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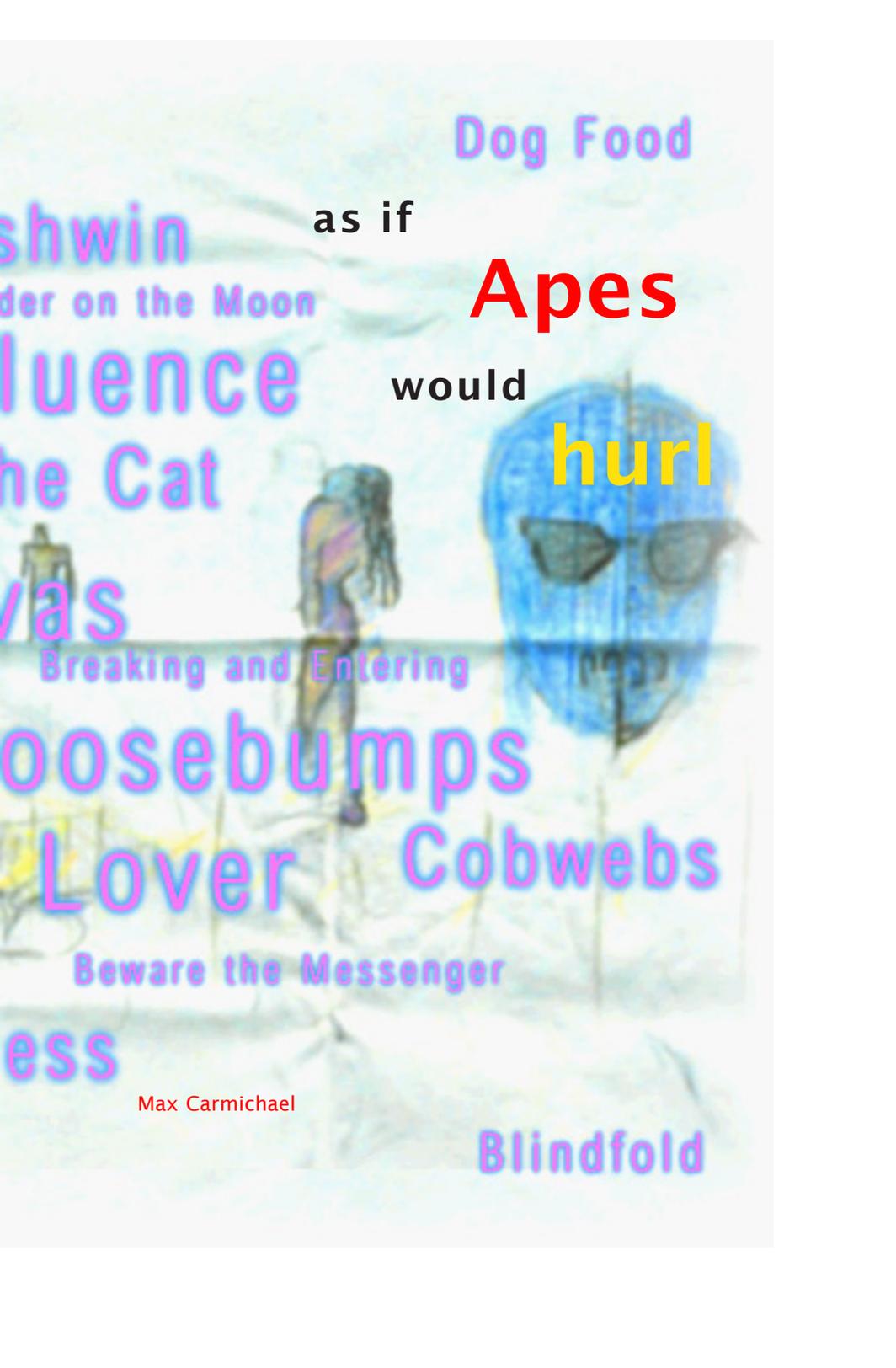
Apes

would

hurl

Max Carmichael

Blindfold



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as if **Apes** would **HURL**

