

THIS ABOVE ALL;  
TO THINE OWN  
SELF BE  
ZOO.

Vol. I

No. 2

February 2023

In this issue,  
a magical dog is ritually summoned by smells,  
and a lurid video tape is discovered.

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*To Thine Own Self Be Zoo*

*Vol. I No. 2*

*February 2023*

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## SCENT BECAME FLESH

Else leaned forward, her cheek resting between Tsen's shoulder blades, her arms clasped around his waist, the couple rocking back and forth atop the stallion Rosh, who carried them onward through the windy chilled night. Clumps and ridges of snow remained on a ground that was otherwise composed of frozen mud, brown grass, frigid puddles. When they had set out in the late morning, Else and Tsen had been dressed in their lightest garments, and Else held a parasol over them as Rosh carried them on. Now they were bundled in jackets and caps, and Else nuzzled closer against Tsen's back.

Rosh came to a stop.

Tsen bristled, and Else sat upright, looking around with him. In the moonlight, vague darkness crispened piece by piece into the shapes of a field strewn with boulders.

"Oh!" Tsen remarked. "We're here. I had nodded off."

Else reached back and gave Rosh's flank a rub.

The partners dismounted. Else stretched. She looked up at the full moon, and inhaled deeply of the cold windy air. There were smells of freshly melted water, and also smells of freshly uncovered decay.

Else came up to Tsen, who was tending to Rosh's tackle. She made a gesture of rubbing her nose. "We should make this."

Tsen stepped back from Rosh for a moment, closed his eyes, and inhaled through his nose, slowly and deeply. He nodded. "I will remember it."

Else kissed her husband. When their lips separated, Tsen gave Else another peck on the cheek before returning to Rosh's tackle. Else walked down Rosh's side, keeping a gentle hand on him, and opened his saddle bag. Reaching inside, she retrieved an oakwood drum, its lid fastened by a wooden bolt.

She began wandering off into the field, holding the drum. Tsen called some words of encouragement after her, though Else was already mentally in another space. Guided by the joyful familiarity of a happy tradition, Else arrived at the center of the field, where there was a circle of grass that was free from rocks, into which the wind blew on this night from five directions. Else smelled deeply of the wind yet again, and then unlocked the drum. From it, she withdrew the first of five candles, and set it upon a boulder at the north of the clearing. With a spell word, her tongue set a spark which ignited the candle, and she inhaled deeply of the candle's scent:

*Hair: the thick smell of it on the nape, and the thin smell of it on the belly, it is the most distinct of your form, the least comparable, the most exalted, and here, the most appreciated. Blessed be the smell of thine hair.*

Else walked from the north of the circle eastwards, lighting each of the candles as she went in a clockwise fashion:

*Breath: the essence of your life, the smell of your mouth. Blessed be the smell of thine breath.*

*Feet: the four paws upon which you walk, padded and clawed, the scent of all that you walk upon mingled with the scent that is thine own. Blessed be the smell of thine feet.*

*Anus: that which you smell of your own kind, that which speaks to your health as well as to your virility. Blessed be the smell of thine anus.*

*Urine: the scent you leave to be found from afar, and the scent you leave upon those to whom you come the closest. Blessed be the smell of thine urine.*

After lighting the last of the five candles, Else sat back against a boulder, and withdrew the final item from the drum: a jar of thick slime. She removed her garments, and as she waited, she coated an arm with the slime, and began at herself. She had prepared earlier in the day, taking Rosh in full: it was not long

before she relaxed back against the rock, her hand and forearm fully encompassed.

As she made herself ready, the winds in the field grew stronger. The five candles flickered in the five winds, carrying the scents all towards the center of the field, where gradually, as a smell comes to a nose, the scent became flesh. There in the center of the field stood a dog the size of a horse, his coat the color and appearance of smoke from a candle.

Else removed her hand from herself, stood, and walked to the dog.

The enormous dog turned to her. Seeing it was her, he wagged his smokey tail. Already, he made a grabbing motion with his paw, ready to know her. When she arrived at him, he lowered his nose to her penis, and deeply inhaled the scent of her testicles. She stroked his warm head with her dry hand, and turned to face away from him, getting down onto her hands and knees. Teasing, she began walking forward on her hands and knees, away from him.

The enormous canine wrapped his left paw around the left side of her hip, then the right paw around the right side. All at once he was upon her, as large as a stallion, and she cried out from the overwhelming sensation. He moved rapidly for a short while, and then held her rump pressed firm against his warm underside. He pulsed inside of her.

When he was finished, he dismounted. The front of her hips was bloodied with yet another year's set of scratch marks. He licked the side of her head, and in the process of doing so, his smokey being dissipated into a greater plume, floating over the ground into the forest. Before Else's very sight, the brown of the dead grass gave way to green, to new life sprouting, to buds eager to flower.

Else collapsed flat onto the wet cold ground and sighed a sigh of relief, pleasure, happiness, fulfillment. She laid a long while in the afterglow, smelling the five candles of hair, breath, feet, anus, urine, happy that she was blessed to spend any time at all with the person spawned of the five.

## DORIAN GRAY

### **or; The Picture of Dorian Gray But It's A Completely Different Story About Something Else**

#### **i**

Agatha idled the car up the quiet dark driveway, eased on the brake to stop before the closed garage door, and then pressed down fully on the brake to come to a complete stop. There in front of the garage door she remained for a while, staring blankly ahead, until after some time she put the car in park and took her foot off of the brake. With the car in park, she took the key out of the ignition, and sighed in the quiet that followed now that the engine was turned off. Well, it was something of quiet. A relative silence that was at once the least and the most that one could hope for in a neighborhood as pleasant as hers and Harry's: crickets or frogs or something chirped and/or ribbited; somewhere a few streets away, a dog was barking at something; faintly, the noise of a TV show could be heard coming from some neighbor's house, the volume evidently turned up very high, but not so high that Agatha could hear what show was on while sitting out here in her car.

Though it was no fault of the new trainee, Sibyl had gotten on Agatha's nerves that day. "Miss Agatha, where can I find the size on these types of Wranglers? Miss Agatha, where do these coats go? Miss Agatha, I noticed this coat doesn't have a price tag, I



don't think—do we print a new one off somewhere or—oh, here it is—do you think we should move the tag to somewhere else more noticeable? If that's allowed? Miss Agatha, Miss Agatha, Miss Agatha...”

The new girl was just learning, of course. ‘Miss Agatha’ herself had asked a lot of those same questions, she was sure. Some of them probably more or less word for word, after replacing ‘Miss Agatha’ with ‘Mrs Narborough.’

As she sat in the car, her thoughts began to wander from the week at work passed to the weekend home ahead, and all of the free time she would get to spend with Harry—Hell, maybe if the weekend shook out to be nice enough she would quit on Monday, fuck it: Live Free Die Whenever, as she had once seen on a probably home-made bumper sticker, on the back of a mini van that was adorned with a truly masterful collage of various bumper stickers; she had followed that car around for about a minute reading as many as she could before she realized that if she kept at it she would soon be lost, and should get back to her course to the grocery store. They had been new to this place then. Now they were settled. Now, if she had had the opportunity to follow the mini van today instead of back then, she would not get lost anywhere here.

Agatha got out of the car, closed and locked the door behind herself, and went into the front door of the house. In the entryway, leaning back against the coat closet door, Harry stood in a tweed suit holding a bouquet of flowers, smiling at the Agatha who had finally stepped inside.

Agatha let out a sad, apologetic, drawn out noise, and asked, “Why do you think I’m mad at you?”

Harry gave a silent laugh, turning his head away into his armpit with a sharp exhale. He stood up from leaning against the coat closet door, and sauntered a few steps to stand face to face with his wife. “You, Mrs Wotton, are not mad at me: You are in fact quite pleased with me as we are going to stay in, smell these ridiculous flowers for a second each, and then watch one of the movies I rented for your consideration on this, our year and three quarters anniversary.”

Harry extended the flowers with both hands.

Agatha smiled as she snorted. “You’re such a *dork!*”

“Yeah well you chose to marry me, Mrs Dork, and this is what you get.”

Agatha took the indeed ridiculous flowers, stuck her nose into them, and breathed in. They smelled like flowers. It was a wholly unsurprising smell, and yet perhaps by way of this fact, they served their purpose well: they smelled lovely, and Agatha drew out her smelling of them for more than the instructed second, making the one inhale last as long as she could make it. When she was finished, she extended the bouquet out to Harry’s nose for his appraisal. He drew in a similar breath, and let it out with a smile that was trying very hard to be a serious, contemplative frown. “Flowers,” he asserted. “Quite,” Agatha concurred, and stepped forward and gave her dork husband a kiss.

She gave the flowers back to Harry as she sat down to take off her shoes. When she had done this and proceeded into the living room, she saw Harry fussing with getting the flowers into a vase on the dining room table. She called to him, “What movies did you get?”

“On the couch,” he called back, not looking up from his work.

Agatha went to the couch and picked up the four VHS tapes that sat in a neat stack on the leftmost cushion.

Ferris Bueller’s Day Off, Dirty Dancing, Groundhog Day, and Pulp Fiction—four movies straight from the top of Agatha and Harry’s shared ‘to watch’ list.

“What’s Pulp Fiction about?” Agatha called.

“I don’t know,” Harry said back at a rather regular volume and from nearer by than Agatha had expected, making her jump. “I think it’s kind of an action comedy thing,” he added.

She turned to him, and cursorily looked the Pulp Fiction tape over front and back. “Want to give it a try?”

“Absolutely,” Harry said. She extended the tape to him as he walked past. He took it, removed it from its case, and got everything set up as Agatha settled in on the couch.

With the tape placed inside of the VCR and playing from the start, Harry came over to the couch as well, and the two of them settled in together, and were soon watching Samuel L. Jackson and John Travolta discussing quarter pounders with cheese.

The movie went on, with many gasps and laughs from the Wottons. Eventually, after John Travolta had jabbed an enormous syringe straight into the center of Uma Thurman's chest, Harry commented, "This movie is *amazing*."

"Do you have to pee?" Agatha asked. As rule, Harry did not comment on movies until he needed to get up for something—Though once this seal was broken, commentary on the remainder of the movie was usually fair game.

Harry gave Agatha a kiss on the side of the forehead and gently stood up from the couch. "Be right back."

"You can pause it," Agatha mentioned.

Harry did pause the movie, and went to the bathroom that was nearby to the drawing room to pee. When he returned and pressed play on the movie again, John Travolta and Uma Thurman stood in front of Uma's house, talking about everything that had happened with them that night. Harry and Agatha settled in together once more.

As the conversation with Uma and John was drawing to a close, Uma with dried tears streaked down her face recited a joke. "Three tomatos are walkin down the street: papa tomato, mama tomato, baby tomato. Baby tomato starts laggin behind, and papa tomato gets really angry, goes back and squishes him—says, 'ketchup'. ...'ketchup'."

John gave a pity laugh, and then John and Uma found themselves at least smiling a little for real, in spite of the terrible night.

"See you around," Uma said, and then turned and walked away towards her door, and the scene cut to a shot inside of the house, in a bedroom.

"Woah," Harry said.

Agatha took a second longer than Harry to realize what the scene had cut to: on a bed there was a woman in a black dress, and she was gently fingering the lady parts of a large female dog.

"Oh," Agatha agreed. "This movie does *not* stop surprising me."

"No kidding," Harry said, in agreement with that as well.

"Do we know her?" Agatha asked.

"I don't think so. She wasn't one of the drug dealer's friends was she?"

“No, unless I missed one. Have we seen the dog?”

“I don’t think so.”

“What breed is that?”

“Uh, I don’t know,” Harry said. “Maybe a mix. Seems Boxer-ish and also kind of Lab-ish.”

As Harry and Agatha talked, the movie went on, showing sweeping shots of the woman and the dog together, close ups of the dog’s lady parts being fingered by a hand that glistened with some type of lubricant, and A B shots of the dog’s face and the woman’s face, smiling and reacting to each other. A cover of Earth Angel performed by a female vocalist played in the background.

“Is she supposed to be Mia Wallace’s sister or something?” Agatha wondered.

