbing, you know? You'd need perfect metal to form that kind of edge."

She shut her eyes tight in thought. In the darkness behind the lids she could see flames and burning steel. A pouring black orange metalfall the color of the day sky.

"What can you see?" Keith asked.

She softly kissed his fingers one by one in gratitude. "The source," she said.

THE SCD SENT A RUNNER AFTER HER AT THE STATE Steel Factory. She made no excuses for suddenly breaking off her tour of the works. She wasn't getting anywhere anyway.

They had found another body. Headless, just like the others. Another male. Outside the State Asylum. Someone had mistaken the crumpled rag-doll of a man for an escaped inmate. Now, one of the inmates had claimed he saw the murder.

"Tall," he said. "So tall." The inmate's eyes remained permanently fixed in front of him. Whenever he turned to look her way, his whole head moved. He shifted against the chains which ran from two rings through his palms to the cell wall like a restless riding locust, constantly fidgeting his head to see around him.

"What did you see?" she asked him.

"You a girl. Not nice to tell you." His voice had a serrated edge to it. Sound that grated her ears. Sawing through her mind as he spoke. Outside, the commissariat watching the door left to complete some other task. She knew they were laughing at her at the end of the octagonal corridor. The headhunter trying to interview the lunatic. They had put her up to this.

"I'll give you a choice then. The commissariats have gone." She moved closer to him. The kneeling man arched his back to face her as she towered over him. Moving closer. Close enough that he could breathe her scent, but out of reach of those big chained hands. "You tell me what you saw, or I'll rip your fucking jawbone off."

She was hot. Hot enough to carry out that kind of promise. He backed into the wall, a soft shake in his buzzsaw voice. "You won't catch this one, headhunter. He changes his shape. He can be anyone he likes. He'll kill you first."

She was squinting at him. He never moved once.

She called for an attendant. They unlocked the door and she left the madman laughing softly to himself in the cell. She sensed without realizing at first what her nerves were trying to tell her. The target was in the room all the time.

But she had to leave now. Had to set the trap first.

His death had to wait.

RICHLANE RAN HER HANDS THROUGH THE SHORT CURLS OF Yverin's soft black hair. She closed her eyes and felt the girl's fingertips tracing down over the nape of her neck. Across her back. Under her arms. Hands cupping her breasts. The air in Richlane's dark room breezing from an open window to a curtained archway beside the bed where they lay side by side in unashamed nakedness.

"Paint me, Yverin," Richlane pleaded. Her short copper mop of hair fell down across her face. "Sweeten me."

Yverin reached out and painted her skin with gum. Sugar sweet, they could smell it as it dried against Richlane's hips; sweet glue congealing over the flat of her stomach. Her skin temperature rising under the touch of the brush. She gasped as Yverin brushed over her nipples. Richlane's chest swelling beside hers. Her breath quickening.

She returned the brush to its pot and breathed over the girl's freckly skin. Soft breath over soft flesh, drying the glue, forming a second skin across her body. Her back arched away from Yverin as she leaned over her and tore the gum from her. It came away from her first in large pieces, and then after in smaller flakes where the gum had formed around her light body hairs. She fed her shedding skin to Yverin, who let the flakes dissolve on her thin tongue before swallowing. A sweet musky liquor down her throat. They kissed then. They held each other and kissed for what seemed like forever.

A DAY PASSED. SHE WOKE UP IN RICHLANE'S ARMS AND left her a note painted in gum across her stomach. She promised to get back before the next nightfall. She knew the girl would understand. They never saw much of each other when Yverin had a criminal to sell.

She walked to the State Commissariat Department tower. A huge blade of grass among the tulip flower chimney-stacks in the city's concrete field. This city was made from a plateau. Hand-carved rock towering into the sky. What was once a huge mesa which filled a landscape on the edge of the black ocean, was now no more than a man-made plantation of concrete-shelled blocks. A city of caves.

Down in the basement of the SCD tower, they had stored the bodies of the dead. She talked to her only real friend in the whole of the department. Avoiding the looks of contempt she got from clerks and commissariats. Aria lived in a chamber carved from solid concrete, like the city itself was. Walls ragged and shadowy with gray chiselled topography.