Max Carmichael

Under the Influence

*Down on Cyprus Avenue
With a childlike vision sweeping into view
The clicking clacking of the highheeled shoes
Floyd and Fitzroy and Madame George*

*Marching with a soldier boy behind
He's much older now with hat on drinking wine
And that smell of sweet perfume comes drifting through
On the cool night air like Shalimar*

(Van Morrison)

All eyes on the bottle as she brings it over
pinched between her thumb and forefinger.
Like monks they attend her with eager silence
in the conical flood of the hanging lamp, and
the wicked bite of her spiked heels ricochets
off the dark masonry walls of their cloistering.
When she stops to face him sheathed in her
whore's dress of funereal satin, she lifts out
the dropper, poisoning it calmy over his glass of
water, and she pierces him with her gaze and

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smiles in the shadow of her broadbrimmed witch's hat. He raises his eyes, she narrows hers, and while he strains for a deeper look inside her she squeezes the seven drops of liquid opium into his glass, one by one. Happy Thanksgiving, Wilbur.

She watches the brown drops decomposing downward through the water in tiny clumps and threads. When he drinks, she swivels round the circle like a roulette wheel, gliding to a stop in front of the dark girl with full lips.

Following her into the high hall of swirling drums, wheeze of pipes in a far wind, sweet eucalyptus on the air, candles ranked around the rugged walls. To dance among the eucalyptus boughs strewn about the floor, to dance faster, taking up the branches and running with them, leaves trailing like long thin fingers. The drums and pipes and chanting, the flickering of the candles, the blur of bodies, boys and girls running in a fine fog of sweet gum, and in their midst she's twirling on her bare feet with her long hair fanning out.

Raw Canvas

Months earlier on completion of the loft, with the self-conscious humility peculiar to his leadership, Wib had consigned to himself the darkest and smallest of the rooms, a laddered bunkhole above the zigzag hallway that dissected the building. Now that two feuding roommates had fled, the harried painter and Wib's rebellious ex-lover, Wib's waking head was crowded with dark dreams, pictures demanding to be let out.

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He took over the painter's room, a remote neglected temple of the morning sun with its crumbling wall of stained windows and spider-cracked skylight. There as the fogs of summer shrank away in the brittle light of autumn, he threw raw canvas up on the walls and slashed impatiently away at it with charcoal and oilsticks.

Listening to tapes of his band, pacing often to the window. The settling and canting of the old building had warped its brittle rusted windowframes, and where one section hinged to open, it no longer fully closed. On cold breezes the freeway rush shot in, sirens horns and airbrakes, the sounds of his urban riverside. The panes were fogged and rippled, but one of them he replaced with clear glass, and out it he watched junk accumulate in the weed-choked backlot below.

Goosebumps

The Bike Messenger had been cruising the scene, and he already had a replacement for Wib's vengeful Girl. Meleia was that mysterious product of the seventies, a precocious daughter of rock-and-roll royalty, beautiful, well-traveled, clever, and usually high. She saw in Wib an ideal playmate, and Wib saw in her a convenient and flattering solution for their vacancy. Now there were four of them: Meleia, Wib, Fenton the fiddler, and the Bike Messenger: quiet, intense, a young Gary Cooper.

When her schedule allowed, Wib crossed town to his Art Student's apartment. It'd been so long since he'd loved anyone, he was rediscovering the patterns through her.

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His earliest experiences of love had been playful and passionate, but the long hiatus had pushed these memories too deep to give him any perspective. It all seemed new now and took place in a fresh world of art and youth and girls who smoked and wore lipstick constantly. It seemed to fit in perfectly with his new domain. He lay with his face burrowing in her crotch while he ran the back of his fingernails over the little hairs on her stomach, and he felt her thighs turn to goose bumps against his cheeks.

