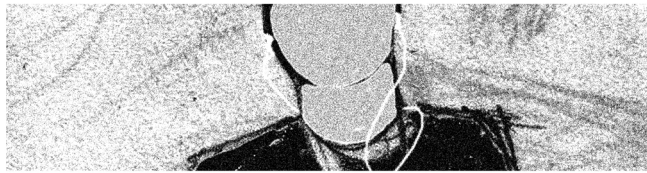


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Reviews of books by some of the hottest writers working today,
exclusive author interviews, literary news and criticism.

THE FOLLOWING EXCERPT IS FROM *THE JESUS TAPES*, A NOVEL IN PROGRESS ALREADY CONTRACTED FOR PUBLICATION WHEN FINISHED. THE FINAL PUBLISHED VERSION MAY DIFFER SLIGHTLY (OR EVEN GREATLY) FROM THE MANUSCRIPT PAGES HEREIN. THIS PREVIEW IS OFFERED EXCLUSIVELY TO WWW.WORLDAUDIENCE.ORG AND MAY NOT TO BE REPRODUCED IN HARD COPY, OR POSTED ON ANY OTHER SITE WITHOUT THE EXPRESS WRITTEN PERMISSION OF THE AUTHOR.

The Jesus Tapes, Chapter One

By

Lee Stringer

I'll tell you like this here: It's funny what life can bring you to. Funny what a guy can become. Why I'm saying this is they have a pretty good library here. Pretty good for this place being what it is anyway. Not that I was thinking much about books and shit when I first got here, just that this place gets you to where you got to withdraw into yourself if you want to survive and, that being the way it is, what else you going to do, sitting all by your lonesome in your hole, except jerk your Johnson raw and count off your time in seconds instead of days and weeks and months and what not. So, couple of months in, doing this, I got into books. Books is like my TV when I'm on the block and tired of staring at the ceiling running things through my mind and shit.

I started out with the more sensationalized stuff. You know, The So

And So Document, and The So And So Triangle and so and so forth. What they call intrigues. After a while, though, I started getting tired of them and started looking around for what else they got. Like something that was more real and whatnot. That's when I picked up on a guy—a brother too—by the name of Baldwin. James Baldwin. He's gone now. Dead and buried, but that's neither here or there. The point is this guy gives it to you straight. About what the white man been doing to us, keeping us down and all that shit, which is pretty much all you hear in here. From the brothers anyway. Especially them black muslim niggers.

Anyway, I got interested in knowing more about this guy. Where he came from and all that. What his life was like and so forth, and I was reading this thing about him in an old magazine they had laying around in there--the library, that is--that was put out way back when Baldwin was the shiznit and America had to take him or leave him but couldn't hardly by anyways ignore him and the reporter asks him about—let me get it straight—asks him about moral imperatives, it was, whatever that means. Know what this Baldwin guy says? he says, far as I can remember, “Of course we pay for what we do,” which right away I'm thinking he's speaking to my shit, me being in here and all. Then he says “but mostly we pay for what we become. And we pay,” he says, “simply by the lives we lead.”

I thought it was cool and all when I read it. I mean you roll up on a guy you ain't hardly seen in a while and what's the first thing you say? First thing you say is "Hey brother! How you living?" So reading that, it kind of--what they call it?--resonated with me. But lately I been thinking on it a whole lot more. Especially on account of what happened down in laundry. I'm still a little shook over that shit. It got me thinking of all kinds of stuff, to tell you the truth. Stuff I ain't hardly never gave two drops of piss about before, it shook me so much what happened.

You see I had told myself right off, way back while I was in court, when you could see the writing on the wall telling me it was pretty much a done deal there was no way I was going to walk away from what I perpetrated--and I ain't going to front on you like these other jive and shuck mo-fos and deny I did it. I did it. Plain and simple. I told myself, from the gitgo, I was going to do the time, not let the time do me. I told myself whatever way all them other niggers in here is living, I was going to make my own choices. According to what me, Calvin Trunsdale is about, not according to what Shallow Brook Correctional wanted me to be about. Know what I'm saying? That's my personal program, far as I'm concerned. And I ain't figuring on taking no shorts.

For a while I was rolling along fine with it, no-one trying to off their shit on me--leastwise not any more than the usual day to day

bullshit that goes down, which is water off of a dead duck's back to me, what I been through. Yeah, I WAS tripping along all easy at first and keeping to myself--which this is when I started using books to kill off the time--and I'm thinking this will work, thinking It's cool, I got this.

Then, three-four weeks in, they step to me. See it fucks with them, the gamers they have in here. Me not being down with anybody's else's program. Not that Muslim bullshit or the Latin King gangbanger tiff. Not me. And those crazy Aryan nut job mother fuckers, shit. Forget about it. So one morning after the count I all of a sudden get yard duty--tightening up the grounds with a rake and shit which they spring on you when they don't have enough jobs for you inside--and on my way out the east side of the block, which I never been that way before, I hit one of those blind spots halfway between where the inside COs can't see you and the outside ones ain't picked you up yet and they confront me.

What was there?--three, four of them at least. Two hard hitting, football headed monkeys blocking me from the front and the rest over my shoulder so that I can't see who's got what--whether or not it's going to be just an old fashioned ass whooping or something more deadly—and they want to know what's up with me.

So this big-jawed, Hershey bar looking dude with a Muslim prayer cap stuck all up on his head--he was about six four, six five, around in there--gets all in my face, wanting to know how I'm living and all that and I tell him the way I see it ain't all that much living going on in here noways but, being what it was, I was living about as good as I could make out, all things considered.

He don't say nothing back right off, just stands there for a few ticks, jaw all out to there, ruminating over what I said. Then he says, after he gets over chewing on what I threw back at him, he says, "True, that." and he's all ivories now--which he got one fine set of choppers on him, that boy--only I don't smile back at him. I just let my eyes go off him for second, scope out his crew standing there with him because, don't get me wrong, he was out to push up on me; was going to push up on me like it or not, me not really having any say in the matter one way or another. I mean that's what the whole thing was about. That's the whole thing prison is about. The street too, that's for damn sure.

Come to think of it, it's what the whole world is about, more or less. Pushing up. Don't take my word for it neither. Read the damn newspapers. It's in there, twenty-four seven. What is, is what is. But see you can push up this way and you can push up that way, know what I'm saying? You can come on all wide in the nose and tight in the jaw, which is how most people do it most of the time.

Everybody's a gangbanger these days. But you can also push up with confidence; come on all slick and stealth and down under with your shit. Like a mack putting the moves on some country girl fresh off of the bus. Which is what I figure homeboy there is up to, smiling all in my face like that. I mean he got his crew down with him, surrounding me, so he can afford to cut me off a little slack. At the gitgo, at least. You know, try to reason with me, clue me in as to how things is and all. Give me the choice as to whether I was going to come along easy or do it the hard way.

So I brace myself, you know, figuring he's going to give the rap about Allah being all supreme and what not and about knowledge being power and the white man being devils and all that blah blah blah which I'm figuring I'll give him a face like I'm taking it all in and digging on what he's laying down which is halfways true anyway because I might have chased down a few blond and blue foxes for the pussy and all, but when it comes to white folks and what they're all about I don't have any illusions about where they're coming from.

But this Muslim shit, I'm not down with that too tough. I got no use for religion in the first place, you want to know the truth. Seriously. What I want to say to this guy—he's so close I can smell him—which he's got an odor kind of like bacon, no-pork—eating motherfucker or not—what I really want to say is Fuck your dogma man. Fuck that Muslim shit. Fuck all that Christian bible thumping

shit too. Uh-uh. Not in here you don't. Not in this joint. Just another kind of gang banging, far as I'm concerned.

Oh, they all talk a good game--about the Koran and the Good Book and all that--but all I see anyone doing in here, Muslims, Kings, those Aryan motherfuckers, all of them, is a lot of running a shank in someone's back if they aren't down with what you're selling, which is the thing that leaves me cold with religion anyway, all that high holy, going to go to heaven talk, then, next thing you know, it's do as I say or else I'll kill you. Tell me that ain't some straight up Nazi shit in the first place.

And when they're not doing that, these guys, when they're not running a shank in you all of them—Big jaw included—they're trying to run a dick up your ass. Hey, your thing is your thing. Ain't no sweat off of my back what the next guy does with his dick. I could give a fuck. Ain't none of my business, long as you don't try pushing it on me. That's your thing? God bless you for it, know what I'm saying? But it ain't my thing. Ain't never going to be. Push up all you want.

So I'm eyeball to eyeball with prayer cap, thinking all this. Only, I'm not stupid. I'm not going to run it on him, four-five of them cornering me. I sure as hell don't feel any sick need to try and reform nobody. This is prison. Hard time. Shit. All this is, is the man playing on you the same thing you got on the street which is power gets to call the

game. Reform? Kiss my sweet chocolate ass. Hell, they're reinforcing everything that got us in here in the first place tit for tat. Reform shit.

Anyway, I figure to just listen to what Big Jaw has to say, give him a nod while he's pontificating, like I'm eating the shit up seven ways to Sunday. Let him think all he has to do is work me a little, counsel me and what not. See it's the same thing I said about doing the time instead of the other way around. You play them, see, instead of letting them play you. Make like you don't know what's what, this being your first time inside and all.

Then, from behind me, one of his homies pipes up. Wanting to know what I'm reading, which I forgot I had a paperback stuck in my back pocket. This is back when I was still reading them thrillers. I turn around and see who it is—a short, muscled up—Brooklyn nigger I take him for—who got a mean, jagged scar running nose to cheek across his face and who I see him always at the gym all the time, if you can call what they got here a gym, a big ole smelly empty room with a couple of mats and a fucked up set of barbells that you can't hardly find two matching weights to put one on each side. They call him thumbs sometimes when he ain't looking. On account of he been doing pushups on his fingertips so long his fingers all look like thumbs. I seen him around. Kind of guy who runs hot and cold. Pat you on the back one minute, cut your throat

the next. So I say, him being so interested in what I'm reading, I tell him nothing much, so far as books go, so far as what books got to offer, but enough to pass the time, which, both me and you brother, happen to have a whole lot of lately. Now all while I'm saying this I got Big Jaw still staring me down, which I'm getting a little sick of his ugly mug. See, even though I see he's trying to come at me all nice and smooth, maybe like he's got pity for me, like he might take taking me under his wing and show me the light and shit, I can see the other thing in his eyes too, see him thinking, I got this nigger. I can see him thinking all he has to do is give me a little soft sell and he's going to get up in there.

"Nothing wrong with passing the time," he says, all soft and serious at the same time. "Nothing wrong with reading either. But what you need to be reading, brother, is your history. Learn something about yourself. Who you are. Where you come from. Bet you don't know who your ancestors are, do you? I mean your real ancestors? Bet you don't even know what I'm talking about, do you? Let me ask you this. Forget you, where you come from. You have any idea where man came from? Where the human race started? What they call the cradle of civilization?"

I don't say nothing when he asks this. Just stand there waiting. Like I'm all hungry for what he got to dish up, which ain't that easy to do, it turns out, because now his whole crew—bunch of muggers, rock

slingers, gangbangers, murderers and what have you—are standing there all holy-serious like it's God himself doing the talking. And it's all I can do not bust out laughing. I mean who the fuck they think they are? Where the fuck they think they are?

But I pull it off—my babe in the woods, don't know shit about shit act—even though I know what the answer to his question is. I heard it all before, plenty enough. And always from some on the corner nigger that's gone and fucked up big time. So he leans in close. So close, with his big ole Hershey bar jaw, you think he's gonna start kissing on me or something. I Mean I can smell his breath he's up on me so close; smells like peppermint, which I'm fixing to bust a gut laughing over too, a fucking stone jailbird motherfucker, sucking on mints all day like that, afraid of his breath might stink.

“How long is your bid for.” he says. I tell him I have to figure, with good time, nine, maybe ten more months to go and I'm free. “Free,” he says and shakes his head. “A man without knowledge of himself is imprisoned all the time.”

All this time—we're only talking about maybe a minute at the most all this went down—I don't say much of nothing. I don't move a muscle, neither. See you can't give these guys nothing either way. It's like my boy Winston told me once, about horses. Winston's from the country and shit. “People is like horses,” he said. “A horse comes up on you for the first time, you got to stand your ground.

Because that way, if you stand your ground, see, a horse won't run you through. Big as they are they stop if you don't move. But if you give way and move, that horse will never stop for you again no matter what you do."

But that's only half of it—that you can't punk out when someone steps to you because it'll get good to them, having power over you like that, and next thing you know you're someone's bitch, like it or not—you also can't hardly come on all out your face either, so as they have no choice but to throw down. Not if you're out to play them you don't do that. What you do is give them nothing, see. You go to zero. Which is what I do, just give them that lean and empty look, breathe as even as I can and whatever business they there for let them get to it. Maybe even less than a minute, all told, we were standing there when we hear a crack and a whine and it's the outside bull on the horn telling us to move it on. So they step aside, the two in front of me, and let me pass--giving me hard eyes all the way--and I go out and grab a rake and take care of the shit I got to do and that was that. Leastwise that was that for now. It ain't by no means over, that's for damn sure.

The Fall
By
Magdalena Ball

Thirty five is early for a mid-life crises, but I was always early. I started walking on my own at 8 months, by 10 months I was running, and by one year I spoke in full sentences. I was an early bloomer and early riser. The only child of zealous missionaries, I spent my first five years in a tiny village near Papondetta, Papua New Guinea, living like a native. Every morning, hundreds of vibrant butterflies flew in through my window, sunlight flashing off the hovering gold, sapphire and emerald jewels, waking me long before the communal breakfast was served. I was out of bed and down to the river faster than any of the laughing children I played with -- Moses, Jehosephat, Meshak, Jacob -- original island names replaced with characters from the Old Testament after re-baptism by my father. It was a successful mission. My father led by example, practiced what he preached, and preached with power and conviction. He was careful, devout, ascetic. He ate little, prayed often and was always upstanding and hard working, leaving for months on difficult inland treks to bring back converts. He visited places that never saw a white man. Places where cannibalism was still practiced.

My mother hid her intensity behind a small frame and ceaseless charity work, often at the expense of her personal tastes. She chose the most obvious cases, those who cried loudest, those with the most lurid clothing, the clingiest and most demanding, expending her time and energy with daily visits, food baskets, attendance at funerals, flower arrangements, sick bed attendance, money, and of course prayer, for, like my father, mother truly believed that salvation lay in sacrifice. She carried a permanent patter of prayer in her head, imagining her vocation in this life amply rewarded in the next. She had fine tastes, fingering the burned velvet pattern on her one fancy dress, holding the heavy silver candlesticks my grandmother left her, or eating with relish a buttery brioche someone brought over on a visit. Mostly she denied herself these sensual pleasures, swallowing the cheap and tastelessness she drew to herself like a dose of heavenly cod liver oil. I spent hours swimming in the ocean, biding the morning until communal breakfast at the long wooden table. I was always the first one there, hungry from my swimming for the simple dishes of ground yam, fruit, fish, tinned nut meats and vegetable protein imported from Australia. Grace was long and loud, led simply at first by my father, the cacophony of "amens" from the worshipful table increasing in intensity to compete with the lyrebirds and finches in the sky, until they stopped suddenly in a magic agreement of cessation.

It was an idyllic life. During the day, the air smelt of salt and

coconut. Once I finished my chores and schoolwork, I had no other commitments but my daily ministrations to sun and sand. At night, the black sky was full of stars, points of light I imagined visiting--a heaven my thoughts could only hint at.

This is a recurring dream. I'm sitting on a beach at dusk with lots of other people. We wait calmly for an impending Tsunami, though we know it will destroy us. Its shadow is off in the distance, and I shiver at its approach as it takes up more and more of the light. The air fills with mournful chanting as the wave moves closer, grows larger.

I've always been devout. Like my parents, I was reassured by a caring, just but strict God, interested in my salvation. Back in Australia, I skipped the rebellious adolescence of my peers, avoiding rock 'n roll, cigarettes and women, secure in my convictions, early to class, early with my assignments, and an early university graduate.

I was going into the church like my father: Theology; Latin, Ancient Greek, Scripture. All was pre-arranged. My life was a clear path before me. I had only to walk upon it. My father was absent most of the time on Church business. My mother kept up the routine she mastered in Papua New Guinea--from sickbed to funeral; church dinner to bake-stall. She didn't have to worry about me. I was easy.

Perhaps it was my youth. Maybe it was just innocence. There were things I didn't know. Something hard and ugly sat inside me, waiting for the right moment to destroy everything.

Have I mentioned Mary? She plays the church organ each week. Holy sounds come from her long fingers. Delicate, fair skin with just a hint of freckles. She sits like an angel at the keyboard entertaining my flock. She is also my wife--the woman who keeps my house clean; my shirts ironed; has dinner ready for me when I come home from work. Did I mention Sean and Liza, my two children? It was a good life. I had everything a man could want. A wife and kids; a job I truly believed in, and salvation. Day after day, writing and preaching sermons, overseeing mission work from my office in Sydney where Mary and I lived. Sin was my favourite topic. I had a special sermon for each of the Seven Deadly Sins. Like my father, we tried to live a life of moderation. The children went to good schools. There were birthdays, school plays, piano lessons—the years flew by. We were happy. Of course we were. I wasn't looking for trouble.

We did have one small vice. We went out for Indian food once a week. We were vegetarian of course. I knew, and preached, that gluttony was a sin, and that it could start with the enjoyment of

food. Like my mother I tried to limit the excitement of my senses, but I couldn't help succumbing to the sweet smell of cardamoms, the sweaty cumin and coriander, garlic, ginger, the light crisp poppadums or the delicate melt in your mouth dahls. After a week's worth of rice, potatoes and nut meats, I looked forward to my one indulgence with something more than anticipation. It wasn't only the food. There was one waitress in particular, perhaps the daughter of the owner. I thought she must be, since she was a little haughty in the way she took our order, or brought us new dishes without our asking. Something about the tiny bits of blue in her gold sari, brilliant spots of cobalt in motion, reminded me of the butterflies of my original home. Her red lips seemed perpetually curled in a knowing smile. Biting into a potato samousa, I felt as if I was sinking into her black eyes, falling down into a hole out of which I could never recover. Perhaps it was just the Marsala Chai—it was my only caffeine. After creamy mango kulfi and sticky halva, we would leave, full, bloated even, but for me, not quite satiated.

I sat on the sand, digging a hole. The hole began to fill with trickling water. Then the water began to flow faster, filling the hole until the hole disappeared under the rising tide which covered the sand, my legs, my body. I was sinking under the water. Falling.

Drowning. I awoke with a gargle, startling Mary out of her peaceful slumber.

God is stern in dealing with the arrogant, but to the humble He shows kindness. - Proverbs 3:34. Hubris. Pride. The mother of all sins. We build up illusions about our strengths, our prowess, our capabilities. We are full of flaws. Truly small in the eyes of the lord. Our dreams, pathetic. Spiritual blindness. In front of god we lose our illusions. We must lose our illusions to see God.

My flock was excited. They always were after a harsh sermon. They gathered around. Wanting to touch me. Sea of hands. Diamond rings. Dressed in their weekly best. Clean. Shined shoes. Glowing skin. Showing themselves off. Each sin committed in turn. I show them a mirror and they thank me for it. I'm no better. Worse. A hypocrite. All of the sins are reflected in my heart. Who am I to preach?