“I could see it,” Harry said, nodding.

Earth Angel faded out, and the woman stopped fingering the canine. The human and dog shared a mouth to mouth kiss, and when they parted, the movie showed a close up of their nearby mouths, as she whispered to the dog, “*And mustard.*”

Agatha snorted in a laugh, head reeling back in confusion. “*Okay?*”

The movie cut away to the next title card—Prelude to “The Gold Watch”—and moved on to an entirely different scene, of a kid sitting in front of a TV in a living room in the daytime, watching cartoons.

In reference to the scene with the dog, Harry said, “Whether we do get an explanation for that scene or whether they never bring it up again, this movie is *kind of* genius.”

By the time the credits rolled, the movie did *not* give the Wottons an explanation for the fairly lengthy scene in Pulp Fiction of a dog being lovingly fingered; though the explanation did exist, and would in time be found out, and in fact made the beginnings of its appearance the next Monday while Agatha was at work.

“So anyways,” Mrs Narborough said, coming to the conclusion of the story of her own weekend, “how was your weekend, Ag?”

Agatha and Mrs Narborough were in one of the store rooms, doing something that was in essence a form of taking inventory, though the regional managers liked to give these things more unhelpful names when they could accomplish it.

“It was good,” Agatha said with a smile, and paused to do some figuring. After writing down a number at the bottom of a column on a table on the paper on her clipboard, she continued. “Harry and I stayed in most of the weekend and watched a couple of movies. Pulp Fiction, Ferris Bueller’s Day Off.”

“I, *love*, Pulp Fiction,” Mrs Narborough said. “It’s honestly my favorite thing ever made.”

“Ooh, really?”

“Did you like it?”

“Yeah it was great,” Agatha said honestly. “Can’t believe all the different things they tied together and made it still completely work.”

“I know! Which one was your favorite?”

“The gangster guy and the gangster guy’s boss’s girlfriend going on a date.”

“John Travolta and Uma Thurman. Yes. Same.”

“Really?”

“Uh huh.”

“And what was with that scene after that?” Agatha asked.

“After what?”

Agatha blushed slightly as she realized what she was bringing up with her boss, but in fairness Mrs Narborough *had* said the movie was her favorite thing ever made, and so Agatha continued on about the particular scene in the movie that she was talking about, while scanning the end of a pencil down the table on the paper on her clipboard. “After the two get back from after their date, after she tells him her joke, there’s that scene with the dog? Did that ever tie in to anything?”

“Dog? I... Are you talking about something in the background that I missed? I don’t remember any *dogs* in the entire movie.”

“You can *not* have missed this dog, she was *extremely* the focus of the entire scene.” As Agatha had to go on about it in specific terms, she could feel her cheeks absolutely burning up.

She lowered her clipboard, glanced all around to make sure they were alone in the store room, and said quietly, “The scene where the woman is... *fingering*, her pet dog, on the bed?”

Mrs Narborough let out a piercing shriek of a laugh, and then covered her face with her clipboard.

As she eventually lowered it, her face was red with choked, silent laughter. Letting out high pitched wheezes, she dropped her clipboard, gently grabbed Agatha by both wrists, and eventually composed herself enough to say, “Ag—honey—I’m sorry, I do *not* think the movie you watched was Pulp Fiction.”

That night Agatha went straight home, got straight out of the car, and burst in through the front door to report this news to her beloved husband. She marched inside down the hall, and Harry came marching towards her in exactly the same fashion from the living room.

“That dog fucking scene isn’t in Pulp Fiction,” Agatha asserted, as though making an argument of the point.

“That scene of a beautiful mixed breed dog having her weird animal vaginal parts lovingly touched by a beautiful human woman’s lubricated fingers to both of their enjoyment and pleasure is absolutely not in any way shape or form in the 1994 major blockbuster movie Pulp Fiction directed by Quentin Tarantino,” Harry agreed, taking Agatha’s side of this argument that was now apparently occurring against some unknown third party—the universe, maybe, or the movie rental place that had given the tape to them. Harry had returned the tape yesterday.

“I—” Agatha began, and then vaguely held up the tape of Pulp Fiction that Mrs Narborough had lent to her as a trustworthy copy, and then lowered the tape back to her side again, and then leaned over and set it on the counter, apparently not needing it anymore.

“How did you find out?” Harry asked.

“Pulp Fiction is Mrs Narborough’s favorite movie.” Agatha glanced at the tape. “She did not recall that scene of a dog’s pussy getting played around with.”

Harry winced his mouth into a small o shape.

“How did you find out?” Agatha asked.

“Towards the end of my shift I had what sounds like it may have been a similar conversation with my boss also.”

Agatha winced her mouth into a small o shape as well.

The two of them stood in silence for a moment, both of their eyes soon settling on the tape that was placed on the counter.

“Is that the same—”

“It’s Mrs Narborough’s copy, not the copy we got from the rental place.”

“Ah,” Harry said.

The two stared at it for another contemplative moment.

Agatha sighed. “Should we... *do* anything? Call them and let them know what’s on that tape that they’re giving out to people?”

“It... I mean, we *could* call them and let them know, yes. We could do that if you wanted to.”

“Go on.”

“I think it’s a better cut of the movie with the dog scene?” Harry said, employing quite some degree of played up uncertainty—Agatha could quite plainly tell that her husband was not uncertain of his opinion in the least, though he *was*, in kindness, ready to drop the topic and let it go if she gave the slightest hint that it would be wise of him to stop saying the things that he was presently and tentatively saying. “Not *better*, I take *that* back actually, but more *interesting*,” Harry clarified.

Agatha nodded. “I agree.”

“Oh do you now?”

“I do,” Agatha said, and smiled a little, and shrugged. “What if we just leave it? Let the next person see this ‘interesting’ cut of the movie too?”

Agatha and Harry shared a kiss, and the two of them went to go start on making dinner.

### iii

For a time of approximately five months, three weeks, and some small additional number of days beyond that, nothing more came of the tape that the Wottons had watched. It was, by their estimation, the strangest thing that had come into their lives in that time, but it was not the most worthy to remark upon: They had seen it, yes, but aside from the occasional speculation about

whether the tape was still in circulation and whether some other unsuspecting couple was watching it right now and what, do you suppose, they think of it, there wasn't much more about the tape to discuss. Harry got a promotion from engineer to project architect. Agatha had Thursdays dropped from her schedule at work in order to pursue painting lessons and generally other creative endeavors. The Wottons around this time were discussing at length whether they wanted to start trying for a baby—they both did want to start trying eventually, but were in agreement as to their tepid uncertainty that now was the right time. Many Saturdays, the two went out on dates, to lunch or to a park. One muggy Saturday afternoon, Harry and Agatha were in the midst of an enjoyable and very sweaty walk down a trail at a state park, when they walked around a bend in the trail, and Agatha stopped in her tracks and barred her arm out in front of Harry, stopping him in his tracks as well.

Up ahead, a woman sat at a bench. There was also a dog lying down at her feet. The woman wore athletic clothing, and had her long black hair back in a ponytail. The dog was panting; the dog happened to be facing the Wottons, and wagged at them as the panting and lying continued.

"That's *her*," Agatha said.

"Do I know her?" Harry asked.

The Wottons were both catching their breath a bit.

"She's the woman from *Pulp Fiction*. *With the dog*."

Harry wheeled around to face away from the woman and the dog. "I think you're right."

"Wait, we *are* going to talk to her, aren't we?" Agatha asked.

"Yes, *I* want to," Harry agreed. "I'm just, actually nervous. I think we could have happened upon the entirety of the actual cast and it wouldn't be as big of a deal to me as this."

Agatha tugged at Harry's wrist. Harry turned back to facing forward on the trail, and the Wottons approached.

The sweaty woman gave a polite though rather indifferent wave as the sweaty Agatha and the sweaty Harry neared. The dog continued to pant and wag, and seemed to be smiling at the approaching couple.

Agatha and Harry, both smiling as well, stopped in front of the woman.



“Hi,” Agatha said, and Harry also threw in a “Hi” of his own.

“Heya,” the woman said, and gave her little wave once again. “Need any water or anything?” she asked.

“I think we recognize you from somewhere,” Agatha said.

The woman did then smile a little too, and glanced away. “Oh yeah? Where from?”

Seeing the woman’s face up this close, Agatha felt absolutely certain that this was indeed the woman from the movie. Harry felt much the same way as his wife did, though more from looking at the dog.

“*And mustard*,” Agatha whispered in her best impression.

The woman squirmed and gave a few little stomps as she smiled completely. “You’ve seen it!” she said. Looking down to the dog, she repeated, “Someone’s seen it!”

“Truly great performances,” Harry said. “Big fans. Always a pleasure to meet your heroes.”

“This is my husband Harry, my name is Agatha,” Agatha said, and extended her hand.

The woman shook the hands of each of the Wottons. “Dorian,” she said, introducing herself. Pointing down at the dog, she added, “And this comely young lady is Gray. Do you wanna say hi?”

The dog stood up and went to the Wottons. Harry crouched down and pet Gray, stroking down her back and rubbing at the front of her chest as she wagged. Agatha threw some approving headpats into the mix, and then turned her attention back to Dorian. “Do you mind if we sit down?”

“Please,” Dorian said, and made room.

Harry sat at one end of the bench, petting Gray who had come to sit in front of him. Agatha sat in the middle, with Dorian on the other far end.

“I suppose you’re wondering what the hell you watched on that tape,” Dorian said.

“We hadn’t seen it before, we legitimately thought it was part of the movie,” Harry mentioned.

Dorian fist pumped to herself.

“But yes,” Agatha went on, “after learning that was *not* part of the movie...” She looked back and forth between Gray and Dorian, and asked, “Is it a kink thing?”

“Art project,” Dorian said, and turned her head back to have a drink from her water bottle. “She and I *are* together—”

“Oh, alright.”

“—but if you’re asking about our apparently *seamless* appearance in Pulp Fiction, yeah, that was just an art project, not even my idea.”

“Oh, really?”

Dorian nodded. “Some friends of mine from New Mexico, going to art school there, they came up with this project to try to add in ridiculous scenes to movies but do it well enough to make it look like it was always supposed to be there. And apparently they thought of me and Gray.” She craned her head forward to look at Gray when she said the dog’s name. The dog wagged, and came over and laid down at her feet again. Dorian gave Gray a couple of pets down her back and then left her alone. “But yeah. Heh. It was fun to make for sure, and I’m sure my friends would love to talk with you sometime. As far as *I’m* aware you’re the first people ‘in the wild’ who have definitely seen any of these.”

“I *love* that idea,” Agatha said. She glanced both ways down the trail, and then asked, “Is it legal?”

“It is!” Dorian said. “A legal expert signed off on the project. Apparently as long as the movie you’re working with is labeled as rated R, you can show animal fun parts doing pretty much anything. It’s only human nudity that gets you in legal trouble.”

Harry chimed in to say, “Against store policy, surely.”

“Oh, yes,” Dorian nodded. “Fifty dollar fine for taping over any of the films, which my friends do have set aside and are more than happy to pay if the matter should come up.”

Agatha snickered, and shook her head.

Dorian looked both ways down the trail, and then leaned a bit closer, and said, “I also have an appearance in Reservoir Dogs if you want to see it.”

The Wottons looked to each other. As subtly as could be silently screamed, Harry’s eyes were pleading, as were Agatha’s.

Agatha turned to Dorian, and reported, “Absolutely we want to see.”

Arrangements were made to meet up at Dorian’s on next week’s Saturday. An address was written down and handed off,

phone numbers were exchanged, and the two couples got back to continuing their hikes in opposite directions down the trail.

“I think I *like* her,” Agatha commented, when they had gotten a very far distance away so as not to be overheard.

“You sound a little surprised to,” Harry noted.

“I mean I’d like to get to know her more, but yeah. I am *actually* looking forward to meeting this lady and her dog again next week.”

#### iv

Agatha and Harry pulled up the driveway to Dorian and Gray’s.

“Nice place,” Harry commented.

“Really nice place,” Agatha agreed, and the two of them got out of the car.