Music Lover

The Art Student was in the midst of art school and lived with other young art student girls. They were all studying the latest theories of women's politics, which engendered a constant suspicion of men. Their art projects usually included some reference to tribal mythologies or to their mothers or to patriarchal oppression. Things they felt deeply and were anxious to comprehend. One roommate's work consisted of standing on street corners downtown during business hours and continually changing in and out of various costumes. The object was to show how men's perceptions of her changed depending on what she was wearing. She was very cute and Wib wanted to be part of the anonymous crowd that briefly got to see her in her underwear, but he never could.

Whenever the Art Student came to the loft, the Bike Messenger retreated to his room, avoiding their eyes. Other times the Student would call and leave messages for Wib, but the Messenger would never pass them on. When Wib found out, he shrugged it off. He'd had so

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much trouble, he hated to cause more.

One day in her room Wib looked around and realized she had no stereo, not even a boom box. I never listen to music, she said. I never really have. Wib was dumbfounded. He'd never heard such a thing. What about your parents? Didn't either, she said. Wasn't part of our house.

The next time he brought his cheap boom box and tapes of his band. She listened dutifully, smoking, her eyes narrowed. Wib felt like she was confirming some suspicion about him. At the end of the tapes was a haunting melody the Bike Messenger had come up with on the sax. I really liked that last one, she said.

In spite of her political awakening, the Art Student really wanted to be in love with Wib. He was older and less distracted than the other boys she'd gone out with, and clearly a leader of something. Somebody who took chances, but with his eyes wide open and his feet on the ground. Unfortunately, any man in a position of leadership was by definition a problem.

George Gershwin

You a musician? Wib looked up. He'd been drumming on the table, in time with the churning washing machines, as he read yesterday's paper. Across from him was an older man, slim and rugged in a denim shirt and faded jeans.

Yeah, I guess. Among other things.

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Look at these hands. The man spoke quickly in a gruff urban accent. His eyes were large and bright, his features chiseled. Wib saw that his hands were huge. An octave and a half. I play piano. Live right up the hill. What about you?

I write mostly, play whatever. Sing. I guess guitar's my main thing.

Play by ear, huh? We're the lucky ones. First thing I teach is to listen. That's what Duchamp taught me. Marcel? My name's Gershwin. George.

Wib shook his hand, took him in. Big nose, big ears. Looked early-to-mid fifties. No way. Gershwin's dead.

George smiled. Fact is, he came to me in a dream. Ten years ago. Said I should take up the name. A vocation. Before that I was CIA. Strictly underground. You wouldn't believe it, but to this day I pass them on the street all the time, here in the city. KGB, British Intelligence, hand signals, winks, just like gradeschool.

Wib felt stumped. His dryerload had stopped and he began to fold. How old do you think I am? Fifty, said Wib.

Sixty-eight. My wife's twenty-four. Met her at a march in LA. You should meet her some time. Sings those old labor songs.

Gershwin heard his own dryer stop and went to empty it into a patched canvas bag. The other denizens of the laundromat, Latino women and their daughters, looked up shyly

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from the benches along the window. George passed Wib on his way to the door. Here's my card. Call me. And he was gone.

Wib stood puzzling over a neat, elegantly embossed business card bearing the name John Christy, Piano: Concert & Lessons.

Throw the Cat

Wib was walking down the hall toward his room. The hall was dark, only the light from under Meleia's door. He could hear Meleia and her boyfriend Billy Ray inside. The walls were glowing from her laughter.

I wouldn't do that if I were you, she said. They sat facing each other across the broad white floor. Meleia smiled upon Billy Ray. She was relaxed. Billy Ray had on tight black jeans. He was hunched up frowning down on a tray of speed. Crystal meth, on a black enamel tray.

His blond hair curled up in a wave. His forehead scrunched up like a brain. She started laughing and leaned over toward the crankplate, rolling onto her knees and elbows. She took the dollar bill lying there and rolled it up and stuck it in her nose. She looked up at him, smiling, then she sucked it all the way up.

Billy Ray still sat there hunched up. Yeah, but you grew up that way. His arm shot out and grabbed a pack of cigarettes off the floor. You walked around naked while your folks tripped on acid.

You tumbled gravestones under a full moon, she replied.

