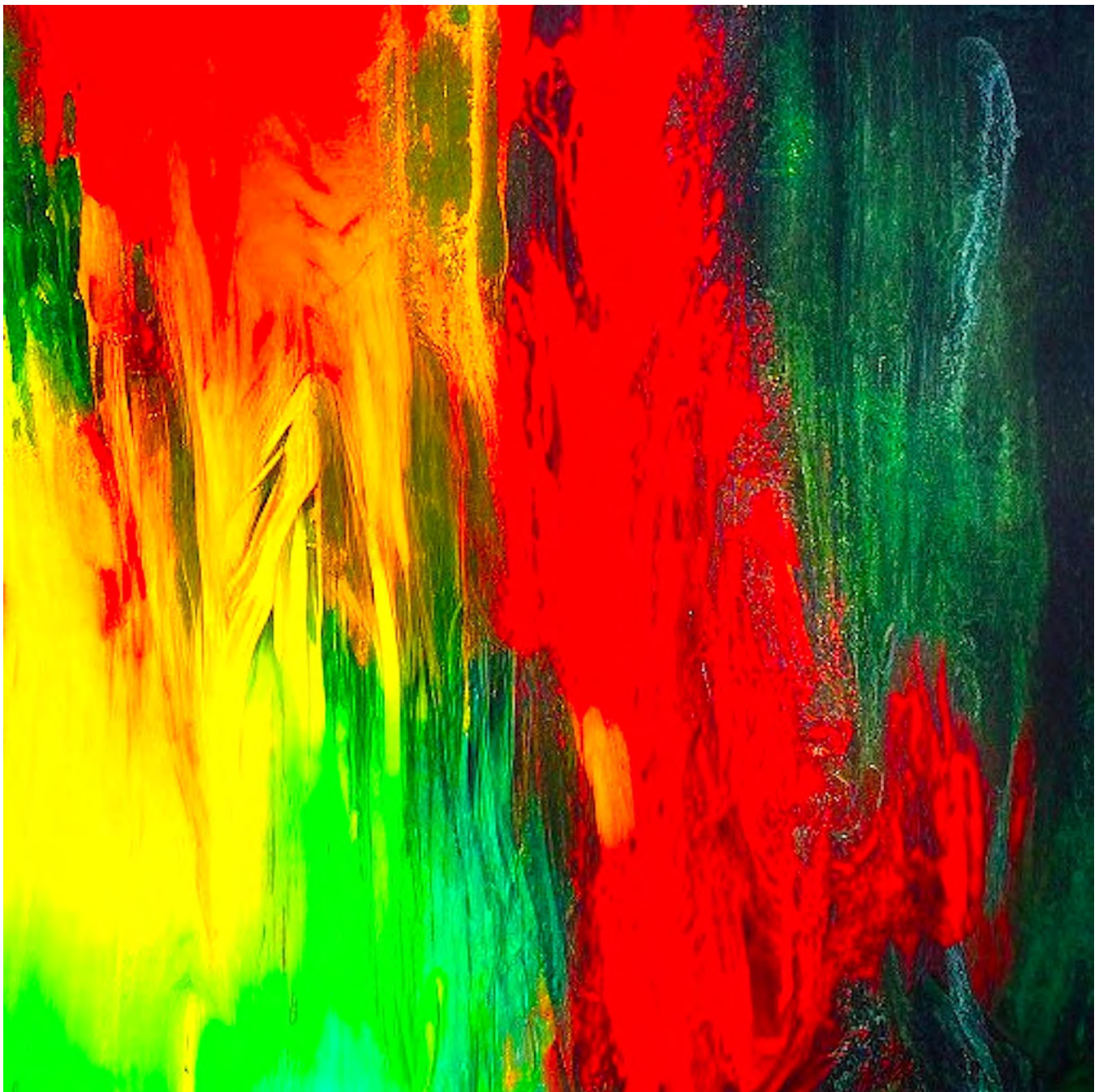


STREET CAKE

experimental writing magazine

issue 88



@janis butler holm

contents

issue 88

COVER: janis butler holm – unpredictable climate

mw bewick – parlour game onslaught

arthur davis – the favor

gerry fabian – to see what I missed

luca fois – snow III

grant guy – content

nicholas hogg – vortex *and* how to escape from a crocodile (on
land)

stephanie ivanova – within

sarah james – a^{wake}, the morning* 1 after *and* renovation.

samantha kelly – up // down

kathryn lasseter – theoretical with a tail

amy marques – aged *and* past perfect

danielle mcMahon – strange & fretful times(in television)

stephen middleton – mainframe (or)

bobby morris – gray flamingos

bobby parrott – rewriting dysfunctional algorithms toward a more
transparent post-anthropocentric misbehavior

tim suermondt – “these poems are not for us”

ilias tsagas – where do you plan to be?

heather walker – poetry sudoku

grzegorz wroblewski – lower street

PARLOUR GAME ONSLAUGHT

As life is some kind of line
 “and the comfy chair”
 is an accidental codex,
 “an aspidistra”
 is a sleeping horror,
 “and the cafetiere”
 is an unconscious response to a reality of travel’s material pressure.
 “It is said”
 you lie there,
 “looking at your socks”
 and what to do about double indemnity.

