

Spring 2016

Versus Los Angeles

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VERSUS LOS ANGELES

by

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B.A. May 2011, Christopher Newport University

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
Old Dominion University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

MASTERS OF FINE ARTS

CREATIVE WRITING

OLD DOMINION UNIVERSITY
May 2016

Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

VERSUS LOS ANGELES

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Old Dominion University, 2016
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The poems included in this manuscript construct, explore, and interrogate hyper reality and how it affects the twenty-first century. Simultaneously creating and destroying representations of a world made in the image of electronic entertainment, *Versus Los Angeles* inhabits various pop-culture personas in order to illustrate loss of identity, fame as commodity, the erosion of language, and the politics these various icons or platforms promote.

This collection of poems is dedicated
to family and friends.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

A special thanks to my director, Luisa Igloria, for helping me see this project to completion and finding a way to channel drive into me even when I felt like I was out of gas.

A huge thanks to Tim Seibles: His workshops fostered my growth and further development as a writer. Without them, this collection would not be nearly as layered.

Another huge thanks to Janet Peery who helped me find my voice, focus, and points of influence when I began this program in Fall 2013.

Thank you to my former colleagues Lucian Mattison and Michael Alessi for the amount of time dedicated to providing feedback on these poems outside of the workshop.

Thank you to Elizabeth Vincelette for the outstanding show of support and putting up with me while I wrote the majority of this manuscript.

Thanks to my professors and fellow MFA candidates at ODU for the time and useful lessons and feedback.

Thanks to my family for the unconditional love and support.

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the summer Bob died

a yellow-crested finch
ricochets off Wells Fargo's glass walls

background music mutes *freeze-frame*
seizes the scene upon impact

jump cut to cattle clouds
surfing sapphire pastures

now cue
the windblown vacuum

smash cut dirt flecks catching
the finch's fiery crest i swear
i could've spent the afternoon staring

Sleeping on the Pacific Surfliner

I dream some sleek version of myself,
haunting Santa Monica Pier's

ghost town arcade, pale skin
scorched from morning surf.

In the ventilated dark, infinite
tokens weigh my pockets

as I peer at a time-dusted claw
machine containing a single prize:

Donald Duck wristwatch blinking
blue-light harmonies to pulse

the lazy sun-beat season. Jostling
joystick, I perfect new ways to fail

since winning means Game Over
and ownership of the excess

gimcrack jilted by previous winners.
Like a clearance aisle's last designer scarf,

it looks doomed just for being here.
Steel claw fumbling in air, the clock

-face swirls counter-wise: I lose
the days away—the only game

worth playing. With each fake attempt,
time unzips age's stuffy garments,

till I shrink from the glass display's view.
Unable to reach, the minute-hand's

march loses meaning. The prospect of winning:
less cheap consolation and more akin

to salt breeze blowing through arcade
doors; familiar breath tingling fragile spine

or loose hand grazing grand piano keys,
teasing desire's slow song from untried lungs.

Outside, a carousel's burning bulbs supplant
the sunset. Doo-wop chokes from Ferris wheel

speakers. The evening tide breaks into chants
faintly sounding my name, while I bask

in the cool blue light of the unobtainable,
learning what it means to want.

The Wash-Up

Ever wonder about your resident bartender?
the one who looks forty but hasn't lived a day past thirty—
& why he still bothers botching opens mics,
voice like anti-Marlboro campaigns, guitar useless
as a corpse, hawking Jesus Doesn't Love You clichés
to other has-beens who hit prime in high school.
For bourbon or batted lashes at last call
once his Ford pick-up friends leave to fuck
& the lights whistle alive like a train-wreck,
he'll explain his knee spasms, the off-key slippage:
He caught the crowd hooked to a minute-hand.
He'll steer into epics about the garage band days
his posse rocked basements Bay to Brooklyn
bound for Big Time with pawn shop telecasters
& a demo titled Mona Lisa's Clit.
Later, on his porch, he'll plug the cassette player
& retrace the limelight beneath a veil of static.
When the squeal & stutter of the tape distorts
his teenage yelp, he'll press fingers to fretboard
so familiar that a note murmured into the breeze
could tell him what he can't tell himself.

Hell no, we won't shoot a porno

The sky's rained defunct satellites
for weeks, but through the telescope
I see only contrails: tally-marked efforts

to stir appetites for aspiring starlets
who hate themselves as much as I do.
When cam girls wink or stumble

over penny-a-minute sweet talk,
my cheeks cook medium-raw.
I prep breakfast on our bedsheets,

garnish us with a basil leaf:
a fantasy I think I can stomach—
dream dandelions foaming

your mouth, August's breath draped
across your breasts like ultimatum.