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She watched the boy as he smoked. He slowly untangled himself and got down on the floor. She felt her fingernails digging into the floorboards and she began to walk her fingers back and forth. She watched her hands. When she looked up again Billy Ray was staring at her, his eyes bugged out. Me a shot of that whiskey, he said. She complied, studying him intensely.

Wib had his door open so he could hear them. He hung up his jacket and stashed his bag on the floor, still in the dark. The moon was moving far away, on the other side of the earth. Wib was returning from the Art Student's place, where she'd been too freaked out over school, smoking like a furnace, lipstick wet and dark like fresh blood. It was a hard row to hoe.

Billy Ray cast his eyes about, swallowing a double shot. Meleia sat up straight. They both saw the kitten sitting under the lamp, tipping its head back and forth as it watched them. Billy Ray laughed. Let's throw the cat, he said.

No! she shouted. Wib stood outside in his doorway, his hands gripping the sides of the doorjamb.

There was a scuffle. Billy Ray got hold the cat, Meleia jumped astride him. They shuffled around a bit and he gave the cat a good swing. It slid shrieking all across the room and smacked into the wall with a low groan.

Wib kicked his doorjamb. Damn!

But then there was no sound. Hey! shouted Wib. He shoved Meleia's door open. Billy Ray

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sprawled there limp, unconscious in the middle of the floor. Meleia curled in the opposite corner, holding the kitten, smiling down into its frightened eyes, her tears dripping on the kitten's whiskers.

Fertility Awareness

The Art Student began to borrow from native american traditions. Her anatomy and chemistry had trouble with modern birth control, so she decided they would practice a method called fertility awareness, which meant that sex was scheduled around her ovulation, measuring pH, etc. And she had begun menstruating in time with her roommates, and she was building a wigwam for menstrual seclusion in a popular city park, in which she would perform a ritual and photograph herself during the new moon. As this and other projects began to pile up, she became more and more tense and anxious. To him it was as if she was consciously and deliberately trying to remake herself as a woman in compliance with thousands of years of native tradition interpreted in the context of abstract modern political theories. It seemed impossible, but he had tried impossible things himself.

They had planned a trip to another city to visit his friends at another art school, and the night before they were to leave she was frantic. I have to turn in my paper by next Tuesday, and the fabric for my hut has to be sewn the next day. Then we won't go. No, I really want to meet your friends. We can go later. No, later I'll be working up to the end of semester. Besides, your friends are expecting us. It went on like this for a while. The ceiling light was on and they were packed and

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dressed to go out. They walked back and forth in her brightly lit bedroom not looking at each other. Outside was where they had planned to be but the windows were dark and you couldn't see through them.

Oh I hate this! She threw herself down on the bed. He sat beside her and laid his hand gently on her back. Let's just not go. We'll drive down into the mountains by ourselves and stay in a motel. Just an overnight trip. We'll go to the beach in the morning and then come back. You can work all day Sunday.

She lay there quietly. After a while she rolled on her back and looked up at him. This is the second time you've made a decision for me.

What?

You did this once before.

What?

Made a decision for me. You have no idea what that feels like for a woman.

I don't know what you're talking about.

Of course not. She got up and grabbed her bag by the door. Let's go.

Cobwebs

Sometime after midnight, deep in the mountains. The road twisting tightly between massive trunks of redwoods, headlights cut off there without penetrating further in the forest. She sits silently in the passenger seat, Wib

drives hunched over, dead tired. Suddenly the roadside opens out, there's a sign, dark, the shapes of cabins.

This must be it! Wib cries, startled.

She leans forward, Wib pulls off into gravel. The office is dark, locked. No bell.

She stands in the gravel, waiting for Wib to decide what to do. He surveys the property, his eyes adjusting. Half a dozen cabins the color of treebark, completely dwarfed by the mammoth trees above them. All dark. No other vehicles.

He said it would be open. Unlocked. Wib starts toward the cabins, she follows. He tries every door. Finally at the end of the row one opens. Feeling for a switch. Dim bulb comes on, knotty pine paneling, flowered bedspread, an archway at the back framing a kitchen table with gingham cloth. Cobwebs hang from everything like curtains.