NAILS OF RUST

BY RIDLEY MCINTYRE

• After we fail at something, it's usually our first instinct to try and redeem ourselves. For that redemption, we look to our loved ones first. Perhaps, instead, we should look inside ourselves — no matter what the dangers. •

Is it possible to wake up after the nightmare,
to discover it was *just a dream?*
— Rachel Twin

SHE FOUND THE THIRD CORPSE HEADLESS AND SET upright against the gates of the State Park. Beyond the steel of the gates, she could hear the cold wind moaning through swaths of needle trees. A soft scream in the darkness. She dipped her fingers into the bloody stump of dead throat, sniffed at cold wet salt. A fresh kill, no more than two hours old. She could feel the red congealing over her fist. Flowing into the cracks in the skin across the back of her hand where her identity had been branded.

As a commissariat's riding locust came to land behind her, she was searching through the clothes of the corpse for clues. She couldn't read the memory of the body alone. All it gave her when she touched it was the shock of sudden death. Without the head, her readings were useless. She could only use what she knew.

"Identity?" the commissariat demanded. She showed him her hand. He looked closely at the sigils scarred across the veins and tendons. "Yverin. A headhunter. Lost girl." He looked up. "Disgraced?"

"Retired," she lied. Those who had lost a hunt were forced to live in shame. Yverin had lost too many. But once the taste of the blood was inside her, no matter how she w as making her money at the time, she had to catch the man. This target was locked now—she couldn't give up even if she tried.

He let go of her and stepped over to inspect the body for himself. "What have you discovered?"

Behind his impossibly tall silhouette, the huge locust clicked mandibles in disgust. Headhunters were too deep in the dirt for most state commissariats. But its rider was of the opinion that they had their uses like all things. Murderers and thieves, for instance.

"Nothing," she replied. "Killed a couple of hours ago. No head for a trauma memory reading. Skin reads no more than the death itself." She wiped bloody fingers across the corpse's sleeves. "He must have been a wealthy man, though," she said. "These clothes are quality brushed silk."

She stood out of the way while the commissariat memorized the scene for evidence. Then he lifted the body and threw it regardlessly across the saddle of his locust. Without so much as a look at Yverin, he climbed on. The huge insect, with rider and cargo, pulled off into the muddy orange sky.

"I JUST OPENED UP ANOTHER HORSE. WANT SOME?"

She nodded. In a series of tunnels and archways under the clean house towers of the city someone had built Dream Arcade. At Keith's stall, he had access to a boiler and was cooking horse meat with a hose-like steam gun. He blasted at a piece of freshly-slaughtered flesh and she watched it gray under the wet heat, the skin splitting and the fat popping and boiling away. He let her carve a fist-sized chunk out of it with a bladed meat-scoop.

Keith's usual trade was in spikes. That was why Yverin was there. The SCD had run some tests on the wounds the three corpses had, after they drained all the fluid out of them, and each one came up the same; that some kind of sharp, double-edged spike had severed those heads, and whoever killed them had spent a lot of time and energy cutting through those necks.

Today, though, Keith was running the food, using some of his own meager stock to cull the horses with. They sat down on a floor made of crumbling concrete to talk and eat.

"So, I hear the commissariats have a stalker on their hands?" He touched his face as he spoke. His fingers dancing through a language of their own over his light-deficient gray skin. It was a way of communicating to the deaf-mutes that congregated at Dream Arcade for warmth and shelter. A major epidemic before Yverin's lifetime gave birth to hordes of children who could do nothing but see and feel. The dance expressed their emotions in such a beautiful fashion. Yverin remembered crying when she first saw them speak.

Keith had to force himself to learn the dance when he first came to Dream Arcade. Now it was habitual. Even when talking to those from the city above he danced. "Has the target locked? You looking to make some money out of him?"

She couldn't read the memory of the body alone. All it gave her when she touched it was the shock of sudden death.

