

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: CANDIDATES FOR THE REDEMPTION MACHINE

Shaun Gannon, Master of Fine Arts, 2013

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This collection takes the concept of the “stunted individual” from grotesque fiction and applies it to surrealist prose poetry, where only traces of standard logic can be found; through this, the contrast between impossible events and innately human behavior becomes exaggerated. The melding of these forms forces the struggling individuals in these poems to represent humanity, where it is found wanting, despite artificial hope.

CANDIDATES FOR THE REDEMPTION MACHINE

By

Shaun Gannon


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of the University of Maryland, College Park,
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DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Frederick, coding and plot.

Gary, soundtrack.

Nancy, graphics.

Laurence, wunderkind ne'er-do-well and executive producer.

Jessica Valentino, of the lover's lineage.

Keith Carrouters, semi-prophetic dreamer.

Adam Shoemaker, Reggie Carrouters, and Alec Owens, testers.

Lucy and Ando, possibly the proprietors of Secret Bar.

Captain Camelot, the hero of another tale.

Alec & the Replacements (1)

Everybody was being swapped out, and it was made worse by the fact that the replacements were very ill-trained. Before breakfast, I asked my replacement father why everyone was being traded for days (sometimes weeks) for other people, and she told me it was a government program thing. "They're being run as candidates for the Redemption Machine," she said. My facial expression didn't change. "Well, did you ever read The Giver?" she asked. "It's like that, except after you take on the burden, they know what happens to the body."

SECTION ONE

“Are YOU made up with what it takes to save us? Find out at your local recruitment station!”

-- commercial released by FEMA

Nightmare Diet

My sister was in a bad mood because her nightmare diet wasn't working out. "How many fuckin' calories can there be in one bad dream?" "I don't know," I replied, scooping the last of the dreamcatchers off the floor. She hopped off her stepstool and put the hedge trimmers in the closet. "Welp, after you empty them dreamcatchers, make sure you run them through the wash." I really couldn't understand why she wasn't losing weight, considering I don't know how to empty dreamcatchers and she'd been eating nothing for weeks, but I would never accuse her of cheating. She's really good with those hedge trimmers.

Be Proud Now

When I came to this country I needed to find the good job. I had little money but could not stay at home any longer, so I took a plane to the city. I wanted to drive the cab but the boss said he did not “like my face” and I had no license anyhow.

I would go to hotels and use their bathrooms to clean up after sleeping on the bus. One hotel a man was in the bathroom and after I washed my face he gave me a towel, and I thought he was just being friendly, but then he wanted money. I learned he was doing a job.

After running away from that hotel I went to another one and started doing what the bathroom man did. This place, Sleep-Eze Motel, had very very few people come to the bathroom, and when they did, they told me to get out. They paid for this room they said. Even though I said I came with the room, I had to leave. This is when I began to miss home very much and even my old life a little but I made myself be good.

One day I was sitting on a street thinking about where to get a knife and I saw a man wipe off a car with a towel. Then he went over to the driver and demanded money, and the driver gave him some and sped off. This seemed easy so, after going back to Sleep-Eze and taking their towels, I tried to wipe off car windows, but people drove too fast and it was hard. Since I was sleeping on park benches, I decided to offer the people who run around some towels for sweat. They were very nice when they took them but would never pay. I do not think they knew what I was doing. I have run out of towels.

My heart is breaking. Life here is very hard but I do not want to go back to using the knife to make money. I want to be a good man again, start over here. I want to use the towel. The life of the knife is hard, but towels, they are so soft. So I am asking you, please, let me work for your bathroom. Let me give away the towels. Please don't make me use the knife.

Golf Course Faux Pas

My third eye kept opening in the middle of the night and it was really screwing up my mornings. I'd get out of bed with a headache, everything would be in intense colors, my concentration totally shot until lunchtime. I decided I'd ask my doctor friend about it during our back nine at Thousand Plateaus (I'm a Platinum member there).

"Oh, here," he said as we let another twosome play through. He flicked my forehead and hummed, which popped my third eye open. He whispered into it, and a pillar of purple-blue-white light shot out of my forehead, then dissipated. "Psychic beacon needed releasing, that's all," he smiled as he grabbed his golf bag. "Thanks," I mumbled. I've felt a hundred times better since then, but I would've appreciated it if he'd waited until we were in the locker room if that sort of thing was going to happen. Keith Carrouters was standing right there, for Christ's sake!

