

Frail Shrines

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stories

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Shotgun House, 2017

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*Stories in this work, some in different form, have been previously published in Black Sun
Lit, The Fanzine, Miracle Monocle, and Hobart.*

*“...in the intoxication of falling, man was prone to believe himself
propelled upward.”*

BROCH

AGAVE LANDSCAPE

A longing for the sun drove them to Jalisco. They moved around in a latemodel Skylark whose windshield shone the color of sweet vermouth. They'd met and meshed through a common interest in the various kinds of wine. Ellen had a nervy mouth, moist and humorous. If she was in a mood Marc would have to tell her to cut it out in his hushed tenor. She'd endure, hiding her venom behind a pearly smile.

They were hedonists both nourished and hindered by unrest, by longing. A flash of lightning bloomed on the rossofied glass, a crack of thunder moved him, longing, as the solid work of an emotional timpanist. Ellen hunted for cigarettes in the visor and found none. Ovine herds grazed on the roadside. Marc drove through a pothole and she rushed to vomit out the window.

The light was dying, the hues of the day dissolved into generalized green as they drove through quivery motes. Warped grupera creeped from the speakers. Ellen opened the visor again to study her mouth and her view hovered on the denim collar of her shirt. She wanted a mint. There were none. With a sort of cagey grace Marc produced a cigarette from his shirtpocket and handed it to Ellen. It was supposed to rain all day but it never did. She smoked to get the taste out of her mouth.

Next day Ellen and Marc had been walking on the playa when they saw a mime chastising himself with violent gestures. Marc made a face and saw the mad mime pout. The pomaded mime wagged a finger at Marc and went on with his fit. Ellen thought they should pack up and go somewhere weird, the Julian March or the coast of Krk. Instead they went to a cafe.

The water in the carafe shone the color of mesquite, the color of Ellen's brand of cigarettes. She placed the pack, shiny in cellophane, by the carafe and studied the stilllife. Blue agave pups sprang underfoot. She entertained the brief and ludicrous idea to move to a more photogenic table. Ellen looked to the cloudbright sky and visualized contrails spelling out #NOFILTER, then #NATURALEZAMUERTA.

I never thought to express myself. I'd rather be local.

Ladies and germs, Marc Fringe, everybody.

Marc ignored Ellen and studied the moving forms of passersby in the reflective glaze of his coffeecup. He crossed his legs, exposing the three day old coffeestain on the knee of his pantleg. It was the exact political shape of Borneo. For some reason which Ellen could not define, she was horrified.

Pigeons lit on the leafy pavement, jetting leaves like drops of water above a thrown stone. Other birds chattered and whirred like a solari board, flapping and tickering through the bright verdigris of the Malecón.

She leaned back and saw the glossy fronds of palms shining above, an areaceous aroma in the air. Down the street a man

with maracas shook a suggestive beat along to the warblings of a flute. The duo's tune, Ellen thought, was vaguely arousing. Her finger traced sensuous circles around the depression in the empty saucer, marking the time, and soon she found herself in tempo with the duo. A breeze from the playa came bearing a note from the flute, lonely as a lost feather. The fronds shone like the coated paper of a magazine and shook with voluptuous undulance. Ellen looked at Marc's knee and shuddered.

They caroused, they roamed, plagued by their longings. They drove. Ellen set his teeth on edge, he would sometimes grind them in various states of stresstimed attrition. It would take a few miles for his teeth to quiet before they found themselves again in the lilac silence of dusk in June.