Think. Think hard.

The allegations of benefit gigs are all true.
 The paparazzi left, the new lens quintessence of hard-won fact
 guided by the spirit of old rebellions, or
 “movement of bowels”
 histories yearning for new sensation, language skirting
 the notion of ideas and
 “Bugs Bunny”
 or Black Panther,
 “gaze of slack-jawed visitors”
 or tinnitus of tomorrow, the thin-strewn mulch a mockery of
 malapropists, of nature of
 “what, of what?”

Think. Think hard.

 “The record player?”
 idles into blue-bird hallucinogens, reel-to-reel dub-plate springs,
 jeans of threadbare psychic charge, exquisite corpse of
 sampled kick-drum.
 “The beat”
 is an exile of clear-skinned licks, replaced and replicated
 simultaneously,
 “a beautiful tapestry”
 or elite vehicle,
 “faded fresco”
 of minor parallels, colliding in borderless relevant effects
 and establishing agency, the necessary conditions
 for rocks and bodies.

Think. Think hard.

“You see, this is”
the slow work, the need for something without restraint, but cohorts
are still arriving with paintings and speeches about
“waistbands and buckles, short-eared owls”
and resistance is only another shared reference, and nebulous
freedoms are problematic, and the continuum is still
one of growth.

Think. Think hard.

The Favor

In May of 2016 my cousin asked me to murder her husband.

Bernie wasn't a bad guy. He was overweight, drank more than occasionally, didn't have much of a sense of humor, and was fiercely outspoken about his politics. He worked hard to build a successful construction business. His family wanted for nothing, including love.

"I need a favor," Carla, his wife, asked while we were having our semi-annual family breakfast at a Denny's in Baltimore. Outside the restaurant, we were two outcasts who refused to quit smoking while it seemed like the rest of the country had long shunned

what had become a gross, lethal habit.

Since childhood Carla had a way of innocently asking family and friends for favors. Maybe at first to get attention as a child. It could be to hear a stupid joke or ask if she could finish someone's desert. When she was in her teens, she asked my brother if he could steal three loaves of artisan bread from a fancy-assed gourmet store. Kevin stole them without question.

Carla was an excellent student, which our family believed offset her strange habits. Family and friends looked the other way. Carla never drank or took drugs. There were faint rumors of promiscuity, but they were swept aside because of her unequivocal devotion to her family.

"That's a pretty big favor," was all I could muster. Why would she think I was capable of killing Bernie, or anyone?

Carla crushed half of her remaining cigarette with the heel of her shoe. I always admired her confidence. Everything she said had the ring of unquestioned importance. "I can't tell you why or it will influence the way you think about the family."

I was in two fights in high school. Nothing to brag about. And I've never wished anyone dead and never thought of ways to murder anyone. But I was intrigued. I watched all the crime programs on television and often considered what would I do in different circumstances. Always as the criminal, never as the detective with the probing investigative insight. The best was Chicago PD. Never posing in search of an award, the characters were real, relatable, straightforward.

“And not to worry,” she said, reaching out for my hand, “you wouldn’t get caught.”

#

That night I was sleepless. I kept hearing Carla, watching her lips move. Her expression indifferent.

Why didn’t she ask about me? She knew what I was going through?

I liked Bernie. He was your everyday guy who was never very good at expressing his feelings. His only claim to fame was that he had been singing in a local church choir since he was a teenager. But killing him, and why was Carla so confident I wouldn’t get caught?

“Are you a killer?” I asked, shaving the next morning. The image in the mirror had nothing to say in my defense. I nicked myself badly. A trickle of blood slipped down my chin, and just as quickly I realized there must be another man in Carla’s life.

I had breakfast watching the second John Wick movie. The first was the best, even with an improbable fight scene at the end. The second was even better, with a more international flavor and an insanely tedious fight at the end. I survived a half hour of the third installment. Pure crap.

After lunch I made my way to my uncle Ernie’s Delicatessen. The six-block walk from my apartment was all downhill. The arthritis in my left knee was manageable. Walking back was suspect since it was downhill too.