She nodded, her blue eyes alight with the fire of commerce. "Three dead so far," she said to him. "Kills them by tearing off the heads with a bladed spike. Pushed through the throat, then hacked outward each side."

Keith coughed on his horse meat. "Spare me the details while I'm eating, please!"

plot elements X and Y. When a fellow from the network saw it, he asked him to change Y to Z, since Y wasn't really important anyway. So Brennert, agreeing that Y wasn't that vital, dutifully changed it to Z. Then the network guy came back and said: "Great! Now just get rid of X and we'll be fine."

That's how I felt. Slowly, the entire thing was slipping away. Most of all I remember one chilling summertime conversation I had with Director-Boy, in which he suggested that if I didn't like what was being done with the script, he would simply "not make 'Into Gray' " and instead make another film, presumably the exact one we were working on. The message was clear: I had nothing to do with this film. It wasn't really mine anymore. If I didn't want to be involved, he'd take the work that he'd done—the work predicated on something that *I* had created, not him—and run with it himself.

I said nothing. I turned in the newer version of the screenplay: shorter, serviceable, and secular. Because I said nothing, the film remained "Into Gray."

But just as 007's mentor M did after Bond misused his gun in one of those movies starring the cross-eyed Timothy Dalton, Director-Boy revoked my License to Write after my second re-write. He and a friend of his, some guy named Ray—why is it that there's always somebody named Ray involved in these things?—re-wrote the whole thing again.

I never saw what they had done until the final cut of the film was completed. I don't remember much of my first screening, sitting alone in my room in front of the TV set. But I do remember that woman pulling the cross up and holding it in front of the camera, a motion you'd expect to see from Michael Jackson with a can of Pepsi or June Allyson with a box of Depends.

This Film, the motion said, Is Brought To You By the Church Of Bad Screenwriting.

I don't remember much of my first screening, but I do remember that woman pulling the cross up and holding it in front of the camera, a motion you'd expect to see from Michael Jackson with a can of Pepsi.

FLASH TO 1993. DIRECTOR-BOY WANTED ME TO WRITE A new screenplay for him, based on two of my stories ("Gnomes in the Garden of the Damned," which appeared in *Quanta* Vol 4, No. 1, and "Mister Wilt," which appeared in *InterText* Vol. 1 No. 1*)*. And I did it. I wrote it, all fifty pages of it, on the last weekend in June, a hot and sunny weekend that I spent inside, typing on my PowerBook.

Why put myself through the torment? First of all, Director-Boy has left the Church of Nipsey. For all I know, he might have joined the Trilateral Commission and even now is planting secret mental radio antennae in the minds of unsuspecting Americans. Or perhaps he's taken up golf.

But more than that, I was just intrigued about how the film might turn out. "Gnomes in the Garden of the Damned" is about a pagan ritual involving Slurpees and lawn gnomes. "Mister Wilt" is about a crazy old man who believes everyone's in on a satanic conspiracy. I couldn't *wait* to see how he can convert that into a Christian message.

If he manages to do it, however, I may have to kill him. No great loss—after all, once the world socialist government comes to power, murdering directors will no longer be a crime.

In fact, I'm expecting a *reward.*

JASON SNELL edits *InterText* when he's not writing film projects, working as an intern at a computer magazine, befriending rabid squirrels. He's just finished his first year at UC Berkeley's Graduate School of Journalism. He and his girlfriend Lauren live in Berkeley, where Jason considers writing more fiction and enjoys using his Macintosh PowerBook. He also likes to drink iced tea and mention monkeys as often as possible. If you'd like to see a copy of "Into Gray: The Movie" — no *way.*

FIRST TEXT

Jason Snell

INTO GRAY AREAS (A TRUE STORY)

THE MOMENT THE WOMAN pulled the cross out of her shirt and showed it to me like a jewelry model on the Home Shopping Network, it hit me.

I, a good old-fashioned agnostic, was very close to becoming a latter-day L. Ron Hubbard, author of pulp science fiction and billion-selling cult mind-control—uh, self-help—manuals.

I had written a religious epic for the screen. And nobody had told me.