I was researching for a book: *The Seven Sins, a Modern Christian Primer*. It was to provide understanding and help for combating the temptations of life--something to meditate on for self-improvement. There were definitions for each Sin, and its opposite. There would be anecdotes; quotes from the Bible and from great saints; ways to incorporate clean living into a modern life. I wasn't exactly sure where it would go, but I knew the power, the familiarity, and the

impact of the sins on my parishioners. I knew that all of us were sinners. It takes constant work. I was writing it more for myself than for others. It wasn't an easy book to work on. Many hours were spent in the library, researching the history of sinning through the ages. Sin was a fascinating topic and there was plenty of material. I worked late. Didn't see much of Mary or the kids. My work was paramount, critical. I needed the context for myself.

Now the works of the flesh are plain: fornication, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, factions, envy, drunkenness, carousing, and the like. I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things shall not inherit the Kingdom of God." – Galatians 5:19-21

I was working late when Mary came in. That pale clean face. A little tired looking. She never wore makeup. She was devout. She never questioned; never doubted. The children were in bed. She always gave me space to work. My heavenly sermons. Her charities. Stairway to heaven. She put her hand on mine, and quietly told me she was worried. I had been remote. The children felt my coldness. I told her that I was busy with my book, my work. It was the pressure. I would soon be finished. Did she want to go

out this week? I felt hungry. Nothing in the cupboard. Old Mother Hubbard.

There was always a lot to do. I had my parish to run; missions to arrange; confessions to hear; funerals, weddings. The rituals of the blessed. I didn't see much of the children it is true. They had their friends, their schoolwork and I had my book. Mary was busy with her devotions too. Flowers for the church; potlucks; visiting the sick and needy. We had our routine, our rhythm. But sin was brewing in my heart. The worm was eating me from the inside. I started a slow fall.

She came to me in my dreams; nightmares. Black hair reaching down towards her ankles; gold bangles on her arms; kohl on her lids. I smelled bhuja, cinnamon. I reached out for her, knowing she was Lilith. Wanting her witchcraft. I felt my lips sinking into ginger and tamarind. I woke feeling sick.

There is more than one kind of greed. There is greed for possessions, money, houses, things to show off. There is greed for power, for strength, for honour. If we trust in the lord, we will not need to accumulate, always accumulate. We must simplify, divest, take nothing, focus on the eternal - the treasure waiting for us

beyond this life.

I stopped eating out. I thought initially it was the spices. Overindulgence; gluttony. My illness began as a kind of indigestion. I smelled the spices coming out of my pores at night. I tried to stay awake, but as soon as I drifted off she would come. Entering my bedroom as a butterfly before changing into a dark woman. An eastern version of the women I fed from as a baby. I awoke feverish, the sheets wet from sweat.

"Michael. Are you alright?! Michael!" Mary's voice was a faint tug, pulling me back. She brought home tinctures; herbal teas; said her prayers; tried to be patient. I needed more than tea. I was becoming weaker. Satan was trying to get me; targeting me. My pride was a red flag to him. "Michael!" I was moaning - pleasure mixed with agony.

"This can't go on. I want you to see my doctor". I went, just to please Mary, though I knew the large woman with iron grey hair and little sympathy couldn't help me. She prescribed a bland food diet, a range of pills to be taken daily and creams to rub on my neck and head.

Gluttony is the desire for excess. Too much food, too much pleasure, too strong a desire for things, for sex, for beauty, for love,

perfection, even for god. The only way to combat gluttony is to cut back. To slowly pare back on the addictive pull of pleasure until you no longer feel it.

I began to cut back on food altogether, reasoning that the antidote to hunger was to eat less; imagining that my illness was rooted in the carnal pleasures of diet. I spent long hours in prayer. Fasted for days at a time; disappeared on retreats which left my throat parched and head spinning. It didn't work. One day Mary came home from visiting the local retirement village to find me finishing a carton of ice cream. My head was in the freezer, my lips blue with cold and self-loathing. Her shock and my shame hung in the air; their acrid smells competing with the sticky scent of vanilla, until I exploded in a fit of rage, breaking plates, banging my head against the wall, throwing cups, spoons, anything I could find. This was my first fit—a total loss of control, but it wasn't the last.

I hardly knew what started them. Anger, wrath. I pronounced judgement on everyone. Anything could set me off. My son's guitar left on the floor, a spot on the wall, fly in the room, music on the stereo, my daughter running freely in the yard. All open portals for Satan to sneak in. To rob us of the life of devotion we had created. I had to stay vigilant.

Whoever is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment -

Matthew 5:22

I began buying whisky--the cheapest I could find so I wouldn't take too much pleasure in it. Just a small nip to help me sleep at night. To keep the visions away. It worked at first, but when a single glass didn't work and I woke bathed in the evidence of my sinful heart, I started drinking doubles, then triples. I was never hung-over, but the look in Mary's eyes as I dropped another empty bottle in the bin was worse than any headache. Her freckles had disappeared and in their place was a dull pallor. I knew I was destroying her. Destroying my children's innocence. Drink settled me, kept me from raging uncontrollably against my family. The people I loved. It was perversity which made me push them away; push God away. No! God had pushed me away. Left me with a meaningless dread in place of the certainty I had once known.

I was alone on a beach. The wave was off in the distance. It was cold. I felt the cold deep inside of me. Then I was not alone. She came out of the darkness. The wave was her hair. Around her neck was a necklace of tiny skulls. They began to crumble, and with them her face started aging, the flesh thinning, until she was no more than a skeleton. Then her skull began to crumble also, teeth falling into the sand as her watery hair spread outwards, washing over my face, drowning me. I reached out to fight; to defend myself and woke with my hands around Mary's neck,

choking her. I let go and Mary looked at me with pure hatred: horror mingled with disgust. I tried to explain but my words were garbled. It was the Devil's tongue.

*Can a man take fire to his bosom and his garments not be burned?"
- Proverbs 6:27*

Lust is about more than just sex. It is the craving for physical pleasures of all kinds, for comfort, for good things, for materialism. There is lust for power, for revenge, for pleasure in all its forms.

I entered my son's bedroom the next day. He was listening to some music--a popular modern band. I knew it, and said to myself as I walked in, this is normal. Lots of boys his age listen to this music, but he was just laying there, his face slack, and I saw the devil; I saw him. The devil was in the room, originating from the music he was playing, and although a part of me remained calm, watching, repeating gently that this music was just music, perhaps a little devoid of value and taste, but just music all the same, another part of me, the outward part, seemed to crack. I could hear the snapping, twigs in the coldest part of winter - brittle on the edges of their branches.

I fought him. I fought the beast at every turn. At night he was lust and gluttony, leaving me desperate with hunger and thirst, his

succubus torturing me. During the day he was wrath, an anger at me which misdirected itself towards those in whose eyes I was reflected. He was everywhere and nowhere. In my children's toys, clothes, book bags, in the crockery, the light bulbs, mirrors, a phantom insect buzzing in my ears until I was unable to hear. He was sloth, leaving me exhausted, unable to move, pinned to my bed with his heavy foot on my heart. He was pride, allowing me a few moments of freedom to believe I had conquered him, before he returned with his foul sulphur smell and pointed fingernails. He was greed, as I hid my whisky, drinking deeper and wanting more even before I was finished. I had no idea of what day it was. I lost my parish and had no work to do and felt only envy, coveting what I once had, wanting my vocation back; the vocation of my neighbours, the devotion of my parishioners, who had long since stopped coming to my frenzied sermons.

Mary was crying as she packed her bags. A strange high pitched whine came from her mouth in a long stream. It sounded inhuman. I didn't know whether her pain was real, or another illusion created for me by the devil. Another trial. Always trials. The children were at Mary's mother's. "you're no longer safe to be around"; "Refusing all help"; "Should be locked up"; sentences fell on the polished wood floor like marbles. I heard their tinny ping as they hit. Some

of the sentences bounced back up, hovering above us, butterflies blooming into flowers. Mary's face was swollen. The door shut with a bang and the flowers crumbled and fell.

I could continue no longer. My family was gone. I had lost everything, sitting alone in my empty house, which would soon disappear too. The parish was gone and I couldn't pay the mortgage. I no longer knew how to eat, to sleep. Basic function was gone, but in its place was an odd freedom. There was nothing left for the devil to take, and then, I knew.

It came over me with the rising of the sun one morning. There was no Devil. No God. The madness was my own. The Seven Deadly Sins were mine alone. Created by me, distorted by me towards my self destruction. I lay outside on the overgrown lawn, looking at the stars above, imagining myself a boy again, wondering about the heaven beyond. There was no heaven I knew now.

Some mystery remained though. I felt calm. My rage and madness had gone, probably temporarily, but for a moment I was still, even peaceful. I knew there was some truth under all this, something permanent, but not God. Not the religious father I had put in place of my own, but some wonder connected with the stars, the earth, the grassy smell coming from the lawn I lay on.

I went inside and found some curry powder in the cupboard. I shook it onto my hand and licked it. A shiver ran through me. I knew this exquisite pain, this hunger I'd been struggling with was a hunger for meaning. I realised with a start that the answer was in the family who had left, in the children who I had, like my own father and like the mythological father above, forsaken.

I would reclaim them. I would take back my life. Take my dear Mary's hand and tell her all this. Tell her about the mystery of life. Cleanse her of the overbearing hatred and pain we've been living with for all of these years. I wanted to sing. My heart was light. I was in love again and the sunshine radiated off the roofs of the buildings and houses. We would finally live. Finally know love and joy. "Mary!" I yelled in my enthusiasm, "Sean!"; "Liza!" I was walking. I wanted to see, to smell, to taste this world which I spent most of my life trying to escape. The main church was in high street. It was a beautiful old building undergoing renovation. You could climb the steps to a high point, step out of the door and see the entire city.

It was a cold day. Autumn was just coming and the breeze lifted my hair slightly. I stood there for a minute, and then jumped.

I was falling; rushing past sky, clouds, birds, gargoyles. I felt the air against my skin, pulling me back to the life I once had. Years passed by in seconds as my body tumbled forward, fingers opening towards wind and cold. I saw my wife, making dinner in the kitchen, her skirt moving slightly as she worked, tidying away the papers which always seemed to accumulate around the place, washing her face in the morning, water splashing up on the sink. I saw my children, laughing as they raised their arms to be picked up; toddlers racing around the house on their little cars, cutting up pieces of paper on their plastic play table; throwing a ball around in the yard, dancing to music in their rooms. I saw the grass I mowed every morning, soft, tidy. The colours seemed so intense--my wife's shining face; my children picking up sticks and leaves, my yard with its bicycles, swingset and beachballs, my study filled with books, paperwork, an unfinished book. There were birthday parties, pin the tail, ring-a-ring-a, duckduckgoose, bags full of chocolate, masks and blowers, teddy bears; laughter; tears; horserides; books; the dog chasing a thrown bone; all appeared before me as I sped downwards, wishing for time. I needed more time to hold the images; to watch my story, which flickered, dwindled, and died, as I hit the ground.

The System
by
Matthew Ward

At Henderson's Hobby Shop, Lewis Glenko wiped his mouth of excess saliva on the front of his fading black t-shirt. The greasily chubby 45 year old unemployed man gazed lovingly into a glass display case at a model frigate.

"Beautiful specimen, Jake," said Lewis.

"Yep, and it'll all be yours in... how many more dole payments was it?" Jeff said, dryly. "And, by the way, the name's 'Jeff'," and he pointed to his name badge.

Lewis closed one eye and used his fingers as a calculator. "Two," he said. "I've done away with the mobile phone and I sold that old Commodore that was costing me a fortune in oil anyway, and now I only eat every second day!" He was pleased with himself.

Jeff smiled, too, even though he really thought Lewis was a selfish and irresponsible prat for wasting thousands of dollars of unemployment benefits on a toy. He feigned enthusiasm: "Wow, so that's only a month, then?"

“Yeah!” said Lewis, buzzing with excitement.

“So, you still gonna pop in every now and again to have a look at it before you buy it?” asked Jeff.

“Every chance I get, buddy boy,” said Lewis.

“Well, you better hurry up, buddy boy,” said Jeff, “cos of course you know Clark Kosky’s got his eyes on your frigate...”

“What?” said Lewis, alarmed. “But I have my name on it,” he stammered. “I’ve paid the deposit, remember? I’ve paid my hard-earned money towards buying it as well, not Kosky – not that... 6 foot 2 inch freak!”

“Well,” said Jeff, smirking, “freak or no freak, Clark Kosky said he can pay up front...”

Lewis’s face went pale.

“But don’t worry,” continued Jeff, facetiously, “I’ll give you ya deposit back...”

“That bastard Kosky wouldn’t have fifteen dollars,” Lewis pleaded, “let alone the fifteen hundred dollars it costs. He’s having you on,

mate, believe me.”

“Maybe I heard he won Lotto or something,” Jeff suggested. “He is getting this money from somewhere...”

Lewis’s eyes now pegged from side to side in a sudden panic. “Shit, he didn’t, did he?” Lewis asked.

Jeff puffed his cheeks up, shrugged, with a look that said, ‘I don’t know, maybe...’.

Lewis looked at the wall for some five seconds, then said: “You wouldn’t let him have it, would you, mate?”

The huge Lord of the Rings clock on the wall chimed half-past Gandalf.

“Nuh,” said Jeff, “he didn’t win Lotto, mate.” Lewis managed a half-arsed smile, and even a geeky giggle. Jeff’s index fingers pointed like pistols and his eyes said, ‘Gotcha!’, and then he laughed, maniacally.

Lewis’s smile disappeared – he shook his head, remembering something. “Shit,” he screamed, “the rally! Gotta go, Doug, see ya tomorrow, dickhead!”

“That’s ‘Jeff’, you fucking jerk!” Jeff said, angrily. “You said it before...” but Lewis didn’t hear him, he was already out the door. Lewis marched up the long street, his medium length black-dyed hair moving with the breeze, his little round \$5 sunglasses slipping down his spotty nose, his jeans had holes in the knees and seat, and his shoes were worn down. He carried a grungy black backpack on his left shoulder and two hand-made signs in his right hand. One sign said: ‘GAMBLING RUINED MY LIFE’, and the other: ‘GAMBLING ISN’T WORTH THE RISK’ and there was a cartoon picture of a horse painted on one, and the horse was crying tears that looked like coins and dice.

He smiled as he reached the rally point: the T.A.B. He stored his backpack under a nearby bench and held his signs up high. He was there protesting like he did every day, and like every day he was the only one protesting: This was a one man crusade.

Inside the T.A.B., 42 year old Ruth Nash stood behind a counter and took money from desperate, depressive types who fed betting cards through a machine that sucked and punched in a distinctive, mechanical way. She took their money and then tucked it away in a till.

When Ruth had no customers on the counter, she walked out into the betting room to pin up and take down the odds sheets,

occasionally rubber-stamping 'SCRATCHED' alongside a horse's or greyhound's name.

The customers at this T.A.B. were overwhelmingly middle-aged men. They stood around with betting tickets in their paws, and they smoked. Every now and then they looked up at the televisions that listed in day-glo colours the winners and losers, and there were also two older TVs showing races on screens that flickered from colour to black and white and back again.

Then Ruth heard a familiar rant from outside: "Don't Gamble! The Tee-Ay-Bee is ruining our lives. You don't need gambling, but it needs you!" It was Lewis.

Ruth stormed outside and shouted at Lewis: "Piss off, whydoncha? You'll scare everyone off."

"Well, that'd be good, wouldn't it?" Lewis said. "They won't be gambling, then, will they?"

"No, it wouldn't be good," said Ruth. "They'll go, I'll get the sack and then who'll pay my rent and my car loan?"

"Why do you need a car for, Ruthie?" Lewis said. "Just foot it, like I do."

Ruth raised up her hands in mock surrender like she'd been through all this before, and she had. "Foot it?" she said, "I'd sooner die!"

"And you will, Ruthie, you will, if you keep on slaving away for Satan in his Palace of Sin." The 'Palace of Sin' bit he did in a Hammer Horror movie baritone voice.

Ruth was calm but looked tired of this scenario. "Leave, Lewis," she said, sighing, "I won't tell you again."

21 year old Herbert Eddings, a 3rd year science major at a well-known Sydney university hit 'redial' on his home phone. Ruth answered. She placed the phone receiver between her left cheek and shoulder, crimping it there while putting money in the till and handing cash back to a customer at the same time. She said to the caller: "Yeah..."

"Hi, it's me," said Herbert.

"What do you want, Herbert? I'm at work, you know. You can't just ring me whenever you want..."

"I know, I know, dearest," said Herbert. "Y'see, I have found the perfect name..."

“And what name is that?” she asked.

“Lanthanum’...”

A customer came up to Ruth’s counter. He was a man in his 60s. In an Eastern European accent, he said: “What’s the best Pisces in the third at Randwick?”

Ruth put Herbert on hold, leaving him with easy listening rock.

Ruth whispered to the man: “I have one, but it’ll cost ya...”

The man waited, stared, and then said a bit loud: “What?”

Ruth quickly scribbled on a bit of paper: ‘It’ll cost you \$50 to find out’.

The man nodded, opened up his wallet, took out \$50 and handed it to Ruth – she palmed the money and slipped it into her pants pocket, then she wrote something on another slip of paper. It said: ‘Lizzy Matters, 100/1’.

The man smiled, filled in a card with a pen tied to the counter, pushed the card through the machine, then payed Ruth \$1,000 in \$50 notes. As he was going, Ruth passed the man another card; it

said: 'I have an Aquarian in the 5th at Brisbane...'. The man chuckled through half rotten, half gold teeth and said, softly: "Aquarians are such dreamers, darlink – they have no ambition. It'll never win." Then he walked away to the corner of the room where he washed down two Nurofens with a couple of swigs of cheap hipflask vodka.

Ruth pressed the recall button down on the phone and listened to Herbert trying to sing Neil Diamond's 'Crunchy Granola Suite'.

"And what were you wanking on about before?" she said.

"Oh... Yeah, the name, sweetie, the name... 'Lanthanum'," he said, excitedly.

"What the hell is that?" she asked.

"Lanthanum's a grey, metallic element in the aluminium family."

Ruth said: "Well, it's not gonna be in my family," and she instinctively rubbed her belly.

"Well, I want it," Herbert insisted, having a bit of a tantrum.

She said: "Well, tough, I'm not calling my baby Lanathem for

anybody or anything – ”

He corrected her: “That’s Lanthanum, sweetie.”

“Whatever. Keep thinkin’,” she said, and she hung up the phone.

A semi-attractive, suited woman, looking a lot like a lawyer or at least a lawyer’s clerk came up to Ruth’s counter and put a betting card in the machine. The machine spat the card back, the woman handed Ruth \$100, she took the card, said thank you, turned around and walked away.

Lawyer woman, as we’ll call her, walked three or four steps, stopped, then turned and walked back to the counter. She smiled, then said quietly: “I need a Scorpio, a Cancer and a Capricorn for a trifecta, and she winked her left eye.

“\$150 to know,” said Ruth, “plus extra for the bet, of course.”

Lawyer woman handed Ruth three 50 dollar notes, which Ruth took and stuffed in her pocket with the other money.