VERMILION DUSK

It is thin roads of rough asphalt and trucks careening at fifty, the calligraphy of tar flailing on blacktop, oily fractals slapped on cracks rushing beneath us as we drive further into the parish. She sticks her hand out the window and salutes the sun, admiring the slender beauty of her fingers and the solar glow of her nails, fervent crescents with a keratinous shine. Her hands are artful and rough, possessing a certain kinesthetic wisdom, expressive when inert, skilled at peeling fruit, capable of corkscrewing the rind in one take. It is thin shafts of heavenly light filtered through massive heaps of nimbus. The tar on the blacktop laps like delta waves, a seized readout of the madness of the road. The flat expanse of the coastal prairie seems to go on forever. A lone palm waves its flabellate cheer to the gravelly road. It is the car woozing through a dreamy swarm of dragonflies. We arrive at the old woman's house and are greeted by three smiling hounds. We get out and survey the endless fields of soy. A place of comfort and serenity, a place to still the pace of life and stall death's slow approach. It is a house with a wraparound porch and a bright green swing. It is three cats: mad tabby, slow calico, and a mix of indeterminate origin that appears to've been mummified. This one dozes on a step, and the old woman nudges it, waking it, says that one day soon it won't wake up. Through a screened veranda lousy with insects she leads us to her atelier. Inside it we find the work of a lifetime unspooling. Five years ago, she says, Gustav ravaged

the prairie, drowned the cattle, flooded the goldengreen fields, forced homeowners to leave, broken, empty, foutu. The storm made a graveyard of refrigerators, many still fixed with magnets and family pics. The houses of this route are modest onestory bungalows, with the exception of one comically garish mansion behind an iron gate and fountain. It is signs of commerce: DURKE'S CRAWFISH. MEAUX'S SNEAUX SHACK. THE BOOZE BARN. THE SALE BARN WE DO NOT RENT PIGS. It is PAST N BLAST, a store that sells antiques, guns, and antique guns. We take dinner in the parish seat of Abbeville, a place on Main Street. It is a platter of oysters, shrimp, crab and catfish. After we walk past the church to Magdalen Square, we marvel at three ancient oaks. The air is thick and sultry, but by the fountain a breeze comes in, a new coolness soothes us like a freezer door in summer. We describe an arc round the gazebo and head back to the car at dusk, it is the Vermilion dusk, and we begin the journey through the Atchafalaya Basin, through the town of Paradis, through the swampy night and into the city of elegant decadence that we once called home, a home that now seems much further in mood than mere miles.

VALLETTA SUNSET

In the Maltese sun shone the catseye cabochon that you donned in moods of absent solace. Beach stones loosened under our shoes, heelground obsidian at the onset of noon. We were enclosed in an ellipse of longing with evershrinking axes. Overhead birds soared in echelon and you noted the event in your phone. Later, blatantly, you did a search for the phrase "the situation has become untenable."

You had a beaten cloche and a dusty boa, the Louise Brooks in the breadline look, and blanched conches you liked to look at while you bathed, highspired and sonorous shells of priestly whiteness. You believed they echoed celestial motion as well as ambient noise. You got tans in the a.m. and left your clothes on the kitchen table. I drank the scotch on the kitchen table.

I looked at the mirror in the hall, my eyes beastly with malt. I clenched a besotted fist and raised it. I adjusted the glass, disrupted its symmetry. You didn't notice for a week.

We chose our sentences carefully. We often boasted, we sabotaged inviolable taboo. We kept discreet tabs on our open tabs. You went incognito for a week. At dusk you still glistened and I wanted to lick your dewsweet lobes, commit unspeakable perversions against your auricles, write a corona to your

cochleae. Later, spitefully, you did a search for the phrase "a history of inappropriate behavior."

We walked to Paola to hear the oracles of today, where all time sang out in deathless tones. You decoded their fractalled resonance as *prosodically deficient* and wanted to leave for the historic dovecote and the artificial groves built for american t.v. There we only saw the ruins of an ecosystem. Later, desperately, you did a search for the phrase "found in a state of shock."

You placed an informal gag rule on all forms of dialogue - we simply wouldn't have words breaching etiquette like a levee failure. I sat in the empty bath by the three seashells, glowing in all their ivory grace. There were blue irises in a bowl beneath the window. I checked my watch: sunset, scotch time, and poured a little into the bowl. You appeared wearing nothing but your tan and the catseye, and in it I could see the sun receding, a fiery ellipse enclosed in stone. I longed for that light even as I felt ourselves collapsing.

