

THE MANCHESTER

New prose by:

- (i.) *Tom Batten*,
- (ii.) *Amira Pierce*,
- (iii.) *Edward Marshall Shenk*,
- (iv.) *Nicholas Jackson*,
- (v.) *Nathaniel John Waggoner*.

I Civic Duty ♦ Tom Batten

It was five minutes before closing when Bobby arrived at the polling station. Packs of volunteers were already stacking plastic chairs. The old man at the check-in table was rolling up sheets of 'I Voted' stickers, and he looked up at Bobby when he approached. False teeth bulged between his thin lips in a smile that Bobby thought concealed annoyance. He imagined him thinking, What kind of a person waits until the last minute to vote? Doesn't this pervert know we want to go home?

Bobby wore a trench coat whenever he went out in public, because of his condition. The sleeves hung limp, he kept his arms crossed against his chest.

The old man took his information and flipped through the registration book until he found his name, smirking when he found it as though he was disappointed Bobby wasn't lying and therefore easily dismissed.

"Here you are," he said. "Must be your first time at this precinct. Most folks I know on sight."

Bobby smiled. "I normally vote absentee," he said. "But you know, they changed the procedure, and I wanted to make sure I got counted." His coat shifted violently, shaking as though the hands concealed within were rebelling and fighting for freedom. Bobby turned away from the table and cooed under his breath until the beating stopped. When he turned back the old man's face was slack and

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The following are fictional works. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of each author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

white. His expression barely changed when Bobby told him he would need special assistance.

He waited while the old man whispered and hissed with another volunteer, another old man. Occasionally Bobby's jacket would jerk and thrash, and he turned away from them until it stopped. It was this strange behavior that led to the volunteer's final decision, which they delivered together.

"We won't be able to help you," the first volunteer said. "And you should know, the police are coming by any minute to secure the precinct."

Bobby sighed, unsurprised. His coat rippled. "I promise you," he said, "I'm not a pervert. For all our sakes, just let me vote."

The two old men stepped forward. "Sounds like a threat, doesn't it, Isaac?" said the first volunteer.

Isaac cracked his spotted knuckles. "Certainly, Miles. Should we show this pervert how we handle threats in the northern district?"

Bobby stepped back, his coat writhing more violently than before. "Please," he said. "I want to do my civic duty, that's all." Something sharp caught within and tore a ragged hole.

"He's a knifer, Miles," Isaac screamed.

Bobby ran, his loose sleeve whipping directly into Miles' grasping hand. Miles yanked, and Bobby twisted and screamed, "Just put me down for Wilkins! I vote for

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Wilkins!" as he tripped and the coat slid from his shoulders.

Bobby sprawled on the ground, revealed. There was no knife. His figure was typical, the only abnormality being the miniature tyrannosauruses that sprouted from his wrists in place of hands.

The volunteers gasped. Isaac began to suggest that the dinosaurs were bizarre prosthetics, but stopped when the one on the right blinked its yellow eye and snapped its tiny jaw in his direction.

"Just put me down for Wilkins and I'll go," Bobby said. He drew his legs up and began to rise, both dinosaurs snapping as if annoyed at being jostled.

The dinosaur on the right twisted its head and stared back at Bobby. "Don't throw your vote away on Wilkins," it said. It turned to the two stunned volunteers. "Put us down for Madden. He'll restore dignity to the office."

The dinosaur on the left hissed. "Madden wouldn't know dignity if it stabbed him in the face. Wilkins is a man of vision."

"Please, ladies, we discussed this," said Bobby.

The dinosaur on the right laughed. "Vision, sure. A vision of a hell."

The dinosaur on the left lunged and caught the throat of its twin between its teeth. Blood poured over scale. Bobby screamed, and Miles and Isaac blanched and backed away.

"Please, we'll put you down for Wilkins, just go away," Miles said.

The dinosaur on the left released its prey and faced the old men. Blood dripped from its teeth. It hissed, "Not until we get our sticker." ■

ii The Best Zoo in Gaza ♦ Amira Pierce

Again and again, the soldiers take the tunnels—for a few days maybe, sometimes a week. They stop the things that ordinarily go through from going through—guns, candy, zebra feed. This time it goes on long enough that the zebras' faded stripes sink into their rib cages. The zebras starve.

So Ali and Majid bury their main attraction in the cemetery that stretches to the barbed wire, at the edge of the brown lawn where one day they hope to have an elephant graze.

The next morning at market, the brothers buy strong, fine-ground coffee, two singing birds in delicate cages, and two white donkeys they lead back to their zoo by ropes tied around their necks.

First, they try the paint they used for the monkey shack, but the donkeys bray distress. The stuff stinks and it won't stay on their bristles.

That night, as the evening prayers sounds and they have their daily game of backgammon, Ali despairs, "Maybe we pile our things on their backs, and we walk and walk into the mountains, away from here." The board is between the knees of this pair of men perched on tiny plastic stools looking out across their flattened city, smoke from their hookah fuzzing the distant blinking lights of houses in the valley below. Majid loses for once, stays on the hill as always, with the beasts—

(seven gazelles where there were once twenty and during that last intifada they had been down to only two, in their largest cage ancient lonely lioness who has outlived her mate even their child the cub she suckled a month before the sickness, boa they now must keep in a barrel, a few old chickens and a rooster and at least a dozen birds in that ugly phase between chicken and chick when brown feathers pierce through the yellow fluff, two long-haired sad dogs that lope around until night when they snarl and snap at figures in the shadows, and five baboons their father God rest his soul brought back from Taif)

—and Ali goes home to his Noor. He walks through their door to her hair dripping over their tiny sink. She massages gray foam into her scalp. In bed, Ali drowns in her glossy, dark mane, tells her she couldn't improve her

beauty: *my woman, my woman*, again and again.

Morning, she steers him to the beauty store, rows of dusty boxes on dusty shelves under the brightness of naked bulbs. He buys twelve boxes of the same black dye, each box emblazoned with a photograph of the same smiling, frozen woman. He takes them all back to his brother, to the clucks and howls, the smells stuck always in the throat.

With British shears, they cut short the donkeys' coats. For hours, they apply masking tape, just like a picture Ali found in an age-stiffened encyclopedia. Dye-dipped brooms in hand, they meander with the animals across the lawn, singing songs their mother sang over dark, sweet tea at breakfast.