Outside, Lewis had made an elderly Chinese man angry by taking his betting tickets. “Give them back, you lunatic!” said the Chinese man, reaching around Lewis’s back, trying to get them.

“Not until you agree to come with me,” said Lewis, “to sign up to a 12 step programme to quit gambling.”

Inside, Ruth fumed. “One moment,” she said to the Lawyer Woman, and left the counter, walking out into the betting room.

Lawyer woman looked at her watch and panicked. She said: “Look, I’m in a hurry, I’m supposed to be getting the mail, couldn’t you just – ”

“I won’t be a sec, love,” said Ruth and she hurried outside.

“Lewis saw Ruth and smiled. “Ruthie, my dearest, help me make this Chinaman see sense – ”

Ruth smiled through pursed lips and drove her right knee through Lewis’s groin. The betting cards fell like white doves to the ground. She picked the cards up and handed them to the now laughing Chinese man. She then turned and power-walked back inside to her place at the counter.

Ruth wrote something on a bit of paper and handed it to the lawyer woman who read it and then put a betting ticket into the machine, reached into her bag and handed over \$10,000 in new 100 dollar bills.

Ruth's eyes bulged to see so much cash at the one time.

Lawyer woman said: "Just borrowing it for half an hour..."

Ruth's shrug said, 'Whatever – I really don't want to know', and she gave the woman her betting ticket.

The phone rang again, Ruth picked it up – sure enough it was Herbert. "I really like 'Lanthanum'," he said.

"How did you pick this name, Herbert?" she asked.

"I tossed my lucky coin down onto the Periodic Table of Elements. At first it landed on 'Einsteinium', but who's gonna call their kids 'Einsteinium'?" and he laughed in a snorty kind of way.

Ruth gently put the phone on the hook, leaving Herbert muttering on about the positives of 'Lanthanum' compared with 'Einsteinium'.

Outside, two cops were now trying to separate Lewis from a couple of disgruntled punters. Lewis has taken a left hook to the face from one of them. "Sinner! Gambling is a Sin! Face your demons!" Lewis shouted.

One man said to Lewis: "Even money I hit you again," and his mate

laughed.

“Come on, lads,” said one of the cops, pleading for calm.

Ruth rushed outside and told the cops: “Take him away.”

Lewis protested: “C’mon, Ruthie, give me a break. At least I’m doin’ something with my life.”

“Doing something? Yeah, you’re being a proper pain in the arse.”

“But gambling is a sin.”

“It wasn’t that long ago that you liked gambling as much as you like me. That’s how we met, remember? Here at the T.A.B.?”

Lewis nodded. The cops still held him by the arms, and he said: “Come back to me, Ruthie. I’ve changed. I’m good. I don’t drink anymore. I don’t smoke anymore. I’m gettin’ myself together. I’ve had to, for our baby.”

“It’s not our baby, Lewis. I’ve never even had sex with you.”

“I know, that’s what’s so miraculous about it.”

The two cops looked at each other and tried not to laugh.

“We can call him Jesus 2!” said Lewis, excitedly.

“Forget about it, Lewis,” she said and she walked towards the door. She heard Lewis sigh and turned back and saw him, being held by the two policemen, his head bowed, and she felt sorry for him. “Let him go, guys, I’ll watch he doesn’t cause any more trouble.”

The cops tipped their hats and walked away.

“Thanks, Ruthie,” said Lewis.

“Whatever,” she said and she walked back inside just as the TVs went on the fritz. The punters moaned. One impatient sod shouted out: “Hey! How ‘bout fix’n the fuk’n TVs, lady!”

Ruth skated up, took a broomstick, booted the handle into the side of one of the TVs, and amazingly all of them hissed into action again. There were cheers and grizzled smiles all around. Ruth rubbed her temples. “I gotta do something with my life,” she said.

Lewis came inside, walked up to the counter and said: “Please Ruthie, I’ll do anything to get us back together.”

“Together? We never were together. We were in the same coffee shop, once! I read the paper, you talked about yourself from two tables away.”

“But I love you.”

“You really love me?” Ruth said with a hint of malice in her eyes.

“Sure, you know I do.”

“Then I want you to look the tiger in the mouth.”

“What tiger?”

“To show your love for me I want you to place a bet on a horse.”

“I can't. You know I can't.”

“Then fuck off. Leave me alone. I never want to see you again.”

“But I am a gambling addict. If I have a bet I may never stop.”

“I have faith in you, Lewis. Listen, you know how ex-smokers will sometimes carry a pack of smokes in a sleeve?”

“Why?”

“It’s to show that the addiction is always around the corner and that they are always battling it. The T.A.B. is your pack of smokes in the sleeve...”

“A T.A.B. wouldn’t fit in my sleeve,” said Lewis, scratching his head in a puzzled way.

“You’re missing the point,” said Ruth.

“It’d stretch the sleeve for starters, and the weight’d kill me. Imagine a building on top of you...”

“It’s a metaphor.”

“Oh...”

“Okay, here it is: have one bet.”

“I don’t have any money.”

“I’ll shout you a ticket.”

“But shouting means paying you back.”

“Okay, I’m ‘giving’ you the ticket. You need the money, right? You wanted to pay off that toy plane, didn’t you? The one you’re always going on about?”

“Plane? No, it’s a not a plane, it’s a frigate.”

“Frigate, yeah, whatever. Well, if the horse wins, you can buy that friggin’ frigate today. If the horse doesn’t win, well it’s my money and you don’t lose anything.”

“One time?”

“Yeah.”

“And you’ll go out with me?”

The phone rang again; Ruth picked it up and dropped it without answering it.

Ruth sighed. “We’ll go and have coffee. And we’ll go from there. Here’s the ticket. \$500 on a trifecta. The horses are already picked.”

Lewis thought it over, then noticed Clark Kosky waiting outside, having a cigarette and tossing a coin.

He nodded as he put the card in the machine.

• • •

At two o'clock a dozen or so people left the T.A.B., some with smiles on their faces; the others, like the Eastern European man, staring into the afternoon while symbolically tearing up tickets.

The lawyer woman paced out into the street, carrying her briefcase. She walked up to Clark Kosky and handed him a wad of \$100 notes. He reached under his sweaty t-shirt, pulled out a gold envelope.

Lewis walked out, smiling as he counted his money. The smile disappeared when he saw his rival Clark Kosky. Clark Kosky saw Lewis and glared at him.

Lewis did the same; then bolted down the road.

Clark Kosky followed, leaving the lawyer woman who took out of the envelope several 10 x 8 photos and negatives of her sneaking wet kisses with a woman who was probably not her husband.

Lewis pulled out his mobile. The phone at Henderson's Hobby Shop began to ring.

Lawyer woman squatted down and with a lighter set fire to the envelope, photos and negatives.

Jeff said: "Hello..."

"Jack, you bastard!"

"Who is this?" said Jeff, annoyed.

"It's Lewis! I got the money and I am coming for my frigate! You hold it for me or I'll chew you balls off!"

"You fucking toad, you better not sell that frigate from under me!" yelled out Clark Kosky, already getting tuckered out.

"Really..." said Jeff, smirking.

Lawyer woman smiled as she walked to the bank, working on the fake migraine that would be in full flight by the time she got back to the office.

50 metres from the shop, Clark Kosky was out of breath and fell down with a thud. Lewis saw this and laughed so much he lost balance and he, too, fell down. They both got up and lumbered forward. Clark Kosky reached Lewis and gave him a dead leg with

his fist.

Lewis hobbled, took off a shoe and clocked Clark Kosky right behind the left ear, taking him down.

Lewis closed in on the shop only to hear maniacal laughter from the roof. It was Jeff.

“Chew my balls off will ya, Lewis! Fucking Toad am I, Clark Kosky!”

Clark Kosky went into the foetal position and started to cry. Lewis went down on his knees with hands on head and watched in horror as Jeff set fire to the frigate with a Wilkinson Hobby Blowtorch (on sale, \$22-99).

The Card Game

by

Matthew Ward

The impromptu card game had been very financially rewarding for Gabrielle Allen. She took yet another crispy ten dollar note from her sizable pile of winnings and placed it slap-happily in the centre of the table. She tried keeping a poker face, but in this game of cards it was difficult as she knew for certain that the other people in the room – two men and a woman – couldn't beat her.

Gabrielle had learned how to play cards a long time ago from her Indian parents back in the home country (England), who taught her that sometimes it is tactful in a card game to feign ignorance, then clean up in the end when the opposition's guards are down; this time was no exception and she went in for the kill.

Gabrielle's 43 year old crow's feet danced about her eyes as she uttered: "So, any more bets from you suckers?"

Silence.

Gabrielle fanned out her cards on the lemon-coloured '70s tabletop – she had a royal flush. With zeal she scooped up her winnings

with a right-clawed hand and took a slurp of tepid, cheap scotch from a peanut butter jar with her left. "Ah!" she exclaimed when the booze hit the spot; and she gave her chest a punch to help it down.

The older of the two men stared blankly as he let out a slow-leaking fart, and Gabrielle cackled: it didn't matter how smelly it got in there, she was rolling in cash and nothing could ruin her good mood.

Meanwhile, black suit-wearing Jonas Seldon walked down a dimly-lit corridor in the same building. His grey-flecked black hair neatly combed across his autumn years head, his expression one of investigation. He stopped, listened, his eyes flicking from side to side, and he headed in the direction of celebratory laughter.

Jonas poked his head into the staff room where a gloating Gabrielle sat opposite three unimpressed opponents; their bodies slumped slightly in defeat, their elbows in their laps and cards in their hands.

"What in God's name is going on here?" Jonas said, angrily.

"Card game, Mister Seldon, sir," said Gabrielle, facetiously. "It's okay, though, we're all on our lunch breaks," and she smiled as she said: "We know our rights – you can't do nuthin."

• • •

That afternoon, Gabrielle Allen reluctantly cleaned out her locker of personal belongings. She was annoyed and crushed at being sacked after five years of loyal service to the Company. She had spoken to her union rep several times in the past hour but as usual he was of no use. What did I pay my union dues for? – she wondered. Her boss Jonas Seldon had it in for her – she knew it. But, in the end, it seemed that no matter how unfair it was to her, there were grounds for dismissal when an assistant to the Mortician at a funeral home decided to get drunk at lunch and play cards with three dead people.

Eternal Penance

By

Hareendran Kallinkeel

A zigzagging stream,
Twisting and curling,
Clattering over slippery rocks,
Glistening pebbles
Studding the bed,
Flows to eternity.

The silent rocks,
Cursed to forbearance,
Lie motionless,
Glinted by the waning moon
And rising sun,
Wait for penance.

Transgressive Whims

by

Hareendran Kallinkeel

She suffocates,
Suffering my probing fingers.
I learn the pattern of zigzag
Through her wrinkled skin.

She doesn't tell me
What sin is,
She allows me to know it,
Let it pulsate,
So that I feel the vibration
And learn it,
The chill buried beneath.

My fingers thrust,
Her scabby arm shields her eyes.
Grey dreadlocks, coiled like serpents,
Wriggle on her shrunken breasts.

My waywardness glide through
Firmness that melts
To my transgressive whims.

In the depths,
The stony solidness
Of a frozen zone
Receives me.

I wrap my arms
Around her chest,
And feel the warmth
That transcends generations,
To sensitize me to sin,
To prod me to awakening.

Sunspot
by
Magdalena Ball

On the Earth facing side
of the sun
wider than Jupiter
crackling solar flares
silently heat the atmosphere
with coronal mass ejections.

The geomagnetic storm
of my rapidly beating heart
tilts and flashes
an Aurora begging for attention
its dancing beauty
belying the absence
which follows immediately after
or the violence that gave it birth.

Swallowing solar sized pride
burns like a Taurid fireball
all down the esophagus
while my eyelids soften
pretending you haven't just
shown me your dark spot
the hot ions of rejection
on the coldest day of the year.

The Chain

by

Magdalena Ball

At first there was nothing
you spoke of faith
tradition
I saw a rusted chain
linking the ankles of
a billion dead men.

You spoke of history
obligation
I saw showers of
poison gas
naked women stripped of
dignity
naked men stripped of fight.

I wanted distance
separation
I was young and didn't know
the clicking I heard
when I rolled over at night
or walked down the street
carefree in youth
innocent of God and the
demons filling my family's past
was the clinking of a rusted chain
around my own ankles
the burning smell when I showered
my own flesh.

Betelgeuse

by

Magdalena Ball



In the critical moment
before you blow
your fusion almost exhausted
maybe just a few million years
or a second on earth
time being illusory
when the vastness of your life
the swelling and contracting of your matter
your billion year old breath
becomes a single exhalation.

Alpha Orionis
over 160 million Suns
could nestle in your stellar body
instead there's only me.
hiding behind your magnetic force
listening to the noisy beating
of your fiery heart
I close my eyes
and inhale
waiting, and hating
your promised demise
and my own insignificance
while you prepare yourself
to become a cold and impersonal
Supernova

The softness of your cosmic rays
no more than a memory
a mango
too beautiful to look at
with the naked eye
and too exacting
to allow yourself a laugh
in the critical moment
before the blow.

The Fading

by

Magdalena Ball

in the sienna gasp
eyelids closed tightly against life
you create your own shadow
the steel bars
of your deviant past
shatter the illusion of freedom
I continue to cling to
with inappropriate desperation
useless desire
a hunger you can't ever satisfy
floating the narrow
staircase
towards Cyclops
allseeing, unforgiving, utterly uncaring
that seductive nothing
you've been straining
towards
since the day you were born

there's no backward glance
no tiny wave
from the arc of your clenched
hands
only the last smoky exhalation
out of the icy
cavern
of your
phantom lips

Event Horizon

by

Magdalena Ball

Matter collapsed to infinite density
the curvature of your spacetime spine
extreme
your beautiful body edges
the point of no return
my disembodied voice
a cosmological constant
begging you to hold back
the raging hunger
you denied for years.
Stay.

Traced out by critical light rays
that can never escape
you sit alone on the event horizon
the inward pull of gravity
overwhelming
locked off
to stupid mortals
like me
terrified at the vortex
you lean towards
ready to cross the threshold.
Stay.

What draws you forward?

Is the naked singularity
of your imminent
big bang

more provocative than the warmth of human embrace
the randomness of
your madness
which shakes the beauty from your hair
leaving me alone
in the coldest space
while redshift
increases beyond bounds to infinity
forget it
glory's nothing against the simple truth of presence
stop your velocity
and stay.

Virtual Communication

by

Magdalena Ball

before technological singularity
it was all anticipation of pleasure
or pain avoidance
human desire
reduced to a rock and hard place
your head a hyped film full of
black leather and karate
you feared the coming of intelligent machines
hid under your electronic pillow
stocked your cupboards with essentials
and fitted your body with electrodes
ready for the war

you never guessed at the revolution
within
an interface so intimate
you'd sacrifice art and morality
against the overwhelming fear
of age and death
trade love for efficiency
superhuman intelligence
for consciousness

as you continue to rebuild
body and brain
accelerating through the singularity
at critical speeds
communicating in networks
of variable bandwidths
discarding dinosaurs of speech

wasted time over le mot juste
and the catatonic nature of your forgotten past

spare a thought for poor old
Homo-sapien
scratching her mortality
with a broken piece of wood
and a few salty tears

Lancashire bloods

by

Graham Hayward

Sitting by a bistro,
in the city,
I was mulling the
flavors of a fantastic
Panini Italiano.
It was warm
down in Chelsea,
antique in my corner.

The bricks
in a wall,
a broken,
crippled wall,
spoke to me.
They grew thoughts
to me,
single ingots
of countless sagas.

They were Lancashire bloods,
new in 1900,
as books,
on shelves,
unread,
noble novels
without words.

Each had felt the
grip
of a chiseled hand,
a gentle push
atop wet mortar.

They took their place
beside
one another,
each brick,
every course,
placed there
by a mason,
assisted perhaps
by an apprentice.
(all brick touched)

a thought, or wish,
attached to each.

When he first knelt
by the cornerstone,
had he been content?
Had he a wife
and children,
debts unpaid?

For sure
I'd felt
what he had that day,
during
the third course,
there had been tears,
a funeral
for his father
he'd attended that morning.

Pigeons crowded
the lonely pavilion,
beside the mason,
and the
brick by his side.
Each red brick,
a memory,
a moment,
flower,
year,

season,
smile,
parade.

An arm,
a hand,
his,
a brick,
a trowel's tap,
lilt of mortar,
knees to earth,
another course
toward sky.

Storied stories,
each wall
a prince,
hand hewn
by kings,
Lancashire bloods,
in course
atop course,
lime and sand,
water and lunches,
and walks
by the walls.

Lovely tales
entail,
once the brick
leaves
the kiln's
bake...

Their stories
begin.

Mouse Trap

by

Graham Hayward

Tiny fuss
from the little
brown mouse.

Smear of
peanut's butter
had lured her
from a closet.

She'd made
this house
her home,
when November
showed its teeth.

She came in
where
the cat came
out.
Through a hole
in
the door,
engineered
by occupiers
of this cabin
near the trees.

They'd left
in a hurry noise,
in a smelly steel
box.
rolling
away

crunching as they
rolled.
they made noise
where quiet
kept always.

They made odors
with strange
bags,
burned what
they carried,
on a box
inside the box.

She'd spied
from beneath
the leaves,
near August's end.

They'd walked,
holding
the cat that
walked through
the hole
in the back door.
Strange, how
they picked
it up,
when it wanted
to walk.

Though fat,
a cat it was,
it walked faster
than they.

Now, brown mouse,

she struggled
more,
not interested

in peanut's butter,
but her,
struggle with her breath.
Tight, behind
her head,
just tight.

She'd watched
them build
the box,
from underneath
the leaves,
she should
have stayed
beneath
the leaves.

Just beside
the box.

and outside,

no where near,

the trap----

Wee Prey

by

Graham Hayward

Sun,
poked through holes
in the barn.
Swallows darted
as pendulant hints.

By a stall in the dirt
a hobo slept,
disturbed
in his slumber,
he pawed at his maw.

An ant took hiatus,
whilst taking
his jaunt,
between this
drifter's
nose, and his sullied
drifter lip.

Antenna tuning
suspicious,
of the fingers,
grazing in the beard.
little lost
loser of its way,
On a trip across a face.

A voyager
On top of itinerant,
Roving the rover,
A spook,
In the whiskers

Of the vagabond.

Neither knew
either,
nor knew at all
now.
But one had the other
on his back
in the barn.

The passenger
on the pilgrim
retraced a few steps
just missed
by the fingers
of the misplaced mister
under he.

Suddenly, with no warning.

Ambushed by
by a tongue
an involuntary
rush
from the mouth,
of the stray snoozer.

The wary
ant,
a sleeper's
nibble.
Rambler ate rambler
in the building
built for neither.

Horses had witnessed,
though none would tell,
of the monotonous
murder
in the barn
here today.

The wayfarer
would waken
one ant fatter,
before they had met,
while one slept
and the other,
tried tending business,

in the barn.



The Misfits of Mary Katherine

by

Graham Hayward

Brothers not as kin,
But as a kindred three
under asunder sailors
In the bilge of the Mary Katherine.