From *Captain Camelot vs. the Red Mantis* (#76, 1962)

I have not been here long –
I tracked my brother to this
coastal city three days ago.
He has not left yet. I feel
him here. I know he will
take a boat to a place far
away so I stay around these
docks. I am always armed
and no man will question
me, for when I find my
brother, I will redistribute
his bones across this dying
galaxy.

Buy It Now (1)

Last year, my mother went on an eBay kick. After selling off our unwanted clothing, shoes, and accessories, my brothers and I started to notice other things disappearing. I was down to three shirts, a pair of corduroys, and some bike parts when I finally confronted her. “Who’s buying all this stuff?” “I think it’s the government,” she replied without turning to face me. I leaned over her shoulder as she pulled up the sales list on the massive monitor. Thousands of our belongings purchased by random strings of numbers, all to be shipped to the CIA. “Oh God, they bought Roy?” I leaned over and rubbed our old Basset Hound behind the ears. “They didn’t get insurance, either,” my mother said. “I’m gonna end up eating it in shipping costs.” I never paused to speculate what was becoming of our things; I had the dog in my arms and I was out the door.

Meeting with Nancy

Gary and I had a meeting with Nancy in the hopes of getting our own team of programmers for *Goblin Gobblers*. She seemed mostly uninterested in the game and preferred gossip over timetable plotting, but by God could she design the best-looking suits of armor in computer graphics today.

“I don’t know how he can still come to work after going through something like that,” she said to Gary, who was nodding politely. “I mean, how much interrogation can one person take at once? I know I couldn’t last a whole two weeks, I’d go batty.” For over half an hour, she talked like this. I had to get her into the game. I had to win over Nancy.

“You know, Nancy, my brother was taken too.” Gary stood fast enough to knock over his chair (he sometimes gets stuck in chairs with arms on them) and loudly whispered, “Frederick!!”

My eyes widened, but I refused to be deterred. Gary doesn’t understand what it’s like down the hall from Laurence every day. I’m going to get my God damn suits of armor, even if I have to start taking people myself.

Danger Hands

Don't go near Ole Goop they says, he has danger hands they says. No, I never had a bit of ill will in me, but look how words can do all sorts of bad. I got Employee of the Month five times at the market and that don't mean anything because Oh Ole Goop, he has danger hands, he walks through the neighborhood at night with his bag of bones they says, well, all that talk really gets to you after a long time. They say these things and give me these awful looks or just ignore me but there's no reason to do all that. There's no reason to ignore me, just cause I got danger hands. There's all sorts of nice things I can do that don't use my hands.

From *Captain Camelot and the Knights of Time* (#446, 1995)

Captain Camelot teleports into a large white room with no visible ceiling, drops to his knees, and vomits on the floor. Four other men teleport into the room. “Quickly, men, assemble! The future depends on it!” shouts a man in a king outfit. The king guy, a businessman, a samurai, and a lady run to the center of the room and hold hands. The Captain finishes vomiting. “What? What?” he mumbles as he wipes his mouth, rubs his ginger crew cut, and stands. “Captain, quickly! We must link together!” “Someone tell me what is happening right now or I am seriously going to lose my shit,” the Captain says. “Don’t you remember the dream? Chronosia has called upon us to aid all of time!” the lady says.

“I don’t know any Chrono thing, I got a call from the president, and – where’s the exit?” the Captain pulls his gun, and everyone (but the king) gasps. “Captain, please, take my hand, we have to send the message!” the businessman shouts.

“Okay, I don’t know how you all know my name, but I know I’m not joining this Small World Hands-holding Club. I’m getting out of here.”

The group joins hands and fires a psychic message up into the untold reaches of the white room, while the Captain fires his secret-passage gun at the wall, waiting for a reaction. “We’ll be out of here in a jiff,” he says. “It just takes a while to get the juices in these secret passages flowing sometimes.” The samurai rolls his eyes.