The brothers announce their new attraction with a free admittance day and droves of children come.

That afternoon, a soldier parts the crowd, hoists himself onto a zebraed back. His biceps burst under a green vest, a shoulder-slung automatic. His boots shimmer and he digs them into the animal's sides as he gallops the poor thing in circles, shouts:

"This is not a zebra!"

He dismounts. They stare and he doesn't look as he walks past them again, dissolves into the broken country.

Ali and Majed stay that way stone-frozen, until one small boy cries, his whimper like some signal through the crackling air and again the children climb their zebras three at a time. ■

iii Untitled ♦ Edward Marshall Shenk

The show is over, say goodbye.

—*Madonna to Kurt Cobain*

Then I'm done, and I can go home.

—*Kurt Cobain to Madonna*

↻

The show has ended, and the babes have all went home, the author has committed suicide on stage in his daffy duck devil costume, and the backdrops have been unclipped from the pipes, brought down and rolled up by two overly tough set designers, real sores in the eye of the production company, striving daily to exact some vague notion of machismo, embarrassed by their job, terrified of their résumés. One's name is Danny and one's name is Tony. Fifteen minutes in Mood perhaps lasting

fourteen minutes too long. Now at some afterparty at a nearby Sheraton, avoiding eye contact with each other, they wade in a sea of producers and editors, sound guys and set painters, grips and costume designers, only now and again making smalltalk over prosciutto-wrapped cantaloupe with supervisor Mike Zen. [Mike Zen a recent acquisition of the studio. The much sought after feng shui master being the One who originally proposed the now feverishly popular idea of making a room look bigger simply by introducing the occasional tumbleweed.] The men, nuts flexed, extremely exhausted, want nothing more than to unwind with something alcoholic. But finding there only bathtub-sized punchbowls of the fruitiest sangria ever seen (Danny's mind sharpening now on a scene witnessed two years prior in Margaritaville, FL. Drunk at a bar, dehydrated from a day tanning on a salt-as-sand beach, Danny returned from the head mid-zip to witness the final amateur this particular night had to offer. In the glow of the tiki spotlight stood a man no taller than himself swaying and strumming a giftshop ukulele. Apparently the byproduct of a chola mother and a PTSD Parrothead father, wearing a silken island print button up buttoned only at the collar, the man serenaded the crowd in one of the most beautiful voices Danny had ever heard: I don't prac-tice san-gria / I ain't got no crystal bowl / Jus pass me the Cuervo but hold— / Hold the par-a-sol!) they resort to other modes of intoxication. One goes to his car and unfolds a Wendy's cup, runs to the convenience store across the street and empties half a forty in it, the other wanders into the handicapped stall, smokes a bowl and puts on some wraparound sunglasses. Returning to the party there is a crowd surrounding Mike Zen, scattered laughter as he finishes a joke ("...Jean-Luc 'Gay-dar'"), self-hating milves standing opposite trophy divorcées, tranced out and empty, in front of gurgling chocolate fountains, and a perfectionist ice sculptor named Kerns returning to do some last minute touch up work on a life-sized reproduction of Biff Loman (some teen rager thought it was funny to snap the testicles off the statue and place them in his Mountain Dew). All of this reflecting in the tint of Tony's wraparounds. There are some adulations, reminiscing on the show—but not much. Reviews won't be in for another day or two, everyone feels empty, the thing has come to pass. Women already deemed unapproachable laugh at nothing, Mike tucks coupons for tumbleweed into a server boy's slacks, one of the light guys tries in vain to correct the white balance on his digital camera, stomping his foot in place, a sweaty Kerns messes with the thermostat. The author is dead, the blood has been swept off the stage and into a drain, the audience has left, coughing into their playbills or rolling them up like disappointing kaleidoscopes, eyes adjusting to the moonlight outside the

theater, waiting under the marquee for the valet or simply going to their respective cars, fumbling for their respective keys, helping or not helping respective wives into respective passenger seats, seat warmers turned on, or not. Valets tipped, or not. ■

IV. You Can Always Stick Your Head in a Volcano or Where Do Broken Hearts Go? Nicholas Jackson

[FOR BRYAN JABS]



*Their bedroom is full of conducted tours.
Their radio is louder than yours.
They celebrate week ends all the week.
When they shower, your ceilings leak.
They try to get their parties to mix
By supplying their guests with pogo sticks,
And when their orgy at last abates,
They go to the bathroom on roller skates.*
—Ogden Nash

The music is gonna be loud...
—Trey Songz



The day before Christmas Eve, it has been snowing, at a light to moderate rate, since the afternoon, and now it's the evening.

Donald D Perry, *Dr. Donald D Perry* to be exact, forty-five year old independently published poet, semi-habitual marijuana user, L.L. Bean catalogue subscriber, Hair Club for Men member, associate professor, sits on the sofa in the living room of his modest townhouse. A fragrant candle burns on the coffee table and sentimental piano-led jazz music plays from a pair of small bookshelf speakers, made of mahogany, or a material that closely resembles it. Tomorrow, Don will travel to his parents' house, and they will have dinner, just the three of them. Tonight, he's taking it easy. In his hands is an old, dubiously-binded paperback, which he scans, slowly, with closed mustachioed lips. Before turning each yellowed page, he nods, as if saying, "Yes, yes," imagining the affirmation-seeking young author beside him.

All of a sudden, there is a *knock, knock*, knocking on the front door? No, nobody is at the front door. Overhead,

the ceiling fan, which has been collecting dust all winter, trembles. Deep, muffled bass pulsates through the hardwood floor. The walls vibrate, causing the elaborately framed photographs—Don rides a camel in the desert in one, poses proudly on the summit of a snow-capped mountain in another—to vibrate. It's as though the smiling Dons are dancing joyously, but, because he is alone in each of the photos, the effect achieved is muddled and troglodytic. Banging...screaming... As if to hide and take shelter, Don raises the book and covers his face, then lowers it, slightly, so the musty pages rest on the bridge of his nose. The lights flicker off and on like a strobe in an extremely awkward nightclub, then the candle is the only source of light left in the room. Moaning...groaning...more banging...*falsetto*...