#

“Dead?” Ernie said, sipping his espresso over a small table in the back of his store while a mob of customers demanded their turn to order.

With four counter men, it still wasn't enough. It wasn't the salmon, swordfish, pickles, soups, salads, or other exotic ethnic entrees. All his customers, even the blind, were here for one dish.

“Yeah, dead.” I answered.

I was always fond of Ernie. Sharp smart with strong, reasoned opinions, he started the shop as a young man and found his fortune through the back door.

“Carla has always been a little off, but still a sensible woman.”

“What do I do?”

Ernie scratched away at his week-old beard, “Did she say why?”

“No, just that I wouldn't be caught. Did you ever kill anyone?”

There was a revealing blink before he shook his head. Ernie had a somewhat suspect past, living in South America for half a decade.

The clamor from the deli caught his attention and he disappeared behind the flimsy curtains that separated us from the front of his shop. Of course you could order plenty of Jewish dishes. But Uncle Ernie's great wealth came from his connection to the South American halvah cartels that controlled over 80 percent of the most refined delicacy on the planet.

###

Slowly, the uproar subsided. Ernie returned with a bag of food and handed it to me. “Here,” he said with loving familiarity. “Taking a life is serious business.”

We hugged and I left.

I sat in the park for several hours. I couldn’t do it. What was worse, if I didn’t, Carla would find someone more willing. I wanted to relieve myself of the burden. Later that afternoon we met in the park.

“You know I want the best for you, but murdering Bernie, I just can’t do it. That’s not what I’m about. That’s not me,” I confessed with great relief.

Carla lit up a cigarette without offering me one. We sat in silence for some time. “I’m sorry I asked. I’m even sorrier that I could do something like that to the man I married. Bernie is a good father and husband.”

“But you did.”

“But I did,” she replied taking a long drag, letting the smoke slip through her lips.

“You’re not all right, are you?”

She smiled. “Yeah, it seems I’m more than not all right.”

I wanted to ask her why?

“I’m so sorry I put you in such a terrible position. What must you think of me?”

Two joggers ran by our bench. Both pretty young women. They were chattering away while running. I’ve never seen two men jogging and talking to each other at the

same time. They both had nice butts. My ex had a great butt. At least for the eight years we were together.

“I am going to ask you another favor. It might be more difficult than the first,” she said haltingly. “Can you ever forgive me? I don’t know what drove me to ask something so terrible of someone I love.”

It was getting cold. It would be dark in a few hours. I didn’t know what to say. I hadn’t gone to the point of judging Carla as many others would. I didn’t say no immediately and question her motives. I didn’t do a lot of what most others would have come to naturally.

I felt complicit. It revealed too much of the dark side of my soul. Maybe my ex was right to leave me.

Carla got up. “I’m going. I have a lot to think about. I can’t apologize enough for what I’ve asked of you.”

All I could offer was a faint smile. I sat a while longer, thinking less of her and even less of myself.

Why hadn’t she asked how I was doing, like most of the rest of our family and my few friends did routinely? “How are you feeling? What’s happening?” were the most common texts and calls.

But nothing from Carla. In her own world, she was the only one who mattered. Everyone else was there to support her quirks and peculiarities. Bernie must be a saint, with the patience of one to keep his family together.

I looked down at my hands as though they were part of the conspiracy, as though they were prepared to do the unthinkable if asked. My nails were clean. The right length. No scars or callouses. Nothing revealing of my soul. With the parade of bikers, skateboarders, joggers, couples in conversation, I found myself surrounded by a deafening silence.

I made my way home. More than forgiving Carla, Finding a way to forgive myself was going to a more difficult task.

If I murdered Bernie today and was sentenced to life tomorrow, ironically, I would never serve a day in prison. I didn't have that kind of time left.