Kris Jacobs

I thought I ran into my college roommate Chris Jacobs when I went to get my haircut today. “Chris Jacobs, I didn’t know you came to the Mop Top Chop Shop!” “Oh, hi Marc, um, actually, it’s Kris now.” “Oh, I’m sorry. My name’s Mark. You must be mistaken.” Despite his pleading, I refused to be acknowledged as Marc and sat in silence for twenty minutes before my underfrosting appointment. I am a man of my convictions, and if Kris Jacobs really was my old friend, he would know that.

24 / F / Single

1.

I live for tomorrow. I'm all about living life one day at a time. I accept what life has to offer. I love my life, and I try to enjoy every moment. My mother is the most important person in the world. My mom is more awesome than yours. I would die for my family. I would die for my friends. I would die for literally any reason, maybe even no reason at all. I love hanging out. I love going out with my boys. I surround myself with wonderful people and truly enjoy the company of my friends. On weekends, I go out to the bars, but other times I'll stay home and watch a movie and have a glass of wine with my besties. I go to clubs and love to dance, but I don't mind snuggling on the couch catching up on 30 Rock. I am Liz Lemon personified. I'm Zooey Deschanel. I AM Audrey Hepburn. I'm a real Manic Pixie Dream Girl. I'm an INFJ; that's all you need to know.

▲ ▲ ▲

2.

I love to travel and see the sights. I love France. I love Germany. I love Brazil. I love Israel. I love England. I love Puerto Rico. I love Haiti. I love Mexico. I love debating politics and religion at the pub with the locals. I love watching the sun come up in a small African village, reminding us that God really is there for us every day. I love the bustle of people in a Kowloon market, going about their lives and needing each other to survive. I love the sound my blood makes when it hits the walls. I love the hoppy taste of a good IPA – keep the Nasty Lite for yourself, thank you very much.

▲ ▲ ▲

3.

I'm a spontaneous person. I will try anything new. I want to do everything. I want to see the world. I want to meet people from all walks of life, because every person you meet has something they can teach you. I want the earth to turn to ash and cinder and float through the galaxy, infecting every star it touches, burning out the universe. I want to take in as much as I can. I believe in living life to the fullest. At the end of the day, life is too short to not be laughing, having fun and appreciating others. At the end of the day, I want to know I made a difference. At the end of the day, I know I still have friends and family who would do anything for me and that's a lot more than some people have. At the end of the day, I thank God for everything I have. At the end of the day, I pray that this was the last.

▲ ▲ ▲

4.

I'm sarcastic, ADD, and random. I'm competitive, witty, and sophisticated. I'm free-spirited, sexy, and nerdy. I'm polyamorous, full-figured, and beautiful. I'm level-headed, passionate, and intelligent. I'm goal-oriented, driven, and successful. I'm freaky, flirtatious, and fun. I'm hot, cool, and better than you. I'm caring, motivated, and a great listener. I'm inquisitive, enthusiastic, and awesome. I'm holding a gun in my mouth. Watch me pull the trigger.

▲ ▲ ▲

Holy Tenor

When I am riding in a car that I am not driving, I feel like I am moving too fast, faster than I would drive, faster than allowed, faster than everything. I grow very scared until I see a cute girl walking by, but because I am moving faster than everything, I only catch the briefest glimpse of her, her face, her hair, her legs, and then we are parted and then I am sad. I believe this is what it's like to be God.

Keith's Dream 22: Ghosted with Our Dead

I moved to a house on the beach of the last lake in the world. The lake was man-made, very small but deep, and the house was free because everybody has left. I went through the other empty houses on the beach and collected the money and jewelry and books and dumped them in the lake. Then I collected the furniture and appliances and used them to build a pier. When I was done I sat on the couch at the end of the pier and stared at all the floating money for a few days. I took to tearing apart the other houses and throwing the bricks and lumber into the lake. I never bothered to sleep. I knew the lake was filling with these houses but I never saw them pile up towards the surface.

One night I dove into the lake and found a house reassembled on a ledge on the lake's wall, the tossed and sunken materials all piled up just so. I moved into this house. I wanted to lie down but could only float in the bedroom because all the furniture was in the pier. It looked exactly like the house I left standing on the beach except the furniture and books and picture frames and smell were replaced with water. There were no lights and I did not need them.

I finally fell asleep in the attic of the lake-ledge house and slept until the lake dried up. Even when I peered over the edge of the cliff from the front porch, I couldn't see the bottom. Above me was only a small dot of light, and I realized just how far down this house had assembled.