It's Karl, Don's next-door-neighbor, twenty-four year old roofer's assistant, part-time drug dealer, contemporary R&B enthusiast, renown philanderer, causing the disturbance. Don has never been inside Karl's place, nor has he ever seen its blueprint, so where exactly Karl's bedroom is located he hasn't a clue. The turbulence seems omnipresent and nonspecific. Usually—the thought of confronting his neighbor, ringing his doorbell and saying, "Hey, I was wondering if you could keep it down," makes him feel like too much of a square—Don would find an excuse to run an errand, buy a carton of milk, surreptitiously admire the cute barista at Starbucks, or get high and pass out on the sofa, but—on account of the snow, the grocery store, even Starbucks, is closed, and the little jar in which he keeps his marijuana is empty—those distractions are not an option. Resembling a half-deflated balloon, Don thinks, even says out-loud feebly, "I am all alone."

After a brief intermission, the banging resumes, the light returns, and Don has an intense desire to compose a poem, which he begins, tentatively, as if the fetal words were a mysterious stranger with horrible news to deliver, on the title page of the paperback.

The last time Don attempted to write, the fall semester hadn't quite finished, and he was sitting at the creaky desk in his office beginning a suicide note. He had bought an expensive leather bound notebook and a fine felt-tip pen from a sweet old woman at a stationary shop, believing the gravity of the situation called for special tools, also, it made him feel special. In his typical way of titling, he wrote "*A Note*" on the top of the first page, then jumped down a line and—

"Excuse me, Professor Perry," a small female voice called out, followed by three equally small knocks on his closed office door.

Now what was he going to do? Don was hardly in the mood for forcing a smile and explaining the difference

between an A and a B+ composition. Class had finished hours ago, loafers tossed on the floor, tightly woven sweater peeled off of his pinkish midsection, and he was now wearing a sweat stained t-shirt with a hole wrapping around the armpit and a mismatched pair of socks, which didn't exactly give off the stoic vibe that was customarily present during his interactions with students.

"*Dr. Perry?*" the voice called out again.

This second appeal was more difficult to ignore, but still, he sat motionless and silent until he heard her pittering down the stairs and exiting the English Department building, and then his attention was back to his death note, his concentration back to the opening sentence, sinking deep into the mud of contemplative thought, Don, well, he imagined a disgruntled former student, a cantankerous colleague, or even—although improbable—one of the precious few true loves-of-his-life (*O hours and years have passed, but he believes he is never to forget!*) discovering his sad stale body, reading the hypothetical note, and not understanding, not getting it, but more than that, they read the note and sort of chuckle, not because they think it's funny per se, but because they're uncomfortable and unsure of how to react and, for whatever reason, laughter seems appropriate.

Well, needless to say, by this point, the whole thing had lost its luster—suicide, come on, really, what had he been thinking? He wasn't even depressed. Bored, maybe, lonely, sure, but he wouldn't—he couldn't—*kill* himself. *Life* was his only option.

The poem is going to be about, Don decides, how on the infrequently travelled side streets, scant traces of sooty slush remain well after the main passageways have been cleared and the storm has long been forgotten, already a distant memory in the minds of busy people with more important shit to worry about. His pen is dry. He scrawls circles wildly in a failed attempt to revive it, pressing so hard an inkless imprint is left many pages deep. Then the record he has been listening to—well, trying to listen to—and the clamoring on the other side of the wall share a dénouement and finish...*falsetto*...

Karl's door opens, and, because he hasn't made any progress on the poem, Don pokes his head through the curtains, sees his neighbor, bare-chested, wool cap atop his head, overseeing an underdressed woman to her car, sauntering back, and then smoking a cigarette, all with obvious pleasure. "What's up, Double D?"

Don has been spotted.

After some clumsy hesitation, he closes the curtains and sulks over to his neighbor's porch. Normally, he greets Karl with, "Hey, brother,"—much to Karl's chagrin—but, on

this night, Don just nods and shrugs his shoulders.

"Smoke?" Karl extends a cigarette which, upon closer investigation, is not at all a cigarette.

Grievances slowly melt away and dissipate as psychoactive chemicals swirl around the nooks and crannies of Don's brain, manifesting as an audible expression of satisfaction that sounds similar but not identical to, "*Ahhh*," which seems to reverberate in the cold air and stretch out and wait, then expand, then change directions and double-back, but, upon returning, something, somehow, has changed and Don has a dry, salty taste in his mouth, his eyes redden, and he hears himself saying, "I feel as though I have lost my way, like—look at me—I am not a young man anymore, and I am not sure when it happened, when I got like this, threadbare, mismatched socks, slumbering through classes, holed up in my office after that, and I am not writing, *anything*, and I have begun to think, *What's the point?*, you know, I mean, why did I do what I did, and why do I do what I do, and did any of it matter, and does any of it matter, and, if so, then is it too late, and, if not, well, if not, then, *What's the point?*"

Karl is fumbling with his pack of cigarettes, and, eventually, lights one, inhales long and deep, and when he finally releases his breath it's like no smoke, just frozen water vapor condensed into a thick sticky fog. "Slow down. Slow, down." His expression has changed, morphed into one Don recognizes but can't place or define or understand. A beat of silence—snow, which has stopped falling from the sky, blows gentle tremors through the air—happens. "*Pussy*. It's that simple, man. That's what it's all about. I don't know about college, or fuck, *poetry*, but I know you wouldn't be stressin' over any of it if you were getting it."

"..."

Somehow, Don is back in his place, in his living room, on his sofa, and the candle, although considerably melted, still burns on the coffee table, and the record player is making that clicking noise it makes when the record has ended, and his old paperback is in his hands, and he contemplates finishing what he started earlier, and he pulls back the curtains and looks out the window, but there isn't anyone there to say, "*All this time apart, it was just a test, and you've passed, finally, I've come to take you away with me...*" He wonders if Karl has ever been in love... The little cord that stems from his brain and branches out through his body twists and kinks and ties his stomach into a hundred tiny knots, also, there's a faint but persistent aching sensation emanating from his testicles, and he wonders if the prehistoric ostrich displayed any symptoms before his wings lost their purpose, or maybe one morning he just found them clinging lifelessly to his body, but maybe he should just fix something to eat, oh, for

the cats too, wait, Where are the cats?—Alf, Debbie, Gus, Julius, René, T.T. Walter—they seem to have vanished, and he hasn't noticed before now but they have been missing all day, or maybe hiding, or busy doing whatever it is cats do when people aren't around. Staring down the darkened hallway, Don calls out to them and waits, but they don't appear, and as he picks himself up off the sofa to go search for them, he stops...thinks about how, tomorrow, he will travel to his parents' house, and they will have dinner, just the three of them. ■