A few years ago, I began a descent into movie hell that few could understand. You know how you have some friends that you learn to trust, and others you have to keep watching, wary that they'll do something to screw you over if you're not careful?

Here's a tip for you: if one of your friends wants to work as a director, toss 'em in the second category. Better yet, toss them in the deep end with a 50-pound bag of Cat Chow tied to their ankles.

One of my friends wants to be a director. And that fact, mixed with my delusions that I'm a writer, pulled me down into a level of hell usually reserved only for child molesters and the management of the Cincinnati Reds.

Five years ago, a story I wrote won my high school's annual short story contest. "Into Gray" (which appeared in *Quanta,* Vol. 1, No. 1) was a decent tale, I suppose, about miserable people living miserable lives after a nuclear holocaust. (The high school students of the '90s, of course, write short stories about miserable people living miserable lives who end up on *Donahue.)*

A year later, a friend of mine—you guessed it, the director—said he wanted to make my story into a movie.

And, sap that I am, I went along with it. I was fascinated with the idea of seeing my words translated on the screen, and told Director-Boy I'd be glad to write a screenplay, even though I'd never really written one before. Before my freshman year in college had ended, I had mailed off a screenplay. *Heck,* I figured, *I can't write a script worse than "Howard the Duck," can I?*

The problem wasn't that Director-Boy was a Christian. It was that he was a *weird* Christian, a member of the *Church Of Nipsey Russell, Scientist* or some similar faith, and he had evidently decided to devote his film career to God, Family, and the Green Bay Packers.

I wrote one draft of the screenplay, and gave it to Director-Boy. When I got it back, it looked quite different. My cynical science fiction story had turned into a religious epic, rife with crosses and rainbows and praise to God. All that was missing from it were Charlton Heston and a rousing half-time number from Up With People.

My favorite scene from this screenplay? A woman—dead and rotting in my story—smiles and shows a little girl a glittering cross around her neck. "This is important, too!" she says, pushing the cross toward the camera.

Cursing Director-Boy, who had evidently decided that he was also Better-Screenwriter-Than-Writer-Boy-Boy, I took his Christian Epic re-write and re-wrote it again from there. I sent the crosses to Gehenna. I banished the rainbows to a pit of hellfire, where the savagely tormented soul of the Lucky Charms Elf awaited them. I de-emphasized Director-Boy's reliance on mime.

The next time I got the script back, things had really changed. My original story, which had looked a bit like a mediocre "Twilight Zone" episode, had turned into something out of a bad "Star Trek" episode. I could only hope we could find an actor whose toupee was half as talented as William Shatner's.

All of the references to God were still in there. And like the first version, these references weren't even subtle. Characters would begin addressing the camera about how lucky they were to have accepted Jesus as their own personal savior, and if they hadn't, they'd better right after the movie was over or they'd be sorry.

I figured that at the rate religious language was appearing in the screenplay, pretty soon the Gideons would be placing it in hotel room drawers. I changed all of the Christian references back.

Well, almost all of them.

I did, however, swallow hard and allow one reference to God in the dialogue, right at the end. I bowed to the pressure of Director-Boy, the same guy who kept sending me books about how Jesus would save my soul and my life. The guy who mailed me pamphlets that explained how George Bush and the Rockefellers (except Jay, that Democrat bastard) were part of the Trilateral Commission, a secret yet well-known group that was planning to form a world socialist government.

I caved, like the spineless weasel I am. I decided to put in the God references and let the world socialist government put Director-Boy to death when they finally come to power.

I took every scene I felt was a mistake to add and tried to at least make it as good as I possibly could, only to find it changed by the next version I saw. I continued to fight against overt preaching in the film, but that was about it. My story had essentially been taken from me.