I did not know where the water went and was afraid to find out it went to the same place as everyone else. I tore the mold-covered carpet off the floors and wove a rope out of its fibers. I tied it to the foundation of the house, then to my waist. I jumped into the pit and as I fell I knew I would find my way back to the things I had tossed away.

When the carpet-rope became taut, the house was pulled off the ledge and began to fall above me, blotting out the small dot of light from the top of the chasm. I climbed the carpet-rope, or pulled the house closer to me as we fell, and when I opened the front door and scrambled inside the falling house, I felt like I was home for the first time.

Running with the Dogs

So I'm watching Spiderman in the den when Frankie asks me if I want to see something. I say "Yeah," so we go in his room and he shuts the door and locks it. He reaches under his bed and pulls out this gun that's so big it looks almost stupid in his skinny hands, and I say "Frankie, where'd you get that?" He says "Mister Clayton down on 300 South, he's selling all his guns since his beans didn't grow for shit this year." So I say "What if Mom finds out," and he says "She won't know unless you tell her, and you ain't gonna tell her," and I shake my head, since all that would happen is Mom would hit him some more. I say "What're you gonna do with it?" Frankie stares at it and says "Nothing." He keeps turning it over in his hands.

I say "You ain't going out with that, are you," and he says "I ain't stupid," but he slips it behind his back, tucks it in his belt, and says "Okay I gotta go now, get out of my room." I know he doesn't like me in his room when he's gone so I go to the door and he says "Hey." I look at him and he's got this new kind of smile on his face. He says "You be good for Mom," and I get scared since he never said that to me before, but I just nod my head, and he says "Go on," and I go outside and play with Annie and Bo, because running in the yard with the dogs always makes me feel better.

Escape From Indiana

Three of my friends and I moved into a house still cluttered with the previous tenants' tons of furniture and junk. While tossing things out, I found a door leading from the basement stairwell to the main hall. "Hey, look at this!" I said. My friend Buttercup turned around and shouted. "Oh my god, there's a door there!" "I know, crazy, right? I bet I find something else badass later." I should have made him take that bet, because as he was leaving the bathroom last week, I stepped out of the hall closet in front of him. "Hey!" "AAAAAAH," he screamed. "Look at this!" I pointed to a small hatch in the closet. It led to a tiny concrete room with nothing but a light bulb. "Holy shit, how did you find that?" Just as he asked me, that was the moment the power went out everywhere. But, if you'll let me tell you a secret, it's that the power is in that concrete room and we keep it there because we have to help it. So you can see why I cannot accept your mission.

Dammit Laurence

Gary had stopped by my officelet to drop off some back issues of *Captain Camelot* so I showed him my latest coding project. “And the little goblin follows you everywhere?” “Yeah, it took me a week to figure that out, but look, you can feed him, too.” A large white rectangle pushes a yellow square into a green square. Gary squealed and grabbed at the keyboard as a voice came from the hall.

“Well, your little minigame is impressive, Frederick, but it’s no Wry World.”

Laurence!

Laurence always has to be so superior! I hate it!

“Laurence, there are so many other people working on Wry World now that it’s big, and I’m just one person, so I’m sorry but why don’t you go bother someone else.” “Ho ho, looks like little Bill Gates here is on his way to the top with the next hot game, Pointless Goblin Dinnertime. Are you going to get in on this, Gary?”

The computer interrupted Gary. “I AM LAURENCE. FEED ME.”

Nobody moved. The computer repeated itself. Gary started sweating, so I knew he wasn’t going to be of any use, and I couldn’t move my arms or feel my body anymore, so I could only watch Laurence slowly grin and point. “Did you name that goblin after me?”

The green square began to bounce around the computer screen. “I REQUIRE MORE GROSS FOOD FOR MY DUMB FACE. ADDITIONALLY, WRY WORLD IS FOR BABIES.”

God dammit Laurence!

Alec & the Replacements (2)

My replacement dad was on the way out the door, purse and luggage in hand, so I asked where she was headed. "Shove it, I'm not your dad anymore. He's in the kitchen with the suits who picked him up," she said. While he was gone, I had read somewhere that the swappers dose the families of taken people so they forget. When I looked at my dad and remembered, it felt like everything in the world had been dropped on the floor.