V. A Chicanita with the Power of Flight Nathaniel John Waggoner

I don't understand how to eat soup. You know when old ladies try to read comic books, and they say, "Do I look at the pictures first or read the words first?" and you know it doesn't work that way but can't explain it. I'm like those old ladies w/t/t soup. You get a spoonful and there's potatoes and maybe beef or noodles and carrots, and that's all great stuff, but there's also a lot of broth, and do you eat the food or slurp the broth first? You end up eating the food and there's all this broth left, and just noodles or whatever at the bottom, and you can't even get to those noodles because the broth now puts everything else out of the way, and you can get only broth, and the noodles and onions and anything that can't stand on its own in cm. deep freestanding broth goes off to the sides of your spoon and falls off, and you just have all this murky dense substantial stuff to deal with that doesn't even taste good.

I go over to Alicia's late one night and she's already in her pajamas and under the covers. Actually, just one cover, a small blanket like you'd throw over yourself on the couch, not even a real comforter, and she's lying atop several better covers. She's giving me a look exactly like one a Very Serious toddler would give you just before saying, "I don't like it," or "You broke the rules."

"I have ants in my bed," she says, bottom lip protruding.

"Aw, baby. How many ants did you see?"

"I'm living like the kind of person who commits suicide and they don't find her body until weeks afterwards."

"Jesus. Well lemme get under the covers."

"Kay, here."

"Let's just get under all the covers, it doesn't matter."

"No, just—here. The rest are *dirty!*"

"It'll be fine. How many ants did you see?"

"This is like a comforter. The rest is like a sheet."

"Alicia, goddammit."

"*What?*"

"You're being an IDIOT."

"..."

"Babybear, don't be mad at me."

"Don't call me an idiot."

"I said you were *being* one, not you *are* one."

"'Are' and 'to be' are different forms of the same verb."

"Yeah, but one implies a fleeting temporary time period and the other is permanent. Don't make me explain fucking verbs to you, you know that shit. You're just BE-ING difficult."

"Don't make me explain *emotions* to you." She chuckles.

The following is a response to a long email from my mother. I wouldn't give away her email address in a piece, but if I could it would provide good character development: the address combines her love of prose and of manipulating fabric, and it rhymes, and it is still, in 2010, @aol.com. In the email I take issue with the fact that she had apparently told my dad every terrible thing I had said about his new girlfriend, like that she doesn't get *Mad Men* and that they have digital picture frames in their house. This email is the best thing I've written in a while.

It looks like you will stop at nothing to make me "pick sides." Explain something to me: what contest is it, exactly, for which we are picking sides? What will someone receive if their side wins? Do you see the absurdity? I am not on Team Edward or Team Jacob. I like to think that my understanding of human nature is a little beyond that at this point. This letter was poignant, hilarious, bitter, and bold-- everything I like to read. It was completely unacceptable, monstrous even, for you to air what I've said in confidence like that, but know that I love you not just because you're my mother but also because of your ability to articulate like this. Of course I will never confide anything in you again. I hope you understand. Why do you feel the need to antagonize your family? Remember that the universe, nature, most people outside your immediate family have no sympathy, awareness, or concern for your well-being. You think your fellow divorcee Facebook gal pals could accept from you the kind of behavior you force Hope, Dad and me to tolerate? The embarrassing nightly drunken rages, the outright lying when I try to tell you something in confidence, that you won't just keep the information stored away somewhere until you can use it as ammunition? It's *tiresome*. We're all you've got. Treat us better. Hope and I don't believe in sluts, whores, or trash. Accept that. Are not we all trash, just systems of bones and blood and synapses, created by an uncaring God and prone towards making decisions informed by passion rather than rationality? Do we not deserve forgiveness for that?

She responds by cancelling the rent check she had sent me.

Alicia accompanies me to go check my schedule at Movieland, where *A Mexican Werewolf in Indianapolis* has just opened, and a literal busload of black kids stands in line before the ticket-tearer who is one-legged—diabetes—and named Jeff and gets around zooming in an electric wheelchair, and is the most active employee at Movieland—as in I’ve actually seen him come in to see a movie, and he’s noticed that the salt and ketchup packets are inadequately arrayed, and corrected them, insisting that his wife go on ahead without him, he’s seen the beginning of *Harry Potter* already. Someone has spilled M&M’s on the ground and the black kids are stomping on the M&M’s. The scene, Alicia will point out later, is like one in a movie that panders to the audience’s having just had a terrible time in the movie theatre—a grotesque exaggeration of the frustration, squalor, and cruelty of the typical moviegoing experience.

It turns out a manager has changed my schedule without notifying me, and therefore I have missed two days of work, also without any notification. A composite character of a manager, Richard, comes by, and I ask him about my schedule.

“Nope. You’re responsible for your own schedule. You were a no-show. You were supposed to be here yesterday and today. Look at the sheet. It says, ‘N.S.’ That stands for a no-show. N.S., No Show. It’s what they put down on the sheet when you don’t show up. It’s an abbreviation. You were given the task of keeping track of your own schedule and you have failed at that task, as you can see by this sheet and the initials on it that stand for No Show.

“You know what happens when you’re a no-show? You get a write-up. Having just not showed up now twice, you have been written up twice. You get three write-ups here. Three strikes, you’re out. That’s from baseball. So I don’t have to do the math for you here, but I will anyway. One plus one, those are your write-ups, is two. Two write-ups. Three possible write-ups, which is how many you can get before you get terminated, three, minus two write-ups, which is what you have now, means you have one more write-up and you’re out of here. Do you understand what I’m saying when I say these things, and these words come from me? ‘Out of here’ means termination. No, you can’t go see a movie for free today.”

“I wasn’t trying to—”

“I have a situation I have to deal with now.”