Banished to the bowels
For mistakes,
Made on the bridge.
Under sail,
One of them slept,
When from the crow's nest,
He was to watch.

Toll of rum
Had taken him,
During the throws
Of a sail at dusk.
A spiny reef
Ripped Mary's oak,
She took the sea
into her bilge.

Another misfit,
fended orders,
Polish the binnacle,
Bring blond back to the teak.
He spat tobacco
in the ruttred face
Of the portly potentate
On command.

Lucky,

He wasn't hauled to keel,
Just handed
Down below.
In the bilge
Beside the others,
Including the bastard
That slept in sails.

Brilliant gloom,
Down there,
Below the decks.
In the soup
By the sea,
Squeezed there,
By the soaking oakum,
A seep
Through Mary's wound.

Shining the compass,
Sanding teak,
Seemed a reverie,
They wished
Were there and real.

The billowing schooner
Took her breath from
The sky.
Cleaving the ocean,
And leaving
A wake of brindled foam.

The crystal
Of sun dried salt
Lent a glint
to her broad black transom.
While ligaments
Of gulls,
Stole scraps
from the spiraling brine.

Another brother,

From the swarthy dark
Below the water's line,
Raven in the dark,
Blinded by a cannon's powder,
Lucky the ball
Hadn't found him too.
No good for his complexion,
Nor apparatus for sight at sea.

Traveling below the broadswords
Of the others
Up above,
They listened to the lashing,
Of more brothers
On the way.

Collectively,
They hoped down there,
That Orders would be conceded,
In the nest,
Eyes peeled,
wakeful in those sails.
The shallows
Might be avoided,
And they'd all see light again.

Salute the injured ship,
The Mighty Mary Katherine.

Sugar Jen

by

Graham Hayward

Formica, faded
under covered cakes,
bear's claws,
pies, pecan,
near donuts under glaze.

The diner was home
to sugar Jen,
or,
home away from hers,
she was known
to say.

Brown polyester,
wrapped sugar Jen's life,
sallow asunder,
fluorescent skies,
her atrophied heart,
all but there,
but it was.

She perused the wants,
while serving people,
on mushroomed topped stools,
grilled to their papers.

Cheese burger faces,
by the French fried
boutique.

Sugar Jen sallied
near the stove
paying rent.

Sugar Jen rallied
on a couch
near a pail,
hot water bloomed
around her tight toes,
as the diner screamed,
tomorrow was as near,
as all tomorrows are.

She slept,
tender as touched,
by the hot grill's fire.

Sugar Jen woke,
ghost dreads in her head,
past dreams
past dogs,
past loves in her head.

In bed, in the safe,
in the world she kept,
so safe,
so sacred was the world
she kept.

She bet on the dogs,
who stole
her weak heart,
she fished clay pots
while planting spring
flowers.
Seas of dreams
washed,
and tears fed the flowers.

But sugar Jen
scrubbed,
and fancied those
dogs.
for if dreams stopped,

and the dogs met
the flowers,
why would she want,
what she could,
not have now?

Sugar Jen wept,
and fed the flowers.

Born

by

Graham Hayward

The rain came
and through the sky
It fell.
Made mud cradles
filled fish homes
and a farmer smiled.

Water opened
worsted wills healed
the silver beads found
green corn.
While she washed
in a brown cherry bucket.
The last of his love,
was drawn by soft sponge.

The locusts made quiet.
The thunder's wind pushed,
thin air grew cool
as low clouds grew muscle.
Sunlight was there,
in the wake of the rain.

And,
as the river rose,
one mighty inch,
her water touched new soil.
An egg,
was found,

and you were born.

Alba
(for Atoosa)
by
Raymond P. Hammond

Nightingales flutter about the barred window
Singing every lover's song

Inside the barren concrete walls
Purity that once stayed fate is again raped
From your battered body the moon's shadow
Lights faceless men time and time and time again
Rifles rest in one hand, pistols cocked the other

"We cannot take the life of a virgin"

Father, the Great Healer, answered prayers
And smuggled pills that would expel
Any seed's soul
Ill-conceived to a summary damnation

Skies gray with daybreak

Consummatum est

Larks silenced
By the crack
Of executioner's song

Just Jizzing

by

Raymond P. Hammond

I lie naked
In the mountain stream
Face up
Fresh water rushing around my body
 Chilled by the water
 Warmed by the sun
Beaming through the trees
My penis periscoping
Skyward fighting
Against the current
 You come to me
Kneeling into the brisk waters
Nipples erect as you straddle me
My eyes close as I see your hair
Wisping in the breeze
 Leaves shudder overhead

My eyes open to see stained
bathroom walls. The only chill
is the toilet seat stuck to my ass.
I look down, dick in hand, and realize
there is no fucking point.

Two Poems

by

Lee Stringer

1.

High above
Where dreamers bend
From beds all fluff and white
Mere man has dared to ascend
In fire-breathing flight.

With arrogance
And turbine thrust
Steel-gray cabins soar
And shake the earth
And whip the dust
A bird's sky never more.

2.

I remember
Being stretched out
In the lap of a perfect, breezeless summer afternoon
Watching a single-prop Cherokee scratch against the sky,
Listening to the sound of child laughter
Sprinkled from the garden hose next door.
Like diamonds exploding.

The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln

By M. Stefan Strozier
(www.mstefanstrozier.org)

A Production of La Muse Venale Acting Troupe
(www.lamusevenale.org)

And

World Audience, Inc.
(www.worldaudience.org)

The world premiere of *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* was April 13-May 7th, 2006, Thursdays-Sundays (except Easter), at Where Eagles Dare Theater (347 West 36th Street, NYC).

Characters/Actors (alphabetically, actor):

Ulysses Grant	Greg Adair
General Robert E. Lee	Douglas Caine
Mary Surratt	Maureen Chandler
Edward Everett	John Chatterton
Junius Booth Jr.	Robert Cross
Mary Ann Booth	Judeth DeMott
Abraham Lincoln	Justin Ellis
Frederick Douglass	Reginald Ferguson
Edwin Booth	William J. Gowney
Asia Booth Laura	Ida Lamberti
Aide de Camp	Sunrise Marks
Lewis Powell	Paul Mischeshin
General Longstreet	Ross Pivec
Lucy Hale	Katharine Poklemba
Douglass's Understudy	Rob Richardson
Mary Todd Lincoln	Mary Riley
John H. Surratt	Aaron Sandler

David E. Herold
John Wilkes Booth
General Sheridan
George A. Atzerodt

Matt Slavin
Josh Stamell
M. Stefan Strozier
McGregor Wright

Director
Assistant director
Dramaturge
Lighting technician
Stage manager
Set design

Alan Kanevsky
David Segretto
John Chatterton
Leck Dzie
Eliot Lanes
Jean-Claude Villaréal

Foreword

The most famous assassin in America, arguably, still remains John Wilkes Booth. What motivates a well-respected actor, socialite, and entrepreneur to commit such a heinous crime, an act that he knew would live forever in infamy? To truly understand those motivations one must give up his or her predisposition to accepted history, and come to the story fresh. One will discover that JWB was a true Romantic in every way, not unlike Lord Byron or Shelly.

Strozier gives an even and unbiased view that allows audiences to experience history for themselves and decide whether or not Lincoln's fate was sealed long before his inauguration speech for his second term of office. Was Lincoln a tyrant? The danger for a director of *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* is underestimating the integral part of all the players. At twenty characters there is

temptation to believe only Lincoln, Booth and Mary Todd are to be concerned with. To do so would undermine much of the meaning and motivation of the play. Even some of the simplest and smallest lines have weight, as when Asia Booth remarks, “The snow falls relentlessly. How can anyone survive?” her concern is for someone. That someone may be her husband, as she later speaks of him, while he is not present at a holiday. Another important aspect of this play is its construction. Each scene stands alone, almost removed from the play as a whole. Though each scene seems independent, there are a number of themes that run throughout the course of the play. As a Director or a Player, one needs to acknowledge and identify those themes. The major themes are: tyranny; the prisoner exchange issue; and, the rights of journalists and ordinary American citizens, and others. Making connections strengthens the play and joins the scenes together.

For actors playing historic roles, there are dangers to avoid. Try to avoid the pitfall of unintentionally creating caricatures. As with any play, fictional or not, the actor must first start with their own instruments. No two actors come to a role with the same background or training. I feel an actor must portray his or her part, initiating it from what comes inside. Then, by breaking down the play, and analyzing a character’s needs, wants and desires the actor will have fully realized the role. The back story and traditions are subservient to the main course, that of the script and portrayal

of the characters therein. Of course, one must stay true to the time period and style but the one constant is we are all human, and so are the characters being portrayed. People throughout time have the same emotions and basic needs. People's thoughts have been so long inundated with American folklore and legend, this telling of Lincoln's story may not change many minds. Perhaps, over time, that may change. For now, you can decide.

Alan Kanevsky, director

New York 4/5/06

Act I

Scene I

Setting: November 19, 1863, Gettysburg, Pennsylvania. There is a speaking platform, with Old Glory bunting. The chief orator, the eloquent Edward Everett of Massachusetts, has just finished speaking, after 2 hours. Mr. Lincoln rises to speak.

Lincoln: Four score and seven years ago our fathers brought forth on this continent, a new nation, conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal.

Now we are engaged in a great civil war, testing whether that nation, or any nation so conceived and so dedicated, can long endure. We are met on a great battle-field of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field, as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this.

But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate -- we can not consecrate -- we can not hallow -- this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here, have consecrated it, far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note, nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here. It is for us the living, rather, to be dedicated here to the unfinished work which they who fought here have thus far so nobly advanced. It is rather for us to be here dedicated to the great task remaining before us -- that from these honored dead we take increased devotion to that cause for which they gave the last full measure of devotion -- that we here highly resolve that these dead shall not have died in vain -- that this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom -- and that government of the people, by the people, for the people, shall not perish from the earth.

[Lights fade to black.]

Scene II

Setting: Battle of Cold Harbor, summer, 1864. Two tables are on stage and the scenes alternates between Grant and Lee.

[Enter Grant, to his tent.]

Grant: I am out of whiskey! How can I run a war without whiskey!
Captain! Front and center!

[Enter Aide de Camp.]

Aide de Camp: Yes, sir?

[Exit Aide de Camp.]

Grant: More whiskey! General Lee, we meet for the first time in this long war. It seems you and I slowly dance through this smoking wood, like two youngsters, awkwardly groping, stepping on each other.

[Aide de Camp enters with whiskey. Aide de Camp exits.]

But, you will catch the chill of death when I draw in close, as my bones are colder than yours, general. There is no more escaping me.

[Lights fade on Grant's tent. Lights rise on Lee's tent. He is pouring a drink of bourbon.]

Lee: Finally, a spot of bourbon.

[Enter General Longstreet.]

Confederate General Longstreet: General Grant's corps advances along the entire front, sir.

Lee: What great news! Are you certain it is true?

Confederate General Longstreet: I assure you, sir. The terrain is causing the enemy to bottleneck along a narrow section, here. We are dug in, defensively, and we are stopping them in their tracks, dead. In a short time, we have killed many enemy soldiers.

Lee: A Confederate victory, here at Cold Harbor, with the North bearing down on Richmond, would be very beneficial to the Cause. Perhaps Lincoln might agree to terms.

Confederate General Longstreet: Perhaps. But Grant will continue to fight hard. I urge you to consider remaining on the defensive, General Lee.

Lee: Bold aggression will win this war, general! Boldness – like the qualities of Hannibal. We shall win this Civil War by how we fight, not by winning the most battles. Still, as long as Grant is hurling his troops at us, we shall retain our defensive positions. Would you like a spot of bourbon, General?

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, sir.

[Lights fade to black. Lights rise on Grant's tent.]

Grant: And, into this malleable sword I will fold the lives of ten thousand souls; and, hardened by death, I will drive this sword straight through your heart, man!

[Enter aide de camp.]

Aide de Camp: Excuse me, General Grant?

Grant: Ah ha!

Aide de Camp: Sir, General Sheridan is here to see you.

Grant: My cavalry general; send him in, at once.

Aide de Camp: Yes, sir.

[Exit aide de camp.]

Grant: This can only be good, or very bad news.

[Enter General Sheridan, followed by aide de camp.]

Ah, General Sheridan, good to see you. Are you busy severing

Lee's supply lines?

General Sheridan: We are losing the battle of Cold Harbor, General Grant. We lost seven thousand men in half an hour. I rode hard to get here.

Grant: What are you saying? Give me details on the map.

General Sheridan: It is a particularly bloody battle, sir. Dead soldiers litter the field like fall's leaves. We have suffered an extremely high number of wounded from their artillery fire.

Aide de Camp: The Southern artillery is mobile, even in these dense woods, general.

Grant: I am aware of Southern artillery, captain! Blast it, Sheridan; focus on the tactical details of the battle!

General Sheridan: Yes, sir. Our men are being annihilated as they charge through a narrow ravine, here. With so many dead, the fresh soldiers must surmount the corpses. Many high-ranking officers have been killed. I must relate one story: As I rode along our lines, I spotted an injured Southern officer, whom I think was trying to crawl through the woods to our lines, either to surrender or for medical treatment. I stopped riding, and I have delivered him to my tent. The surgical tents are far away. I have not had the opportunity to question him, sir.

Aide de Camp: The surgical tents are full of wounded soldiers. They are overcrowded.

Grant: Is he your relative?

General Sheridan: He called me, sir, by name. I have not had the chance to speak with him yet.

Grant: He is an enemy soldier, Phillip. You ought to have put a bullet in his brain, as you rode past! This blasted prisoner exchange issue lingers on me like an ingrown toenail! We no longer exchange prisoners of war! I have rescinded the cartel's order. Paroled Southern soldiers simply return to the fight. At this rate, we'll have to exterminate the entire population of the Southern states!

General Sheridan: My only desire was to assist this man in his pain and suffering. I will aid him. He will not be treated like a dog, sir.

Grant: The South is executing our officers because of the colored soldiers! President Lincoln wrote an order to execute Southern

officers, in retaliation. You will obey the President's order!

General Sheridan: I understand, sir.

Grant: What of the battle, general!? Our soldiers are dying, as we continue arguing.

General Sheridan: Lee's army crossed from the right, here. They are now dug in deep, against the creek. Richmond lies to their backs.

Grant: In the future, do not waste my time with stories, sir.

General Sheridan: Yes, sir.

Grant: If I order a retreat, our army will rout. Hold! Do not pull back until daylight; and, I will issue further orders then.

General Sheridan: Yes, General Grant.

Grant: You are dismissed, General Sheridan.

[Exit General Sheridan.]

Lee, you have stolen my victory! Ah, this war drags on, incessantly. I will reach Richmond; and, once I have made it into the Southern capital, I am going to destroy it! I am going to burn Richmond to the ground!

[Lights fade on Grant's tent and rise in Lee's tent.]

Lee: General Grant is a bear, which though you keep shooting, keeps advancing, swatting you with his claws. General Sherman is looting and razing our cities outside Atlanta. The populace is beginning to demand the end of war. We are no longer able to secure rations in the countryside. This Civil War is unending. These battles have entered my conscience.

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, the smoke; the early-evening, red haze over the sun; the sounds of cannon and men fighting and dying; the cavalry charges. War is awesome.

Lee: A debilitating bleakness lingers over cold mornings and bloody fighting; horse corpses, floating down the creek, bloated by hot sun's rays. War is truly beautiful. God have mercy on our souls.

Confederate General Longstreet: Sir, I ask to confide in you something.

Lee: Yes?

Confederate General Longstreet: I have a friend – a classmate at West Point – who was taken prisoner at Fredericksburg. Yesterday, I learned he was executed.

Lee: I am sorry. A friend of mine is still being held in one of the Northern prisons – a classmate of ours, too. The enemy’s prisons are atrocious; the prisoners are tortured and beaten. Lincoln has ordered this treatment. These violations of the Rules of War only replenish my spirit, in our goal of independence. Britain may provide troops soon, for want of our cotton.

Confederate General Longstreet: From Lincoln’s point of view, we are simply in rebellion – not a recognized country.

Lee: Lincoln is a strange man. If the South were to assassinate Lincoln, I feel a peaceful and gentlemanly agreement might be reached – if only for my poor friend, wasting away in a cold cell. Time demands bold action, don’t you agree?

Confederate General Longstreet: Lincoln worries about being reelected.

Lee: He will be reelected: He is the great manipulator.

Confederate General Longstreet: Without Lincoln in the picture, the war would change dramatically!

Lee: Maintain your defensive positions. Await my further orders. Continue to kill the enemy, as he advances like so many buffalo. God aid our Cause. Be safe.

Confederate General Longstreet: Yes, sir. Goodbye.
[Exit General Longstreet. Lights fade to black.]

Scene III

Setting: 1864, mid-November, Winter Garden Theatre, NY, NY. *Julius Caesar*, by William Shakespeare, is being performed by 3 Booth brothers. Edwin and Junius Booth have blood smeared up to their elbows, and John Wilkes Booth has blood on his hands (Shakespeare’s stage directions). Caesar’s bloody corpse lay on the ground. John Wilkes Booth carries the same dagger he will wield when he kills Lincoln. Lights rise on John Wilkes Booth.

John Wilkes Booth:

(ANTONY)

O, pardon me, thou bleeding piece of earth,
That I am meek and gentle with these butchers!

Thou art the ruins of the noblest man
That ever lived in the tide of times.
Woe to the hand that shed this costly blood!
Over thy wounds now do I prophesy,--
Which, like dumb mouths, do ope their ruby lips,
To beg the voice and utterance of my tongue--
A curse shall light upon the limbs of men;
Domestic fury and fierce civil strife
Shall cumber all the parts of Italy;
Blood and destruction shall be so in use
And dreadful objects so familiar
That mothers shall but smile when they behold
Their infants quarter'd with the hands of war;
All pity choked with custom of fell deeds:
And Caesar's spirit, ranging for revenge,
With Ate by his side come hot from hell,
Shall in these confines with a monarch's voice
Cry 'Havoc,' and let slip the dogs of war;
That this foul deed shall smell above the earth
With carrion men, groaning for burial.
[Lights fade on John Wilkes Booth.]

John Wilkes Booth: Do not lead me so much, Edwin. I was feeding you lines. I should be playing Brutus in *Julius Caesar*, not Mark Antony. I do not appreciate being upstaged by you.

Edwin Booth: How can I possibly upstage the great John Wilkes Booth, whom all the critics call the darling of American theatre – The Son of the South?

Junius Booth: Why are you two fighting? We should be celebrating.

Ewin Booth: Why, you have performed on the boards for the president of the United States, Mr. Abraham Lincoln!

John Wilkes Booth: I performed for a Caesar, an American tyrant, who also belongs on the ground, bleeding. It is he who has let slip the dogs of war!

Edwin Booth: To hell with you, John! If you hate the North so much, why don't you go fight for the South? We live in a neutral state. What is holding you back, cowardice?

John Wilkes Booth: The only reason I have not is mother.

Edwin Booth: Well, why bother? General Grant is bearing down on Richmond.

John Wilkes Booth: I read the Battle of Cold Harbor was a huge Rebel victory! The stakes are even again. Jubal Early's army recently advanced on Washington, and nearly captured the president.

Junius Booth: Mother will be here any minute. I am not going to stop you two from fighting. I am too exhausted from my performance.