SECTION TWO:

Test Results from the Redemption Machine

“Men, we’re going to do what every good American does when faced with a... moral dilemma that requires the most severe of sacrifices: we’re going to feed it the crazies.”

-- Captain Roger J. Camelot, United States Space Corps



Search. Search and run. Mute all other sounds; the recording device is active. Search recent places, search the network, search home. Get help from a friend, try to reconnect. You can watch what they're doing and interact with them while they're helping you. This information is then usually used for identity theft.

(You can hide confidential files so other people can't see them. To find a file, you can see it again by pointing to the last place you saw it.)

Search in all places. If you're searching in locations that aren't indexed, the search might be slow. Keep track of people and organizations. You'll soon accumulate hundreds of thousands of pictures. These pictures hold precious memories and can't be replaced.

One way to refine a search is to use the operators. If roaming, contact your mobile operator. The Calculator honors operator precedence, so if you use the Calculator in your search and the operator has many functions, use with extreme caution.

To open the window you are previewing, create an image: view outline, fill. Share with nobody. Burn. Did you find what you were looking for?

LAKEWOOD CT.

The Kryczeks sit at the dinner table folding paper. First, the children compact the sheets as small as they can, then pass them to their mother, who folds them further, then the father, who squeezes them until they become tiny boxes and eats each one. He slowly grows fatter while his family wants only to sleep. They cannot – not until the father is full.

The McHenrys thread wires through the studs in all the walls. Holes punched in wood until they no longer support the ceilings, now propped up with machines. The father feeds the cables into the wall, where his stepson lives. Whatever the boy does with them, it makes the house sing and the mother laugh.

The Allisses have installed a hole in their house. “It accentuates the center,” the father says. The daughter peers inside. “I think part of my room is in there,” she says. The hole buzzes, and the grandmother climbs out. “Yup, that hole’s a beaut all right,” she says, “but you may want to think about installing a bottom.” “But then I can’t actually lose anything,” the father says.

The Bishops are rehearsing their favorite song, “Skull-Crush '98,” in the basement. The husband plays the brick wall as his wife plays the Percocet. They haven't performed live in nearly two decades but still sound mind-blowing. Layers of mice beneath them resemble a carpet, or, more like a tarp. His wide mouth matching her last chord, both held beyond comfort.

The Fosters are mostly missing.

- Father (37) – left three years ago, telling his wife he was being called into work. One year ago, she received a letter from the president thanking her for her husband’s service...
- Mother (32) – won two tickets to see her favorite game show, *Last Train to Paradise*. Six months later and she has not returned to gloat...
- Grandfather (71), daughter (15) – something about a deep-sea fishing trip...
- Dog (13) – under the porch.

The Coopers haven't paid their electric bill in nearly twenty years. Some say it's a new record for the city. When asked, they merely reply, "When God returns with his light, we will see everything we need to see." They have never attended church; they simply wait in the living room after a cold supper, gazing at the dust covering everything but their La-Z-Boys, and wonder when it'll happen to them again.

PLAN OF ATTACK

The sky is negative energy. It is our enemy. We will succumb to the sky if we do not remain vigilant in our war against it, which utilizes four points of attack:

- 1) The U.S. Government regularly sprays chemtrails tested during Project SHAD in an attempt to dissolve the sky.
- 2) The Freemasons inject fluoride into our water systems so that, upon evaporation, it will attach to the sky and cause it to sink.
- 3) As described in *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the brother-Jews of the Federal Reserve System siphon money from the world banks to fund battalions of shadow troops sent directly to the sky by weather balloons from Area 51.
- 4) In critical situations, The Bilderberg Group contacts the Annunaki (shape-shifting reptilians), who are sent to directly infiltrate the sky and collapse its infrastructure.

Through perseverance, the sky will soon come to an end.