It's beautiful! she cries. She kneels before an antique desk, carefully switching on its brass lamp without disturbing the spiders' work. Look! It's our magic kingdom!

High Tide

Right here, said Wib, pointing to the slab of rock at the foot of the cliff. It was Doug, and me, and rat-faced Fred. Lived underground. I think I was the first to ever drag him outside. I talked them into camping out here. With their girlfriend. They had a threesome thing going on. Wacko.

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The Art Student watched the surf for a minute. It broke on both sides of a tall flat-top rock that had been separated from the mainland and was heading out to sea, paused at the edge of the beach. They stood on the beach in a natural amphitheater, surrounded by semicircular cliffs a hundred feet tall.

We built a fire well after dark, and Fred began to throw newspapers into it, tearing them up. And they rose up burning, all the way up the cliff, burning in rainbow colors, like our own personal fireworks. We figured it must be the ink.

She looked up at the white cliffs. I would've liked to have seen it, she said. She looked down the beach. Is that a cave?

Yeah. It used to be open sometimes, at high tide. Sometimes it fills in. We crawled back in it once, and it opened out. Quiet. Spooky.

Others were coming down the trail, making noise. Wib and the Art Student wandered toward the cave. There was a natural trough in the rock shelf, leading back under the cliff. She sank into it. Wib watched her succulent butt wiggle through the tiny hole under the cliff.

Cold and wet, she proclaimed as she crawled out. Let's just stay here, where they can't see us, said Wib, settling next to her, starting to unbutton her shirt. She laid back with her eyes closed, letting him.

When they got back to the city she threw herself into her schoolwork and he didn't hear from her for a week. When he finally reached

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her on the phone it was like talking to a stranger. Call me in a couple of weeks.

Dog Food

The whole band was there around the kitchen table, dressed in their thriftshop suits. Wib, Joe, Fenton, the Bike Messenger, and the Singer. Bottles of decent wine waiting to be poured.

The buzzer shrieked just as the clock hit the hour. Wib's eyebrows arched in surprise. I'll get it, said Fenton.

They all turned to face the top of the stairs. Mrs. Gershwin's head rose first above the railing. She was a giant. But then George himself was quite a man. Swell place, he enthused, looking enviously around at the stereo and recording equipment.

Wib pulled a huge stuffed catfish out of the oven. Mrs. Gershwin was a vegetarian. George didn't drink. The Bike Messenger sat up, his hands clenched on the table in front of him. His eyes practically bugged out. So, how did you two meet, Mrs. Gershwin.

Oh, George and I met on a march, she replied, in a thick, sweet drawl. George himself threw his hands out over the table. It was a labor march, for civil servants. They were advancing on City Hall, and Tessie was belting out these old labor songs, old Wobbly songs, you know? I just happened to be there, waiting for a bus.

Tessie was staring at George in rapture. So I went up to her afterwards, and asked her to

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sing with me. We're going to do a concert at the Bank of America next Wednesday, aren't we, Tessie. She nodded mightily. My friend Bob is the program director for the local classical station, he sets these things up. I'd like you all to come.

What kind of stuff do you play? said the Singer.

Something for everyone, George whispered, tucking his chin and grinning mischievously.

Rhapsody in Blue? said Wib.

Naturally. George turned to Tessie and fell to smiling at her. After a while he turned back and looked straight at Wib.

I had no place to live, but I had a toy piano. Tessie let me move in with her and her mother. A suffering soul. Have you ever eaten dog food?

In the silence they could hear Fenton chewing food he'd grabbed off somebody else's plate.

It's not bad, you know. George smiled comfortably. Got everything you need.

Blindfold

One morning Meleia climbs the ladder to Wib's bed, grabs his leg and shakes it.

Wake up sleepyhead. He peers through her white cotton nightgown at the daylight. Rolls over to examine his alarm clock.

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I don't have to be at work 'til nine, he complains. You're sick today, she responds. Case of the vapors.