Edwin Booth: You are a Southern sympathizer and a supporter of slavery! Any rational man, with a modicum of humanity, rejects slavery.

John Wilkes Booth: Slavery is written into our Constitution. But, the Civil War is not about to slavery. No, one man orders we fight this Civil War: Abraham Lincoln: the Republican Unionist, whose only concern is restoring the Union. How can you support this tyrant, with the surname of Brutus?

Edwin Booth: Of the Brutus family, our sister Asia is in agreement with me. Junius here, and mother, are neutral. You and Joseph are alone in your twisted beliefs.

John Wilkes Booth: There is an entire nation of proud people with whom I stand. If my family will not tolerate my convictions, I will find my people.

Edwin Booth: Perhaps you should. It might be best for everyone.

Junius Booth: You are tearing our family apart! Stand apart from each other. Hold your conversation in a dignified manner. Edwin, try not to upstage John, please.

Edwin Booth: Oh, and lets not forget your secret love affair with Ms. Lucy Hale, daughter of the U. S. senator!

John Wilkes Booth: She is my fiancée!

Junius Booth: John! You have a fiancée? Have you told mother about this?

John Wilkes Booth: No.

Junius Booth: Will she approve?

Edwin Booth: He does not care about mother or her feelings.

John Wilkes Booth: You are the one who is a cold-hearted fool,

Edwin!

[Edwin and John Wilkes Booth fight. Junius is unable to stop it.]

Mary Ann: Hello, gentlemen? May we enter? We would like to see the great actors!

Junius Booth: Mother? Open the door!

[Enter Mary Ann and Asia Booth.]

Hello, mother. Did you enjoy the show?

Mary Ann Booth: Yes, it was wonderful! Oh, I am overjoyed.

Asia: Edwin, have you and John been fighting again? Junius?

Edwin Booth: No, Asia.

Mary Ann Booth: I am so happy to see my three boys performing together again. Your father, Junius Brutus, is here in spirit; and, he is so proud of you three. This is the greatest day of my life!

Asia: I thought Edwin was a little better than John tonight.

Junius Booth: Asia!

Edwin Booth: Thank you, sister.

Mary Ann Booth: Well. We are all going to celebrate with a fancy dinner, in a fine restaurant on Broadway. Hurry up and change. We shall meet you outside.

John Wilkes Booth: I have to meet some people, mother. I will join you later.

Mary Ann Booth: Very well; but don't take long, John.

[Exit Mary Ann and Asia Booth.]

Junius Booth: Your childish bickering is wearing on mother's health. Do not argue in her presence! I insist you apologize to each other.

Edwin Booth: What?

John Wilkes Booth: You are right, June.

Junius Booth: Edwin?

Edwin Booth: Why must I go first? All right, John, I apologize for my rash statements, which, though, while I do not dispute their validity; I recognize and admit their hurried nature.

Junius Booth: Apologize correctly, Edwin!

Edwin Booth: I am sorry, John.

John Wilkes Booth: I am sorry, Edwin.

[Edwin and John Wilkes Booth embrace. Lights fade to black.]

Scene IV

Setting: Lincoln is alone in the White House, winter, 1864. Enter Mary Todd Lincoln.

Mary Todd: Hello, Abraham. Have you eaten dinner?

Lincoln: No, I have not and I am not hungry. I am meeting with Frederick Douglass.

Mary Todd: Is something the matter? Tell me what is wrong.

Lincoln: There is nothing the matter. Only good news arrives these days.

Mary Todd: Abraham, I should like to buy more drapes for the White House. We will be living here another four years. I should like a new wardrobe, as well.

Lincoln: Mrs. Lincoln, as we have discussed, our personal finances are in a state of disrepair.

Mary Todd: I will not live in this depressing house without decent clothes and fine-fabric draperies!

Lincoln: Please, Mary Todd.

Mary Todd: I am tired of war! Are you listening to me? The smell of gunpowder eternally wafts into this city. The sky is perpetually grey, the sun obscured by haze of combat. I feel as if I am a jailed prisoner in this White House. I no longer read newspapers, Mr. Lincoln, because I can write them myself. Here is how one, such as me, can be a journalist: One simply writes, 'today there was death; many thousands of soldiers died. The dying is will continue tomorrow and the next day and the next – the end!' Wait! There is one more thing the papers say: 'Lincoln is a tyrant who jails journalists'.

Lincoln: The end of the war is in sight. Where is little Tad?

Mary Todd: He runs amuck, causing trouble. Spare the rod and spoil the child.

Lincoln: What time is it? I must meet with Mr. Douglass.

Mary Todd: We are not done talking!

[Exit Mary Todd.]

[Enter ghost of John Wilkes Booth, cloaked, moving about the room, with the same dagger he will have when he kills Lincoln.]

John Wilkes Booth: The war will be lost, Mr. President. You will die.

Lincoln: What? Who is here, in my house? Come out of the shadows.

John Wilkes Booth: I am your guest. Don't you recognize me?

Lincoln: I am sorry; I do not see you clearly. I have many guests. Approach, so we can see each other, eye to eye.

John Wilkes Booth: Oh no, I cannot. Not yet. I remain your humble prisoner.

[Ghost of John Wilkes Booth exits. Lincoln kneels to the ground, overcome with emotion, though he does not necessarily understand why. Enter Frederick Douglass, from opposite side of the stage. Douglass puts his hand on Lincoln's shoulder.]

Douglass: I am here, Mr. President.

Lincoln: What? Ah, Mr. Douglass, it is good to see you again. Thank God you are here. I was only lost, for a moment. How was your journey? Are you busy canvassing for the 54th in Massachusetts?

Douglass: Free Negro men wish to become Union soldiers, Mr. Lincoln. But sir, the obstacle remains the prisoner issue. Negro men are aware they may be turned over to Southern slave-masters, beaten and enslaved again – or, executed, all without even a fair trial.

Lincoln: Well, freed Negro people are not taking up arms, despite out-numbering white people in the South.

Douglass: Sir, you must understand, as I do, to be a slave is to live in constant fear. The very concept of rebellion is foreign to a slave. The Southern slave-masters are aware of this fact.

Lincoln: Blast! This prisoner issue stems from the Emancipation Proclamation, which you insisted I issue! General Grant has stopped the prisoner exchange. Rebels refuse to turn over a Negro soldier for a white soldier. They do not consider Negro men soldiers. Now, the Rebels are murdering both Negro and white Union soldiers, and officers – or, torturing them, in retaliation. 54th Massachusetts and other colored units are proving to be a far greater strategic liability than tactical value!

Douglass: The 54th has fought with honor, sir! We must fight this

Civil War with integrity. We cannot allow our prisons to become medieval torture chambers. We must not stoop to the level of this evil Confederate nation.

Lincoln: The South is not a nation!

Douglass: They have existed as a nation for four years.

Lincoln: Do not refer to the Rebels states as a nation again! I apologize, Frederick. This subject wears on me, like a case of consumption. Have you read of the atrocities of Andersonville? I have issued a written order, to execute Southern officers, for each officer of ours they kill.

Douglass: The prisoner issue is escalating. Perhaps, there is a wiser path. Both of my sons are in the 54th now. They are fine soldiers. I worry about their well- being, as their father.

Lincoln: As soldiers, your sons are bearing this additional burden. Their sacrifice is indeed high. During the Black Hawk war, I was a captain. I certainly understand what it means to be a soldier. I was mustered into service three times. One time, my unit bivouacked along the side of a wide and deep ravine, during the middle of a harsh Illinois winter. My soldiers captured me one morning; and, put me into a large wooden barrel. I was still groggy-eyed. They rolled me slowly up to the edge of the slope and I could hear them shouting, 'one, two three!' Then, my men pushed me over the edge and my wooden barrel slipped and sledged, all the way down the icy ravine! I was rolling for a good twenty minutes, at a minimum. I must have been traveling very fast. I became very nauseous. I felt as if I was being hurling over Niagara Falls. Oh, what a ride it was.

Douglass: Mr. President, do you feel this Civil War is necessary?

Lincoln: We must win this Civil War, at all costs, Frederick. The Union must be restored. It is critical for all humanity. American is a Union!

Douglass: The South cannot last much longer. I urge you to continue working toward your goal of permitting black men suffrage. Slavery will exist, long after this Civil War is over, Mr. Lincoln. The trade of slaves may end; but the treatment of Negroes in America as second-class citizens will not end for many years. The issue is economic and social and legal.

Lincoln: Well, you are the leader of the abolitionist movement. It is

up to you to insure the Underground Railroad keeps its gears well-greased. Are you meeting with other dignitaries in Washington?

Douglass: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Very well, then; it has been a pleasure.

Douglass: Goodbye, Mr. Lincoln.

[Exit Douglass. Lights fade to black.]

Scene V

Setting: Mary Surratt's boarding house in Washington, D.C. (The Surratt tavern, in Surrattsville, MD, is mentioned.) It is spring, 1865. Conspirators dress in drab clothing.

Atzerodt: I'm gonna be rich and famous! They'll sing songs about me!

*I wish I was in de land ob cotton,
Old times dar am not forgotten;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*In Dixie Land whar I was born in,
Early on one frosty mornin,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Old Missus marry "Will-de-weaber,"
Willium was a gay deceaber;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*But when he put his arm around'er,
He smiled as fierce as a forty-pound'er,
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Dar's buck-wheat cake an 'Ingen' batter,
Makes you fat or a little fatter;
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land.*

*Den hoe it down an scratch your grabble,
To Dixie land I'm bound to trabble.
Look away! Look away! Look away! Dixie Land*

Ah, perhaps I shouldn't be singing Dixie in Washington.
[Enter Mary Surratt.]

Mary Surratt: You need to lower your voice! I can hear you all the way downstairs!

Atzerodt: Bah! Hey, I'm running out of beer. When are the others getting here?

[Enter Powell and Herold.]

Powell: Good day, Mrs. Surratt.

Atzerodt: 'Bout time ya'll arrived. I've had to deal with this woman all day long.

Mary Surratt: Hello, Payne; how are you, David? How was your ride from Baltimore?

Powell: It was fine, ma'am. Can you bring us a bottle of bourbon?

Mary Surratt: Yes, Lewis. How is my son?

Powell: He's doing Fine. He and John checked on our things at Surrattsville Tavern. They'll be along.

[Exit Mary Surratt.]

Herold: George is drunk again. George: When you're drinking, your mouth wags like a speaking dog. Your last slip with your brother – the federal marshal – nearly blew up our plans.

Atzerodt: I have decided I am no longer a part of this here plan.

Powell: You ain't going anywhere. We stick together or hang together.

Herold: I despise having to come to Washington, even if Mrs. Surratt is a gracious host. This city has more spies than rats.

[Enter Mary Surratt, with bourbon and glasses on a saucer, which she places on the table.]

Mary Surratt: He's been drinking all afternoon – and singing Dixie.

[Enter Booth and Surratt.]

Hello, son! How are you?

John Surratt: I am fine, mother.

Mary Surratt: My heart is filled with joy. Gentlemen: This is the hope of a Southern nation: a people of boundless youth and vigor.

Powell: Hello, John.

[Enter John Wilkes Booth.]

John Wilkes Booth: Hello, Lewis; it's good to see you again. Mrs. Surratt: ma'am.

Mary Surratt: Hello, John. How are our horses, George?

Atzerodt: The horses stabled at Pumphrey's.

John Wilkes Booth: Good.

John Surratt: John and I checked the pistols and Spenser carbines at Mary's tavern in Surrattsville, along with the handcuffs, field glasses, change of clothes, and food box. Everything is set.

John Wilkes Booth: I have just returned from meetings with high-ranking Confederate agents in Montreal. We will capture the president, during one of his solitary rides to the Soldier's Home, commandeer his buggy, and take him to Richmond. He will be held in exchange for the release of Confederate prisoners of war.

Powell: When are we doing it? Did the agents tell you when?

Atzerodt: Yeah, we keep talking about all these different plans to kidnap the president; but we never take action.

Herold: George: You keep your mouth shut! A lot goes into these plans; plenty of important people are involved.

John Surratt: The Confederate government in Richmond and the generals in the field are informed.

Mary Surratt: The Catholic Church stands behind us.

John Surratt: Lincoln is not a popular president. People in the north don't like him. The newspapers despise him. He keeps jailing journalists and citizens without any reason. He ain't got to have any reason, because he's suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus.

Atzerodt: I am getting out of this operation, Mr. Booth. I have to go back to making buggies and earn some money. I am flat broke. John Surratt still owes me one hundred dollars.

John Wilkes Booth: I am not releasing anyone from their duty to the Cause! I remind each of you: witnesses, letters, written and verbal statements, and the like, implicate you in this plot.

Powell: What do you want us to do, John? Is Lincoln riding to the Soldier's home this weekend?

Atzerodt: I understand this job is our duty. I ain't arguing it. I am simply stating I don't like all of this talk. I am in full support of our

purpose. I want to aid the Cause and help our boys fighting in the field or stuck in prison.

John Surratt: Southern spies have told me about Northern prisons. The Northerners will hang a Southern prisoner, to try and scare the rest of 'em. Then, they leave the body swinging in the wind, the whole day, and march the rest of 'em out to the field to see. But, our boys ain't scared. Northerners beat and torture our boys, and don't feed or care for them. More than ten thousand of our boys have died in Northern prisons.

Mary Surratt: It is just deplorable. Northerners are barbarians. I remind you gentlemen, we are fighting for what is right, and for the greater good of our Lord God in heaven. We mustn't waver in our convictions!

John Wilkes Booth: The South must keep fighting for its independence.

Herold: There ain't no other way. If we don't get independence from the North, we'll wind up being slaves!

Mary Surratt: We have to protect our country's way of life. We are no longer similar to Northern people. We've lived independently for too long. General Lee and his armies will keep fighting in them woods. The longer we keep fighting and surviving, the closer our nation comes to independence. Capturing Mr. Lincoln will change everything.

John Surratt: We have to take action, help our boys, fighting in the field. We ain't having as many victories as last year. The war is being won by the North. Once we take Lincoln prisoner, we can demand independence!

Powell: We can make Lincoln pay for what he's doing to our prisoners. Once we got him in his buggy, and we're riding to Richmond, how about we stop somewhere and beat the tar outta him? I'll beat him good. I hate politicians.

Atzerodt: Now you're talking! He's a lawyer too.

Powell: Oh, he's in real big trouble.

Atzerodt: What do you say we hog-tie the president, and drag him from behind the buggy? We can shout at him, 'Where're your generals now?'

John Wilkes Booth: No! We have a change of clothes and food for

Mr. Lincoln to eat on the journey to Richmond. He will be treated with respect. We are going to show Lincoln we can treat our prisoners fairly. We will meet here again Sunday night. I must go to New York City. I ask all of you to swear an oath of loyalty to our mission. Look me in the eyes and swear. To the Cause! To the South!

[All toast. Lights go black.]

Scene VI

Setting: John Wilkes Booth and Lucy Hale enter a hotel room in Washington. They become intimate. It is spring, 1865.

Lucy Hale: What is the matter with you, John? Your mind is somewhere else, since I last saw you.

John Wilkes Booth: I want you to have this necklace, Lucy. Keep it always, promise.

Lucy Hale: Pearls, how beautiful! Will you put them on my neck?

John Wilkes Booth: Yes, just a moment.

Lucy Hale: I promise to keep them forever.

John Wilkes Booth: There.

Lucy Hale: You must stop being so mysterious, John. Where have you been? I haven't seen you for several weeks. I have been concerned for you.

John Wilkes Booth: Do not tell me I am being mysterious. I am conducting business with my very profitable oil drilling company in Pennsylvania, and doing other things. Do not ask me again about my travels or who I meet.

Lucy Hale: John, would you like to come to see President Lincoln's inauguration speech with my father and me? You may bring a few guests, if you like.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes! But, is your father aware of my politics?

Lucy Hale: Why, all of Washington is aware of your politics, John! It's the biggest secret in town! But I don't love you for your politics. I feel the Civil War is ending, and we might all be happy again. Wouldn't it be nice to not have to worry about war anymore? I still wish you would share what is bothering you. You are traveling often

and not acting anymore.

John Wilkes Booth: I will come and go as I please!

Lucy Hale: Do not become violent.

John Wilkes Booth: Wait! Please do not abandon me, Lucy. Stay by my side, to my end. I am doing something very important, which will be remembered forever, and become a part of the ages. I cannot say more.

Lucy Hale: John, I swear my heart to you; and, I promise I will keep anything you tell me secret. I am on your side; but not unless we are one. I want to have children with you, and raise a family. But, we cannot be husband and wife, if you do not let me into your heart. I do not care about money. I love you, John, now and for all time. Please tell me.

John Wilkes Booth: I love you too, Lucy. I am weary from my journey.

Lucy Hale: You look tired and forlorn, as if you've just fought a battle.

John Wilkes Booth: Do you see the comet streaking across the sky?

Lucy Hale: Yes, it's been there all weekend.

John Wilkes Booth: Shakespeare says in *Julius Caesar*, 'When beggars die, there are no comets in the sky. The heavens only announce the deaths of princes'. Do you believe in me, Lucy?

Lucy Hale: Yes, I do, very strongly.

John Wilkes Booth: I feel it is sometimes necessary for a man to take action, when he believes he is right.

Lucy Hale: Only you can decide what is right. But, once you have made your decision, you must stick by it. Just ask President Lincoln. He feels the Union must be restored, at all costs.

John Wilkes Booth: There is right and wrong in this world, Lucy. Evil and tyranny must be crushed. Good men cannot stand by and do nothing.

Lucy Hale: Both sides, fighting this Civil War, feel they are right and the other side is wrong. Time will judge everyone. I don't want this war to disrupt my life, or people in my family. My state is the most important state.

John Wilkes Booth: This war is about more than states' rights.

Lucy Hale: This war is about too many things, and we are all a part of it.

John Wilkes Booth: I must meet some people.

Lucy Hale: Please remember: I will not divulge your secrets. I promise. I love you.

[Exit Lucy Hale. Booth suddenly falls backward, to the ground.]

John Wilkes Booth: Go away and leave me alone! You have no idea what I will soon accomplish. I will become a hero! The South will be freed from Lincoln's tyranny! Lincoln has freed the slaves! Lincoln would give them full citizenship and even grant them voting rights. Tyrannicide is humanity's necessary evil. I will kill President Lincoln! I am Brutus, father! I am Brutus!

[Lights fade to black. Intermission.]

Act II

Scene I

Setting: The White House, spring, 1865. Mary Todd enters.

Mary Todd: Abraham, who left muddy boots in our living room?

[Enter Lincoln.]

Lincoln: Secretary Stanton, I believe. Give them to Mr. Forbes, to return to him.

Mary Todd: This is our house. Inform your guests to take their boots with them when they leave. How did he get home without boots?

Lincoln: I lent him a pair of mine. Secretary Stanton, or Seward, or any other guest, must be comfortable in our home, and feel they are free to come and go as they please. I have to maintain access to all of my political contacts, and my generals. It is no different than Springfield, when politicians visited us.

Mary Todd: Abraham, today our maid was spring-cleaning the room upstairs, where little Willie died of fever. Tucked in the bed boards, she found this object.

[Mary Todd produces a bow tie, which is thoroughly wrapped.]
Is this yours? Why is it wrapped like this?