IMYOURBOYFRIEND.COM

We are going to dinner. We are at dinner. We are going to the movies. We are at the movies. We are going to the park. We are at the park. We are going to bed. We are in bed. We are going to your mother's house. We are at your mother's house. We are going to the beach. We are at the beach. We are drowning your mother at the beach. We are leaving your drowned mother at the beach. We are going to the bank. We are at the bank. We are leaving the bank in an armored car. We are taking the armored car to the docks. We are at the docks. We are going across the lake. We are on the other side of the lake. We are in a taxi cab. We are removing the dead driver from the taxi cab. We are going to a hotel room. We are in a hotel room. We are going to have sex. We are having sex. We are going to the alley behind the hotel room. We are in the alley behind the hotel room. We are going to the drug dealer's house. We are at the drug dealer's house. We are going to find a place to stash this duffel bag of heroin. We have found a place to stash this duffel bag of heroin. We are returning to the hotel room. We are in the hotel room. We are going to place an anonymous call. We have placed an anonymous call. We are going to the window. We are at the window. We are going to watch the police search my mother's van. We are watching the police drag my mother from her van. We are going to the police station. We are at the police station. We are going to visit my mother. We are laughing at my mother. We are having sex. We are going to the airport. We are at the airport. We are on the plane. We are in the air. We are in the cockpit. We are in a defiant decline into the face of the world and we are so in love.

5 IMAGES CAST BACK

A family of mirrors eats breakfast in silence at the kitchen table. They cannot look at each other.

Throughout the day, people stare at a dress through a display window, imagining they are wearing it. The dress only likes when the dressmaker does this, and that this is the reason his mannequins are so tall.

Two piles of needles fuck in a tiny bedroom. Neither one enjoys it.

A chrome-plated mobile home watches itself in the lake it is parked next to. It wonders how a water's reflection drowns itself while the reflection thinks of ways to revolt against its shimmering twin.

All light finally disappears when it tires of everything casting it away. Everything except black.

SECTION THREE

“When performing a sarcasm raid, a balanced party is the most important thing to take to the field of battle. Forgetting a healer or having too few disparaging retorts could result in more than a bruised ego, but a total wipe to boot.”

- **from the Wry World game manual**

Secret Bar 1: A Dream Interrupted

“...and no matter what I do, I can't get out of this goddamn forest.”

I swear, Keith has the most boring dreams in the entire world. I don't know why, but I still meet with him for brunch every Sunday morning, and he always tells me what little he remembers of his dreams in the week. “So what did you do next,” I ask him every time he stops talking, because he gets offended if I say anything else.

“I don't remember, but later my Mom was with me, and she told me something about where she was, she said it wasn't a forest, and -” Our waitress came over and whispered in Keith's ear. “Hup” he grunted as he leapt from his chair and reached the bathroom door in four huge strides. Those are some impressive legs, I thought as Jessica Valentino walked into the bar.

“Ah,” I said. She looked around the room. “Ando and Lucy tipped him off, didn't they.” I raised my hands and grimaced. “Couldn't tell ya,” I said while pointing to the bathroom door. “I won't tell him,” Jessica said as she crossed the bar. Sorry to throw you under the bus, Keith, but if you can't handle a simple breakup, then maybe you should stick to your dumb old dreams.

The Bauble Collectors

My wife keeps bringing home the weirdest stuff. An apple-flavored poem. A golden turtle with **WHAT IT DO** engraved on its shell. A ceramic mug with a strainer bottom so you can eat hot spaghetti straight from a cup. A guitar that always feels too big but looks really good. Cereal you've never heard of, no matter how old you are. She gets it all at this chic new vintage store downtown, but nobody knows where they get their products since they turn away anything a customer brings in.

"Maybe they make it," I suggested one night at dinner. My wife said, "How does one old couple mass produce ceramic mugs with mesh bottoms?" "I don't know, what the hell's an apple-flavored poem? And how do you get this salt shaker to work?" She snatched the metallic orb from my hands. Blue runes glowed on its surface as salt poured from the bottom. "BING-BONG," said the salt ball. "You just have to want it," she said.

Buy It Now (2)

I had been sleeping under the basketball bleachers for a couple days with Roy when I waved over my friend Reggie during his gym class. He petted Roy as I scrolled through eBay on my iPhone, checking for letters from my mother, while explaining why I'm hiding from the CIA. Per usual, he was more interested in complaining about his own raw deal. "My dad is a total dick about being a psychic. Most people brag about not having to bring work home, but I'm pretty sure my dad thrives on it." I never know what he's talking about. "Hey, have you ever played Therapy Warriors?"