Richard storms off, probably to fuck his mother. Jeff is now sweeping up the crushed M&M’s with an undersized broom whose extending straw fibers are collectively curved to one side from too much sweeping, from his seat in his wheelchair, obviously struggling. Another manager who is not a

composite but a real guy that I’m just going to go ahead and describe for you, Dave, lumbers by apathetically, the picture of sluggishness, bald head, infantile countenance (as in *exactly* like a baby. On the rare times he smiles, one wonders if it’s not just gas), oversized black suit on, blank look on his face, absolutely unaware of anything around him, just wandering, perhaps foraging, too big, gelatinous, like a muck-spirit from a film by Miyazaki, going out for a cigarette.

I am at Double T’s Barbecue Steakhouse. I ask a waitress for an application and she says someone can interview me after I fill it out if I’d like. She points to a man in a cowboy hat sitting in a corner near the kitchen next to a window. The man is staring off into the distance reflectively. I say that’s fine. She says to be sure to put something specific under “Position Desired.” He won’t hire me if I just put “anything.” So I put “Associate.”

“Hi. I’m Double T.”

“Hi. Nate Waggoner, nice to meet you.”

“Now, you currently work at Movieland? So you wanna have *two* jobs?”

“No. I wanna quit Movieland and work here.”

“Mm-hmm. Well I don’t see how we can schedule you with all these hours you got workin’ at Movieland.”

“No but you see, if you hire me I won’t *have* any hours working at Movieland, because I won’t be working there, I’ll be working for you.”

“Hmm. Just hard to schedule you if you’re workin’ two jobs, that’s all. How did you hear about this position?”

“A friend. And I guess he saw it on Craigslist.”

“Oh yeah, who’s your friend?”

“Jason Ikea? I went to school with him...”

“Why didn’t he apply?”

“...Uh. Because his ex-girlfriend works at the Byrd and he didn’t want to work someplace where he’d see her across the street every day.”

“Ex-girlfriend at the Byrd...” Double T looks off again, out the window at the grey sky. “Well thanks for comin’ in.”

I’ve developed this zit on my nose that is bigger than any zit I’ve ever seen on a person. I hate to go out in public now, it’s that embarrassing. It’s like having two noses. When I pop it it bleeds a lot and I feel and smell like I’m actually menstruating out of a new hole, in my nose. It pops on its own sometimes, just bursting out, apparently unprompted, at social functions or at the movies.

My mother, a glass and a half of iced chardonnay in her system, feels her now-ringless hand and becomes inspired

to write a poem about her newfound freedom as exemplified by the literal weight lifted from her ring finger. Only she’s not really inspired to write a poem, she’s just inspired to write a Facebook status update about being inspired to write a poem. Twelve of her friends reply with supportive comments.

Notes on seasonal employment at family-owned campus bookstore:

•The woman who trains me, skinny, blonde, over fifty, southern accent, married to the owner, whose real name, if it was used in a literary piece would aptly suggest both the words “batty” and “lunacy” or “lunatic,” tells me that she needs my help plugging in a Telecheck machine, through which one runs checks to pay for things. She tells me she has the plugs arranged on the strip in alphabetical order, so she’d better make room so the Telecheck machine plug can be in the middle of the strip. Already, on my first day, aggravated by her psychotic micromanagement to the point where I genuinely don’t care any more, I give her some lip about whether the plugs following the Telecheck machine plug, as in the ones to its right, are for a xylophone or a zebra or what. She says she realizes that she’s placed them linearly before the plugs for items that belong to the left of the Telecheck on an English alphabetic continuum—however, and here she points to the middle area of the electric strip, “It’s in the end here.” The look she gives me is glassy and blue and very, very serious.

•She also at one point says to me, and this relates to the aforementioned micromanagement, “We do things with a certain very specific order here. We want to be like little robots here. But friendly ones.”

•Moonbat employs her sister during this time as well, who refuses to work at any register except for the one at the end near the door, where there is no way for anyone to enter or leave the registry area, because the sister is self-conscious that people can’t get by her when attempting to enter or leave, because she the sister is too big. At one point I print out an extra receipt by accident, and the sister leans in close to me and says very loudly and authoritatively, “NATE’S BOO-BOO.” She then takes the receipt and writes on it, “NATE’S BO-BO” [*sic.*] I almost start to cry.

•It rains really hard one day and I have to take my car, and there is no parking, so I have to keep leaving to go move my car, and sometimes it’s too late and I’ve already gotten a ticket. As I drive around, my only mental consolation is listening to Jonathan Richman’s “Abominable Snowman in the Market,” and imagining images contrary to the ones Richman presents—i.e. imagining that the “housewives” in the song are actually justified in their fear of the Snowman, because he’s just running around tearing people’s heads

off, blood everywhere, and Richman for some reason just pleading for everyone to try to understand the snowman—“I think he’s a real nice guy.” When I get back Looney asks me to dock myself a half hour for all the driving around I’ve been doing today. She confidently and wrongly asserts that anyone can park in the parking lot next door, which is for students with big yellow parking passes hanging from their mirrors. The people across from me in the returns department look attractive and hip and cheerful and engorged on pizza and donuts *c/o* the store. At the end of the day, B/L tells me they won’t need me next week.

I’m very excited today, because it is my first day at my job as an astronaut. My manager, Mandy, is showing me around.

“So here’s the, uh, the cockpit, the central computer’s over there—I don’t really know what else to—oh! There’s the bathroom, heh...” She gives an over-elaborate Vanna White arm gesture and up-and-down shoulder bump and speaks of the bathroom in a sing-song manner.

“The bathroom, I thought...”

“What?”

“I just thought we—y’know...”

“...”

“Thought we could *go*... in our suits.”

“*What?*”

“Astronauts, y’know, they can go... in their suits.”

“I don’t—no. That’s the bathroom.”

“Okay. But—”

“Look, I’ve got a customer.”

“Okay.”

So you can imagine my disappointment!

Eating at a chicken place with Alicia, I move my hand to adjust my glasses when I unintentionally bend the left temple and cause the glasses to flip off my face and land upside-down on the unSwiffered floor. Alicia looks at me affectionately, turning her head to the side and beaming.

“I don’t see what’s so cute about this. I’ve got a job interview today. Sometimes I think you’re only attracted to me because I’m a silent movie protagonist.”

“You’re not a silent movie protagonist.”

“Alicia, yesterday I was in American Apparel and I saw a pretty girl and it caused me to knock all the suspenders off the rack.”

Alicia snorts through her iced tea. “That’s what you get for lookin’ at other girls.”