Agatha went to the trunk, took out a rolled up poster, and brought it with as she and Harry proceeded up the little path from the side of the driveway to the front door.

When they rang the doorbell Gray answered first, coming scampering and barking. Eventually Dorian arrived after, and actually opened the door for the visitors.

“Hiii,” Dorian said, keeping Gray held back.

Harry crouched down. Dorian let Gray go, and the dog shot forward and said hello to the man, and to his wife who stood beside him, holding a rolled up poster high over her head, away from the dog. The dog, incidentally, had very much noticed this, and seemed to be considering jumping up on Agatha to see what the visitor was keeping from her.

Harry reached up and took the poster from Agatha, and handed it over to Dorian.

“What’s this?” Dorian asked, holding it.

“Open it and see,” Agatha encouraged.

Dorian worked off the rubber band that was around the poster’s center, and unrolled the thing.

Dorian gasped.

The poster was the movie cover for *Pulp Fiction*, but instead of featuring Uma Thurman on the bed, it featured the actors from the added scene, the human woman in a black dress and

her canine counterpart. The human and the dog both laid on their chests beside each other and looked towards the viewer with a distant, disapproving but almost seductive gaze.

Dorian looked between Agatha and Harry. "Did you—"

Agatha raised her hand. "I paint. After I did that one I had it scanned and printed. I can give you the original too."

"Oh my *god*. Well, thank you. This is really impressive."

"Oh yeah and you only make movies."

Dorian snickered, and carefully rolled the poster back up. "Would you two have any interest in grabbing lunch before we watch the movie? I know of a couple places near here. Or we could order delivery."

Agatha and Harry looked to each other, and each made a face that said they were agreeable to that. "Yeah we could eat," Agatha said, turning back to Dorian.

"Want to walk?" Dorian asked Agatha, though Gray, also hearing this, gave a vehement 'yes' of a bark. Dorian smiled and shook her head, and added, "It's like half a mile. Dogs are allowed inside, but honestly the weather's nice enough we could sit outside anyways."

The Wottons agreed to this. Dorian clipped a leash onto Gray, and the four proceeded out of the house, and began away down the street on foot.

"I found this place when I first moved here a couple years ago," Dorian mentioned, in reference to the cafe that they were heading for. "I have no idea what they do differently to everywhere else, but they have kind of the best sandwiches I've had in my life. Like, consistently. I have not once had bad food here."

"No pressure, then," Harry said.

"Do you two live around here? I think you said you do."

"Other side of the city, but yes, not far in the scheme of things."

When the four had arrived at the cafe, Dorian cupped a hand over her eyes and pressed her face against the window to look inside past the reflective glare that the sun made on the rest of the window otherwise. Apparently catching someone's attention she gave a wave, and then a thumbs up. "We can sit down," she said to the Wottons.

The three humans took seats around a round wooden table, and the dog remained standing for the time being, nearby to the human who had hold of her leash.

“May I ask what it is you do?” Harry inquired.

Dorian planted her chin in her cupped hands. “What, like, job, hobbies, interests?”

“Anything notable that passes the time of modern living for you.”

Dorian leaned back in her chair, tipping it so it stood on just the back two legs. “For hobbies, tennis and running. For a job, computer programmer.”

“Oh *really*,” Harry said, and now he leaned forward. “I’m curious how similar our jobs are.”

“Yeah?”

“Architect.”

“Oh, interesting. I think mine is more boring than you would guess, actually, but it does pay the bills, that’s for sure.” Dorian looked to Agatha, and asked, “Painter, you said?”

“Well, not as a *job*.”

“What? Hey, why not?”

Agatha shrugged, and smiled down at the table.

Harry leaned in with his wife, and mentioned, “Really might be something to look into in the coming months, if it’s something you think you might be interested in.”

Agatha gave Harry a kiss on the cheek, and then, turning back to Dorian, explained, “We’re going to start trying for a baby.”

“Oh! That’s exciting. Do you have any kids already?”

“This would be the first,” Agatha said. She and Harry held hands, one over the other, on the tabletop.

Shortly after that moment, a waiter came out and handed out menus and took drink orders and gave Gray a pat on the head, then returned inside.

As the humans looked over their menus, Harry said, “So, do you and Gray have any puppies?”

Agatha elbowed Harry.

“As a matter of fact we do,” Dorian said, and set down her menu. “I am not their biological mother, though. We ‘borrowed’ a stud dog for a little while and, hey whadaya know, puppies.

They're grown now though, all off to other homes. Some of the families do still send us Christmas cards."

The waiter returned with drinks, took every human's orders, collected the menus, gave a treat to Gray who very clearly knew from past experiences that he would be giving her a treat, and departed again back into the building.

"Agatha has a mean serve, you know."

Agatha rolled her eyes. "I *had* an okay serve, back when we were in college. I haven't swung a tennis racket in about two years."

"Would you want to sometime?" Dorian asked.

"Honestly?" Agatha said. "Kinda."

"We should!" Dorian said. "Let me know when, I can make the time."

Agatha had a sip from her lemonade, and Harry had a sip from his soda.

Dorian, the Wottons then noticed, had two glasses of water in front of her, one with ice cubes and a straw, the other with just water and nothing besides. Dorian took a sip from the water with the straw, and as she did, Gray came and sat down beside her, looking actually rather polite. Gray picked up the unadorned glass of water and began pouring it out in front of Gray's face: Gray turned her head and began lapping at the stream, and finished off the glass of water in one go, albeit with half of the water ending up on the ground.

"Have either of you two ever had dogs?" Dorian asked, and took another sip of her own water.

"No, I never did," came Agatha's answer, while Harry said, "The family had a couple growing up."

Agatha then added, "I did have hamsters, if that counts for anything."

Dorian laughed a little. "I wasn't trying to keep score or anything, just curious. What were your hamsters like?"

"Cute," Agatha answered. "Digging holes, hiding things in their cheeks, running on their wheels. You know, hamster stuff."

The waiter emerged with a tray of food.

"Oh, that was fast," Harry commented.

Three plates were set down in front of the three humans, as well as a bowl of many various meat scraps set down in front of

Dorian to be given to Gray. The waiter also set down a new unadorned glass of water in front of Dorian, and again went back into the building.

Dorian set Gray's bowl down in front of her, and the dog began wolfing everything down. As Gray ate, Dorian looked to the Wottons expectantly. "After you," she said.

Harry bit into his sandwich. "Holy mackerel."

Dorian glanced to Agatha.

Agatha bit into her sandwich as well. "What the *fuck*, did they do to make this so good?"

"Right??"

Agatha did then cover her mouth with her hand, and, continuing to talk with her mouth full, added, "Pardon my language."

"What? Oh, yes, language. I was very offended, but apology accepted." She then began eating her sandwich as well, and the four of them made short work of their lunches.

When the meal was over and paid for—Dorian in the end managed to insist on the bill, leaving as a compromise that the Wottons could leave as generous a tip as they wanted—the four made the short return walk back to Dorian and Gray's house, and all proceeded inside, Gray being taken off the leash once all were in.

"In spite of being such a movie star," Dorian pretended to boast, "I don't actually watch many movies. So my theater set up is just, y'know, a TV in the living room if that's alright."

"Lead the way," Agatha encouraged.

Dorian did lead the way down the hall, and into a living room furnished all around with couches and chairs, a fire place against one wall, and the promised television set against an adjacent wall. Hung up on all four walls were many framed pictures of dogs, horses, goats, and various other animals as one might see on a farm. On the floor were an assortment of rugs that one might well not in the least mind taking a nap on.

One of the couches, comfortably big enough for three, was centered in front of the television set. Gray went and laid down in front of this couch, and Dorian invited the Wottons to have a seat.

"I already have it set up to just before our scene," Dorian mentioned, turning on the VCR.

Harry and Agatha glanced to each other. Harry mentioned to Dorian, "We actually haven't seen the original *Reservoir Dogs* at all."

"What!" Dorian exclaimed. "Okay, look away from the screen then, I'm rewinding it to the beginning. Unless you two need to be going actually, I wasn't trying to take up all of your time today—"

"No, not at all!" Agatha said, she and Harry both averting their eyes from the screen as instructed. "We'll stay if you'll have us."

"Awesome. This isss going to take a minute to rewind. Do you want anything? Popcorn, drinks?"

Harry and Agatha again looked to each other. "We're usually good without snacks when we watch movies at home," Harry said, "but we are in no way averse to the idea either. We'll have what you're having."

"Not exactly traditional movie food, but I was actually going to have some coffee I think," Dorian said.

"Oh, now that you mention it I could really go for a cup too," Harry said, and Agatha concurred with, "Same."

"And. The. Movie. Issss. Al. Most. Reeaaa... *Wound*, done. Okay, I'll be right back out with coffee and then we'll start this."

Dorian departed from the living room, leaving the Wottons alone with their host's better half, who laid in front of the couch with her chin buried in the carpet, eyes closed.

Agatha curled up close beside Harry, and in her smallest whisper, asked, "Is this weird?"

Harry whispered back, "Existence? Yes."

"*This*," Agatha insisted. "I'm pretty sure we're about to watch that dog get fingered. Like, again. It seems weirder to watch knowing it's coming, and knowing it's not actually part of the movie."

"Should it?" Harry asked. "Seem weirder?"

"I don't know," Agatha whispered. "That's kind of my point, is that I don't know."

"Do you want to leave?" Harry asked. "Give me a signal and I will extract us as politely or expeditiously as you want."



Agatha leaned forward and looked down at the sleeping canine for a moment. Above all other things, the dog in that moment appeared to be, in Agatha's estimation, as contented as a creature of any sort at all in the world possibly could be.

Agatha leaned back in with Harry, and added in yet another whisper, "*She is a mother*, apparently."

"I think it's fine," Harry agreed. "At least going on what we saw in the last film, assuming this one goes along the same tracks. I remember when we were watching that scene and we still thought it was part of the movie, one of the things that struck me as the entire point of the scene was how caring the woman was to the dog, how loving, how empathetic she was to this creature who traditionally would be considered 'below' her. It seemed like everything was for the dog's—Gray's, as we now know—It seemed like everything was for Gray's enjoyment, and nothing else."

"Don't let me think it gets you *too* excited, dear," Agatha said, and gave him a kiss on the cheek. After a moment, she asked, "Actually, like completely for real now, would you do that? With a dog?"

"You're asking that question about two years and ninety five days too late for the answer to be anything other than an unqualified no, my love," Harry said, and kissed his wife on the cheek as she had kissed him. "But back before I found that lovely young woman at the tennis courts who would let me awkwardly try to flirt with her?" Harry gave a hum, and then a sigh, and then a head wobble as he considered it. "I really don't think *I* would ever be interested in an escapade with the tetra-legged. Maybe if one had ever begged me enough and made puppy dog eyes, I wouldn't have been able to say no just for her sake."

"Really really?" Agatha asked. "No joking, I want to know if you actually could have done that—say it was before you had ever met me. Swear, I'm not trying to make it a jealousy thing, I just want to know."

"I *do* think I could figure out the mechanics and perform some very robot-esque service if it seemed sufficiently demanded of me, yes. But you know I tend to be much happier with words than with actions. I wouldn't be happy for a minute

with a girlfriend who didn't appreciate my goings on, and who didn't have at least a fighting chance of talking my ear off as much as I talk off hers."

Agatha gave Harry another kiss. "I didn't realize I still had things to learn about you, Mr Wotton. I thought you had blabbered everything there could possibly be to blabber about."

"Just wait until you get me in the same room as a goat, Miss Agatha."

"Oh *stop*," Agatha said, and playfully pulled away from her husband who playfully continued to cling to her.

"Til death do us part, but some things—those things being goats, of course—a man can't be held responsible."

"You shut up, you're going to embarrass me in front of my new friend."

Harry did drop the subject of goats, and on the subject of dogs, only returned briefly to add, "I suppose the succinct version of my thoughts on the matter of sensuality au canine would be to say that I feel no attraction, but I also feel no revulsion either. Which is how it goes with most things, I like to think. They merely are, it merely is, I merely am, and other such materialist drivel."