Lincoln: It is my tie. I left it one night, by his side. He has wrapped it for me. Oh, my little boy!

Mary Todd: We must try again to contact him on the other side. The psychic medium Margaret Ann Laurie and her daughter can bring little Willie's spirit back, so we can communicate with him.

Lincoln: No, Mary Todd. Cease this talk. I do not want any more séances in this White House. I want peace in my soul, and for the soul of my buried child.

Mary Todd: But you have seen the messages, the visions in the mirror.

Lincoln: I want to let our boy rest in peace. Will you allow me this one wish? It is best we leave the forces, which lie beyond the veil, alone.

Mary Todd: You must never, ever leave me, Abraham. Never, ever leave me. I have lost Willie and Edward. Robert fights in war. I can erase the death of our children from my memory like a bad dream. But, I love you. I cannot live without you.

Lincoln: I love you too, Mary Todd. I must focus on winning the Civil War. The South will not relent. We are coming closer to victory. You must support me. We must fight! All the men, who have died fighting for our Union, weigh heavily on my heart. They must not have died in vain. We must press through to victory. Even the losses on the enemy's side I think about. They are still our brothers; indeed, some of them are your family. Do all of these fallen soldiers walk among us too, as spirits? If so, it is because they are troubled. If we do not finish this war, there will be no closure; no side will be declared victor or loser. Wars are not fought to settle with terms; wars are fought to win!

Mary Todd: I love you dearly, Abraham. I will leave you alone.

Lincoln: Thank you, Mary Todd. I must write my Inauguration Address. I will be in my study.

Scene II

Setting: Tudor Hall, home of the Booth family, in Maryland, in the country, near Baltimore. The Booth family has gathered at the mother's request. Present are: Mary Ann, Junius (eldest son), Edwin, John Wilkes, Asia. It is spring, 1865.

Mary Ann: I am so happy you are all here. Seeing all of your bright faces brings me great strength. Junius. Edwin. John. I love you. We are going to enjoy a nice meal, as a happy family, despite war and politics. Asia and I have everything set. Who would like something to drink? Well, you can all get it yourselves, on the table.

Edwin Booth: I would like to propose a toast: To Union victory!

John Wilkes Booth: The Union is going to be crushed!

Mary Ann: Will you please stop arguing about politics and war in our home! Did you hear me? If you do not stop arguing, I swear to Sweet Jesus, I will sell Tutor House and move to a neutral state. I will find a state not under martial law!

Junius Booth: Mother, please, be calm. They are just getting carried away. They will stop.

Asia: John, we are all worried about your political obsession with Lincoln. Why do you care so much about politics? Have you lost your mind?

John Wilkes Booth: Where does this concern arise?

Junius Booth: Stop it, John!

John Wilkes Booth: Do not order me, Junius! Worry for Edwin; he is the one who dined with President Lincoln and Secretary of State Seward, in the White House. Did you ask Lincoln why he unilaterally suspended the Whittaker v. Ashbaugh Habeas Corpus? Did you talk about Seward secret police force? Thousand of free citizens, Northerners and Southerners, are rotting in Northern prisons, not charged with any crime and denied a fair trial. Is how justice works in America?

Junius Booth: This argument has already gotten out of control. The Civil War is dividing our family apart. Mother, are you all right?

Mary Ann: Oh, sure, I am doing just fine!

Edwin Booth: Journalists who are editorializing and printing lies, in

support of the South, deserve to be jailed. Citizens who are stirring dissent and causing insurrection must be silenced. It has worked! The North has almost won the war.

John Wilkes Booth: Advantage in the war sways violently, month to month, like Poe's pendulum over the pit. America has become a militaristic, totalitarian state, ruled by a despot; it is no different than Napoleonic France – or, Caesar! And, what of Southern war prisoners, in Northern prisons? They are being tortured.

Mary Ann: Asia: How our hams?

Asia: Which hams? Edwin, are you in contact with President Lincoln?

Edwin Booth: Yes, why?

Asia: Tell Mr. Lincoln John will perform *The Fool*, in *12th Night* for him.

Edwin Booth: Your South's Andersonville prison is so rotted with evil; it has become a maggot-infested carcass. It would seem our country has a dubious record of prisoner care.

John Wilkes Booth: Is Lincoln a tyrant? Not my political rival – is he a tyrant?

Edwin Booth: Lincoln is no tyrant. This country is at war. His actions are entirely warranted.

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln is a tyrant! He has ordered the execution of Southern officers simply because we return slaves to their rightful masters – slaves who were Union soldiers. Have you heard of the 54th Massachusetts, the Negro regiment?

Junius Booth: John and Edwin, please lower your voices at once.

Mary Ann: Junius?

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln has suspended the Writ of Habeas Corpus, for God's sake!

Junius Booth: Yes, mother?

John Wilkes Booth: What do you think, Asia, is Lincoln a tyrant?

Mary Ann: Tell them to lower their voices.

Asia: It is true; all the newspapers call Lincoln a tyrant. Even my husband says Lincoln is a tyrant.

John Wilkes Booth: Then he belongs in the same grave as Caesar.

Asia: John, there are Federal agents everywhere! They could be

listening.

John Wilkes Booth: I will not live in fear of government spies. I will live free!

[Pause.]

Asia: Oh my word! John, what has become of you?

Edwin Booth: Ah ha! My brother is delusional! John, I am afraid Shakespeare is fantasy – the Civil War is reality. Learn to distinguish.

John Wilkes Booth: In fact, Shakespeare is the only one who speaks the truth. I should break your nose. You're lucky mother is present.

Edwin Booth: We can take it out back! You never cared about Mother's feelings.

Mary Ann: Oh!

Junius Booth: Enough! You two should go outside!

Mary Ann: I wish Brutus were here right now. There was never this kind of fighting when he was alive. Tutor House is still the theater of the 'Great Tragedian'. My husband's influence still lives!

Junius Booth: There was no war raging in our backyard when our father was alive, Mother.

Asia: Oh, mother, I am so happy to be home; my heart sings like a whooping crane – whoop, whoop! Watch me!

Edwin Booth: Mother: I must reveal John is engaged in a scandalous love affair with Lucy Hale, who is the daughter of Senator Hale, the abolitionist.

Mary Ann: What? John, why are you conducting this liaison? What is the purpose of it?

John Wilkes Booth: Mother: I can explain. I love her.

Edwin Booth: I find it ironic a Southern sympathizer is engaged to the daughter of an abolitionist U. S. Senator! You, sir, are a hypocrite!

Mary Ann: Oh! I must sit. Please get me some water, Junius.

Junius Booth: Here you are, mother. Please be calm. Sip it slowly.

Mary Ann: Thank you, dear. I am fine. Children: I have had a premonition, a dark dream. I have seen ghosts, emanating from a lone house, on top of a hill. The sky filled with red and the ground was caked with dried blood. Even in my dreams, I could feel the

presence of another being, a powerful being, close at hand. Spirits moved in the air. The wind whistled through the trees and everywhere the land was desolate. Then, a monster awakened from the land: I could not entirely see its face, as a vile liquid obscured its face. Armies of the Southern and the Northern nations were clashing on battlefields with terrible fury and explosions and meanness. The victors massacred the vanquished; the prisoners were all killed or mutilated. This is my vision of America! Oh, may Lord God in heaven save us!

Asia: Oh, this is awful! We must remain strong, mother.

Junius Booth: I am taking charge of this situation. I have heard enough! I insist on a moratorium on all political discussions in mother's house. John and Edwin: You can argue in some other location; but this home is off-limits to your insensitive diatribes! If America is a free country – and this applies to both North and South – then we are all free; and, we have a choice of who and what we listen. As mother says, she may move to a neutral state, if she wishes. There are several to choose from, and this family does not have to remain in Maryland. Does everyone understand me? John, let this serve as a warning: We are all concerned for your well being.

Edwin Booth: John, you have been associating with some unsavory people. With each passing month, you have further distanced yourself from the stage. One can put two and two together. We are all worried about you. I will not permit you to drag our family down to the dregs, with your corrupted beliefs. Look at yourself: You are no longer an artist; you have become a politician. You cannot translate art into life, brother. You can only imitate life with art. Do you understand? This Civil War is causing you to lose your mind.

Asia: And, you are constantly traveling, from city to city, though not acting. Your oil business in Pennsylvania has failed. You invested a lot of your friends' money in that endeavor. You lost all of it? Have you paid them back? I am very sorry for you.

John Wilkes Booth: I don't want to listen to any of you anymore! I am leaving! Mother: I am sorry for the inconvenience. Asia: You must insure the papers I have given you are locked in your safe. Do

not tamper with those papers, they are most important. Goodbye.
[John Wilkes Booth exits. Lights dim to a tableau and Booth addresses his family.]

My family has abandoned me. I am not an outcast! They are so quick to pretend as if I am dead. It doesn't matter. They do not understand me or what I have planned. I will take action and put an end to the fighting. My family will see, by my actions, who is right and who is wrong! I will succeed.

Scene III

Setting: Lincoln and Grant speak, following a cabinet meeting in the White House. There is the sound of cheering and reveling in the streets, from celebrations. It is evening, April 13th, 1865.

Lincoln: I recently returned from touring Richmond, General Grant. The Southern capital lay in ruins. I sat in Jefferson Davis's chair. We have turned the corner. Listen to the revelers outside. It is a joyous time.

Grant: I feel as if a great weight has been lifted from my shoulders, sir. Everyone is relieved. The Civil War is all but ended.

Lincoln: I had the same strange dream last night I had prior Antietam, Bull Run, Stone's River, and Gettysburg. It was of a fast-moving ship, crossing over a vast ocean. This is a good portent, a most favorable omen. This dream has always arrived prior to victorious Union battles.

Grant: Sir, Stone's River was nothing close to victory for the Union.

Lincoln: Nevertheless, it was the same dream as appeared prior to the other battles, general.

Grant: These battles are happily drawing to an end.

Lincoln: It is hard to believe we are having this discussion.

Grant: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Will you tell me about Lee's surrender?

Grant: I will, with pleasure, Mr. President. The room at Appomattox Court House, Virginia, is a small one. Lee seemed rather stiff and might have taken offence to my cigar. We chatted about his army and my army for several minutes. He was curious about how our

side had fared at several battles, and he seemed intrigued by the information I provided. General Lee agreed to my terms. He tried turned to over his weapons; but I refused. I allowed him and his cavalry to keep their side arms, and their horses, for farming purposes. It was over. At the end of it, I could see sorrow cross his face, and he turned white as a ghost. He searched my eyes like a guilty thief. He fought it; but there was no hiding his deep-felt sadness. I feel he was relieved, as we are now. It was good to finally meet him in person.

Lincoln: Congratulations, General Grant. I commend you in your victory.

Grant: Thank you, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Rebel officers refusing to denounce their oaths to the Confederacy, in writing, shall be executed. The Writ of Habeas Corpus will remain suspended, and the citizenry silenced, or jailed. Secretary Seward's secret police force is still active. Southern spies move among us. In uncertain times, as these, such harsh action is required.

Grant: Yes, sir.

Lincoln: Well, your description of Lee reminds me of a story.

Grant: Please, tell me.

Lincoln: I was once challenged to a duel by a rival politician – I do not recall for what. His real motive was to eliminate the political threat I posed. I was well aware of the fate of Alexander Hamilton, who was shot by Aaron Burr. I, being the acceptant of the duel, had the right to choose the weaponry, in accordance with ancient customs. I chose Broadswords! And, for our ankles to be chained together. On the designated morning we met, I took my four foot long sword and sliced down some of the willow tree over his head – he declined to duel on the spot – the coward!

Grant: What a great story, Mr. President. You used a shrewd combination of weaponry and bravado to outsmart the enemy. It is no wonder we have won this Civil War.

Lincoln: Thank you, general. Mrs. Lincoln and I would like to request your presence at Ford's theater, tomorrow night. Mrs. Lincoln sends her condolences for canceling our previous engagement.

Grant: Sir, my wife and I have every intention of going straight home, to spend time with family. I regret, we will not be able to attend the play with you and Mrs. Lincoln.

Lincoln: Well, I wish you Godspeed. I will tell Mrs. Lincoln.

Grant: Goodbye, Mr. President.

Lincoln: Goodbye, General Grant.

[Exit Ulysses Grant. Lights fade to black.]

Scene IV

Setting: Booth goes to Mary Surratt's boarding house and knocks on the door. Powell wears a double-breasted coat and a beaver hat. The rest of the conspirators wear fine clothing. It is April 14th, 1865.

Powell: Who's there?

John Wilkes Booth: John.

[Powell opens the door. Enter John Wilkes Booth.]

Powell: Are you feeling well, John? You look pale.

John Wilkes Booth: I am fine! Where are the others? What time is it?

Powell: Seven thirty. They will be here any minute.

John Wilkes Booth: Look: I've brought good things: cigars, bourbon – here are some cards; we will play a game of cards.

Powell: Let me pour you a glass of bourbon, John.

John Wilkes Booth: Drink.

Powell: The war is over, John. Have you seen the Rebel army marching through the city – being taken to prison? They are kicking up one hell of a dust storm. You can see it, clear from the other side of town.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes, I saw them. It as though I no longer have a country. It was a wretched spectacle.

Powell: General Lee surrendered in Virginia. Without Lee, the war must be close to its end.

John Wilkes Booth: The war is not over, Lewis! General Joe Johnson still fights Sherman in Atlanta.

Powell: Richmond has been burned to the ground. The papers said

Lincoln toured Richmond with his son Tad, in the flagship *Malvern*.

John Wilkes Booth: Lord God, the man is insane! Look how quickly he must run there, to gloat, like a ruthless dictator! He is without honor. No, Lewis, we will greatly aid the South by our actions.

Powell: John: Whatever you need me to do, I'll do it. I am a soldier in the Confederate army.

[Knock at the door.]

Powell: Enter.

[Enter Atzerodt, Herold, Surratt.]

Atzerodt: I am physically sick. I am going to vomit at any moment. Can we talk about the plan some more?

Powell: Here, have a drink. Sit. Do not vomit in Mrs. Surratt's boarding house, you dog.

John Wilkes Booth: How are you, John?

John Surratt: I am fine. I made a very long journey to get here.

Herold: Washington is lit with electric lights, in shapes spelling words such as 'peace' and 'love' and 'victory', in the 'Grand Illumination'. There have never been so many drunken soldiers and sailors and whores in one town. I hate this town.

Atzerodt: Yeah, and did you fellas hear General Grant has ordered the North back to exchanging prisoners? What's the reason for killing the leaders of the Union now? Why don't we go back to our plan to capture the president? – seems rather prudent. Hell, the North has won the Civil War!

Powell: Shut up, George! I ought to take you outside.

Atzerodt: I'll knock your block off, you big ape!

John Wilkes Booth: Stop it! Here, who would like a cigar? Mr. Lincoln and General Grant will be at Ford's Theater tonight. I have a horse stabled in the alleyway. I will proceed to the theater and assassinate Lincoln. Secretary of State Seward is injured and in his house. Lewis and David and John, you will simply walk in his front door and kill him. After the act, you will skedaddle out of town.

Powell: We're going to win it for the South, John. This is an important job! The president and the others must die. The Northern government will be in chaos.

John Surratt: The tyrant must die! The south will finally have its

revenge, its victory!

John Wilkes Booth: Here is the gun I will use to kill the president. I should have killed Lincoln at his inauguration speech in March. George, you are going to execute the Vice-president, in accordance with our plan.

Atzerodt: Pour me another drink, Payne – a double.

Powell: Get it yourself, you fool.

John Surratt: Here, George. Who else would like another drink? John?

Herold: I am honored to do this job for the South. I am happy it is all coming together.

Atzerodt: What if this Civil War ends America, for good? What is the point of killing off the North's government if we ain't leaving nothing – except, chaos? You look at a man like John Brown: he died with conviction. He was no great man in life – I mean, he was an abolitionist. But, he died a great man. So what about Lincoln? You kill him; and, you're making him a great man, a martyr.

John Wilkes Booth: George, this whole thing has gone far beyond prisoners and politics. We must act, for the sake of humanity. I was there when they hung old John Brown. He wasn't crazy; he was fearless. Northerners don't care about honor, not the way we honor the Cause – except, for old John Brown. His eyes looked straight through you, deep, into your soul. He walked right up to his rope; his steps right and true. He didn't shake; he moved proud, confident. The executioner had enough mind to wrap the rope around John Brown's neck quickly, tightening it, stepping back; perhaps, out of fear, sensing a power stronger than evil hanging in the air. Wa-boom! The floor dropped and the old son-of-a-bitch went straight down and his neck snapped. John Brown died with honor. Don't question me about greatness! I understand what it means to die with conviction! I will defeat the tyrant Lincoln. I won't die like a criminal, though I have no fear. I will be a hero! This evil tyrant must be destroyed.

[Pause.]

John Surratt: I'll wager old John Brown drank whiskey. A commoner drinks whiskey. A gentleman sips subtle Southern bourbon. Is war in America's blood – war, fire, death, which only

harsh whiskey can ease; or, is our country peopled by gentlemen, their nerves soothed by smooth bourbon?

Herold: War is how this nation began and it will be how it ends. You men must realize we are going to put an end to the Civil War tonight! John, assuming we get across the Potomac River, where we going next?

John Wilkes Booth: We will go to Mexico. I will reward you all with money from my oil business.

John Surratt: Archduke Maximilian has an open invitation to Confederate agents. He will provide us money. He is supported by France and the Roman Catholic diocese. My mother has been working closely with the church. The Catholic Church has said it will provide shelter to any of us, if we're on the run.

Powell: But, we ain't going to be on the run! Our actions are going to turn this whole war around, once and for all. Now, we have had many meetings and everything is set. I am confident our plan will work!

John Wilkes Booth: All resting between the bullet in this gun, and the death of the President of the United States of America, is time! Lincoln will understand the true nature of Shakespearean Tragedy! I shall take Brutus's bloody dagger and raise it high, shouting 'thus always to tyrants!' The South shall be avenged, my friends!

Powell: Break a leg, John.

John Wilkes Booth: I must lie down; I feel suddenly faint. You all may stay or leave, at your leisure.

[Booth lies down. Lights fade to black.]

Scene V

Setting: Lights rise and Lincoln crosses to the living room, where Mary Todd is writing in a diary. Lincoln is humming or whistling *I'm a Yankee Doodle Dandy*.

Lincoln: Good evening, Mary Todd.

Mary Todd: Hello, Abraham.

Lincoln: General Grant and his wife will not be able to attend *Our American Cousin* at Ford's Theatre tonight. He sends his regrets;

but says he must be returning home, to spend time with his family.

Mary Todd: Ulysses is very unreliable. I do not trust him. Is the war over?

Lincoln: General Grant has defeated General Lee, though many armies remain in the field. Why don't you read the newspapers?

Lincoln: I understand you are doing all you can to restore the Union. We must try to be as happy as we can during these unhappy times. Otherwise, we will be driven mad by depression. The theatre is a nice diversion.

Lincoln: I would rather be watching MacBeth; but the date is already set. The tragedies of Shakespeare are the best Theatre.

Mary Todd: You must see to it this Civil War comes to its final end, Abraham.