Later, brutally, you did a search for the phrase "cheapest flights home."

VIGIL AT FORT JESUS

Nighttime near Fort Jesus. We point our phones heavenward and hear about the latest rave death. Some of us vaguely knew the deceased. The veterans know to water frequently but sometimes this sort of folk wisdom skips a generation.

We're in a weathered van wreathed in verdant brush trundling down a dirt path, passengers ecstatic from the tactile vibrations. The driver thumbs the dial expertly and lands on a crystalclear transmission of Green Grass.

To treat the heat like an award and not a punishment is to be a qualified candidate for survival. To express false gratitude somehow. Suddenly, our data connections are fried and we're stuck looking at whichever window happens to be open. The driver hits the brakes and parks on the path, evidently mesmerized by Green Grass.

“Did you guys know? That *Gary* Lewis is *Jerry* Lewis's son? His *son*?”

“Who fucking cares. We're stranded. I'm fucking stuck on a frozen page, I'm trying to transfer funds, I'm hunting heroin and you're on Jerry's kids.”

“Jerry?”

“Jerry!”

“Wait, you’re getting heroin?”

The night air is lush, the tropical savanna moon shines full and wideeyed, alert to our situation. Through the brush I can see the head of Fort Jesus bathed in a spurious lunacy, as though there are possibly klieg lights hidden nearby. Stare at the moon long enough and it becomes the center of all ambient noise: choppers, crickets, Green Grass. Doom.

I think of highrises back home, how they blushed at sunset, and how they now look burnt, charred skeletons victim to what the press would call an industrial accident.

I want the truth about burnt highrises.

“I want some fucking dope.” Springtime, golden sunshine.

Our stalled data is a motionless weathercock waiting for the slightest breeze, an immense collective sigh, low on the Beaufort scale, just waiting for a clean wave or two.

The radio, too, is stuck, is stuck on Green Grass. It is actually the Ventures’ instrumental version. It is the score to an appalling sitcom we are forced to watch at gunpoint. It is a purgatorial name entry screen of a forgotten arcade game. It is hold music from hell. At last it is a stoned deejay on accidental repeat.

Inside the van hovers a swamplike tang. The women step out to aerate, shake out their skirts like picnic blankets. They congregate over a large puddle, faintly naiadic, and wash

themselves of their sweat. They fiddle with selfies, loitering in the cruel crawling heat. It occurs to me now that everywhere's an atelier.

It appears the driver has passed out, blissed out by Green Grass. The van won't start. Someone says what the fuck. Two of us hop out, check the engine in tandem: two heads under the hood, tanned and doomed. The rest are still in the van, smoking and noting the unraveling hours. Flies hover over the portable ashtray, their rapid oscillations tossing and scattering the ashes.

No service.

But just as quick as we lost it we get our connection back. Deals are made, bets over authorship settled. I figure I'll text a vague acquaintance about the death of another.

The driver's still slumped over the wheel, but somehow, miraculously, Green Grass is gone. Now it's blaring I Can Read Between The Lines, Gary Lewis, champion hint-taker. We leave the van in a solemn row.

Standing in a circle, not far from the head of Jesus, we hold our phones like vigil candles and honor the departed ravers. The moon outshines our backlight time, and gentle picking floats like a paean to the night.

EARTHQUAKE BAROQUE

He whirls the rusted tonnage of the shitty buick into a space between two trucks and rolls the windows up. There's little space to open the door and Oertling exits the car in a low slither, whistling all the while, the very act of it a joyless thrill, just something to liven the air. Holding one nostril shut, he exhales with force, discovering a peculiar sinus issue: his nose whistles too. He experiments with this phenomenon several times while walking to the elevator.

On the scuffed cement of the garage is an idling snail, slime shining in the channels of its whorls. Oertling boots it underneath the nearest car, studies the glyphic mucus left behind, feeling vaguely salacious.