Out on the sidewalk next to her red Bug, hastily dressed in painter's pants and ragged sweater, he feels her behind him rummaging in her bag. Don't turn around. She throws a scarf over his eyes, ties it quickly behind his head. Too tight? Good. She wrenches it tighter.

She drives over the bridge, still in fog. Traffic approaching the city in the opposite lanes is stalled, blind Wib beside her is listening for clues, brow furrowed. She hums a happy tune.

Up into the coastal hills, reaching a long stoplight alone at the dark entrance to a one-lane tunnel. Waiting for the light to change, she shuts her own eyes and hears the engine idling, the foghorns calling somewhere. Leans her head out the window like Wib to smell the ocean blowing out from the tunnel. When she opens her eyes the light's green.

On the other side an empty road, black in the damp, winds up the side of a sleepy valley. She follows it to the top of the ridge, carefully scanning the roadside, glancing over her shoulder toward the sea. Finally she swings the car around and parks on the berm.

Fog blows past, breaking up. Wib beside her listening to the car creaking and cooling. Suddenly his door opens and she's helping him out into wet grass. Guided by her firm grip on his arm, he steps slowly downhill on uneven ground. A light breeze, sometimes a warming light on his head. He recognizes the

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sound of waves pounding a distant beach.

She stops him. Just be still a minute. Spreads the blanket and sets the picnic basket upon it: wine, baguette, cheese and fruit. Then she takes in the scene a moment by herself. The last wisp of fog is gone and a wild hallucination of flowers in purple red and yellow cloaks the steep headlands, plunging to a dark ocean. Blue sky clear to the Farallon Islands. Warm now in the sun, she unties the scarf around Wib's eyes and leans to watch his expression.

Popeye

Omar leans against the railing in front of his record store. The old man smokes and peers out from under peppery brows. Suddenly from the alley at his side Popeye strides forth, his long arms swinging, an idiotically regal grin on his face. Wearing a Confederate officer's uniform from the Civil War, he parades directly into traffic, stopping all four lanes, facing to salute each lane in turn.

Omar shakes his head frowning. Popeye reaches the other side and pivots about face, crossing again. Now horns are blowing up and down the street, bringing Wib to the high arched windows at the front of his loft. Wib watches the tall, strong man in the gray suit with his unnaturally long gait. Popeye is really goodlooking, and his uniform appears clean, but he hasn't shaved in days.

Spider on the Moon

Tell me about your family, she said. Wib and

Meleia were smoking a joint at sundown on the roof of the art school. Somewhere down below were the darkrooms, where the Art Student may or may not have been working feverishly on her projects.

I already did.

No, I mean the good parts. There must be something good.

Yeah. I love my mom. My dad was cool. My sister was cool. Wib's father had killed himself after the dean had caught him bugging one of his male students at their tiny cornbelt college. Hung himself in the barn the family had no use for, from the beam at the edge of the haymow. His sister had caught fire and burned to death in the process of gassing up a riding mower, at the age of thirteen.

Wib reached in his pocket and felt the tiny bottle. He pulled it out. I guess my brother's cool too. Not that I would know anymore.

His brother had joined the Navy. They sent each other cards on holidays. He was somewhere in the south pacific. Wib held the bottle up so its label was facing the mouth of the bay, where clouds still burned like coals. Soy sauce. A murky solution. Wib's brother had sent him a half-ounce of liquid opium along with a Thanksgiving card.

He said to take it on an empty stomach. Oh, that could be nice, she replied, smiling eagerly into his eyes.

The evening slowed to a blurred sequence of stills from an old movie as they drove down a

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tunnel where the stars were streetlights and headlights, everything else was deep in stone. Running up lost stairways to emerge in hidden gardens where black roses bloomed high above the crawling phosphorescent planet. Later when they felt very old they lay on a flattened sofa under the big kitchen skylight. There seemed to be a fog of fireflies in the air, faint sporadic signalling.

A door creaked open in the far distance and heavy footsteps came down the hall. Fenton staggered past them into the bathroom, a character in their filmstrip. Sometime later he emerged and stood staring at them where they lay entwined head to foot, their toes in each other's hair, caressing each other's legs, mouths gaping stupidly.