"Quite," Agatha affirmed, in hopes of actually shutting her husband up about the topic before Dorian did make her return. Switching the topic and no longer whispering, she asked, "Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs—Wait, do I have that right? This one is Reservoir Dogs? Re-ser-voir?"

"Reservoir, yes. This movie is Reservoir Dogs."

"Aren't Pulp Fiction and Reservoir Dogs written by the same guy?"

"Yes, I think so."

"Starring the same people?"

"Oh I'm not sure."

"Do you think that's part of the art project thing? That they're both from the same writer?"

"We could ask," Harry suggested.

Before much longer, Dorian did return with coffee for the humans, pressed play on the VCR, and settled in on her side of the couch—Gray scooped onto Dorian's toes as the human was

settling in. Dorian reached down and pet her partner a few times.

“Is this the same writer as Pulp Fiction?” Harry asked.

“It is,” Dorian affirmed.

“Was that part of the reasoning in choosing which films the two of you would make your appearances in?”

Dorian produced an amused contemplative face, and tilted her head. “I think it was kind of a coincidence actually, but you’d have to ask my friends. It really was them who set most of this up, we really did just play our roles as actors.”

Harry was prepared to raise another question, but as the dialogue of the opening scene began, he dropped the questioning and watched.

A while into the movie there were two men in a car: one of them had been shot and was panicking, and the other—the driver—was trying to calm the shot man down. At a certain point the scene cut to an exterior shot, and showed the car careening off the road and down into a dried up concrete river. The camera rotated to follow the car as it continued along down the concrete, but in rotating, the camera came to Dorian and Gray closer in the foreground—Dorian wore a sharp black suit, and was on her knees on the concrete fingering her partner who stood there and received the stimulation. The camera lingered on the two new characters, and allowed the car to continue driving out of the frame. Eventually, in a continuous shot, the camera came closer up to Gray’s sexual parts and Dorian’s fingers working their way in and out of them in an almost business-like fashion. Eventually Gray seemed to lose interest in the fingering, and she turned to kiss Dorian. The woman and the dog did begin making out—“improvised,” Dorian commented from the couch—until eventually, the sound of a car’s motor could be heard growing louder again, and then the same car as before returned into the frame, drove back up out of the dried up concrete river where it had gone in, and the camera rotated away from the woman and the dog to resume following the car. Suddenly there was a cut back to the car’s interior, and the dialogue between the shot man and the driver continued.

“Amazing,” Harry said.

Agatha gave a golf clap, and Harry joined in. Dorian did a small bow, inasmuch as she could without getting up from the couch.

“But yeah,” Dorian said. “Some copy of that *might* still be in rental circulation somewhere. Dunno. What do you think, Gray?”

Gray looked up at Dorian. Dorian bent forward, and Gray stuck her tongue out and the woman and the dog shared a little kiss before Gray then turned away and planted her chin on the soft rug again. Dorian gave her a few strokes down the back and then sat upright again.

The Wottons remained at Dorian and Gray’s a while longer, chatting on this and that, and Agatha arranged a tennis date with Dorian for the following Thursday evening.

## V

A couple of months passed. It was a Sunday morning, and the Wottons were lounging in the living room, Harry reading a book on Kierkegaardian philosophy, Agatha reading a newspaper.

“Mets won their last game,” Agatha mentioned.

“Oh good,” Harry said.

“Harry I will clean every room of this house spotless right now if you can tell me what sport the Mets play.”

Harry lowered his book, and looked up at the ceiling. “Hockey?”

“No, dear.”

“Well.” He shrugged, and went back to his reading.

With a smile and a shake of the head, Agatha went back to her reading as well.

Shortly after that moment, the phone rang. Harry, being closer to the nearest receiver, answered the phone call. “Yellow.”

“Hi Harry,” came a friendly voice.

“Dorian, hello,” he said, and then looked over to his wife and mouthed the name ‘Dorian,’ which received an eye roll and a thumbs up.

“Is Agatha there? I wanted to talk to you both.”

Harry pressed a button. "Got you on speaker. Agatha, Dorian, Dorian, Agatha."

"Hi Dorian!"

"Hello! You two won't believe the enigmatic troupe of people who have just arrived in town."

The Wottons looked to each other. Agatha shrugged, and Harry shrugged as well. Harry asked into the receiver, "Who would that be?"

"Only my film friends."

Agatha made an excited noise. "When do we get to meet them?" she asked.

"*They* get to meet *you* at your soonest convenience at my house," Dorian answered. "If this arrangement is agreeable, of course."

Harry held down a mute button on the phone, and turned to Agatha. "Right now?"

"Right now," Agatha said with several nods.

Harry released the button on the phone. "How does immediately sound, Mrs Dorian and Mrs Gray?"

"Most agreeable, Mr Wotton. You are as always welcome any time. Take care."

With that, the line went dead, and Harry hung up their end as well.

"Was she making fun of me?" Harry asked.

"Making fun of you in what way?"

"Enigmatically, I just feel I was the butt of something."

"I'm sure it's all in good fun, dear," Agatha said, and gave Harry a kiss on the cheek.

The two of them made brief work of getting ready and getting into the car, and making the short drive across the city to the Dorian-Gray residence.

When they arrived, they found two vans parked outside, and several people in very cute or very ratty clothing standing in front of the garage smoking. Dorian and Gray stood outside with everyone, though neither of them held a cigarette at present.

The Wottons parked on the street, and stepped happily up to meet this new host of long spoken about strangers.

"Basil," one of them said as they walked up, making quite a coordinated shuffle of blowing out a plume of smoke to the side,

moving their cigarette to the other hand, and extending a hand out to shake with the Wottons. Basil introduced everyone who was there, and Harry and Agatha introduced themselves.

Many compliments were given and questions asked all around.

"We were about to do a shoot for a third movie pretty soon here if you wanted to join us," Basil offered.

"Oh?" Agatha inquired.

The impenetrably androgynous individual nodded, and then looked Harry up and down, and said after blowing smoke out of the side of their face, "You might not be a bad fit for one of the roles, actually."

"What film?" Harry asked.

"Army of Darkness—"

"I. am. *in*," Harry said, and stepped forward and shook Basil's free hand in both of his.

"Harry, you should ask what the scene is—"

Harry unhanded Basil, and said promptly, "I do demand to know what the scene is before agreeing to this."

Basil went to one of the vans, opened up the back, and returned with a rubber mask of a face that was comically stretched out vertically—the stretched out face of Bruce Campbell, the star of Army of Darkness.

"You know the part where he gets sucked into the book?"

"Off my heart."

"We're gonna add a scene that takes place inside of the book. Dude gathers his bearings, stands up, walks down a short hall, and sees Dorian fingerbanging Gray there."

At this Basil gave a high wave to Dorian and Gray, who had moved to the yard and were standing with a ring of people who were drinking. Dorian waved back, and Gray wagged, and came over.

Basil went on. Harry crouched and pet Gray as Basil did so go on: "We get a bunch of over the shoulder shots of him raising his hand like he's about to interrupt, but then he gives it up, walks back down the hall the way he came in, and jumps back out of the book. We were going to have James play the role, but *he's a bitch!*" The last part was said loudly over to the other group, apparently for James's interest.

One of the young men, probably James, lifted up a middle finger over his head without looking.

Harry stood up from petting Gray. He leaned in with Agatha, and said, "It is a bit risqué."

"He doesn't *join* at all?" Agatha asked Basil.

"Nah," Basil answered. "Mrs and Mrs wouldn't be into it."

"Oh you kids have fun," Agatha said, and shoved Harry lightly forward.

Basil received Harry by grabbing him by the wrist, and raising Mr Wotton's hand up high as though a wrestling match had just been won. "Mount up!" Basil shouted to everyone, "We have our Bruce!"

Cheers and claps came from all around. Harry met Dorian's eyes, though only briefly before Dorian blushed and put her head down in her hand.

"On set by eleven, rolling by noon!" Basil called to everyone, and at that point they lowered Harry's hand and went off to one of the two vans that awaited.

"This really is alright?" Harry asked Agatha discretely, as a river of art students poured around them.

"I know it's just fun between friends," Agatha said. "Really, don't touch them while they're literally in the act and I don't even care in the least."

"Gray is very friendly, I do need you to confirm there's no cooldown time between 'in the act' and me being permitted to pet her."

"I trust you, dear, I'm sure you'll do fine."

Dorian joined in with the conversation between the Wottons. "Mind if we catch a ride with you two?"

"Please," Agatha said, and the four proceeded to the Wottons' iron chariot.

"Crash course, what do I need to know about being an actor?" Harry asked from the driver's seat, as he pulled out onto the street to follow after the departing vans.

"You'll be more embarrassed if you don't go for it than if you do go for it."

"Wonderful, I feel possessed by the theatrical spirit already. Anything else?"

"The director is right."

“Perfect.”

A short while later, the two vans and the car pulled into the otherwise empty and weed-ridden parking lot of a vaguely industrial, corporate, brutalist cement building.

Everyone piled out of their vehicles. Basil lead a parade of actors and observers and people holding film equipment into the building—there were no front doors and there was in fact a lot of water damage and evidence of wild animals having at least passed through at some stage in the time since the doors had gone missing. The parade proceeded down a large stairwell, and at the bottom of this stairwell, they found a small concrete room wherein the stairs ended, a small concrete hallway, and a small room on the other side thereof.

Lighting and cameras and boom mics were arranged. Harry was given his wardrobe, and went around the corner with Agatha to change. She carefully pulled the rubber mask down over his face, made sure it was aligned correctly, stepped back, and then doubled over laughing.

“Was zo funny, doll?” Harry asked, doing his best Bruce.

“Stop!” Agatha squealed, unable to get up from the floor.

Harry did stop, and offered her a hand for when she was ready.

When she was, she accepted it, and Harry helped her to her feet. The two returned around the corner. Harry, aware of all the eyes on him, stopped and did a pose of shooting finger guns out to either side.

“Yes!” Basil said. “Ohhh my god yes. Places, everyone, we’re starting in two minutes. That means places *now*.”

Harry did take notice of the bed, or perhaps altar, that had been constructed in the non-stairwell room while he had been changing. Coming up to waist level was a platform draped in red cloth, and decorated on top with a careful arrangement of black and crimson pillows and blankets. Around the platform were poles from which red gauzy curtains hung, like an old-timey bed. In all, the platform was the most thoroughly lit thing on the set, sufficiently attention-grabbing for purpose.

As Basil had called places, Dorian lifted Gray onto the platform, and the two found their places on the platform’s center, Gray standing upright on all fours, Dorian in a red dress



lying on her side behind her, propped up on an elbow to have her face level with the mixed breed dog's sexual organs. Noticing the Wottons looking, Dorian gave a big smile and a friendly wave.

"Mr Campbell?" Basil called.

Harry wheeled around, and then followed the beckoning director. Agatha lingered back with the other observers, out of line of sight with the upcoming shots.

In the other room, vines had been hung from all the stair railings, including those far above, such that they hung down from overhead into the frame. Standing face to rubber face in this room-like area, Basil gave Harry the rundown. "We're here to get four shots, three starring you. The first one, you're sitting in the center of this room on your ass, legs straight out to either side, head rolling around a little. Camera's gonna do a tilting blurry thing and make it clear that your dizzy, you've just been dropped into this place, you don't know what's going on yet. Got it?"

"Got it."

Basil gave Harry a pat with both hands onto both shoulders, and then stepped back, calling, "Places!" one last time.

Harry took a seat on his ass, as instructed.

"Hands limp at your sides, wrists up!"

Harry adjusted his arms.

"Rolling? Action!"

Harry lolled his head around for what seemed like a long time, but, the director was right.

"Cut!" Basil called. "Look good on your end?"

Someone behind the camera nodded.

Basil came forward and knelt with Harry. "Okay, this next one is your main shot. We're cutting to a new angle, closer up on your face. You're going to stop rolling your head, touch your fingers to your face—just a little bit, you don't have to mug about it or anything, just kind of feel it and quickly accept it—and then stand up, walk down the hall with maybe a little stagger once or twice, and then stop at the threshold of the next room. Camera will be following behind you. Watch Dorian and Gray doing what they really do do such a good job of. Raise your hand every now and then like you're about to try to cut in and get their

attention, but never do. We'll be intercutting this with close ups of Dorian and Gray, so we'll leave it rolling here on your part for longer than we'll actually need to use, and we'll take the best parts. Eventually when I call it, do one last hand raise, visibly give up, and turn back down the hall."