His wool twill suit is worn out, its rolled lapels shredded, shoulders unstitching, sleeves once sleek now torn and damaged. He looks like a shrewd asthmatic wino in a Penn Station deli, loony and blanketed with lint.

Oertling sidles into this version of himself, the delusional sophisticate, and walks like the Tramp for a few paces. He thinks to check his phone. He twirls it between thumb and

index with mindless dexterity before stopping and swiping the screen.

A message reads: done?

On his free hand a finger moves in the manner of an indecisive diner before a menu. He notices the battery is low. Then he taps a few drafts, entering, backspacing, reentering. He sees the backspace button as a fallen house marked with a blank X-code.

The final draft reads:   

Oertling sends the message. He places the phone back in his breast pocket and shudders.

He thinks of the story of Wagner's dog laying at his master's grave, as was his quiet custom. Suddenly, at the moment Franz Liszt dropped dead, the dog began howling, howled for days. Now there are 800 statues of the dog around Bayreuth.

Oertling thinks he'd like to be howled over by a rival's dog. Perhaps no greater tribute may be paid. The dogs and mistresses of his rival, all howling at his wake, slobbering on the embalmer's handiwork.

Provided Oertling isn't thrown off a ledge among the crowded, pitying highrises.

He sees a small wallet on the ground, leather, womanish, picks it up. No bills but a variety of useless membership cards.. As he rifles through it he becomes aware of the lingering haze. It's

crept into the structure as though the product of a climate pattern.

Oertling pockets the wallet, makes it to the ledge and leans out. He can hardly see down the block. The highrises look like giants advancing. Distant pedestrians are deep into their formicular routines, the feral children with the fernblade anklets, young devils in the heart of the Manila of the mind, ink zipping around their fists and napes, renal failure a few years down the line of their pale and perilous lives. Oertling tries to take it all in. A small breath feels like a fiery drag. He exhales, his nose now at a low frequency, and moves for the elevator.

The lights are cut as though by outage and Oertling stops. He listens for something to tell him what to see. Faint light seeps into the garage, but with the haze it could be either dawn or dusk. He takes out his phone, reads 1:17 in the afternoon, reads 1% battery, and puts it back in his coat.

In the darkness Oertling senses the rippling of snails, a secret viscous army. He walks at a solemn crawl, driftless and silent. Escape means to bust out of one's coat. Right now he's on the verge of it. Through his tatters he can feel the haze against his chest, tousling his torso and rising up to his throat, like the hand of a lover and a sadist. Wind blows through the structure, attempts to revive a dispirited and blinded populace that Oertling doesn't know but feels qualified to join.

He produces his phone again and activates the flashlight, a desperate act of modern convergence. No snails. An odor of old dust. As he finds his way to the elevator the lights flick on again. Overhead the rows of fluorescent tubes thrum and

warm up as he feels the phone vibrate its death knell, its motorized buzz melting in the air. He squints for the sudden brightness and goes toward the elevator.

Oertling freezes as he considers the great crescendo of a sneeze inside him. He stares at the lights while pressing tongue to palate. He lifts a finger in the air, indicating wait a second. He stares until he has to look away. He closes his eyes but he can still see the garage, spots of color dancing before him, the counterportrait of the fluorescent structure. He continues to the elevator, then sneezes a tiny violent scream. For a moment its echo is the only sound in the world.

Before he can press the call button a bell sounds, the doors parting a beat behind. The elevator car is a wide bright monstrosity, its interior light that of an operating theatre. Inside the floor is crawling with snails, a frail old man pressed in the corner, ankledeep, motionless, a savage reimagining of suspended animation. He's not sure if the man's alive.

Oertling kneels and touches the writhing slime, rubbing it between his fingers. He wipes it off on his coat and gently grabs the man's ankle, feeling for life. A faint pulse. Oertling looks up to see the man looking down at him. He talks at Oertling, still crouched with his hand on the man's pulse.