From somewhere above the building, at the cold zenith of midnight, a powerful beam had been trained upon the skylight over Fenton's head. Tared cracks in the glass radiated outward from the light's heart. Look, there's a spider on the moon, she said to Fenton. That first dose kept them high together for almost two days.

Rhapsody In Blue

The auditorium is packed at noon on Wednesday. A noisy crowd. Without any introduction, George strides across the stage wearing a tuxedo, at just the appointed time, dropping his butt on the bench before the grand piano and aggressively attacking it, his feet dancing and his butt scooting around on the bench. He beats out a ragtime, looking up at the audience and nodding with that Popeye grin. It's loud and technically bewildering, it's

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over quickly, and he jumps up and grabs the microphone.

Some of you may know the name Marcel Duchamp, he suggests hoarsely. An artist of some reknown. He devised this next piece to settle a bet.

Mrs. Gershwin advances onstage, carefully pushing a cart stacked with what appear to be crystal wine glasses, brandy snifters, filled to different depths. George is theatrically rolling up his sleeves, revealing his muscular arms. He wets the tips of his fingers in a glass of water, and begins to play a tune by caressing the rims of the glasses. It's "Chopsticks". The crowd explodes with laughter and applause.

When he's done Tessie looms at the microphone and George launches her accompaniment, this time fixing his hunched concentration on the piano. She sings stridently off-key. Old labor songs.

And now, I will do something no one has ever attempted, says George as the hour approaches one. Tessie's returning onstage with a little red toy piano.

I will play Rhapsody In Blue on two pianos, the grand and the toy, at the same time. And he does, brilliantly.

Breaking and Entering

Their Thanksgiving dance had melted, the music fading to a distant howling, as a gentle rain sizzled outside the windows. Fenton and the other narcoleptics were murmuring happily over leftovers at the kitchen table, and

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Wib stood alone among eucalyptus boughs in the great hall. He noticed the Bike Messenger gone missing. When he opened a window the night was warmer than he expected. The Messenger paced rapidly the sidewalk below, soaked in his t-shirt, clutching his arms to his chest.

Hey, what's up, called Wib. The Messenger wheeled and disappeared around Omar's corner into the alley.

Wib stood outside at the corner watching his roommate. An old car parked halfway down the block. The Messenger finding it unlocked, crawling in headfirst. The door swinging slowly shut.

Wib took his time in the mellow rain. Watching the tenements along the way, their dark windows. Looking over his shoulder toward the street. Reaching the car, where the Messenger lay curled on the front seat, motionless.

Hey. Rapping on the window. Hey. No response. Wib looked around again. He opened the door, reached in, grabbing an ankle. What the fuck, man. The Messenger shook him off, shook his whole body, curling tighter into a ball. Wib let the door shut.

The driver rolled the squad car, idling, along the alley. They saw a young man leaning with his hands braced on the trunk of the parked vehicle, as if waiting for a shakedown. They pulled alongside and got out. The leaning boy didn't move. The female rookie handled him. Spread your legs. The driver hauled the Bike Messenger out and cuffed him.

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Wib found himself in the backseat, his hands locked behind him, while the cops interviewed somebody in the dark alley. The windows were all steamed up and he couldn't see who it was. The Bike Messenger slumped against his shoulder, nuzzling him. Kiss me, Wib, he said. Fuck off. Wib tried to nudge him away, but the Messenger was all over him, slobbering on his jaw, his neck. The cops were getting in, and they watched over their shoulders for a moment, dispassionately. Fuckin' queers, said the driver, shifting into forward.

'Scuse me, what's this all about, said Wib. Aren't you supposed to charge us, read us our rights or something? The driver laughed humorlessly into the rearview. You have the right to remain silent, and I suggest you use it.

You Know Rico

No bench at all would be better than the one they're handcuffed to. It comes halfway under Wib's butt, so he has to keep pushing back with his legs to stay seated. And of course the Bike Messenger's still kissing him, here in the the blinding light of the dispatch room as homophobic cops parade constantly back and forth, pointing and cackling.