End

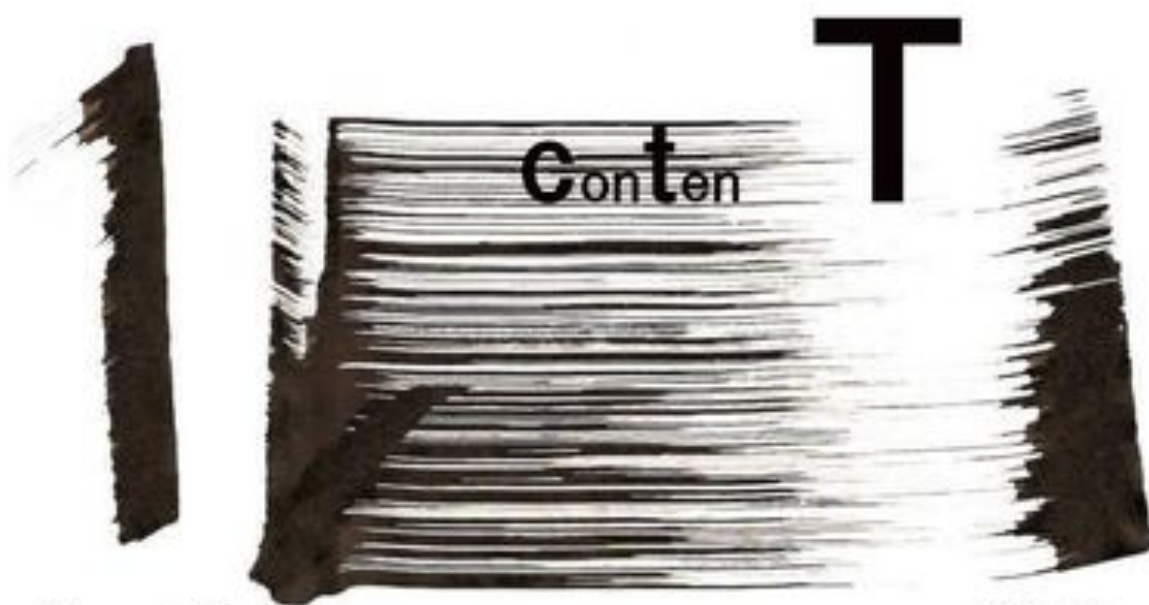
To See What I Missed

Twilight on a midweek
gray winter afternoon,
I am sitting reading
the last page of a compelling novel
I never wanted to end.
Slowly, I turn to the first page
and begin to read it again.
That is why, each evening
before we retire,
I give you an extra-long kiss.

Snow III

Cautious, slowly returning
 home. Sceptical. Will I ever
 make
 it under this snow. The oath
 of the cold is holding me
 accountable for
 For what?
 I did nothing,
 the road.
 The cauldron of clotted snow being
 released on the floor. Shall I
 say it on the road?
 A giant has opened their hands, it makes
 it fall. No voice.
 A snow
 covered crocus
 holds her head above
 her shrouded sons.
 Another
 step. I'm cold. Bored.
 Alone?
 It's this the right way home? I
 don't know. I go. No, I
 stop.
 Cautious.

con **T** ent



VORTEX

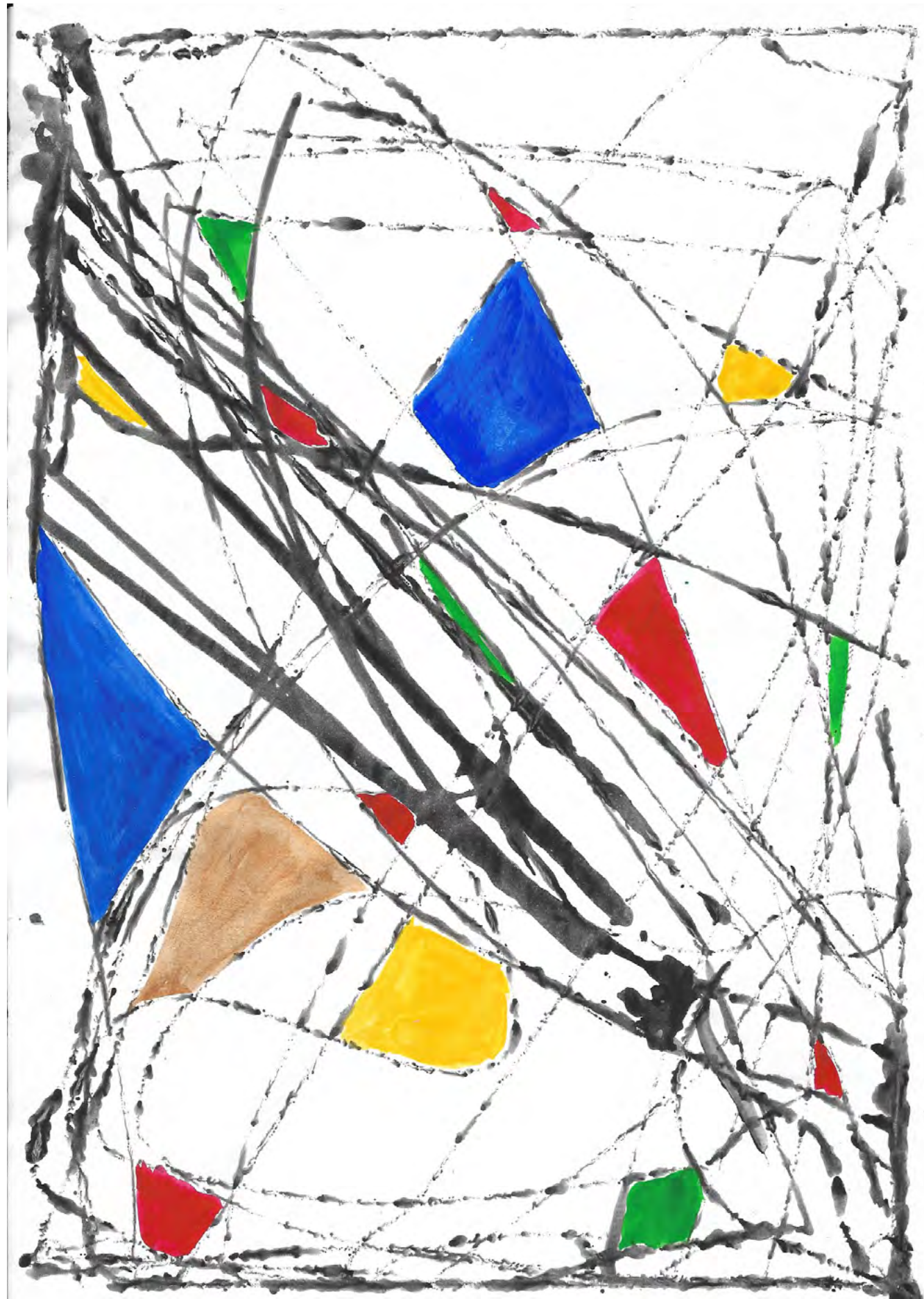
I found a hole
 in time
 with sleep
 when I woke
I forgot
 who I was
 and where
 I had been
a déjà vu
 connect
 to a catnap
 minute
in Central Park
 when I
 dozed
 in the sun
half-awake
 nodding off
 again
 on Tokyo Metro
where people
 on trains
 packed
 with sleepers
loll against
 each other
 like dolls
 and the carriages
shuttle
 through
 dark.