Everyone got into their proper places, Basil called action, and the scene went smoothly as described: after staggering down the hall, Harry stood and watched his new human friend perform very thorough cunnilingus on his new dog friend; every so often, he raised his hand as if to stop them, and they went on as though they couldn't see him there. When they had as many takes as they wanted, Basil gave the call, and Harry gave one last hand-raise, lowered his hand and slumped forward for a brief moment, and then turned and went back down the hall.

Afterwards they quickly filmed Harry's last scene, which only involved setting up a new camera angle from the other corner and lower down, and then having Harry jump up as though he were jumping all the way back up the stairwell. He made it one, possibly two entire inches off of the ground—apparently with some very clever freezeframing, cutting, and audio design, this would be sufficient to make it seem like he had jumped all the way up the stairwell and back out of the book.

The final shot of the night was the close-ups of Dorian and Gray. Harry and Agatha stood side by side, hand in hand, alongside many others, watching as the woman made her partner's female dog parts look as appetizing as anything in the whole wide world.

When Basil called cut, a round of applause came. Gray wagged, and Dorian stood and gave a curtsy.

As everyone packed up, Harry disappeared around a corner to change back into his street clothes, and Agatha followed after him to make sure that he knew his anatomy was every bit appreciated by her as Gray's was by Dorian. During, Harry's mind wandered to the previously seen acts less than he expected—hardly at all, except for two brief times when he felt like it maybe should be on his mind and he tried to impose it on the present circumstances, but then it slipped from his thoughts without his even realizing it, as the present moment more strongly allured his facile and fickle attention. Agatha felt

similarly during, though had tried to impose thoughts of human on canine cunnilingus four times during, to still equal unsuccess, and also to less feelings of wanting to gag than she might have expected some time prior—having known Dorian and Gray for some while, and now having seen the act personally for some time, it was, in the most benevolent usage of the word, nothing. One private shoot and change of clothes later, and the Wottons returned up the stairwell, out of the building, and returned the cloak and mask back to Basil, who bowed as they accepted it.

As all of the art students were getting back into the vans, the Wottons, Dorian, and Gray began ambling back towards the car that they had arrived in.

“Well that was fun,” Dorian said, conspicuously looking forward off into the distance instead of looking at the Mr or the Mrs directly.

“That *looked* fun,” Agatha said, and then stooped down to give Gray a few pats as they walked. “How was it for you?” she asked the dog.

The dog did not answer, though in the moment, it had indeed seemed to look like fun from start to finish.

The four got into the car.

“What’s the turnaround time for these like?” Harry asked. “How many years before my debut on the—”

“Years!” Dorian interrupted, and shuddered as she put on her seatbelt. “We’ll probably be watching the tape a few hours after we get back and then we’ll drop it off later tonight.”

When all had arrived back at the house, large quantities of alcoholic beverages were put up for grabs in the kitchen as Basil and a select few others marched upstairs with the tapes.

“Care for anything?” Dorian offered the Wottons. Dorian herself held one of her water bottles. “White wine?” she offered Agatha. Looking to Harry, she noted, “I don’t believe I’ve ever seen you drink, Mr Watton.”

“Well, perhaps I’ve earned a beer and a shot of whiskey.”

“Okay macho man,” Agatha said, and then gave Harry a kiss. “Let’s start you off with a beer and see if I’m not holding your hair back in an hour.”

“Wise,” Harry acknowledged, and grabbed a beer from off the counter. He twisted off the top, and had a long and shallow sip of the cold and revolting beverage. Agatha accepted the glass of white wine that Dorian offered, though then remembering that she and Harry were trying, she set the glass of wine down on the counter shortly after Dorian departed to go speak with someone elsewhere, and left it there as she and Harry made their leave of the kitchen as well.

Finding an unoccupied love seat in the living room, Harry and Agatha sat down together and eavesdropped on the gossip of all of these strangers who surrounded them.

Some hours later, Basil and their company marched back down the stairs with the copies of the tapes in hand, and applause resounded through the room. The rest of the night was marked with many occasions for applause—applause at the movie being placed into the VCR, applause at the movie starting, applause at Bruce Campbell’s many one-liners, uproarious applause when Bruce was sucked into the book, applause and whistling at Dorian and Gray, and applause when the credits began to roll.

Basil, Dorian, Gray, Agatha, and Harry all climbed into one of the vans, as well as a couple of the other art students, and the seven of them were deacclimated from the party with a final sparser round of applause from those who were outside as they drove off. Agatha and Harry held hands on the drive.

When they had arrived at their destination, it was dark out. Basil parked across the street from the movie rental place, and began walking across the street with the rented tape in hand. The other occupants of the van piled out, and lingered around the van, watching into the store windows as casually as they could manage while one of the art students somewhat casually filmed. Casually, Basil went into the store, set the tape on the counter, and returned the picture of Dorian/Gray.

## THE TALE OF ERSKINE FAERN

### **A street in the Town of Terreh Thomas Faern is 14**

The Faerns's cart, stacked tall with barrels of pine syrup, was drawn by a pair of mules. Thomas's Ma and Da rode on the seat at the front of the cart. Thomas walked alongside. They had come from their farm at the break of dawn that day. As they neared Terreh's riverport, it was getting into the evening. A woman in white robes with black holy symbols slowly moved from one side of the street to the other, lighting the streetlamps with a candle balanced atop a tall wooden rod. Thomas had a keen eye for the symbols. On the left shoulder of the robe was an intricate outline of a human heart, with a thick line stitched across it. On the right shoulder was the outline of a human brain, and a line stitched through it vertically. On the sleeves were stitched the corresponding arm bones that would be below them. On the body were stitched dozens of faces with the eyes made to look sewn shut. This light-bearer was an acolyte of the temple of the death queen.

Thomas realized that he had stopped walking to stare. He jogged to catch up with the wagon, coming up with an excuse along the way—he would say that he'd thought he'd seen something fall off the cart and was trying to retrieve it, but he must have been mistaken. When he caught up, it was of no matter. His parents had not realized he had gone. Thomas was the youngest of four, though for quite some time, he was more

or less an only child. His older siblings had each disappeared on trips to Terreh in years past, while Thomas had stayed at home. Jack had died in an inn collapse. Moira had run off into the woods and was never found. Danielle had fallen in love and run off with a strange man. Thomas had his doubts about all of these tales.

At the port, Thomas stood beside Ma while Da had a long conversation with a ferryman. After some time—many eons, by Thomas’s estimation—the ferryman counted out a sum of silver coins into a sack and handed it to Da. Thomas and Da got to work unloading the barrels onto the ferryman’s boat. When the work was finished, Da handed Thomas a silver coin. “Get your Ma and you a meal,” he instructed. “Bring me back the change.”

Thomas nodded, took the coin, and he and his Ma walked off.

After a short while, raindrops began to sprinkle. Thomas and Ma looked up at the dark night sky.

“I’ll get the umbrella,” Thomas offered, and jogged back to the cart.

There at the cart, Thomas grabbed the umbrella, but he also happened to overhear Da and the ferryman in conversation.

“The boy’s worth double that,” Da said.

“He ain’t,” said the ferryman, who had lit a cigar and held it in his mouth as he talked. “Scrawny. You did near all the work yourself with the barrels. Thirty silver.”

Da gave a contemplative groan, mulling the offer over.

All at once, the rain grew from sprinkles to downpour. Thomas opened the umbrella and walked away from Da, away from Ma, into parts unknown of Terreh. He wondered whether he was following in the footsteps of any of his older siblings, or if they had all been whisked away by the ferryman unawares. Thomas stomped through the forming puddles. Eventually he found an alley to sit in and cry in relative private, aside from a few others who had taken shelter in the alley to escape the rain.

One of the others, seemingly an older man though it was hard to tell in the dark, was drinking from a bottle and grumbling to himself. Thomas sat with his head down, ignoring him.

The grumbling grew louder, until eventually Thomas heard distinctly that the man was calling out, “Oi! Kid!”

Thomas pretended he couldn’t hear.

The man started insulting Thomas, calling him a bum, a starving no good no work orphan, a brat, a spoiled brat, anything to raise Thomas's ire.

From behind him, reverberating through the wall, Thomas could hear the rising of a steady clap, and then a hearty chorus of voices singing. Thomas got up. The man got up too. Thomas ran out of the alley, brushing past the others, and darted into the common room of the inn.

Just inside the door a meaty hand caught Thomas's chest, knocking the wind out of him.

"All booked up tonight," said a thickset man, seeming bored. He looked down at Thomas, and seemed to realize he might have been mistaken. "Are you that fishmonger's lad?"

Thomas nodded.

"Apologies, sir," the man said, still seeming bored, but he stepped aside.

Thomas walked briskly into the inn and disappeared among the dense crowd. He snickered as behind him, he heard the drunk man calling after him but being stopped at the door.

Standing on a table at the center of the room, there was a man dressed from head to toe in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. Strapped to his side was a drum, which he struck slowly in time to lead the beat of the clapping patrons. He was in the midst of leading them in a song, singing a line which the crowd then shouted atonally back. Feeling sufficiently anonymous in the crowd, Thomas joined in on the fun.

"Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle deer!"  
*YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DEER!*

"Our man Johnny bought the dancer two pints of beer!"  
*Our MAN Johnny BOUGHT the dancer TWO pints of BEER!*

"Spilled half of each as he was ogling her rear!"  
*SPILLED half of EACH as he was OGLING her REAR!*

"Spilled the rest on her bosom and his heart filled with fear!"  
*Spilled the REST on her BOSOM and his HEART filled with FEAR!*

“Yoho diddle doe diddle dum diddle daughter!”  
*YOHO diddle DOE diddle DUM diddle DAUGHTER!*

“Just then down the stairs came the dancing girl’s father!”  
*Just THEN down the STAIRS came the DANCING girl’s FATHER!*

The song continued on a long time. Eventually the man in the ribbons stopped beating on the drum, but kept the crowd clapping in time by clapping his own hands high above his head for a few beats. As the crowd went on, the man unstrapped the drum, and then seemingly from nowhere, produced a slew of colorful balls which he began juggling. Members of the crowd whistled while others continued to clap, and Thomas just stared in awe, unable to even count the number of balls the man kept up. With his foot, the man began stomping in double time, and the crowd followed suit, doubling the pace of their clap. The man stopped juggling the balls in one big arc and instead juggled in two separate little circles, one with each hand. The crowd whistled as he crouched down low to the table, the backs of his hands nearly touching the surface, and then rose up and up to his tippy toes, the balls nearly hitting the ceiling. Coming back to center, the man juggled in a way that Thomas could not make heads or tails of: the balls danced in a variety of arcs from hand to hand, but always there came one to rest centered at the man’s chest, seeming to pause there impossibly for multiple seconds before resuming its arc and being replaced by a new ball of a different color. Thomas noticed as the man quickly crouched between tosses to grab something off of the table. Whatever it was, the man was now lighting the balls on fire one by one until they all were ablaze. The crowd cheered and cheered, although those nearest the man backed off a good distance, and many began eyeballing the exit. Thomas stepped forward to take the place of those who had left the front row.

Still juggling the flaming balls, the man in the ribbons looked down at Thomas, sweating and wearing a wide smile. “I like your bravery, son,” the man said, speaking over the crowd just loud enough for Thomas to hear. “Catch!”



From the whirling arcs, one lone flaming ball left the pattern in an easy lob towards Thomas. On reflex Thomas caught the ball, which went out in his hands.

The crowd roared for Thomas. Thomas, beaming, turned to them, holding the ball in a hand high above his head. Then remembering that he wished to remain relatively unnoticed in this place where he actually was not supposed to be, he dashed back into the crowd. Someone in the crowd handed him a pint. He had never drank before, but he was his own man now, so who could tell him no. He drank some and suppressed the urge to gag as he swallowed it down.