Lincoln: This war has become part of life and you must accept it.

Mary Todd: All war is madness! And, there is another aspect to it: manliness! This Civil War lingers on forever because of men, who have no compassion or love, and you are their leader, or their enemy. We look to you to quell our confusion. Perhaps, you do not have enough manliness to end the war!

Lincoln: Why must you always be so troubled?

Mary Todd: Because I am sick and tired of war! And, you do not seem to be doing a thing about what the journalists are writing about you. You do not even seem to care. No, I will not continue living like a prisoner in this house, for another four years. Something must change. You will not sit there, staring at me, and not speaking to me!

Lincoln: Our home is like a battlefield! I go from one war to the next.

Mary Todd: It is up to you to stop all the wars!

Lincoln: Mary Todd, I love you deeply; but you are a difficult woman.

Mary Todd: I am simply pointing out another line of thought. No one else will; they are all frightened of you. But I will speak my mind to you. We are a team. I greatly admire your strong ambition. Mr. Herndon was nothing special.

Lincoln: Ah, Herndon; now's there's a name I haven't heard for a long time. Do you ever miss Springfield?

Mary Todd: Springfield seems so far away. I do not miss the humid summers; but the people were nice. The summer lightning storms were a spectacle.

Lincoln: Do you believe what the journalists write about me? Do you feel I am a tyrant? Frederick Douglass seems to think too many Americans have died, because of my actions. He seems to believe the South will not change, even if they loose. Have I only caused war, when it was not necessary?

Mary Todd: You have done what must be done, to restore the Union. Dying is part of war. I only want the war to end. I cannot stand it anymore. I do not care who dies, so long as you stay by my side.

Lincoln: I am tired right now, after my meetings. I would like to nap before we go to the Theatre.

Mary Todd: You may rest. I will find Tad and we will find where he is with his studies. He will be at the theater.

[Exit Mary Todd. Lincoln prays.]

Lincoln: Lord God, help me with these weights upon my heart. I am exceedingly tired. I implore you to send me your love and kind mercy, to ease my burdens. My God, I trust in you; ease my troubled heart. Please care for my son, Lord.

[Lincoln sleeps.]

Scene VI

Setting: Lights rise partly. Enter John Wilkes Booth, who carries a dagger or a large knife. Lincoln wakes up with a start and stands.

Lincoln: Hey! What? Why are you here?

John Wilkes Booth: I am listening to the secrets of your mind.

Lincoln: There is a ghost in my home! Satan's Devil, leave my house!

John Wilkes Booth: Listen: I will share one of your secrets. You are a weak man, Mr. President; and, your coward heart eats away at you. Only in dominating those around you in tyranny, do you siphon off the bile of your spleen.

Lincoln: You are the actor, John Wilkes Booth.

John Wilkes Booth: Yes. You finally recognize me. We are brothers, you and I. I hold your soul prisoner.

Lincoln: I face you with courage. God is teaching me a lesson. Wars kill men. Wars continue to kill, after wars end. God has made this all too clear to me. I must save the Union! I must save the Union! No, perhaps war is not always right. The future will see rebirth to America; but I am not part of the future. I will forever remain in the past, in this Civil War of America. Like all men, this war has destroyed me.

John Wilkes Booth: You see the truth.

[John Wilkes Booth exits. Lights fade to black.]

Mary Todd: Abraham, wake up, dear. It is time to go to the theatre.

Lincoln: Get away from me.

Mary Todd: Abraham, you are covered in sweat.

Lincoln: I have seen a ghost. It is my self.

Mary Todd: I am here with you now. We will be all right. Rest now, in my arms.

[Lights fade to black.]

Scene VII

Setting: Ford's Theatre, April 14th, 1865. Lincoln and Mary Todd enter the theater and wave at the actual audience. They take up their seats to the side of the stage. *Our American Cousin* is being performed on the stage. The actors in *Our American Cousin* stop acting to clap and watch, as Lincoln and Mary Todd take their seats. Lights dim and John Wilkes Booth enters. John Wilkes Booth begins prowling in the dark, carrying a gun and knife.

Actor 1 (Asa): I am aware, Mr. Trenchard, you are not used to the manners of good society, and that, alone, will excuse the impertinence of which you have been guilty.

Actor 2 (Trenchard): Don't know the manners of good society, eh? Wal, I guess I know enough to turn you inside out, old gal – you sockdologizing old man-trap!

John Wilkes Booth:

[John Wilkes Booth shoots Lincoln in the back of the head.]

Mary Todd:

[Mary Todd let out a piercing scream. [John Wilkes Booth jumps to the stage, holds his dagger high.]

John Wilkes Booth: Sic Semper Tyrannis!

[John Wilkes Booth confidently strides across the stage. People sitting in the audience slowly stand, confused.]

The deed is done.

[John Wilkes Booth exits. One person chases Booth out of the theatre.]

Scene VIII

Setting: John Wilkes Booth has been chased to a barn, which is surrounded and slowly burning. David Herold is with John Wilkes Booth in the barn. Dog barks are heard. Booth wears a low hat and his left leg is professionally splinted. Their clothing is damp.

Voice of Detectives: John Wilkes Booth: You are surrounded. Come out with your hands raised! You must surrender!

John Wilkes Booth: David!

Herold: I am still here, John. They have set the barn on fire.

John Wilkes Booth: Come over here, David.

Herold: I am here.

John Wilkes Booth: Take this. It is the pistol I used to kill Lincoln. I think I have done well, though I am abandoned, with the curse of Cain upon me, when if the world knew my heart, that one blow would have made me great, though I did desire no greatness. I had put the gun close to the back of his head; I thought any of them might hear me approaching. I shot. He died – his head bent over. I made my jump over the railing. I was proud of myself for doing the thing. Then, and now, I feel melancholy. My soul is not at rest. I have killed the president. It all seems like a dream.

Herold: John, I must move to the entrance. This barn is one fire! We will burn alive!

John Wilkes Booth: Lincoln and I have only searched for the good and what is best in man. Lincoln may be the one who saves the honor of America. I feel he has won and I have lost.

Herold: The papers say Lincoln died on Easter morning, April 15th, in the manner of a martyr.

John Wilkes Booth: He is no hero! I acted to end Lincoln's tyranny. I am the Tragic Hero; I am Brutus.

Voice of Detectives: The papers are calling you a coward, John Wilkes Booth, for shooting Lincoln in the back. Come out like a man!

John Wilkes Booth: Wait, David! Don't leave me, my friend. Wait a moment longer.

Herold: John, I cannot see anything. Come outside with me. I only hear the voices. Leaving you here like this is wrong. I will miss your face, alive with passion. Even now, I can see it, from the light of the flames. I will be hung, I am certain. George and Powell will hang too. The North will hang everyone. I am ready to accept my fate.

John Wilkes Booth: I have too great a soul to die like a criminal, my friend. O may He, may He spare me; and, let me die bravely. I cannot surrender, David. I will burn first. I will burn. Lincoln has died on Easter Sunday. I am to die without my mother near me. Will you tell my mother I love her? Tell my mother I have done it for my country. We have fought for what we felt was right. We both fought for our countries, believing in the nobler things in life. He has won. I have lost. The North has fought with no honor, dignity. We have been cheated. Yet, I still believe in the Cause.

Herold: Goodbye, John. I can't breathe. I am leaving. Come outside, John! Goodbye, my friend.

[Herold exits.]

John Wilkes Booth: I bless the entire world. I have never hated or wronged anyone. My action was not a wrong, unless God deems it so. And, it is with Him to damn or bless me. It is useless, useless.

[Booth stands. Gunshot is heard. Booth grabs his neck, falls, dead. Curtain.]

The End.

Kurt Vonnegut,
Dr. Louis Manand (*The New Yorker* fame)

The following is an interview, which was transcribed by interns at World Audience, Inc., at our corporate office headquarters, in New York City.

Strozier: Well, today, I find myself prepared to discuss art and literature with the famous humor writer, Kurt Vonnegut. We are in the author's parlor. It is winter. He is wearing a blue turtleneck sweater, rather happening corduroy pants, which appear to be a smidgen short, polished black shoes. He has his favorite cat, Winchester, curled up in his lap. We're in New York City. The author's manservant has placed a fine English sipping tea; and, cookies of some sort on the coffee table. I am taping this interview. I would like to begin by thanking you, sir, for the opportunity of interviewing you for our electronic ezine, *audience*, which appears on the Internet. On a personal note, it is an honor to meet you, sir; and, I remember your books from when I was in high school...
(Pause.)

Strozier: Hello? It's an honor to meet you, sir!

Vonnegut: What'd you say?

Strozier: Thank you for participating in this interview, for our ezine, *audience*.

Vonnegut: What's an ezine *audience*?

Strozier: An online, literary and artistic journal, on the Internet.

Vonnegut: Sounds boring. I hate the Internet. I threw my computer out my window in 1999. Never looked back. Best move I ever made. What's wrong with typewriters? I like the clanging of a typewriter.

Strozier: I see.

Vonnegut: Macaroon?

Strozier: No, thanks.

Vonnegut: They're my favorite.

Strozier: I try not to eat sweets, actually. I mean, not at all.

Vonnegut: There's hardly any sugar in macaroons. How's your

tea?

Strozier: I'm good, thanks.

Vonnegut: It's Earl Gray

Strozier: I like Earl Gray a lot, as a tea.

Vonnegut: But no sugar in your tea.

Strozier: That's right, just a little milk, like the English.

Vonnegut: You're some interviewer. Is this for a high school newspaper, you said? How long is this going to last? I have to catch my nap. Winchester, here, has already fallen asleep in my lap.

Strozier: Just like a cat in a cradle. I did manage to suffer through that book. You know, sir, I remember reading your books in high school, like I just told you. My friend – Tom Beard – he really liked your books a lot. I thought they were weird. Actually, to be honest, I didn't read your books. I skimmed 2 or 3 of your books. Recently, I have gone back and re-skimmed your books. And, you know what? You are a lame writer. Whatever you're trying to write about, I have no idea; but I have come to realize that I don't care. Also, the pictures in your books are dumb. That's it; end of story. I don't care if you're some kind of politically influential liberal – always on National Public Radio – or, whatever. I don't care about politics, at all. Any humor you have; or, maybe had long ago, is lost on someone my age. You are the quintessential postmodern writer: weak – basically, stupid – and academic, which is to say, boring. Your books are all written for someone who lived in the 1960s; yet, every book, essay, scrawling on toilet paper, which you've ever written, is lining row after row in Barnes and Noble. Scholars pour over your "works of art." I'm tired of it all, frankly.

Vonnegut: Is that a question? You know, in the future, you might want to consult *The Paris Review* before you conduct any more "interviews" for your...whatever it is. They really do excellent interviews at *The Paris Review*. George Plimpton started all that.

Strozier: Plimpton is another mediocre writer, so typical of your generation, who is now dead. But you, sir, are not even a satirist. *Catch-22* is a satire. Your books are so farcical, they are not satires; they are just plain weird and stupid. You are more of a

straight-up humor writer, like, say, Edgar Allen Poe. Your humor is disguised in a giant mound of bullshit, however, unlike Poe's. The humor of both you and he seem pretty stupid, today. Poe wrote many other things, too, unlike you. Last, your "art" – that is, your paintings – are amazingly bad; but you must know that.

Vonnegut: Did we get a question in there? You're a regular Walter Cronkite.

Strozier: Who's he? Do you mean Dan Rather?

Vonnegut: Oh, common.

Strozier: Answer the damn question!

[Enter manservant.]

Vonnegut: Everything's fine. We're trying to conduct an interview for e-zine *audience* Internet. Can you bring lots more macaroons and a fresh pot of tea?

Strozier: Oh, *now* you remember...

[Exit manservant.]

Vonnegut: Well, what about Mark Twain? Certainly, he's still humorous, to this day. Some parts of his writing are obsolete, of course; but the things about language or relationships, that all stands the test of time. Anyway, why do you care? Why don't you just leave me the hell alone? Just do your own thing on ezine *audience* Internet and leave me the hell alone. Get out of my house.

Strozier: That's not what I'm saying, old man. Are you listening to me? I'm not leaving until this interview is over.

Vonnegut: Oh? What are you saying?

Strozier: I'm talking about Poe. I know what I said.

Vonnegut: But you said –

Strozier: Shut up!

[Phone rings.]

Vonnegut: Hello? Doctor? Yes? Doctor Louis Manand? The *Doctor Louis Menand*, The famous writer of *The New Yorker* fame? It is a great honor, and a personal pleasure to hear your voice. Jesus, Louis, I'm getting sort of tingly. Oh! Louis, is this a hot flash? Oh! Oh, Lordy! Well, anyway, it's over now. Listen, Louis, I am a regular reader of your fascinating pieces about Nixon, Kennedy, everything that's the 1960s...We're in the middle of a war

on terror; and, a real war in Iraq – thank God, someone out there is still “fighting the good fight” – taking about *our* issues – you know: Nixon, Watergate, Vietnam; and, all of that. I have your latest, brilliant article right here. It’s an article about President Kennedy. I love your description of Vice-president Johnson – LBJ – sitting in a chair, listening to Kennedy’s speech. Johnson picks up a piece of paper. He turns the paper over. He examines the other side of the paper. He puts the paper in his pocket. Yes, Louis! Phenomenal! Stupendous! A smorgasbord of intellectual prowess! Well, anyway. No, I’m in an interview with some young, disillusioned writer about technology – or, something. I’m so bored, I can’t see straight. No, don’t give him a second thought; he’s an intern, I think; he’s with the Internet. What’s that? You have a problem with your computer? Oh. Well. I threw my computer out of the window in 1999. That was my answer to the 21st century. Ha! Can I put you on speakerphone? Sure. Let’s see if our technology wiz can help you. Hold on, just a minute...Hello?

Menand: Hello?

Vonnegut: Doctor?

Menand: Yes?

Vonnegut: This is Kurt Vonnegut, sir.

Menand: Hello, this is Doctor Louis Manand.

Vonnegut: Doctor Menand – oh my – it is a great honor to be speaking with you, through this speaker phone apparatus.

Menand: Yes, well. I am a professor of English at Harvard University. I also write for the periodical known as *The New Yorker*.

Vonnegut: Oh, yes, sir – oh – how I *do* know that.

Menand: I see, yes.

Vonnegut: I have our intern here with us, in the company of your highness. He claims to be a writer and –

Menand: – We’ll just have to see about that, now won’t we? I haven’t seen any of his work; he’s no writer. What university did he attend? Has he been published in *The New Yorker*? That is where the finest American writers are published.

Vonnegut: Ha ha ha! Oh, sir, you are so funny!

Menand: Yes, I am funny and nuanced, as well.

Vonnegut: Well, sir, if you would be so kind as to state the nature

of your computer problem to our intern here, through my speakerphone apparatus – actually, there are several devices here, so I think I call them apparati!

Menand: The correct word is apparatuses, Vonnegut.

Vonnegut: Oh. I am sorry, sir. Please forgive me.

Menand: Don't let it happen again, Vonnegut.

Vonnegut: Yes, sir; thank you, your highness. Well, anyway, the intern says he can help you. Go ahead, professor, please, grace us with your problems.

Menand: ¹To begin with, the designers of [Microsoft] Word apparently believe that the conventional method of endnote numbering is with lowercase Roman numerals – i, ii, iii, etc. When was the last time you read anything that adhered to this style? It would lead to sentences like:

In the Gramscian paradigm, the “intellectual” xxxvii is, by definition, always a liminal status. xxxviii

(Hmm. Not bad.) To make this into something recognizably human, you need to click your way into the relevant menu (View? Insert? Format?) and change the i, ii, iii, etc., to 1, 2, 3, etc. Even if you *wanted* to use lowercase Roman numerals somewhere, whenever you typed...

[Strozier presses “hold” button on the speakerphone.]

Strozier: Kurt Vonnegut, what's the deal, man? This guy sounds like a serious asshole. What is so difficult about Microsoft Word?

Vonnegut: Put Doctor Menand back on the line, right now!

[Strozier does not move a muscle. Vonnegut presses the speakerphone button.]

Strozier: Do you know the definition of “manandy”? – Academic, pompous-ass speech or writing.

¹ Editor's note: What follows is a direct quote – to include *italics* – from *The New Yorker*, Oct. 6th, 2003; an article by Dr. Louis Manand called *The End Matter*.

Manand: ²When, in the old days, you hit the wrong key on your typewriter, you got one wrong character. Strike the wrong key in Word and you are suddenly writing in Norwegian Bokmal...Finally, there is the moment when you realize that your notes are starting to appear in 12-pt. Courier New.”

³“In the end, you stop the random clicking and dragging and pulling-down and have recourse to the solution of every computer moron: with a sob of relief, you press Ctrl/Alt/Del. (What do Control and Alt mean, by the way? Does anyone still know?)...”

Strozier: Alt means *alternate*! Press and hold Alternate; and, then press Tab: see what happens! That does it...

[Strozier picks the receiver up, slams it down, on the phone.]

“Click!”

Vonnegut: Sit down, Strozier! Is he gone? Why are you so bent out of shape, sonny? There must be other ezines *audience* Internet out there, doing their own thing. What is it you want?

Strozier: This is revolution! One must be careful what one says during a revolution, lest a side you do not want to be on is chose for you. Doctor Menand and you and the hippy cartel, obsessed as they were in youth with being under 40, have become exactly what they preached against in their “counter-culture revolution” – how ironic! I want my generation of artists to move forward; and, not be dragged down by the past – your past! I want to destroy all things print, as well as postmodernism. I am tired of the leftist political stranglehold on art in America. I want all artists to explore these newly discovered worlds, which are all there, right now.

Vonnegut: So do that and leave me the hell alone, you punk!

Strozier: I will!

Vonnegut: Good!

Strozier: Fine! But I cannot fully realize that dream, until I first see your hippy cartel destroyed; and, marginalized, within the literary canon, both now; and, for all time.

² More of *The End Matter*, by Doctor Menand.

³ I got your *Ibid* hanging. (It shrinks after taking a shower.)

Vonnegut: You're insane!

Strozier: Here's the simple truth: Right now, the hippy cartel controls all art in America. The hippy cartel has all the money, sets all the rules. I want to help destroy the print world and your hippy cartel, so more prestige, readership, along with more money, goes into the electronic medium. It's all about business. You seem to be doing rather well, living off your writing, all tree-hugging aside. We are at a major turning point in literature right now. Once your generation is all dead and gone, I am going to marginalize it, within the literary canon. This is the price you pay. I am not here to discuss a thing. I am only informing you, this one time, out of respect.

Vonnegut: Out of macaroons!

[Enter manservant, setting down a platter of macaroons. Exit manservant. Vonnegut commences eating macaroons, crunching loudly. Crumbs fly from his mouth.]

Strozier: There was no artistic collaboration in your generation. The Beats, they collaborated. That was the last of it. The Beats invented flowery, girlish poetry, which your generation has embraced, in the free-verse medium. We are creating our own style – an entirely new style – by collaborating on the Web. The best you can say about the Web is, “It is a marketing medium, for advertisers.” This really demonstrates ignorance, on your part. Your generation does not understand technology, thank God; and, I have the Internet as one of my tools, free of your intervention. The other tool I've armed myself with is the theater – the Mafioso of Misfits – where I don't have to be “published;” and, where your generation has zero influence. Why is that, I wonder? Ah, probably because at least on Broadway, one has to have *some* talent. The underground Off-Broadway – your creation – was an interesting idea, a political tool; but the art sucked – still does. The prestigious theaters like The Public Theater are paper tigers; they don't produce anything of quality – I wonder if they ever did. I am only talking about the quality of art, as my subject and concern.