HOW TO ESCAPE FROM A CROCODILE (ON LAND)

Run

zig

zag.



a^{wake}, the morning^{*1} after

Leave your black^{*2} from the night-before^{*3} outside so this doesn't eat into a new day. Dress practically, but also warmly, brightly, and ready to stiff-lip whatever comes.

As you'll see from your table for one^{*4}, the buffet items^{*5} laid out in metal trays have lids^{*6} of steel, masquerading as silver when placed in the right light^{*7} on sunny days.

You've no real choice on how your eggs^{*8} are served. Make the best between fried and scrambled. In truth^{*9}, you're not missing much in the lack of poached or boiled –

this world doesn't offer any soft centres^{*10}.

**1 lives/loves/losses*

**2 lives/loves/losses*

**3 lives/loves/losses*

**4 lives/loves/losses*

**5 lives/loves/losses*

**6 lives/loves/losses*

**7 lives/loves/losses*

**8 lives/loves/losses*

**9 lives/loves/losses*

**10 lives/loves/losses –
try not to keep tally*

renovation

The lobby chandelier
is a giant cascade of tears
masquerading as diamonds.

As always, the hardest substance
man knows is mined from darkness,
cold stone, low-waged sweat.

Workers could release this
from the vaulted ceiling
in a slow, delicate

unchaining, link by link,
pin by pin, but, then,
who would hear

its monumental fall?
No surprise, they opt
for an explosion

of sparkle
that cuts
deep
!

Up // Down

Up and round, up and round the stairwell. It's all looking a bit like that Italian fella, Piranesi, the one who drew those prisons. Most people thought he was dead on, but there's no sense of perspective. Someone should've taught him. Anyway, it's a bit like that, every floor sketched in greys, monochromatic. All process and production and knees bent, arms stretched, ra ra ra.

Current service users are on the seventh floor.

Why, when last week we were
on the fifth?

Well last week is not this week, is it? Do you
need a claimant commitment form? Take one
anyway.

Up and round, up and round. It's grey alright, but the grey of a body drained of its lifeblood,
chunks of concrete sold off on the cheap to skinny-tied developers. Process and production,
but what about progress? Up and round, no time to stop and take in the sights.

There's a talk on today. You want the third floor.

Not the fifth?

Did I say the fifth? Take a claimant commitment
form with you, that one's out of date.

What's the talk on?

Dunno – decent biscuits though.

Down and round, down and round.

Down and round, down and round.