“Why do you want to work at Noodles & Co.?”

“Well, y’know, uh, the *noodles*, okay, so the food is delicious... I love food, I love to make food, I have experience

working with food at other places... and also the *company*. Right? So you’ve got the noodles, and the company. I’m good company, you’re good company, keeping people company, making conversation, hospitality—”

“Right. Great. Because we can train you on all this other stuff, what we’re looking for right now is *personality*.”

“Right. Well lemme ask you somethin’, how are you likin’ this personality?”

“Great! Good, well, the only thing at this point is getting you a t-shirt, we switched t-shirt suppliers recently...”

“Uh-huh.”

“But yeah, I have just a few more people to interview tonight, but you seem like you’d be a really great part of the team, Miranda spoke very highly of you...”

“Yeah, she’s great.”

“Do you have any questions?”

“No, not really.”

“None? No questions at all.”

“I don’t—think so...”

“Okay. Well I’ll call you tonight or tomorrow.”

“Thanks so much.”

Antagonist: Are you P.T.?

You: What?

Antagonist: Just answer the question. It’s a yes-or-no.

You: ...yes.

Antagonist: You’re a *pregnant teenager*?

Alternate ending:

You: No.

Antagonist: You’re *not potty-trained*?

—Inevitably embarrassing sixth-grade line of questioning

“Thank you for calling Noodles & co., Lichelle speaking.”

“Hi, Lichelle? This is Nate Waggoner...”

“Hi. I’m speaking to Nate Waggoner, right? Who worked at Movieland?”

“Yes.”

“Who was outgoing?”

“...yes.”

“Hey, uh, were you nervous during your interview?”

“What?”

“Were you at all nervous. During the interview. You just seemed sorta, sorta *fidgety*.”

“Um, not—no? I mean it was an *interview*, for a *job*...”

“Have you applied to any other jobs recently, Nate?”

“No.”

“So you’re banking on this then.” Jesus Christ.

“Yes.”

“Well, we’ve hired someone, but we’ll keep your

application on file.”

“Uh-huh, thanks.”

I haven’t written in a little while now, because I’ve been in the hospital. The official cause, according to my press release, is “exhaustion,” but everyone understands that means I have to have my stomach pumped, because I have swallowed at least seventeen gallons (11.3562353 liters) of pride. Pride is not dangerously acidic in any amount really, but if not properly digested it can harden and block certain vital functions. I have, however, built up a tolerance that most recent college graduates do not have.

Driving Alicia somewhere. “I feel like I’ve become more prone to red lights, lately. Do you think that’s possible?” I posit.

“No. I think you’ve actually become so myopically self-pitying that you’ve started to become irritated by the red lights you do encounter, and then notice them especially every time, as if each red light is a personal affront to you,” she replies.

“My theory is that I used to be late to places pretty often, I’d leave late, and I would have a relatively consistent drive. Some red lights, some green. Now I have to act like a professional and be places on time all the time, so I have to leave like five minutes earlier than I did before. Stop lights have set rhythms and times and schedules, so what if I’ve gotten caught in a rhythm where I only encounter red lights every time? Don’t you think that’s at least possible in a Malcolm Gladwell pseudoscience kind of way?”

“No. That’s the most ridiculous thing I’ve ever heard.” We hit another red light.

“See?”

“No. Look. No. You don’t even know. Wait.” Miranda filibusters staccato, tiny cold red and white index finger pointing at no one in particular. Several people gathered around urge her to get on with it. “Okay. So. This is super *fucking* gay. So. We get this like, *newsletter*. It comes in our paychecks. At Noodles. We get this newsletter and it’s called—I told you it was gay. Called the NOODLE NEWS. Yeah. I know. And the newsletter even said, after you interviewed, Nate, haha! As if that wasn’t who I was talking about/to. Okay.”

“God dammit.”

“What did the newsletter say?”

“Okay! GOD! Haha. GOD!”

“Miranda!”

“Let me tell it!”

“Then tell it!”

“I am telling it!”

“Jesus.”

“Okay! So the newsletter, the NOODLE NEWS, said ‘Please everyone welcome our new employees, Shaun and NATE. So, like, they decided not to hire you so late that they couldn’t even, like, stop the presses. Does anyone wanna nother beer?’”

Why do you want to work here?

—It is a clean, fun environment. I would therefore thrive here. I can only thrive in environments that are both fun and clean.

What would you say are your weaknesses?

—Workaholic.

Why did you leave your previous job?

—My goals were no longer in line with the company’s mission. It had nothing to do with the minimum wage pay, the sociopathic management, or the janitorial nature of most of the work. It was the goals, and the mission. They weren’t getting along.

Do you agree, strongly agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with this statement? Do you have any regrets in life? Are there some people you really just can’t stand? In a group, are you a leader, a follower, an important member of the team, or none of these things, as in dead wood? Do people ever make you angry? Do you like to be in the middle of a big crowd? Right now, do you care more about having fun or being serious, at school or at work? Does it bother you for a long time when someone is unfair to you? Do you feel angry when the law-courts let criminals get away? If you worked with a single black mother who you knew was having trouble making ends meet, and you saw her steal from the company, what would you do?

Do you really want this job, or are you just here because you’ve gone everywhere else in this shopping center? Have you checked Rack Room Shoes? Do you see a future working for us? When you think of the future, do you think specifically of being someone who has worked for this company for a number of years, climbing his way up the proverbial corporate ladder? What does the ladder look like to you? Is it made of wood, or metal? If wood, why?

Do you think that you are cut out for this job? You, Nate Waggoner, who turns on the faucet and gets sprayed in the chest by the nozzle? Who rarely walks several steps without having one of his feet fall to the side? Who spills Slurpees on customers?

When you’ve worked for us for twenty years, and you’ve made general manager, forsaking all other opportunities along the way, graduate school, etc., will you have a midlife crisis like everyone else? Will you buy a car, or cheat on your wife, or both, like your dad did? I know what this resume really says: it says you’ve been skating by your whole life, writing your little self-indulgent stories, often masturbating and thinking about how one day you’ll be an author whose works are so universally beloved and frequently cinematically adapted that you live in a house with like a hundred hot babes, and you get to do those babes. Where does this restaurant or sales office or even bookstore fit in with this masturbation fantasy? I guess my question is: if you work for us, will you crack sooner or later?