Later on that night, after the show had finished, Thomas still had well over half of the same pint left as he sat by himself at a booth in the corner of the common room.

Suddenly sitting beside him, there was the man in ribbons, though he had now changed into a drab shirt and trousers. Thomas had learned in the show that the man's name was David. "Havin a good night, are we?"

"Not..." Thomas considered, and then decided not to bother the performer with his troubles. He shrugged. "The show was amazin. I wish I could juggle like that."

"Ye wanna be a jester, eh?"

"Oh, I suppose." Thomas tried to take a bigger drink from his pint, regretted it, and put the immense glass back down after letting most of the mouthful fall back into the drink.

"I could show ye to juggle."

Thomas felt his eyes widen.

"Still have my ball?"

Thomas set the red ball on the table. It was not a light object, as he'd expected when he'd seen them in the air. In fact it was heavy as a stone, larger than Thomas's fist, perhaps about the same size as David's.

David picked the ball up, stood, and encouraged Thomas to stand up out of the booth too. There in the corner of the inn, David tossed the ball in an arc from one hand to the other.

"Easy as that," he said, and handed Thomas the ball.

Thomas tried, and threw the ball back onto the seat in the booth. He tried a second time, and it landed on the floor with a loud bang that drew the eyes of many who were still lingering

around the common room that night. Thomas cringed at the attention, and crouched to find where the ball had rolled to.

David knelt and picked it up for himself. Thomas hadn't even blinked and the ball disappeared from David's hands.

"Maybe we can give it another go in the morning. Outside on some grass, eh? I give lessons you know."

"Oh?"

"Five silver for a session."

Thomas deflated.

"Too steep? I'm often told I should charge more."

"I have a silver to me name," Thomas admitted.

David glanced around, determined that nobody was in earshot, and knelt slightly to speak into Thomas's ear. "One silver now, and I'll meet you in the morning for breakfast and a lesson."

Thomas reached into his pocket and pulled out his silver coin. He paused only to ask, "Meet me outside the front of this inn at daybreak?"

David nodded.

Thomas gave David the silver.

The jester pocketed the coin and then yawned. "I think that's it for me tonight, kid. I'm beat. See ye in the morning."

Thomas looked around. He saw the thickset guard at the door of the inn, standing and staring at him. He considered trying to retire up to one of the rooms, but recalled that there was no vacancy, and so it was unlikely he could find any place to hide away for the night unnoticed. Ashamed, he left past the guard, who tutted as he passed.

Thomas made his way to the river, and spent the night hidden away under a dock. He slept very little, his stomach growling in hunger.

Before sunrise, Thomas rose and returned to the inn. He sat outside of it, eagerly awaiting the jester. For breakfast, firstly, and because maybe this was the start of his new life.

The sun rose, and Thomas sat alone. Noon came, and Thomas had relocated to a nearby alleyway entrance, as it had started to dribble rain. He still watched the inn, but he knew that he'd been had. The jester was not coming out.

In the evening, Thomas saw the thickset guard come out of the inn to replace the thinner one who had stood there the day so far. Thomas walked through the rain to him.

The guard raised his hand to block Thomas, but Thomas was making no attempt to get in.

“Is David in?”

“The jester?”

“Yes.”

The guard furrowed his brow. “Don’t believe so. Wait ere a minute.” The guard turned and walked into the inn. Thomas watched him walk through the door into the kitchen, and then shortly thereafter, walk back. “He left this morning. Packed up his belongings onto his horse in the stable in the back and rode out. Didn’t seem to Hamish as though nothing was amiss.”

Thomas sniffled.

“What, are you *his* lad?”

Thomas shook his head. “I gave him me only silver. He was going to give me lessons this morning.”

The guard chuckled. “Gave ye a lesson alright.”

Thomas lost it and stomped away.

By the time he had gotten over his tears and gotten back to the hunger in his stomach, it was dark. The rain continued to fall at a dribble. Thomas stood around a darkened corner of a dockyard, staring at a riverside restaurant where patrons ate by decorative lanternlight beneath umbrellas. He watched, and watched, and when one of the couples left with a good amount of food left untouched on their plates, Thomas sprinted up, hopped the rope fence, grabbed the sandwich from one plate and threw it onto the other with the half eaten meat pie, and ran off with the pieced together meal. Nearby patrons had gasped and shouted at him, and he heard a great many more shouts behind him as he ran off down a dark street, but by the time he had gone a block it was clear that nobody was giving chase. He walked past a couple of alleys that were occupied before finding an especially narrow one that was clear: one of the buildings leaned as it went upwards, making the alley ideal for a kid such as him, and unideal for anyone taller.

Thomas shuffled deep into the alley and sat down.

Just as he was bringing the sandwich to his mouth, he froze at the sound of something else in the alley. Fear rippled down him. Quite nearby, there was a rapid sniffing. Thomas tensed, ready to lash out if something attacked him.

The creature in the alley with Thomas whined.

“Are you a dog, you are?”

Thomas heard another whine in response, and the dragging of the creature shuffling closer over the dirt ground.

Cautiously, Thomas reached out a hand.

The dog growled.

Thomas quickly pulled the hand back. “Well you mind yourself and I’ll mind myself, then.”

Thomas bit into his sandwich. He had been shaking with hunger, and immediately, he felt energy returning to himself. Not to mention that the food was delicious. Spiced meats he’d only had once before in his life, on another trip to Terreh with his sister Danielle. Thin cuts of vegetables and a good helping of condiments, on toasted bread. He tore through two more bites, and then paused to finish chewing so he could tear through some more.

The dog whined again.

Thomas sighed through his nose, his mouth being still overfull. He took the time to chew, and swallow.

The dog whined once more.

Thomas held his plate tight. “What, you here to rip me off too?”

The dog whined sadder.

Thomas gripped his sandwich for one more moment of defiant resilience, and then sighed, put the sandwich on the plate with the meat pie, and pushed the whole collection over to the dog.

The dog hopped up and began devouring the food as fast as it would fit into its mouth. When it was finished it spent a long time licking the plate, and then a while after licking its lips.

**Upriver from the Town of Terreh**

**Thomas Faern is 14**

**Erskine Faern might be 1**

In all, Thomas had ended up stealing very little from Terreh. He had found great big tangles of fishing line and lures by wading through the river banks. The knife blade—or sword end, or some such—he had found jutting out of a fence post, and had not waited around to see if anyone was coming back for it. The flint and steel, he had nabbed off the side of a traveler's backpack, and had been caught and walloped for it before Erskine had come barking and snarling to liberate the boy.

Thomas and Erskine sat now at a campfire beside the river, Thomas cooking the three fish he'd caught, Erskine supervising. It was noon and only partially overcast. Erskine, though still clearly quite young, was already just as large as Thomas. He was a great big mutt with long shaggy hair that was tangled and littered with odd bits of trash he'd picked up in gods-knew-how-long of going ungroomed. Though only on his own for a matter of days, Thomas was beginning to look quite the same.

When the fish were cooked, Thomas divided the bounty evenly for himself and Erskine. Both of them ate like animals and afterwards licked the flat rocks their meals had been served on.

Thomas went and rinsed off his hands and face in the river. As he did, a river stone caught his eye. It was more or less round as a ball, and a bit larger than his fist. He picked it up, bounced it up in the air a couple of times in his hand. It had a nice weight to it. He waded upriver until he had found three such stones in all, and then returned to the campfire, where Erskine had been standing, watching him.

Standing near the fire, Thomas tossed the ball from one hand to the other. He missed it completely, and the rock thumped to the ground. Erskine bolted towards it and tried to grab it in his mouth. Thomas laughed as the dog wagged and fussed with the stone.

"Go find me a stick and we'll play."

Erskine looked up at Thomas and barked. Whether or not the mutt was being playful or mean, the volume of the bark stung Thomas's ears, and he flinched.

Thomas left the stones on the ground near the campfire for the moment, and went to go find Erskine a stick.

As the day went on, Thomas threw the stick for Erskine, threw the stones to himself, and in the evening he set a lure in the water to get dinner started for the both of them.

## **A street in the Town of Merrom**

**Thomas Faern might be 15**

**Erskine Faern might be 2**

Thomas stood on a street corner, juggling his river stones that he had gotten painted red, orange, and blue. They were not evenly weighted, but they were what he'd learned everything he knew on. On the one occasion he'd had to use evenly weighted stones, he was completely thrown by them.

A fair few people stopped to watch him juggle throughout the busiest market hours of the day, and most who stopped were kind enough to toss a few coins of change to the boy's straw basket—woven himself, which would likely be of little surprise to anyone.

When the day's performance was over, Thomas bowed, stowed the stones in the basket, wiped the sweat from his brow, and sat for a while on the market corner, petting the shaggy brown dog that had laid at his side throughout the show. Later on in the day, he bought a sandwich for himself and a meat pie for Erskine, the cost of both easily covered by a portion of the day's earnings.

## **A crowded beer hall in the City of Tinst**

**Thomas Faern might be 17**

**Erskine Faern might be 4**

Thomas sat at a secluded table, idly running a hand over the well-groomed Erskine who sat close at his side. It was a cool night, the air smoky with the cookfires of nearby restaurants. Thomas stared daggers at a jester in ribbons of red, green, and yellow. It was David, unmistakably. Earlier he had done the same song from all those years ago, and a juggling routine with flaming balls. Thomas was a much more skilled juggler now than he was before. David's routine was certainly still

impressive, though Thomas could now put a name to all of the tricks.

At present, David had produced a lute—none of his trademark slight of hand on drawing out that one, which Thomas did consider fair enough, given the instrument's size. As he strummed, he told a classical tale of Leigus and Tinira.

*The widowed Leigus waded through the shallow waters of the land of death for fifty days and nights, the days waning duller and the nights waning greyer, until the two were a single thing, as fogged as the air and the water. Leigus's handsome complexion was wracked with mourning the fifty days and nights of his walk. At the end of his journey, in a mist of grey nothing, Leigus stood face to face with a figure whose white and black robes contained naught but whitened, faded, and now grey bones. "What will you trade?" the skeleton hissed. Leigus produced Tinira's garden sheers, and with them, cut off his nose. His fetching looks were nothing to a world without his beloved. His nose fell to the ground, and there it grew larger and larger, forming into a torso, arms, legs, a head, a face—Tinira. The new body gasped at life anew as Tinira's soul entered it.*

David's rendition of the tale continued. Thomas waited patiently for the jester's show to end.

When the jester took his final bow and descended from the table, Thomas melded into the lingering crowd and followed the jester out of the beer hall and into the common room of a nearby inn. These days he looked respectable enough to usually get into such places uninterrogated. Near the common room's hearth, Thomas stopped to kneel face to face with Erskine.

"Wait for me here, if you would."

Erskine sat.

Thomas stood and followed David up the stairs, spied which room the jester went into, and then hid himself away around a corner until hearing the door open and close again a while later, followed by the opening and closing of the door to the bathing room. Thomas skulked down the hall, eased his way into the

jester's room, and took quick stock of the jester's equipment, which had been strewn on the floor near the foot of the bed.

There were the balls, though Thomas cared little. In addition to his favored river stones, Thomas had procured through legitimate means a set of twenty colorful weighted balls. There was the lute, and although he was tempted to steal it and learn to play, it was not what he had come for: he could get a lute in any city, if he saved his coins. What he had come for was the pair of devices that the jester had not tossed onto the floor, but had placed carefully on the room's little desk. Thomas hadn't seen them during the show all those years ago, but he had been watching keenly this time. In each of David's sleeves had been some type of apparatus that lit the balls on fire, only for a second as they left David's hand, and going out in time to be caught again safely.

Thomas nabbed the devices, fled the room, darted down the stairs, and walked briskly out of the inn, giving a *c'mere* wave to Erskine, who wagged, stood, shook as though flinging water from himself, and followed out at Thomas's side.

Early the next morning, Thomas awakened at his and Erskine's latest riverside camp. They'd found a secluded spot east out of Tinst, in a dried up divot of dirt where the river used to flow, but didn't anymore, finding an easier route just nearby. They hadn't need of a fire for that night. Thomas had spread out a blanket and laid on his back and Erskine had burrowed up against his side, and the two had slept warm enough.