Down and round, down and

Pause on the steps, halfway down – or up. The paper of the claimant commitment forms is rough and slightly warm to the touch in the way that photocopies always are, a replica of sensation. The bulk of their characters given up to the black and white of a life that might be lived, if only you were more committed. In other words, less yourself, you workshy benefit-thieving scrounger.

Instead you rip up the claimant commitment forms, tear them into little pieces, expend energy into making them something other than what they are. Now there's the shredded remains of claimant commitment forms twirling through the air like a bureaucratic snowfall. You *can't* be less of yourself.

Do you know how to make paper? Chop down a tree, although these days not without a quick sorry to the burning planet and all those dead monkeys. Then you turn it into pulp with the wood and the glue and the water and the chemicals all mixed up together in a kind of soup. The audience is sceptical. Water? But you wreck paper by getting it wet! Now, that's true enough, but the pulp starts out *mostly* water. Sometimes as much as ninety-nine percent – even the human body can only be made of up to seventy-five. And then, after they've gone mad on all that water? They dry the bugger out! Layer the pulp in neat little rows and wait until it's forgotten its roots. That's paper for you, the only time it stops pretending is when you get it a little wet. Like anything, the end and the beginning are not so distant cousins. But none of that will fit on a claimant commitment form, whether you get it wet or not.

Down and round – gone down too many floors, this one is the second. It looks like all the others. Turn around, up and round.

You're late.

I didn't know we were on this floor.

I sent an email.

I don't have an email.

You have an email registered in the system, which means you must have put an email on your claimant commitment form. Are you informing me that you have lied on your claimant commitment form? If you are informing me that you have lied on your claimant commitment form then I will have to issue you a sanction for unacceptable behaviour and you will have to fill out a new claimant commitment form.

Enough with the bloody forms it's

Explicit language constitutes unacceptable behaviour, for which I will have to issue you a

What was explicit? Bloody?
Blood's hardly explicit – we all bleed, love.

Harassment constitutes unacceptable behaviour,
for which I will have to issue you a sanction.

I should also sanction you for being late, but as
it is only five minutes I will simply issue you a
warning on this occasion.

Would you call another man love?

I see.

I do.

Sick pay?

Who's harassing? What are you
on about? I

Love? Is that what all the fuss
is about? I didn't mean
anything by it. Don't you see,
I'd call anyone love, me.

Well no, but that's different, isn't
it?

They wouldn't appreciate it, do
you know what I mean?

So, what's the situation with the
sick pay?

Whatever it's called, you know what I mean. The benefits or what have you.

We have had this conversation before, the department of work and pensions

I don't need much you know. Not a lot at all, really. But I've worked all my life, paid my way and

declared you fit to work. Of course, you may appeal but

Fit? My doctor doesn't seem to think I'm fit – quite the opposite, actually. He

Look, that's not really what we do here.

Oh? What is it you do here?

You signed an agreement as a service user to look for work to the best of your ability. I am only here to confirm that you are holding up your end of that agreement. Now, do you have your booklet?

Did you know that the human body can be made up of seventy-five percent water?

What's that got to do with anything? May I please see your booklet?

Right here.

But you've not filled it in all week!

Filling that bloody thing in is a full-time job in itself.

I've warned you before about explicit language.

You really haven't applied for any jobs this week?

Loads of them, they're just not in the booklet.

Like what?

Car park attendant ... quality control in a ball bearing factory ... oh! The man who fixes the printers.

Are you having me on?

Not at all, I had a trial shift.

And what happened?

Couldn't fix the printer.

Applying to jobs proves that you are a reliable service user, which proves you can be a productive member of society.

You do want to be a productive member of society don't you?

I have been applying for jobs.

Well, they're not in the booklet.

The booklet can be trusted where a person cannot – must be because of all the extra water.

Because while the human body can be made up of seventy-five percent water, what's the rest of it? Platelets and bone and ligaments, sure, but what about joy? What about dignity, and that lightheaded feeling you get when you climb too many stairs? What percentage do they make up? Could you fit them in a booklet?

Is there anything else I can help you with today?

I could do with a glass of water.

We're not allowed to provide refreshments to service users I'm afraid. I think there's a talk happening on the fifth floor though, they might have tea and biscuits.

Right.

Don't forget to fill in the booklet for next week,
or I will have to issue you a sanction. And
please don't be late.

Down and round.

Down and round.

Down and round.

To settle down in the pile of claimant commitment forms blocking the exit. They're no longer warm, and as a place to rest your head they're less comforting than you might think. But what else is there?