—I do not question your assessment of my character, or anything any representative of this organization is ever allowed to do, but I must insist that I want nothing more than to have this job, and keep it forever, or until you don’t want me anymore, because sometimes it’s good to reorganize, and structure, I fully support that and all policies no matter how they may affect me, and I will be the best, better than any employee ever, at this stupid, stupid job, whatever it is.

OK. Well I’m still not sure about you. But you can watch the video and then go on to the second interview. For the sake of this situation, let’s say you’re now in a well-maintained corporate office like twenty minutes outside of town, if you take the highway, and you’re wearing a full suit, and now you’re with like thirty other potential employees, also in suits, some young white college grads and some sadder black men and women maybe a decade older than you, all nodding their heads and participating and not laughing at how terrible this video is you’re all watching in your metal-and-grey-fabric church basement-type chairs. Also: this place is actually called American Income Life Insurance, or ALL, I swear I’m not making a pun on “to ail,” as in about to croak, that’s really what it’s called, hang up if they happen to have found your resumé online or something.

“I’m the master of my own destiny!” a disarmingly pointy-faced man says into the camera, his hair a bleached vertical ecstatic flame. The word “DESTINY,” in Arial bold size 72, floats by his face, translucent. His tie is a small intestine.

“At first I thought,” the one Hispanic muses, “there *must* be a catch. And there was. You have to work hard, and believe in yourself.”

The video ends after what seems like several hours. Nothing about the job I’ve just interviewed so poorly for

has been explained yet except, apparently, how great it is. A tall man in a brown suit introduces his wife, who just interviewed me, brown wavy hair with blonde highlights, in her forties I guess, shirt with long lapels and two buttons unbuttoned but with no cleavage. The man, in reference to his wife, makes several *Anchorman* references and looks around the room, eyes gleaming mouth smiling and open and revealing big teeth. “This is my wife, she’s kind of a big deal around here. She has many, uh, uh, uh, leather books.” No one even laughs. Another man is introduced, and the two men exchange nervous banter about how the other likes to have “too much fun” and “act immature.” The second man, who has dark gelled hair and a rubbery face, launches into a speech that feels about as long as the video was.

“How many of you are familiar with this company? Did you know we’re a Fortune... what? 1,000. We are a Fortune 1000 company, does anybody know what that is? No one? Come on, guys.

“How many of you are highly motivated individuals? You? Yeah? Highly self-motivated? Who here knows what a labor union is? Ok, great. So basically what this company does is basically, say Bill and Mary are in a labor union. And Mary comes down with AIDS. Well, what’s Bill going to do about that? Is that a good thing? You think he can afford that? Those medical bills? In this economy? Anyone? Bill and Mary are in the hospital for six years, \$1,000 a day. You think they have that kind of money? Workin’, workin’ at Dick’s Sporting Goods?

“What we do is we sell *health packets* to people *through* their labor unions. Say John and Billy Jean both come down with a terrible case of viral encephalitis. They’re in a labor union, they’re workin’ ninety hours a week, they’ve got sixty-four children. Can they deal with that kind of an inflammation of the brain? In this economy? Health packets. These health packets contain paper airplanes, a piece of caramel, and nine bucks, and they’ll only run Bill and Mary about \$65. Does that sound like a good deal to you? Is that completely fucking insane?

“Who knows what a pyramid scheme is? Anyone? Ok, well that’s this. All you have to do is give us your money, and we keep the money, and you don’t make any money. That sound good to you self-motivated competitive individuals? Great. Now stay in here and give, give, give!”

“Oh hey, Nate? I forgot to tell you this: if you leave that door open, we lose all our oxygen and die. I know I did it differently earlier, when I was showing you, but that was because of efficiency. So, ah, I’m gonna go ahead and spend our last remaining minutes alive here on this spaceship thousands of miles away from all our loved ones out in cold

silent outer space berating you for that, and then if there’s time, you could maybe clean up a little around your area?”

Driving Jason back from a party, I happen to mention my Braddockian worry about my future, w/r/t jobs & stuff.

“Why are you worried about the future, dude?”

“Oh, y’know, just worried about getting a job and stuff.”

“You shouldn’t be worried, you should just be proactive like me.”

“What do you mean proactive? Jason in what way are you proactive?”

“Y’know, I just *go* for it, I’m proactive.”

“Okay.”

I drop him off and turn the radio on in my van. “Beast of Burden” is playing, the strumming pattern & bass line slinky and sleazy and angular like Mick’s own insouciant dancing. I light a cigarette and don’t roll the windows down. The giant zit is gone from my nose, but I have a scar where it used to be. Briefly I think I can see the dawn, but it’s just headlights coming up the way. ■

Jozzy's Corner

“I’m not a piece of art, son. I’m just a Gangster G.”
—Lil’ Wayne, *Mardi Gras*



Since graduating, moving out of the rents’ place, and moving into my own in Richmond, I’ve been charged with the responsibility of reconsidering the things I actually like. What to eat, to drink, to wear, to watch. Wondering “What do normal people do?” and reconciling it with “What do I do?” I’ve set out to define my after-work domestic lifestyle, post-dorm, post-all-nighters, post-Mom grilling up pork chops and watching marathon Law & Order. Fortunately, by virtue of some customer service freak accident/miracle, my broke-ass house has HBO.

As *Entourage* preps its seventh season, Sunday night, my nouveau 20-something Family Night, means peeping HBO’s new show, *How to Make it in America*, a snappily shot hipster homage by all means targeted at my age demographic. The show, boiled down, tags after two friends, Ben and Cam, trying their hand at making a denim line in contemporary New York City, hustling, grinding, wheeling and dealing (industry jargon) – Horatio Alger’s done dropped a mixtape.

Admittedly, this narrative has been beaten to a pulp. For many, it’s stuff to ignore. But the allure remains. This copy of a copy of a copy somehow only gets shinier. Cam and Ben’s

cosmopolitan anti-button-down American Dream is but an iteration of something grand and pervasive, resonating throughout popular culture and hip hop, specifically. Simply put, without it, there is no Lil’ Wayne, no Drake, no Kanye, and the guest list goes on.