Jack Gobjin was institutionalized on his son's sixteenth birthday. That's me. Not the son. I'm Jack. My son's dead. I've been down hallways and boardwalks. I used to get funny pictures on boardwalks. There's a shot with the missus urinating in the cabstand. She looks like a stick of big red turning tricks. But I'd say this is no time for brash behavior. I'd

prefer to speak in a terse style, but not tinker with data but create a whole new network of thought, the wattage of which at this point is no higher than that of your common espresso machine. I've often felt wronged by unwarranted praise. It hurts. I'd rather a good solid No. Leave. The classic axe.

Oertling looks up and says, Your name is Gobfinch. A snail tries to mount his wrist. He shakes it off and stands up.

You know what they say, right. Don't use two violins when one is enough. How many violins did Stradivari make anyway. I step out of the shower one foot at a time like anybody else. Although I'd like to shake the hand of the man who jumps out like it's track and field. I'm talking patterns of experience and behavior. My son's dead, but the language of health brochures still targets the victim's family. Make sure your loved one remembers to go to the appointment, they say. What if you are your only loved one. Which is to say there is no family.

The doors are still open and the snails crawl towards the haze. The man named Gobfinch is silent again. Below the elevator phone is a sign. Push for help. Oertling thinks about making an emergency call and then hearing news bigger, more breaking than this.

DIEGETIC ANIMALS

At last the elevator doors opened and freed the revelers, fleeing like poached parrots back into freedom, and there was a sense of emergent vengeance in the air, carefree, whistling vengeance: a car keyed or a wife fucked, a wig pulled, a cocktail thrown, a black shirt bleached, drunk texts to an ex, and they walked out whistling, gripping the cobblestone.

In the corner of the elevator stood Denne, muttering *motherfuckers*, watching them on the street. He'd been stuck with the revelers since the fifth floor, pressed in the corner while the man with the most colorful camp shirt had joked about the people whom the crowded elevator had mercifully stranded at each descending floor. The women laughed until their jewelry shook and it looked like they were weightless.

Earlier they'd discussed what to wear in Europe this time of year. The entire time Denne had thought he should've taken the stairs, he'd take the stairs when the situation called for it. Years ago, in an anonymous office tower, swerving down flight after flight, the many-storeyed corkscrew of scuffed concrete, blackened wads of gum and cigarette butts, he had prided himself on his ability to trot down two stairs at a time. Drills,

evacuations, whatever the situation called for, two stairs at a time.

One of the women had turned to another, adjusting an earring: If you're going to Paris this time of year, bring a sweater.

Denne pressed five and the doors closed on the lobby, then were jarred open by a pug's head. It was followed by a woman in athletic gear, wearing a shirt bearing a manipulation of the Twitter bird.

Good, Banana, you held the door for us. Do you know where that club is by any chance? The Khmer Vert?

Denne shook his head and pressed five again.

Can you press four for me, thanks much. All the way to four he scowled at the dog scowling back at him while the woman tapped on her phone, her eyes scanning old texts with the manic rhythm of a kit-cat clock.

The doors opened to the fourth floor, where bright signs were posted for both advanced leadership and estate planning seminars. The woman scraped the elevator floor with her sneaker like a bull before the charge. Come, Banana, she said, and walked off in the direction of advanced leadership.

Denne decided to follow them until he'd reached the nearest men's room. The hands-free soap dispenser was utterly fucked and disrespectful to one's personal time, so he was forced to writhe in various states of supplication until a drop of Dawn sputtered into his folded palms. He then shifted over to the

hands-free faucet, moving his palms this way and that, trying to find the sweet spot, wetting his hands in erratic bursts. He went to the hands-free dryer and wharved his wrists to it, watching his arm hairs, now curled like clefs, now scraped straight by the galeforce air, and he wondered about the rolling cloth towel dispensers of yore, the pull rag, that seemed to live on solely in dives.