I had read a lot of stories about writers in Hollywood, and how their works were changed when they got into the hands of producers and directors, but I never thought it would happen to me with one of my friends from home. But the story of Alan Brennert, an award-winning TV writer who had worked for shows like *L.A. Law* and the new *Twilight Zone* rang true for me. Brennert recalled having a story with

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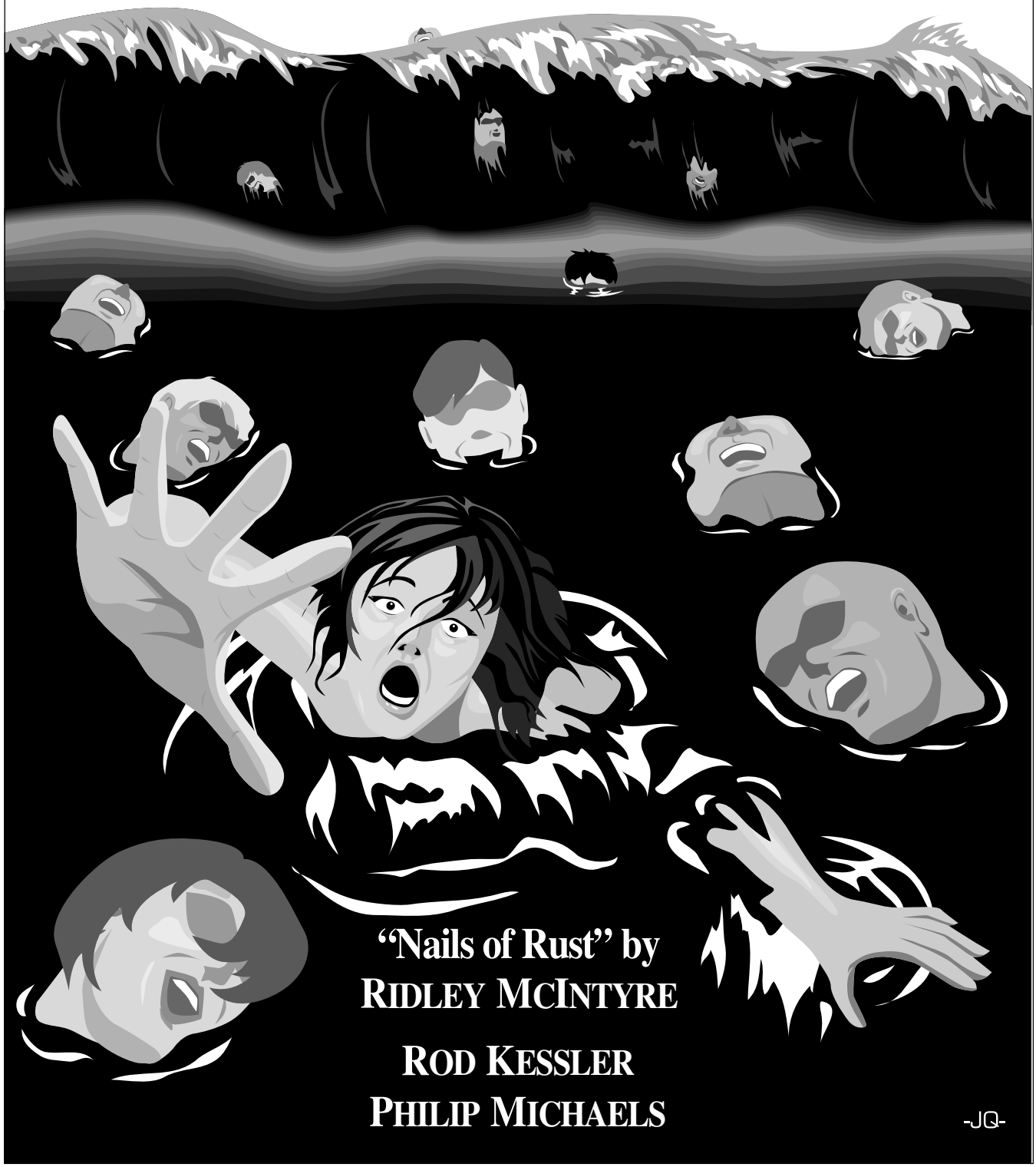

"Nails of Rust" by
RIDLEY MCINTYRE

ROD KESSLER

PHILIP MICHAELS

-JQ-