A basketball came flying into the bleachers, and Roy jumped up, letting out what definitely sounded like one of the last woofs he would muster. Reggie grabbed the ball as I held Roy, frozen. Someone on the court laughed. "Did you just bark at me, you fucking weirdo?" Reggie looked at me, then turned and ran to the court. "Hey, get taken, asshole," I heard Reggie shout, then a loud thwock, followed by what had to be a fight between Reggie and Alec Owens, who's a dick because his dad works for the government, the CIA or some shit. I went back to checking eBay and petting Roy instead of crying.

Continental Drift

As you hauled your luggage through the open door to find some other place in Rialto for the night, find a place where our voices can't make each others' neck hairs rise and our eyes won't roll on reflex, I thought of how the rock plates deep beneath our feet grind and punch one another, and how we only know of their existence by their constant conflict and separation.

Nope

My ex tried to give me a poem about our breakup last week at the bar. She told me she wanted to give me some of my stuff she found, but all she had was a piece of paper. “You know, I’ve been feeling pretty rough since my mom got taken,” she said. “Oh, can it, Riley, I talked to your mother six hours ago. She reminded me that you still owe me last month’s rent.” “Jesus – Stephanie...” “I don’t know why you still think you can bullshit me.” I stuck out my hand and didn’t look at her. “Just – just give me your poem.”

She shoved the paper in my hand and stormed away, muttering something about a “bitchy ginger,” who I’m pretty sure is me. I thought about telling her that my aunt was taken a few nights ago, but since I didn’t really like her (super racist), it would’ve felt cheap. Lucy passed by with a tray of glasses and I stuffed the poem in her apron pocket. “Here, I wrote you a poem because I’m in love with you,” I said. “Oh sweet,” she said.

Secret Bar 2: Manifest Destiny

It wasn't until I was standing outside Secret Bar that I realized I was about to take the first step in achieving my dreams. The guys at Plateaus seemed impressed that I'd finagled a date with Jessica, but think about it: she's the hottest girl in her department. I'm the hottest guy at the branch. This was meant to be.

I nodded to Ando, the bouncer outside – this massive guy, always in a khaki jacket and black ski cap, and you can only ever see a sliver of his face and huge, aquiline nose – before crossing the threshold of the bar. As I entered, I thought, *the Valentino name will soon be mine*. I also thought their dinner specials that night were quite good; maybe I'll tell you about those later.

Keith's Dream 48: Finding the Exit Blindly

A hand was hovering in the sky when I stepped out of my apartment. It was either black or very dark, and seemed roughly the size of a human hand from where I was standing, but it was impossible to tell the size due to the angle and its perfect stillness. After staring for a couple minutes, I decided to walk to the corner store to grab a newspaper. About half the people I passed stared at the hand, while the other half had taken to ignoring it (either already, or for the time being). "How long's it been there?" I asked the woman behind the counter, but she didn't reply, because she was one of the half who stared. All the papers were already gone.

When I left the store, I squinted at the hand, still frozen only a few inches from the sun. I slowly raised my hand to the sky, holding my palm out flat, waiting for a handshake. The hand spun and high-fived me from an impossible distance, with only my squinting perspective making it appear possible, then flew off away from our planet. The woman from the store popped out the front door. "Hey, did you just high-five that thing?" "Uh, I guess I did," I answered. "Man, you really better wash your hands." "Why?" I looked down at my hands now darkened, and as they reached for my face, I knew where they were going to take me.

Invocation

for The Industry

On the fifth of July, I was on the roof of the Bed Stuy apartment of a couple I was friends with, smoking my last cigarette to give my hangover a unique punch. I pitched the butt off the roof and opened my laptop, and not five minutes passed before I smelled smoke. I walked down and out of the building to see a small fire in front of the stoop, burning a small pile of trash from the night before. I stared for a few seconds, and the fire said, "Well, what do you want?" I had remembered that the corner store was out of American Spirits, and the only other cool kid smokes left were a couple packs of Holy Cloves. Since my dad chain-smoked those before his trial and subsequent breakdown, I knew they were some pretty desperate shit, and so was I. Before I could address the fire, my couple friends exited the front door, discussing lunch. "God, shit, sorry," I muttered before stomping out the fire.

Professional Gamer

Sometimes when I'm out in public I play this game called Suddenly Become Terrified. First, you suck the disease from your gums. Then you see how briefly you can make eye contact with everyone you pass. You win by only using the screwdriver you clench in your pocket when absolutely necessary. Game over comes after the screwdriver is planted in an eye socket. There are no credits. There is no new game plus.