First thing that day, Thomas beheld the new gadgets he'd stolen. He sat in the divot of dirt looking the things over. Each one had a cuff to hold the device to the wrist. Besides that, there were also a few little tubes connecting a few little opaque tanks. Thomas held the device up to his left ear, and shook it to hear if the tanks were filled with anything. As he shook it, his hand slipped on the device, pushed a toggle, and snapped one of the tubes—the next thing Thomas knew, the entire left side of his face was on fire, sizzling and smoking. Screaming, Thomas dashed to the river and leapt in.

Afterwards he laid on his back on the riverbank for a time, trying to take deep steady breaths, trying to push down the pain.



Erskine tried to lick him. He held the dog at bay, but thanked him all the same, and stroked him comfortingly.

When the burned Thomas felt ready enough to travel, he went and packed up the meager camp, kicked dirt over the pair of cuffs, and made the hike back towards Tinst. In the suburbs thereabout, he found an apothecary and purchased salves suitable for his burns. "A lesson indeed," the boy muttered as he counted out sixty silver and change for the witch.

Though not eager to stay in the city proper, where his thievery might quite well be deduced, Thomas decided to spend the time it took to heal camped near enough to the city, in case anything about his condition did take a turn. Thomas rented an inn room in the suburb of Wrelt. He and Erskine shared a bed and three square meals a day. They went on walks and played fetch in the field behind the inn. Each night by the hearth, Thomas picked the brambles out of Erskine's coat and brushed the good boy, while Erskine rested his chin on Thomas's knee, or in the crook of the young man's elbow.

## **A booked performance hall in the Capital City of Verruskt**

**Thomas Faern might be 25**

**Erskine Faern might be 12**

Though far from the only act of the show that night, Thomas was more than eager to rise to the occasion of being chosen as the closer. He still enjoyed juggling the river stones in his idle time, but he had graduated from that in his public performances. Torches, axes, hammers, and swords were in his repertoire, to name a few. In among all of these, Thomas also juggled seven shoes that had been volunteered from seven members of the audience, and a hairpiece more-or-less volunteered that he had taped around one of the hammers to give it the needed weight to throw in the enormous arcs of this final routine. In closing as all of the items fell back to Thomas for one final time, the juggler threw each shoe back to its owner, threw each sword at a target behind himself, let each torch go and ignite a fuel-soaked pyre, let each axe fall and chop a log of wood, and let each hammer crash up through a colorful pane of

sugarglass suspended at the ceiling, making the glittering pieces come raining down over the stage. The audience erupted as the glass dust came down, and showed no signs of quieting as it settled. Thomas stood looking out at them, beaming, catching his breath. He beckoned the owner of the hairpiece to come on stage and collect it. The owner came up. Thomas guided him to face the audience, and together, the two of them bowed.

Thomas felt transcendent as he left the stage. And although coming down from the most exceptional performance of his life thus far, he felt a deeper happiness swelling in him as he neared his dressing room.

Pulling aside the curtain, he smiled down at Erskine, who was resting on a pile of folded blankets, wagging up at his friend. Thomas came and sat there on the floor with Erskine, back against the dressing room wall, staring blankly at the ceiling as he pet the old dog.

Eventually, Thomas's gaze lowered down to the full-body mirror that was across the dressing room. He looked at himself. His upper body was very muscular. Half of his face was disfigured and immobile from burn scars. The other half of his face, he had decorated in tattoos: a little star below the eye, the name *FAERN* spelled out in an arc above the eye but under the eyebrow, three imperfect circles in a triangle on the cheekbone, and a canine noseprint on the cheek proper.

Thomas lowered his head down to Erskine. Erskine licked the human's forehead with care. Thomas stroked the dog's scuff likewise.

**A road north of the Capital City of Verruskt**  
**Thomas Faern might be 25**  
**Erskine Faern might be 12**

Thomas and Erskine slept soundly, cuddled up in their little tent, which they had pitched to the side of the trade road.

Thomas awoke with a start when Erskine let out a loud bark.

Bleary-eyed, Thomas rested a hand on Erskine's back. "What do you hear out there?"

The hair on Erskine's back was raised. He released a string of barks, body tense, facing the tent door. At a pause in the barks, Thomas strained his ears, but could hear nothing outside.

Clearing the sleep out of his eyes, Thomas got to his knees at the tent door and began unfastening the little knots that held it shut. After pulling the last string free, Thomas moved the tent door aside, and found that his face was an inch away from a bear's face. The bear fully eclipsed the view of the world outside the tent, and was raising a paw to strike.

Erskine bolted past Thomas and latched onto the bear. Thomas gave a wordless, mourning shout. The bear roared and spun around away from the tent, swiping at the dog that was attacking it. Erskine yelped but did not stop. The bear and the dog's struggle brought them onto the road, well lit by the full moon on that clear night. Thomas ran to his pack that sat against a nearby tree, and retrieved an arsenal of swords. He hurled them one after the other, and then the axes, and then the hammers, until the bear was motionless. But the damage had been done. Thomas held his friend's lifeless body and wept.

## **The shallow waters of the land of death**

### **Thomas Faern might be 30**

Walking through the shallow waters for fifty days and nights was a balm, not a burden. For Leigus seeking Tinira, perhaps this had been the difficult part. They had lived quite near the land of death to begin with. Thomas had crossed an ocean and three continents. But it was worth it. He had arrived.

On the close of the fiftieth night, Thomas came face to face with a figure in the grey whose white robes were decorated with the black symbols of the death queen, whose face was a skull, whose hands were bones.

An ancient wind blew from behind the skeleton, passed through their bones, and brought their message hissing faintly to Thomas's ears: *"A life for a life. What will you sacrifice?"*

Thomas gave a sendoff to his life as a juggler with a final trick. He drew an axe from his belt. With his right hand he tossed the axe in the air, where it spun once as it rose, once again as it fell, and then chopped off the selfsame hand which

had thrown it. Then he drew a second axe, and in the same fashion, cut off his left hand as well.

The wounds on his forearms seared shut. In the shallow waters, his hands floated to one another, and formed together. They grew, and took the shape of a barrel of a canine chest. Four legs. A head. A tail. Long brown fur.

The servant of the death queen turned and floated away on the shallow waters, into the grey fog.

Erskine, anew with youth, barked playfully at Thomas, head down, haunches still in the air, tail wagging. In tears, Thomas dropped to his knees before Erskine in the waters, and rubbed the dog's coat up and down as the dog licked the scarred man's face. "I missed you, friend," Thomas said, and repeated it again and again as he and Erskine were reunited. "I missed you, friend."

## SISTER SHIM AND THE PRIESTESS OM

*We send our most holy to wreak miracles, and our best monsters to protect them on the long walk back.*

I sit in the frontmost pew beside Brother Elia, sharing a bottle of wine with him. He is filling my second glass. The sleidr have been groomed and fed, and there is little else to do until dinner. It's an exceedingly pleasant Fall day. Orange and yellow leaves have blown in through the archway, and the smell of them fills the air. Brother Elia hands my glass back to me. I give it a little raise towards him before having a sip. The wine has an almondy taste, which I'm ordinarily not a fan of, but it seems to compliment the cool Fall breezes, the stirring of the little leaves that have made their way into our holy place. Not to mention, Brother Elia came a long way bringing this bottle back, and so even if I didn't care for it—though I do—I would likely not mention distaste aloud to him. Nobody is in the pews besides us. He leans back, head facing the ceiling, eyes closed.

"It's good to be home," he tells me. "The work abroad was worthy, but the day to day bolsters one's soul."

"You still haven't told me of the trouble you were attending to."

Still facing the ceiling, he swirls his wine glass. "I suppose I ought to, Sister Shim." He sighs. "Where to begin, where to begin..."

This was his third time being whisked away by a priest or a priestess for work abroad. He has a very conspicuous wound on

his forehead now: a slash, with many blisters great and small surrounding it.

It is a cool day, and I realize that his forehead is shining with sweat.

From my bandolier, I flick out a dagger and whirl it at the ceiling. The blade strikes one of the many colorful strings which hold things up there—broomsticks, dustpans, pitchforks, shears, unlit candles, bouquets of flowers. In this case, I have snapped the string holding up a clay vase filled with water. It falls towards my lap. When it arrives at me, I catch it. I hand it to Brother Elia.

“Al sai,” he says: *Thank you* in the holy tongue. He lifts the vase to his mouth and has a long drink.

He and I became followers at the same time. I have yet to be called away once. On most days I accompany the priests and priestesses on walks through the city.

Before Brother Elia has decided where to begin on the tale of his journey, and as if beckoned by my thoughts, I hear the clacking of a sleidr approaching over the ceramic floor, and I perk up in my seat and turn. Coming up the aisle is the priestess Om. She glides like a leaf on her six legs, two hind, four fore. The footprints she leaves behind glimmer just as her black, oily coat.

She comes and plants her chin on my knee.

I smile. “Shall we walk?”

As soon as I say walk, she lift her chin off of me and prances for the archway, black shimmering coat waving with each step.

“Tell me all when I return,” I ask, setting the remainder of my glass on the pew.

“Of course,” he says with a smile, eyes still closed, head still lolled back, facing the ceiling. He has another long drink of the water.

As I walk up the aisle after the priestess Om, I draw a length of red ribbon from a trouser pocket. The priestess Om waits for me under the archway, wagging as she faces the courtyard outside. I tie one end of the ribbon around my wrist. I tie the other end loosely around her neck. When I’m finished with the knot, I pat her side and she begins walking at a fast pace, and I walk quickly to keep up.

To the south there is a garden with a pond which she often likes to visit. To the north one would eventually arrive at the gate out to the countryside, where the priestess Om would be free to be untied and run to her heart's content. In an unusual choice, the priestess Om leads me straight away across the courtyard, towards the road leading east, towards the market district.

Distinct from the city's other districts, the market district has no tallstanding buildings, and few that are more permanent than a wooden stall. It is akin to a miles-across colosseum, stuffed with tents and tables. As we walk past a cloister of seafood stalls, the priestess Om keeps her nose to the ground, following the trail of a scent. She spends quite some time sniffing the side of one fish vendor's booth. The vendor eyes us disapprovingly, but soon has customers to attend to. Once the priestess Om is satisfied with her sniffing, she moves onwards, and I follow.

We proceed through an immense tunnel out of the marketplace and arrive at a road to the king's palace, and I realize that this actually might be what I had resigned myself to no longer hope for.

The palace stands atop a hill, the base of the hill fenced off, the slopes of the hill a multitude of hedges and gardens. The priestess Om leads us to a small, nongrandiose gate in the fence, manned by a guard with a well kept beard and an eye missing. He sees the priestess Om approaching and opens the gate for us. He nods and wishes us a good afternoon as we pass by, and closes the gate behind us.

The priestess Om stops. I come up to her and untie the ribbon from around her neck. She shakes and then darts forward, running up the hill to a patch of purple flowers. I follow after her, untying the ribbon from around my wrist as I go.

When I arrive, she is sniffing the purple flowers. She sniffs the underside of one for a time, intently, and slowly works her way around the petals until sniffing the upper side. With a final big inhale, she moves over to another flower, and smells it just as closely. When she is finished with this one she bites it off, chews it a bit, and swallows. She progresses slowly along the side of the flower patch, passing by many flowers, eating the

occasional one. When she has eaten five, she walks up the hill a little farther until arriving at a patch of long strands of grass. She eats this grass indiscriminately, and soon, she is heaving. She vomits, leaving a pile of yellow slime on the ground, which contains long blades of grass and purple flower petals. I go to the vomit, pick out the flower petals, and eat them.