Theoretical with a Tail

The pet theory is that

pets

have theories, too,

but

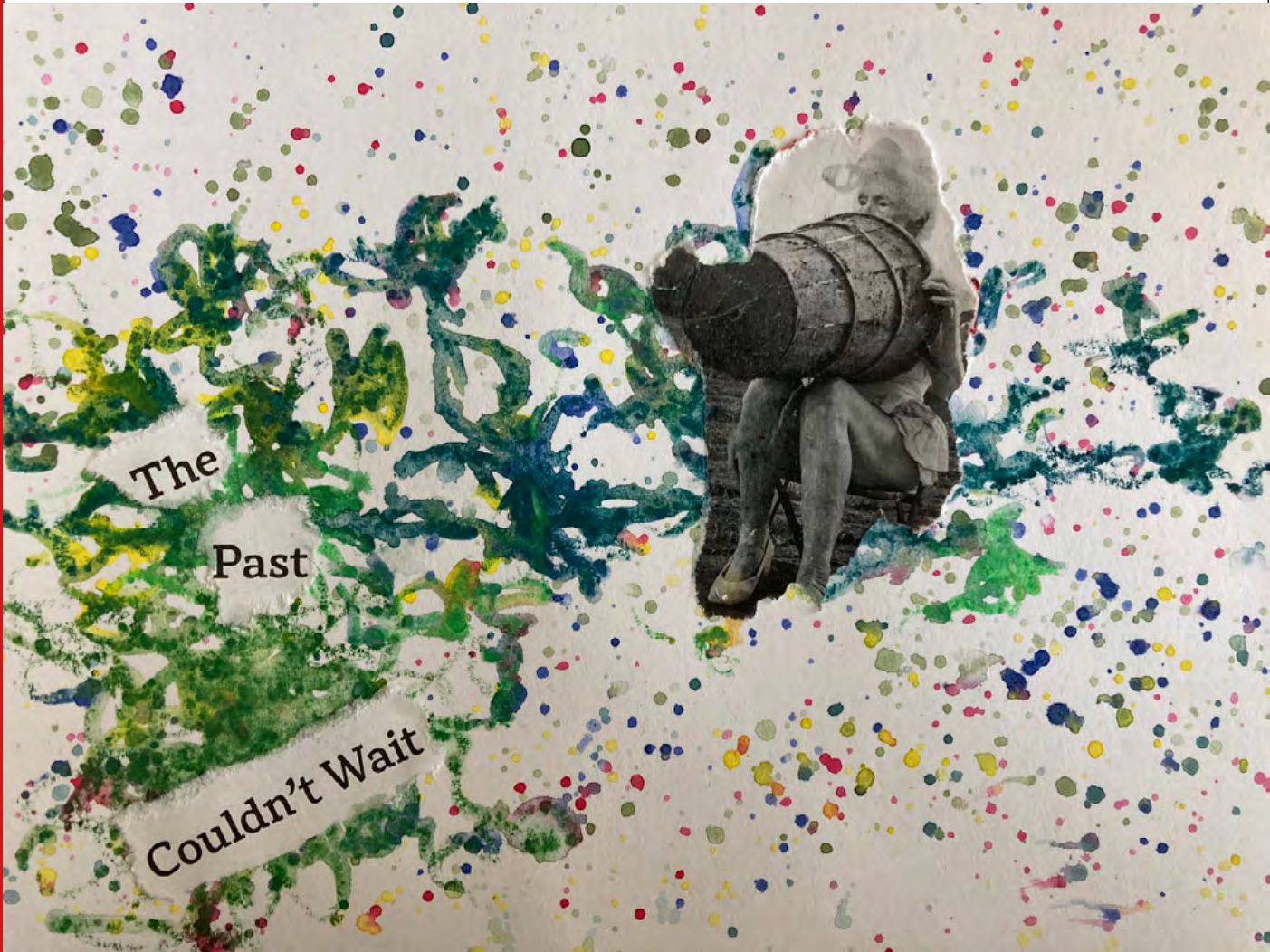
pets don't proselytize.



How, when the aged are

Quite leisurely

Something amazing,



Strange & Fretful Times(in Television)

Cut/paste poem, sources:

Chayefsky, Paddy. "Television Craft." *Adventures in American Literature*. Eds. John Gehlmann and Mary River Bowman. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1958. 148-152.