On the way out Denne went for some sanitizer at the hands-free dispenser. Before the door he froze, the sanitizer on his hands prickly cool, and for a moment stood there with eyes closed, hands up as in benediction, air drying. He stretched and sustained the unswerving moment. At any time someone could walk in, notify security, and have him admitted somewhere unpleasant with fluorescence.

He was still thinking about the situation that had been his life, the abstract outline of the situation and its ragged demands. An expert crisis manager, the Picasso of contingency plans, had once told him while breathlessly trotting down two stairs at a time that trust and courage were really all it took to remedy a bad situation. Denne had learned that the best crisis managers were also the worst at living in the present crises: they were always envisioning worst-case scenarios. Situations required nothing more than cliches commonly found at seminars. Trust. Courage. They sounded like the names of dogs.

Eyes shut and hands up, he elbowed the restroom's powermatic door opener and strode off in the general direction of the stairwell. His hands, cold and antiseptic as the wall they touched, guided him along and he began to hum.

As he walked beside the wall, touching it ecstatically, he smelled the indoor flora. Ornamental succulents, sentry-like in their smart black planters, scented the ambience in a pleasant, productivity-raising way. Denne paused and leaned against the wall for a moment with his eyes shut and let himself down slowly, still humming.

Natural and earthy notes combined with an invigorating floral accord, with subtle hints of sage. An uplifting, soothing, and nondrowsy environment.

Over the cool tiles of waxed onyx, on which he now lay face down, there was the rapid click of a woman's heels, the heartbeat of the wide open space, upwards of a hundred beats per minute if he was counting correctly.

MASTERPIECES OF THE ORAL AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE OF HUMANITY

The Germans call it the downfall. The French call it sleep. The Polish just give you vague directions. In Romania it's a disappearance. In Helsinki it's an invoice.

But for me a sunset is always only a passing thought.

I was loitering outside the Musée Guimet, a building containing the fruits of colossal ransackings, brief scenes of lives and horses, the decline of a courtesan. Which is actually how they say sunset in Sumatra.

I was considering the Guimet at sunset. Sunlight settled on Washington's steed, a wine-gold glow that spread in scintillant increments, soon reaching the Avenue du President Wilson and the veins of linden leaves above the sidewalk. I looked at a shop window and saw the image of the glow on the ridges of the roof high behind me. Whether or not the window was smeared with an oily print, some fingers' friction distorting the light, was something I couldn't have known.

A triangle inside a circled square, a treasured vehicle, hills of women snared in lace. The Mediterranean diet. At last a Panama hat. Masterpieces all, but what were they compared to the profound mystery of the smear?

It was the time of day when lavish plans are canceled, weeklong visions fizzle in the span of a few colors fading. The time of day when the world looks old.

A man looking like a drunk or unmedicated Anton Walbrook waltzed along in forma pauperis. I had always recognized the waltz as a dance full of inner turmoil. Such stateliness is meant to conceal the violent nature of things. Certainly this man was capable of violence. His box step was impeccable.

It was five in the afternoon. I was looking at the Guimet when my phone buzzed shortly.

"they said suicide accidental," read the text.

I walked away from the fading light and the waltzing Walbrook and sought shelter in a dusky cafe on Avenue Pierre I^{er} de Serbie. The legs of the table I took were uneven and it rocked and swayed when the weight of coffee and porcelain were placed upon it, the crippled citified furniture common to modern cafes. I made a shim out of a matchbook and produced my phone and read the text again.

I didn't recognize the number, american, though I did the compulsion, american, to trivialize death via text. How to reply except:

"how?"

"phone fell in while brunching in bath," read the response, a portable autopsy. Then another short buzz:

"funeral tmrw."

I considered the electrifying absurdity of death at an apartment brunch. I considered the softly rippling coffee in my cup in the deepening dusk. The time it takes bottomless mimosas to become bathysmal. Wrong numbers, mistaken identities, slips of the tongue, the pen, the finger, injuries sustained from repetitive strain: *Everything that's happened to me is my life.*

I felt like I had no right to be where I was. I moved through the vaporous streetlight. Tomorrow admission would be free.