Vonnegut: That's just not true – none of it. Broadway – all three of them – is wonderful. So are Modern Art and Free Verse Poetry and Billy Collins and Norman Mailer; and especially, Doctor Louis

Menand, who is genius! You are not endorsed, a writer. You can't even conduct an interview properly. You're not validated in any academic circles. You are self-taught. Doctor Menand laughs at you. You are nothing to Doctor Menand; he is so much better than you are. You are a worm of a writer, squirming pathetically, underneath the heel of Doctor Louis Menand's Harvard loafer, emblazoned on its side by its distinguished emblem: Academism, Intellectualism, Postmodernism...Liberalism!

[Pause.]

Strozier: May I please have some more tea – no sugar?

Vonnegut: No!

Strozier: Listen, old man: A writer must be educated; but one cannot teach writing in a school. Therefore, your generation has certainly been a misguided one.

Vonnegut: Out of tea and macaroons!

[Enter manservant, who removes the tray.]

Strozier: The process of learning to write is its own exploration. It is a difficult, taxing journey, with no equal. And, this process reveals powerful axioms, along the route, which is my favorite reward. The only light does not come from the end of a tunnel: you, the writer, are the light. A writer must have experience; or, there is nothing for the writer to write about. He or she will eventually run out of experience, too; and, have to run out and get more. So, what is the opposite of your confused meaning of "self-taught"? Your generation's agenda is providing writers with brainwashing in "creative writing" classes; and, sending those writers out to experience the world and write about leftist, political subjects.

[Enter manservant, who places fresh pot of tea and plate of macaroons on the table. Exit manservant.]

Strozier: This is journalism, à la Hemingway, not writing. Besides, while clearly *not* the best writer of his generation, at least Hemingway learned how to write, via the experience, aforementioned. (How he did it doesn't matter.)

Vonnegut: Mother-fucker! This tea does not have one quarter of a packet of Sweet and Low in it! Son-of-a-goddamn-bitch! Get in here, Junior! Now!

[Enter manservant, who carefully adds part of a packet of Sweet

and Low. Vonnegut sips tea, finds it to his pleasure. Exit manservant.]

Strozier: I will now properly define your term “self-taught” to you. Your generation has created a cartel, which has been systematically stifling all forms of writing. Readers and writers alike are forced to buy your books, listen to your mind-numbing rhetoric in universities. Thus, since one cannot teach true writing, your generation can only teach the masses how to adore your generation’s own form of writing, which exists in a time-loop of the 1960s; for example, your own expired, humorous books. Your cartel cannot allow true competition. All artists you promote – hippies themselves – must meet a strict regimen of “how to write like a hippy.” Hippy print publishers (it is easy to name an unashamed, powerful set of twenty), as well as the liberal media, only care that people will purchase leftist books at Barnes & Noble, generating money for your cartel, furthering its political goals. For the hippy publishers, quality and merit are secondary to propaganda and political correctness and political impact. And now, the highest selling genres are indeed political books and self-help books. In other words, literature is gone from the shelves! If one objects, by presenting an argument, as I just have, you ruthlessly dismiss it with your army of leftist academia, led by Doctor Louis Menand himself, columnist for *The New Yorker*. Or, as he, you ignore me outright, because I am not in print. You do not have any quality writers to fight me, however, because writers suck these days. And I just keep rolling along, in my Internet tank, over your daisy fields, shouting, “I am not in print! I do not have any literary awards! Hear that sucker’s engine roar!” There goes a streaking hippy, running across daisy fields! I whip out my long-range sniper’s rifle; and, drop that hippy freak like the tree-hugging gazelle he is. Guess what? I am still a young writer; and, Orwell didn’t know if he was right, either, when he wrote *Animal Farm*, blasting communism. Your generation will be pushing up those daisies; I’ll still be writing about it. Please note: All it takes is a single, pissed-off writer to bring any person, regime, system – any *thing* – to its knees, relegate it to the lost files of mistaken, worthless, human suffering. Only a fool doesn’t realize this. I keep

saying hallucinogenic, psychedelic drugs ruined your generation.

Vonnegut: Oh, please; for Christ's sake: You're talking out your ass. But...all right. Let's pretend you have one or two valid points, somewhere, lost inside that insane diatribe. That is not how writing works. In order to talk in an educated manner about literature, one has to be an English professor, like Doctor Louis Menand; and, have published several books; or, at least a MFA in creative writing, from somewhere like Columbia University, where *all* the geniuses are.

Strozier: Wrong! Let's take American theatre as a example of how your generation has ruined art and culture in America. Prior to the mid to late 60s, Broadway was in its heyday, a national treasure. It has become, under your generation's watch, similar to all other art forms, which you've castrated: poetry, painting, books (but not counting tie-dyed T-shirts or woven baskets): a political statement. What did you do to turn Broadway (and, in turn, Hollywood) into the commercial, boring, tepid, non-confrontational, highly political, politically correct, formulaic, cookie-cutter art form that it is today? Let's look at one sliver of theater: workshops; and, we find our answer. My play, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, first appeared at The Workshop Theater Company; 312 West 36th Street, New York, NY. My play is in *audience* Vol. 1, No. 1. The idea of a workshop theater was invented in the 60s, by your generation; and, it fits perfectly into your philosophy of an all-inclusive, give-everyone-a-voice-type-of-bullshit, where writing is relegated into a pliable tool, a thing, to be molded to fit a political agenda. But, let's not fool ourselves, you only aspire for more money nowadays; in fact, at aforementioned The Workshop Theater Company, 312 West 36th Street, a rich gentleman donated many thousands of dollars to The Workshop Theater Company; and, lo, his play was given a full production this year – his piece-of-shit play; so poor in quality, that there were three suicides during rehearsals – the actors! On opening night, during intermission, there was a mass suicide of the audience, in protest from having to endure the horrendous play. As for politics, a playwright such as Tony Kushner – a card-carrying member of the hippy cartel, as both gay and Jewish – writes two back-to-back plays about gay rights.

He is writing to fulfill a political objective. He does care at all about the play itself! Gay rights will never make a play – ever; it can only be a political statement.

Vonnegut: Jesus Christ, what was that?

Strozier: What?

Vonnegut: Oh, nothing.

Strozier: It is the same thing when a mediocre writer, such as Tony Morrison, wins the Nobel Prize for literature because she is a black female. Broadway has become a kind of rich-hippy cartel town hall meeting. In a workshop, the playwright submits his play to the theocracy, which runs the workshop. The playwright must be humiliated; his work is torn to shreds. Everyone does the writer's job, telling him how to write his play. Ultimately, the play is turned into a weak, politically-correct concoction, housing a leftist agenda. The workshop is a process whereby a play is written by a committee, following a formula, just like a film is written in Hollywood.

Vonnegut: Do smell anything strange?

Strozier: No.

Vonnegut: Okay.

Strozier: This process is also seen in other forms of writing; for example, when an editor (or creative writing teacher) is, actually, more powerful than a writer, in the assigning of writing projects. One example of this is the editor of the hippy writer Raymond Carver. An editor wrote that author's stories for him. The theater, however, has traditions, which still exist; and, as I say, your generation's influence has been minimal, because those efforts don't work in theater – they fail!

Vonnegut: That's all fascinating. I don't agree with any of it; but what's it got to do with me? Isn't this an interview about me?

Strozier: I'll tell you when to speak or answer questions. Otherwise, why don't you just keep your pie hole shut, unless you have something intelligent to say?

Vonnegut: I'll tell you what I think. There is no print bias or "print culture," at all. There is no hippy cartel. There are a million different presses out there; and, if you can't get published then the problem may be with you, not the presses. You should keep trying.

I know it is hard to get published. Why don't you just take a break for a while, listen to music; get a fresh perspective? My favorite band is U2. Boner is a creative genius.

Strozier: It's Bono.

Vonnegut: I thought it was Boner.

Strozier: I'm not done yet. Art has become another form of politics in America; but not in the rest of the world. Siphoned into journalism and 'big media', art is powerless, dependent on bodies such as the National Endowment of the Arts; the leftist press and publishing houses; and rich philanthropists; curators, collectors, such as Lord Peter Palumbo; etceteras – all hardcore liberals. Large corporations; and, the tentacles of their advertiser, legal, Wall Street suction cups, have infected all forms of art, from museums to Broadway, like a cancer. This is all your generation's fault. For all the free-this-and-that, your generation is the most ruthless, unethical of businesspeople; Key Ley is your hero; you couldn't even run a non-violence movement without incorporating violence. All of these things have ulterior motives, other than art, of a leftist leaning. Notice how popular Poet Laureates have become, as if poets were mayors, with political clout. Now, art's political voice is *recognized* as political, not as art. For example, when a Republican Congress cuts funding to the NEA because of confrontational, "Modern Art." In this case, the funding should get cut! It never used to be this way. In reality, art is not dependent on anything, not even food. The art world, in America, has no independent voice anymore; and, that is all because of the hippy cartel, leftist academia, leftist publishing presses, *The New Yorker*, philanthropists, museums, etceteras. Only the Internet can save us now. (And theater.) You know, the other day, I was wandering around the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA), which just opened. I will be doing a lot of wandering in that building. And, for the first time, it all became crystal clear. You see, Modern Art belongs in the Modernist Movement, which begun at the turn of the last century, in Paris, right? After a while, out it petered; and, having nothing new, along came "postmodernism." Your generation – the hippies – desperately wanted the 60s be just like the 20s. So, you extended the Modernist movement by half a century, plus. That is

what I see at the MoMA – not what you would like me to see: A “rolling-in” of everything subsequent to the Modern Era, into the Modernist Movement, which, itself, died by about the 40s or 50s. Even the MoMA itself left us 40 years ago, along with the Modernist Movement! Modernism was excellent; postmodernism sucks. What we are doing now is not postmodernism. Postmodernism has zero permeation into the electronic age. The separation is demarked on 9/11/01. We’re done being modern; here we are.

Vonnegut: I see a narrowing of my field of vision. There is a cliff, and I am going to fall...

Strozier: Try not to die until the interview is over. Do you need your manservant? Don’t eat any more macaroons.

Vonnegut: No, no. Okay. I’m okay. I’m all right now. I am making it through this interview! But, you’re just complaining. I understand; it’s okay. You’re a young writer, trying anything to get published. Have you given thought to being a journalist?

Strozier: Do not ever insult me like that again, sir. Newspapers are almost dead too. Newspapers are always one day late. The news is handed out at subway stations now, free. Why on earth would I pay \$1 to read a journalist or columnist; a part-time, unimpressive writer, operating under a deadline? I never have time to finish the thing, anyway. Besides, newspapers plagiarize, routinely. (Like the cockroach, when you catch a plagiarizer, there’re always a hundred more, unseen.) Magazines appear to be holding their ground; but diversifying into smaller, specialized niches. As for literary journals, do you know how many people read them? No one! Academia reads literary journals. But if the journal isn’t endorsed, forget it! In other countries regular people read journals; why not in America? Books are dead! Kaput. Sayonara. Fineto. Sleep with the fishes. Wing-chi. No one reads books anymore. Book editing is woeful; it has been for some time, as we all know. E-books are everywhere now. Books can be read on palm pilots or hand-held devices, etceteras. Artwork is also being digitized and put into electronic mediums. Digitized art looks better, actually. Furthermore, digitized artwork can be explained with precision, instead of wandering around a museum.

Vonnegut: What about the role of the critic? You have to receive

endorsement from critics, first, before you can be considered a true artist.

Strozier: The best critic is the artist. This is why the Internet is revolutionizing art. You do not understand the degree with which artists collaborate on the Internet – or the effect of this collaboration – because you do not understand the Internet. There is a vast reading audience out there, who are artists. The artists determine what is or is not art. The public is wise. In fact, they are infinitely wiser than all of academia. There's no middle-man/critic, authorized to give a seal of approval on art anymore. This is a fact that someone like Oscar Wilde could never have known, because in his day, art existed for only a small section of humankind. The Internet has made art available to all humankind. The days of a lone critic determining what's art and are already gone. To pay for his overreaching, the critic has been given a rubber stamp by the electronic age; his seal has been taken back. Academia, of course, has a love affair with the critic, because it is possible to fool the public into believing that the critic is an artist, and can therefore judge art, when the art actually sucks, as it does, at present. (Journalists are, therefore, kissing-cousins to critics, in this regard.) Thus, academia becomes a super-powered midwife to art. This is not unlike Freud's notion of penis envy.

Vonnegut: You're entertaining, that's the only reason I keep you around; but you're not right. I simply can't believe that the Internet is going to replace newspapers or books. The Internet is a marketing tool, just like Dr. Louis Menand says in *The New Yorker*. Books are irreplaceable. They will last forever. You are a liar! Books will never die, you scum! Don't say it in this house ever again!

Strozier: Well, it's all true. Furthermore, I am going to use every effort of my being to insure the permanent destruction of books, and the entire print culture apparatuses. Ha!

Vonnegut: Get out of my house, now! Get out of here, you little punk!

Strozier: All of the books will die! I will burn them all in hell! The books shall all die! Hahahahaha!

Vonnegut: No! Please, no! You are un-American! Take the

newspapers; take the magazines; but in the name of God, don't destroy the books!

Strozier: The Internet will destroy all the books! They are all going away, forevermore!

[Enter manservant.]

Vonnegut: I'm all right. I'm okay. We'll finish this fucking interview. [Coughing, wheezing.]

[Exit manservant.]

Vonnegut: [Lights a cigarette.] This all sounds personal. You have invented all this, in your mind. I don't know you from Adam. Do you hate me?

Strozier: I have nothing against you, personally. I don't hate you.

Vonnegut: Do you hate your father? Is that the problem?

Strozier: Writers on the Web, right now, are reshaping the next thousand years. The economic model is changing; money for art travels across borders like never before. The print culture is dying. And copyright laws do not apply to the Internet. There're no first or second serial rights; everything written is posted, instantaneously. The issue to resolve is how to disseminate the art or writing, and who has control of it. Technologies can be formed to enforce copyright laws; but other technologies can always usurp their forbearers. And, we can't sue across borders. So, writers on the Web will have to develop their own traditions and standards to substitute for what used to be copyright laws. There will have to be international copyright laws; but they will be created by artists, operating on the Web, not lawyers at the United Nations. Otherwise, they will be ignored. An ISBN, I think, is ineffective and a waste of money, frankly. ISBNs may not be required anymore.

Vonnegut: I have no idea what you are talking about. But, I am beginning to understand your point of view now. I am sorry for doubting you.

Strozier: I am glad you understand now. Let's quickly recap my main points. I am not even going to accept your liberal, hippy pretenses, anymore; they are rejected. Books and newspapers and magazines are dead. There is a hippy, print cartel, which I will help destroy. Postmodernism is already gone. Your generation

has ruined every form of art, from the theater to poetry. Your generation is chock full of corrupt businesspeople, and now entire corporations are destroying art, en masse. And the writers, who are working on the Web right now, are changing the shape of art and culture, economics and the mediums themselves, on a global scale, for the next one thousand years or more.

Vonnegut: Would you like to talk a walk with me to the East River?

Strozier: Let's go down there; you take your walker. Perhaps, we can get a warm muffin on the way.

Vonnegut: Yes, I would like a warm muffin. I would like to donate one million U. S. dollars to World Audience, Inc.

Strozier: We can go to the bank first, and then the East River.

Vonnegut: Thank you, for the opportunity to make a donation to ezine *audience* Internet. [Extinguishes cigarette.]

Strozier: You're welcome. Your donation entitles you to nothing, of course.

Vonnegut: I realize that. It's an honor to be given the option. Let's make it two million U. S. dollars, shall we? I am filthy rich. I'm a famous writer. It's hard to believe I used to be a hippy.

Strozier: Let's make it 2.5 million U. S. dollars.

Vonnegut: I think that's a fair amount.

Strozier: I would like your write me check for \$750,000.00, as that is my standard fee.

Vonnegut: I have that, too. It is a pleasure to pay your fee.

Strozier: Do that right now. Step lively, old man.

Vonnegut: Yes.

[Exit Vonnegut with walker. Vonnegut returns several minutes later.]

Vonnegut: Here are your checks. Let's go get that muffin and see the East river.

Contributors

Magdalena Ball (www.compulsivereader.com) lives in NSW, Australia. Her poetry, fiction, reviews, interviews, and essays have appeared all over the Internet, and in a range of print publications from academic journals to parenting magazines. She has degrees in English Literature and Business and has studied at City College of New York, Oxford University, and Charles Sturt University. She runs The Compulsive Reader <http://www.compulsivereader.com/html>, and her short stories, editorials, poetry, reviews and articles have appeared in a wide number of printed anthologies and journals and have won a number of awards. Her non-fiction book, *The Art of Assessment* was published by Mountain Mist Productions in 2002, her poetry chapbook *Quark Soup* is due for publication by Picaro Press late in 2006, and her novel *Sleep Before Evening*, is currently under consideration.

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Lee Stringer lived on the streets from the early eighties until the mid—nineties. He the author of *Sleepaway School*, *Like Shaking Hands with God*, and *Grand Central Winter*. He is a former editor and columnist of *Street News*. His essays and articles have appeared in a variety of other publications, including *The Nation*, *The New York Times*, and *Newsday*. He lives in Mamaroneck, New York.

M. Stefan Strozier lives in New York City. He is the founder of La Muse Venale Acting Troupe (www.lamusevenale.org). His plays, *Guns, Shackles & Winter Coats*, *The Whales*, and *The Tragedy of Abraham Lincoln* were performed in lengthy runs, off-off Broadway, and in the Midtown International Theatre Festival. He has directed four plays and one musical, and produced ten, all off-off Broadway. His stories, poems, non-fiction have been published in many online ezines. He has been published in print at *Gallery*, *War Heroes*, the *Taj Mahal Review*, the op-ed pages of the *Chicago Sun Times*, in several poetry collections, in a self-published short story collection,

Sickness of the Young, and, he was a journalist for his college newspaper. His plays, books, and his collection of short stories and essays are available, print-on-demand, at his Web site: www.mstefanstrozier.org.

Matthew Ward (Newcastle, Australia) started writing seriously in 1993. In 1994, he had poetry published in OPUS (Newcastle University's magazine), Newcastle Herald, Writer's World, and JIGs (Journal of Interdisciplinary & Gender Studies). He has written serious articles for literary newsletters, and satirical ones for the now defunct www.theLiberals.org. His short stories have appeared in OPUS. In 2004, his story *Jake With A Snarly Smile On His Chops* was published as a novella by Independence Jones (Australia). In 2006, he wrote two IT-related e-books. Matthew continues to write when he finds the time away from his web design business. It is only in this year, 2006, that he has started submitting his short stories to competitions. He has novels & screenplays 'in the works'. He is constantly trying to 'write outside the box', and this keeps him enthusiastic for the art that is creative writing. Matt is also the founder, editor and publisher of Skive Magazine (www.skivemagazine.com).

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