At least the holding tank's dark. Now that all his pockets have been emptied, his driver's license with its conservative middle-class photo gone, he relaxes into despair. Even the Bike Messenger is silent and slumped. Others around them set the example. On this Thanksgiving night.

Hours go by. Men are brought in, black and

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brown, young and old. Wib is nodding off when a guard slings the door open and calls him and the Messenger by name. They are pushed down dim narrow corridors, through heavy barred doors. Around corners in a maze. Down a hallway with impossibly tall cages on one side, shoved into one where a slender boy sprawls on his face on the floor. Thin mattresses are tied against the barred sides and strewn across the floor, as if apes would hurl themselves about.

In hell no questions asked. Wib sits and waits for whatever. They appear to be going from bad to worse. But after an hour, the guard returns, beckons him. Wib grabs the Bike Messenger and drags him to his feet. Again through a maze, into darker and noisier depths, ceiling pressing down. The hall widens and is lined with deep narrow cells, each filled with men, each floodlit from within. At the end of the hall an officer alone at a desk.

They are made to stand before this warden one by one. 'Til now they've not been allowed to speak, nor have they been spoken to apart from curt commands. Wib senses they are at some destination and ventures a query. Excuse me, but I don't know what I'm doing here. Can you tell me what the charges are?

The officer stops writing to check him out. Turns over a yellow index card, reads it. Forcible entry, vehicular breaking and entering. Under the influence, controlled substance. Misdemeanor, you were in the felony wing by mistake. He doesn't look up.

The guard, more gentle now, guides them into the loudest and brightest cell along the wall. A long trestle table down its center,

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bunks stacked three high along the walls. Wib scans quickly around and sees every bunk is occupied. As is the table, with half a dozen card games going. In a space ten feet wide at least fifty men are crowded, shouting, laughing, whistling. No one even looks up as Wib and the Messenger find their own way past the table to the end of the room. There alone is some space. A pool of waste water spreads over the green floor, a stained toilet with no seat marooned at the back of it. The cell's only spare mattresses are soaking in the pool.

Wib finds one that's only half wet, drags it under the edge of the table, so he can get his head out of the floodlights. He crawls onto the mattress and curls up. Now all he can see is rows of knees.

Black voices, Latino voices. Tubby, they charge you yet, man?

Charge me hell, who says they got to charge me? Hold me here a week, send me down San Bruno a week, dump me on the street where they pick me up. Same old story, man. Happy Thanksgiving.

Hey, they caught Rico up in Chico, man. Rico in Chico.

No way, man. I seen Rico over on Fillmore last week. Headed south with the birds.

Rico down in Tehachapi, man, movin' that fine Vietnamese. Ain't nobody can touch Rico.

You stupid, homeboy. I know Rico. Rico finished with that shit. Rico father died, he gone straight.

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A deep growl, older. You know Rico, I know Rico. Everybody knows Rico. Rico the only man not here this week. Cut the cards, young man. Wib falls asleep, the lights buzz and burn without relent, the games fly loudly on.

Beware the Messenger

Some hours later Wib's shaken awake and hauled to his feet by a guard. Stiff and sore, led away to a counter where his wallet's returned. Meleia waits outside. She and Fenton escort him the few blocks home, under an iron-gray morning sky. He stares ahead in silence. You smell awful, she says.

Wib's in the tub when the Messenger returns. His footsteps stop outside the bathroom door. Wib? No answer. Wib? What's up, says Wib hoarsely.

Gotta talk to you, man.

So talk.

Meleia lies in bed alone, watching her skylight change from blue to yellow with the dawn. She hears their muffled voices. From time to time she hears a splash, Wib shifting in the tub. Wib, she calls softly, come to bed.

This story is the second in a series.

The first volume is titled "Loft of Dreams."

For more information see www.maxcarmichael.com.

High Tide

George Gershwin

Spice

Under the Influence

Throw the

Rhapsody in Blue

Raw Canyon

You Know Rico

G

Music

Fertility Awareness

Popeye