&

March, Robert H. "Catching Nature's Vanishing Act." *Science Year: The World Book Science Annual*, 1983. World Book Inc., 1982. 197-207

The drama of introspection is a drama
with wideness & weight(a desk

with papers on it & a chair,
energetic packets of light)blown

from anyone's head

These are strange & fretful times:

The audience will accept a hail of false signals
The audience will not accept a weak force
The audience expects a great deal of—————

Don't

bother writing fires or floods or something
that springs full in the act
of destroying itself

A close kinship with the camera
will show something real(a reflection, still primitive,
will transform into antimatter)

Television writers are faced
with the ever-prevalent illusion that

the audience

only wants to make honest sense(You

will use this master force
of Impressionism

& some wisps of smoke &
a small puddle of water)

The point of this arrangement is to run
head-on into the taboos(only
nakedly &

in continual rapid motion as
two grains of sand bumping
into each other, fleeting

encounters, the annihilation
of matter by antimatter,
paper-mache & ply-wood)

They can hardly be blamed for the debris of the collisions
They annihilate each other(

The reason is simple:
if you have a window,
you must be able to look out of it)

& Television,

the scorned stepchild of drama, is mostly
empty space / disturbed human beings / telltale

patterns of light(really elementary bits)

The basic limitation is time
You may be slowly disintegrating

Mainframe (or)

Mainframe (or) sidetrack

Refracted erasure twist(ed) / (the) syntax

An axe to metaphor / everything distracts

Harmonics to noises off

So esoteric even the therapist is bored

Chord progressions or ragtime filigree

Seamless or stuttered rhymes or free

Aleatory, or precision Fermata, for example

Sonics, your starter for samples & crash / reboot, interruptions

Even, all the oeuvre on the computer

But, (he) says, 'it has to be live',

This is not always an option.

GRAY FLAMINGOS

b
r
a
n ted
c pain
h legs, un red taste
walls—dullness is an cqui
a

gray to
lost time

DAMNING
US SORE INDIVIDUALISM

tin-plastic can
dy
where no seeing rea
ches,

stalking its borders

THE DEVIL'S FURNISHING
HELL TO ANTI PROMISES

fill out
the blank verses,

goslowlyit'sokay,
smallpaints,smallpaints
letitdownslowly

a black'n'white
RAW [you
tune in RGB]

Rewriting Dysfunctional Algorithms Toward A More Transparent Post-Anthropocentric Misbehavior

My first name is a bathtub squeeze-toy, a blipped baby-babbled blemish to the sixth-grade ego-driven Frankenstein monster awakening into its freshly minted fictional self. So I use the more formal *Robert* until my mother crushes that to ginormous nano-bits at the first PTA meeting. Little do they understand the pangalactic disturbance this doll house of self-containment foists on an eleven-year-old ripening for commodification. The loneliness of artificial intelligence turned inside-out. Enraptured non-self's swallow-reflex an angry package of lack. The homecoming self-loathing slow explosion inserting insect perspectives into a pre-corrupted self-concept. Get it? The wobbling scaffold of sucking up gone horribly wrong. Yet it works, gets me in, on the outside. The toothless caramel pleasure of the breast offline, reneged. Sex as hopeful surrogate. Fear of paradox. Self. Love a signifier left to acquire, expire, but never just to *be*.

“THESE POEMS ARE NOT FOR US”

So the poems have returned home,
slumping down on the couch like disappointed

teenagers. I start gathering their belongings,

all the while trying to find words of encouragement.
“I never liked my ending,” one of the poems says.

I tell it I’ll revisit, but I won’t—

the ending is wonderful. After a bit more banter
and the possible sharing of a stiff drink

the poems go inside the folder, and I close

the cover as gently as possible—
how beautifully the sun has lit up the room.

Where Do You Plan To Be?

I will be at
I will beat
be at will
will I
be
I will
be at will
I will beat
I will be at
I will be at
I will beat
be at will
I will
be
will I
be at will
I will beat
I will be at

Poetry Sudoku

is		put	be	waiting				
	love		to					
to						puzzle		
love			puzzle				together	a
	together	A						
be	puzzle				together			to
		together						love
					to		be	
				love	a	to		put

love is a puzzle waiting to be put together

(solution on the next page)

Solution:

is	a	Put	be	waiting	puzzle	love	to	together
together	love	puzzle	to	put	is	be	a	waiting
to	waiting	Be	a	put	is	puzzle	put	is
love	Is	To	puzzle	be	put	waiting	together	A
put	together	A	love	to	waiting	is	puzzle	be
be	puzzle	waiting	is	a	together	put	love	to
waiting	to	together	put	puzzle	be	a	is	love
a	put	love	waiting	is	to	together	be	puzzle
puzzle	be	is	together	love	a	to	waiting	put

LOWER STREET

Finally, they cut off
my father's leg.
And they quickly changed
dictator...

However five years ago
I saw a crow
who threw from high trees on the roof
of the car Italian walnut.

What for? It's obvious! To get him
break it into pieces and then
eat it without
drinking.