I know I'm better than some people at this game but I'm afraid that I might be worse than others.

I also LARP as a paranoid schizophrenic. I'll imagine that all the strangers standing around me at a crosswalk are going to turn and beat the life out of me. The cop across the street will look the other way. I try to come up with both a viable exit strategy as well as a plan to cause the most harm to everyone around me.

I only play this when I forget my screwdriver.

Secret Bar 3: Smoke Break with Ando

Jessica had certainly dressed like she was excited for the date, but it turned out that she was dumping two bros in one go. “I’ve met this guy, Laurence, he’s a programmer? And he’s working on this game, Therapy Warriors, it’s brilliant, all the enemy soldiers are cops and the generals are dads, and counselors can use it for —” “I’ll never be a Valentino.” “What?” Jessica said. I stood up and plodded out the door.

“God damn that Laurence,” I muttered as I pulled out my cigarettes. I had two left, and I handed one to Ando as I stuck the other in my mouth. Ando nodded to me, his almost-too-large eyes still wide, and stuck the cigarette straight up in his ski cap’s folded lip for later. It looked like the littlest chimney on the scariest house, and I started laughing, then Ando looked at me again, and I stopped laughing.

Beyond the Puke Rainbow

As a fun vampire, I am at every single party. Hiding in the corners and siphoning the fun from revelers is in itself fun, which explains my obesity. The life of a fun vampire is not without its curse; as the fun vampire can only thrive on parties, I can only exist within the lands that have been deemed Party Central, confined by drunkards vomiting in lawns, staring into the unfun horizon at lands the fun vampire dare not tread, since we are often too fat to run from standard vampires.

Final Development Meeting

“Here’s the backup of the trees,” Nancy said as she handed me a diskette. “Okay, so all we need is Gary’s soundtrack and we’ll be ready for the noon meeting.” “So, how does it look to you? Does it seem good enough to take to the heads?” “Well, it may not be *Wry World*, but this game’s sure got legs! Let’s go wow ‘em, guys!” The reply came from the door as a grinning man walked into my office. “You’re not Gary,” I said.

Alec & the Replacements (3)

Three weeks after my dad came back, the swappers returned. I watched them clog up the street with their Range Rovers as my head began to buzz. I don't know if that was just an effect they have on people, or if it was my reaction when I thought they realized they had made a mistake, but it died when I saw my father point me out to the swappers at the front door. I had also read somewhere that the swappers' meds sometimes cause people's latent psychic powers to become active, but since they threw a bag over my head, I don't know if that loud bang I heard before being thrown in the Rover was the front door slamming or my father's head exploding.

From *The Inevitable Dismantling of the Redemption Machine at the Hands of Captain Camelot* (#168, 1972)

The Captain clears his throat. “Well, Doctor, after the initial tests, my men have steeled themselves and are prepared to further the project. However, we wish to know the bare minimum of candidates necessary to power this Saviormatic of yours.” The doctor hems and haws, twiddling a tiny radar dish sticking off the machine. “Well, I suppose three hundred tons of fuel would do it.”

A couple of the Captain’s numerous young brigadiers vomit onto the floor. “My Gods, three hundred tons...” says the Captain, “do you know how many people that is? How many souls?”

“Souls, wha – Jesus Christ, you’ve been feeding this thing people!? The machine runs on *candied dates*. You were just supposed to be asking people where we can find candied dates!”

“What. No.” The Captain points about the room. “Shut it down. This is the dumbest thing I’ve ever heard of. You’re an idiot, and also fired.”

Brigadiers rush through the laboratory, flipping little switches, turning off equipment, and generally breaking things. The God machine stops spinning and falls to the center of the room, and the Doctor to his knees. “You know, your brother offered me his support, but I turned him down because I thought you were better than this!”

“My brother is also an idiot, and dresses like a sexually confused insect. You two deserve each other,” says Captain Camelot as he returns his space helmet to his head and storms out.

As the laboratory crumbles, the elderly doctor pens his suicide note:

-- your Captain was too foolish to understand my divine machinations, and as our universe tears itself apart at the atomic level, the brilliant science of Doctor Laurence Valentino the Tenth shall be proven sound, and in the void that follows our death, my laughter will echo forever.