With customary Wahlberg swagger, the secondary storylines and plot tributaries of *How to Make It* deliver on feel-good tourism for the <3’s of NYC, the drinks and dares, the VIP nightlife and, in contrast to the pioneer HBO in NYC production, *Sex in the City*, the fist-bumping of male camaraderie. While still cashing in on this fraternity behind the *Entourage* cache, *How to Make It* narrates the nitty-gritty, the heartbreak and delicate victories on the road from Brooklyn to SoHo, rather than simply igniting with the lottery and pipe dream fulfillment of Hollywood high life.

As always in life and art, the inveiglement of *How to Make It* unquestionably entails some micro-to-macro-and-back contextualizing: “It’s (still) a Recession, son.” I graduated from college a very long time ago. Like, almost a year. And if there’s anything I’ve learned since getting my diploma and being intermittently unemployed, it’s that the world is an uncaring place even for the most privileged among us, and that drinking whisky at 8am should be a super rare occasion, not so respectfully.

But if a prestigious degree doesn’t get you yuppie cake, how do you get paid?

After four long years of the liberal arts, I had to put aside the pretentiously lip-serviced yet perhaps noble visions of academia, and in turn, got schooled by Craigslist hard knocks. Click here, and: Sell insurance (to your godmother). Sell defense contracts. Sell medical devices. Sell financial advice. Sell plasma cells. Basically, if you can provide it to anyone for more than it cost you to make or get, it’s good. It’s all good. Enter *How to Make It*.

For a time when college grads feel they’ve been let down or failed, personally and otherwise, it’s no wonder *How to Make It* speaks volumes. When the show falls flat it’s because it’s forgetting what it’s selling. This is only marginally social realism. We’re tuning in because we want to see a fantasy version of ourselves succeed, not because we need some reminder that it’s tough to turn a buck out there. Superficially enough, give us the chance to see broke hot young people become rich hot negligibly older people. We’ll look in the mirror afterwards, on Monday morning, and say what’s up. ■

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Contributors

Tom Batten is not taking this seriously.

Nicholas Jackson is all up on you like a monster truck.

Amira Pierce’s most memorable zoo experience was in Surabaya, Indonesia, where the baboons roam around cage-less.

Edward Marshall Shenk, b. 1987, is the co-owner of Reference art gallery, Richmond VA.

Nathaniel John Waggoner is also the author of www.hornydraculas.tumblr.com, which is an online narrative that has nothing to do with Draculas and is meant to be read from top to bottom or as it’s updated. He has been accused of sitting on couch cushions.

Colophon

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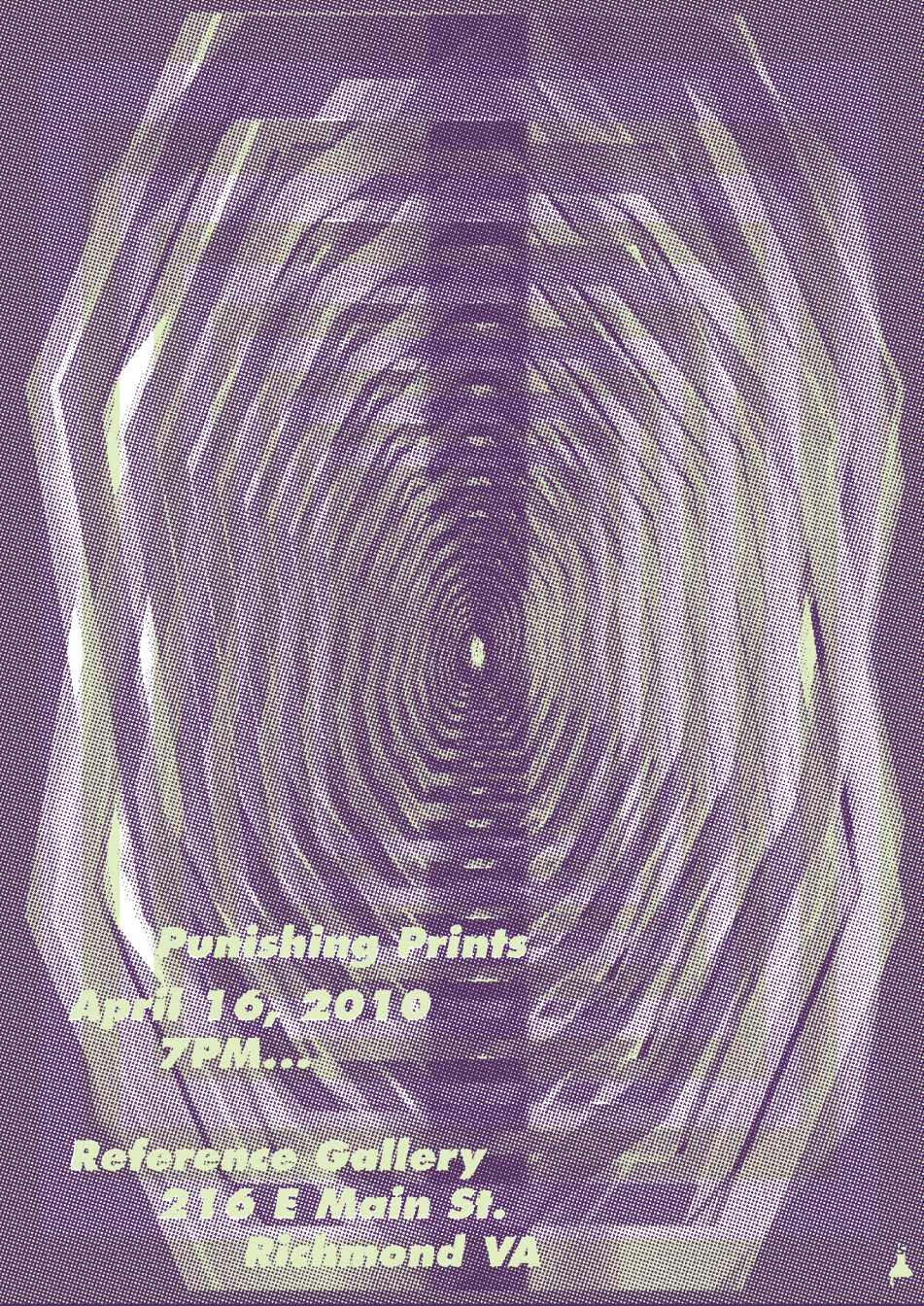
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