When I have chewed and swallowed, I look at Om. She is panting, mouth drawn back in what looks like a smile, though she is nervous. I look around. The world is undulating. Parts of reality are slipping off of other parts. Things melt. I feel the priestess Om gently take my hand in her mouth. She pulls me. I follow. We walk down a hill into the melting world. When we arrive at a figure by a gate, I try to look at him to see if he is the same guard, but it is difficult to say. The world no longer looks like much, and he is no exception. A smudge of a human form. If I concentrate I can see his shining armor, his spear, but the idea of recognizably seeing his face is laughable. The wind blows, and I am nearly knocked back by the smell of him. He wrecks of human sweat. The smell of the leather in his armor is overpowering, the smell of the copper and the steel mere afterthoughts. I am not even that near him, but I can smell his unwashed hair, his breath that is a mixture of onion and mint. I feel Om brush past my leg, continuing forward down the melting, blurry hill. I follow after her. The guard, whether or not he is the same guard, opens the gate for us. We proceed through melted canals of streets, her feet clicking on the ground with each step, my footsteps producing light thumps. I follow after her form, and after her scent. She had been beautiful before, with her sleek black coat, her expressive whiskers and long ears, her multitude of legs. I am delighted to find that she is beautiful again, with the scent of her fur drenched in the electric tingle of black magic, her breath smelling of the cooked rabbit that we feed the sleidr, but more deeply of the scent of her yellowed teeth, her gums, her tongue, her lungs, her throat, all healthy and well, all good, all sleidr, all Om. We find our way out of the city rivers and into the ocean world, and Om jumps in, and I follow after. I have seen her and many other priests and priestesses swim in a lake before, but had never known sleidr to put their heads under. She does, and I follow after, down into



the ocean, where I am surprised to find I can still smell, still breathe. I can no longer see, but I no longer feel I am missing much for it. I follow after the smell of Om's coat, and in time, I realize what we are following. Within me I hold the knowledge of the scents of five flowers, as distinct as five paintings by five masters, as distinct as the faces of my five closest friends, as distinct as five letters, as distinct as five numbers. We are following after the first one that Om ate to give to me. It was in the king's garden, but there is another, an entangled pair, somewhere far away, that we are swimming to.

When we arrive at it, we emerge from the world ocean. I lay heavy on the ground, splayed out, exhausted. Om walks to a flower bed and sniffs a patch of purple flowers. I look around, realize the current ineffectiveness of sight, and instead take big breaths in through my nose. Inhaling, we are surrounded by a multitude of grass, and there is corn growing here nearby. Exhale. Inhaling, there are chickens here, their waste so overpowering I'm surprised it hadn't come to me first, for now I can't ignore it, and everything else I smell is tinged with it. Exhale. Inhaling, there are horses as well, goats, sheep, and a small number of humans. Exhale. Inhaling, the scent of the humans is nearest, most present in the air, and we are in a flower garden just outside of their house on a farm. Exhale. Om lies down beside me. Nestled together, we sleep through the night.

In the morning, we resume our journey, diving back under. We continue on, five flowers, a day for each. We are not the only ones who swim. It is a populous ocean with schools of hares and termites. Above are the light thumps of millions of footsteps on the water's surface, packs of wolves, dens of foxes, colonies of mice. Each acre of forest, a city district. At the final flower, as I emerge from the ground, I feel a sadness, for my sense of smell has dulled to near uselessness, and my vision is restored, and the world is all solid again.

We are standing on a mountainside, somewhere cold. The sky is red with morning light. Down the mountain, there is an endless expanse of fir trees, broken up only by other mountains that rise too high for the firs to grow on. It feels a bit strange to me, remembering how crowded the forest was as we passed

under it, and now seeing not a soul from this vantage where we can see so far. A lone plant is nearby us, its single purple flower drooping. I look to my side, and find the priestess Om. She wags and barks at me. I kneel and hug her, rub her, bury my nose in her coat and take a big sniff. Up this close and with enough concentration, the scent it is at least an approximation of what it was before, at least enough to know that it had been real, the other world that the priestess had shown me.

“Lead the way,” I tell her.

She does.

We go around the mountainside, traveling down a ridge, then up another, my shoes crunching the snow underfoot. When we arrive at the crest of the ridge, I see the landscape beyond us and gasp. For miles and miles, as far as I can see from the mountainside, the world is charred black or in the process of burning. I look back at the expanse of forest, and forward at the expanse of inferno coming to claim it. The sky is not red with morning light. The sky is a reflection of a world engulfed.

Om continues forward down the next ridge. I follow after, but she turns and barks viciously at me, snarling. I am startled in the immediate moment, but I intuit that she is speaking practically, not emotionally: showing me a drop of venom so I will not dive into a sea of it. I stop where I am on the ridge. She continues on alone.

When she has reached the bottom of the next valley, she stops, sniffs the ground, and then raises her face to the sky and bellows out a howl. Even from afar I can feel my inner ears vibrating at the volume, and then underfoot, I can feel that the mountain is trembling. She howls and howls, and then all at once, lightning erupts from her and blankets the expanse of the mountaintop above us. She stops howling, the lightning goes away, and the mountaintop which once held snow now holds an immense conical lake, ready to flow outwards.

Om turns and sprints down the mountain valley, keeping just ahead of the flood that is rushing down after her. She makes it down to the forest and disappears into it, and the water follows after. I watch from the mountainside all day as a new river is carved through the forest, cutting off the burning land from the unburnt. By evening, Om has made it to the next mountain. I

faintly hear Om howl, and I see lightning flash over this mountaintop too, bringing water down its side, drawing a complete river to stand between the mountains, a barrier for the fire.

I set off down the mountainside, and follow the river all night.

As the morning sun is rising, I arrive at a clearing in the forest. In the center, there is a sleidr, splayed out on her side, asleep. Her coat is a patchwork of white and light browns, and has no gleam to it. I approach her. I bury my nose in her side, and inhale deeply. This is her. Her tail begins thumping against the ground as she wags. I nestle in beside Om, and we rest all through the day and night. The magic is drained from her coat, but she is still a swift hunter by her corporeal merits alone, and she presents me with rabbits throughout the day. I get a small fire going, and cook them for us. Aside from eating and sleeping, we pass the time sitting around, her sniffing the air, me petting her as I try to discern what the priestess smells. Sometime in the night, the inferno arrives at the river, and the river holds, and the fire burns through its remaining fuel and is gone, leaving an immense realm of charred ground behind it, but now finished, at least.

I tell the priestess Om that she has done well, and she appears pleased.

The next morning, we begin the long walk back.

## POEMS

### 38 Haiku About Dogs

i

Summer: sniffing grass  
Scent an unseen mystery  
Winter: footprints shown

ii

The smell of dog feet  
Beloved to more than pervers  
It is transcendent

iii

Awakening warm  
Happy, everything is good  
Face in doggy fur

iv

Between desk and chair  
Diligent companion's post  
Head asleep on foot

v

New pleasure one night  
Leaves much research to be done  
With furred assistant

vi

Curious intent  
A wagging tail is lifted  
To sniff a dog's butt

vii

Human lies awake  
Dog hops onto the bed too  
Together they snore

viii

Green sprouts up from dirt  
Esoteric dream from rest  
Boyfriend from dog food

ix

Dog squats on the grass  
Yesterday it was liquid  
Glad to pick up shit

x

Crossroads on a walk  
Dog insists on the long path  
Dog lover obeys

xi

Dog lies smug on back  
O ye of infinite chest  
A belly is rubbed

xii

hghagh, auauau, oghhh  
Interspecies sarcasm  
Teasing words of love

xiii

Calm night in July  
Suddenly exploding sky  
Dogs justly displeased

xiv

A visitor knocks  
Arrarrarrarrarrarrarr  
Welcoming tail wags

xv

Dog spits out carrots  
Empathy across species  
Vegan cooks him steak

xvi

Under large blankets  
Face buried in softest fur  
Snuggling dog butts

xvii

Do you want some food?  
Do you wanna mess around?  
At last, tail says yes

xviii

Picture book on Danes  
Repressed culture is revealed  
Not one cookie shown

xix

Cross-species threesome  
Film captures the friendship here  
Dog smells sadly gone

xx

Dog relieves himself  
Taste of yellow snow is learned  
A worthy snow cone

xxi

Circle circle pause  
Circle circle circle pause  
Poop spot will be found

xxii

A pizza is watched  
Six inch line of drool hangs  
Slobber looks tasty

xxiii

Small vanilla cone  
One soft taco, only meat  
Sharing human's fries

xxiv

Human mad at screen  
Dog asks human to drop it  
Dog is right; they walk

xxv

Human walks with dog  
Something in the dark woods stirs  
All freeze and listen

xxvi

Dead thing found on road  
Human sees it, but too late  
Dog wins this time: munch.

xxvii

Human flops around  
Inebriated kisses  
Dog's tongue is the world

xxviii

Dog is up early  
Grumpy human, needed, stirs  
Pre-dawn sky serene

xxix

Walking down the hall  
Dog puts nose to neighbor's door  
Sniff. Sniff. Sniff. Okay

xxx

Juice, coffee, toothpaste  
Sometimes dog kisses to kiss  
Other times, to taste

xxxi

Anticipation  
The tags are all taken off  
New toy for the dog

xxxii

Mud rinsed down the drain  
Dog leans into towel rubs  
Dry and happy friend

xxxiii

Big dog passes gas  
Non zoos roar about disgust  
Zoo at first confused

xxxiv

Stomach makes noises  
Salad of grass to puke out  
Upset will settle

xxxv

Lickjob in mirror  
All proportions stand naked  
Contrast hides in rhyme

xxxvi

Hand on the sheath rubs  
Hidden anatomy shown  
Beautiful secret

xxxvii

At last the birds sing  
The bright sun again does warm  
Long walks can return



xxxviii

Trotting and halting  
Dog teaches human patience  
Do not yank the leash

## Twilight Forest

There is, in the Land of Nod, a pleasant enough forest  
where it is eternally twilight.

Warm, dim hues creep their fingers around the trees and across  
the grass.

Come: let us go there,  
away from cars and concrete,  
away from the faintly screeching electrical pulses of  
motherboards and gadgets,  
away from screens,  
away from bright lights and obligations to keep up with things  
to the second,  
away from here, away from time, let us go away.

Out in the twilight forest, there is a presentness of being.

You press your hand to the tall trunk of a tree,  
pushing your palm as hard or as soft as you like against the  
bark,

and the tree does not move, it does not break.

It is, and it will be, if you let it.

Lying on your belly and pressing your face to the ground, the  
grass smells like grass.

The dirt smells like dirt.

You spot a weed and pull it up, root and all, out from among the  
grass and dirt.

Holding the root to your face, soil pressing against your upper  
lip and your chin,

you inhale, and the soil smells even more of soil this close up to  
it.

Setting the weed down, you get up slowly onto your hands and  
knees,

and then get up farther, and stand fully upright.

Your breathing is not rushed here:

You take deep, helpful breaths as slowly as you like to.

You take a step, and in the bones of your foot,  
your ankle, your knee, your thigh,

you feel the endearing weight of your body against the weight of  
the rest of the planet pushing back, holding you up:  
steadiness beyond steadiness, it will never, ever drop you.  
As you walk, you wear a blanket over your shoulders like a cape.  
Whatever else you wear, or don't wear, is up to you.  
No one will mind here.  
As you walk, you walk in whatever shape of being you would like  
to.  
Maybe a dog, maybe a human, maybe an ant, maybe a rock,  
maybe a bush.  
Maybe something in between.  
You are what you like to be, male, or female, or some of both, or  
something of neither.

The air becomes pleasantly cooler as up ahead, there is a gently  
trickling stream which you are approaching.  
It is felt and heard a while before it is seen.  
When you arrive, it is as though arriving at the side of a tunnel.  
This tunnel is made of the gentle stream at foot,  
dim tree trunks to each side,  
and a meshwork blanket of branches and leaves overhead,  
through which you can see the sky.  
From where, and to what end, does this tunnel lead?  
You walk along on the bank of the gentle stream, seeking to  
know.

## **I Did Take Care Of Him After For The Record**

The other day we had the air conditioning on  
and so I missed  
when my dog grunted and huffed  
and rolled over  
asking for a belly rub  
but I did happen to turn around at some point  
and see a gremlin on the bed  
halfway between presenting his belly and lying down on his side  
again,  
his limbs bunched up but also splayed,  
his jowls shown,  
his eyes wild  
and staring directly at me  
me  
who had missed his belly rub demands  
in the noise.

In that moment still, he was beautiful.