Everyone's a Piñata in the Making

Hecklers have sex lives & MacBooks,
but they don't stand a gamble against the bluff of him.
He's perfected a wardrobe of expired friends
& icons complementary to his idea of protagonist—
stuntman, silent dinner guest, gameshow dancer
fueled by all things *pizzazz*—this cast revolves
like all-night disco: the mood's nothing personal.

Any minute, auditions for a mirror might arrive,
so he peels the veneer and watches confetti flume
like an artery. His innards: rat mascots in combat gear,
skeleton swindled from a pin-up's casket.
For encore, he'll auction spare limbs as souvenirs.
What remains will vanish beneath the rose heap—
evidence cameras could use to undo him, traces
of imperfections he never managed to efface.

L.A. Instagram #2

[REDACTED] walked all night in [REDACTED] rain with a suitcase [REDACTED] gave up [REDACTED] asked [REDACTED] motel dude to take me [REDACTED] \$20 [REDACTED] he did.

Autobiography: The L.A. Selfies

after Emily Dickinson

Hi! *Who are you?*

I'm the cat-juggling unicyclist extraordinaire,
the one-man show stealer busking for kicks
outside El Pollo Loco on Sunset Avenue. Did you hear
the news? Robin Williams hung himself with a belt.

I know his fifth cousin twice removed.
He scalped me funeral tickets for Franklins
and a follow on Instagram. What's it worth
when I'm seated in the nosebleed section?
So much for selfies with the body. Au revoir

to my weblog's billions of views.
You'd think Hollywood would treat a copybara-
wrangling-childstar to VIP front-row view. In Kiribati,
my avant-garde acapella reinvented
the charts with its debut.

What say you to a sneak preview?
I spit freestyles in numeric
for a nominal fee. *Maybe*
you've heard
of me.

I'm Just a Scrub in the Land of

Giant Hairy Dicks strutting
Rodeo Drive decked out in stilettos
hustle business cards like charity blow
at a halfway house. Though, I'd never score
so much as their second-hand smoke for free.

My eyes aren't the net worth to examine
a glossy headshot. *Excuse me* my mouth farts
unmindful of ego when a nimble,
non-plastic Dick brushes past. The Dick
sneers a donkey kick that bullseyes my nuts,
as if I steal Sunday brunch reservations.

Apologetically, I offer Starbucks coupons
& autographed preschool snapshots
on the offhand I'm someday pity fucked
by fame. Before the Dick can play soprano
to yellow cabs shrieking past, I explain

we're a lot like this season's rookies:
Powerball shits jackpots on proletariats too.
I pet the Dick on the fedora, act of goodwill,
and plant a politician's kiss on her hand-
bagged Shih Tzu. The Dick goes Wolverine
clawing my cheek. Ballooned reaction

or role play, I don't know. I know
my reputation reeks worse than a Big Mac
stewing beneath a truck driving Texan's ass,
but I've come a coastline—*cross my cock!*—
from jacking off at Macy's. I want
the redemptive approval only a beautiful dick can bring—
to feel the Dick's head bury into my shoulder
as it weeps away traces of my misspent youth.

Ideally, we could swing this over spritzers
and Netflix, and later in the evening after divesting

my woes, I could lie in The Dick's lap
like a newborn poodle. The Dick could buy me
a star-studded leash and I'd crawl on all fours
like the best in show, as she paraded me along
Santa Monica's promenade. Better to be leashed
to this beautiful Dick, than dragged like dirty
toilet paper stuck to her stilettos: the both of us
so repulsed by my tenacity and used-up state
we can't stop screaming, *Somebody help!*

Quiet on the Set

We want to praise what we're not
& deny everything we've lived through.
In Universal City, cameras swoon
for a nubile actress, mascara layered, heavy
as wedding cake. The make-up artist
cracks at her crater face, plucks
the girl's unibrow. Another starlet in Santa Monica
folds Benjamins to snort blow, then
doctors her nose which leaks blood like a rumor.
Her manager would cry quits but she
polishes up chipper as a whip awhirl,
packs pep during Saturday morning sing-a-longs.
Kids see only the woman spewing sunshine on TV.
In West Hollywood, a pop singer conceals
swollen eyes after a domestic demolition she calls car crash.
In Glendale, a cover girl gulps FDA-approved crank,
careless her face's sparkle will decay.
Backstage, producers craft
costumes & masks, dazzling acts.

Los Angeles Lease Agreement

I _____ hereby disavow my provenance and birthmarks and adopt MTV as surrogate mother: plastic tit that fostered my incisors' flawless symmetry. And I _____ will invest in headshots to make mother proud. Effective immediately, I _____ am a dog person; a purebred, pedigreed, toy dog person. Tomorrow I _____ will adopt and adorn in sweaters one or more:

Pomeranian __ Maltese __ Pekingese __ Havanese __ Papillon __ Chihuahua __ Pug __

Though cooking's for cretins rich in disposable time, I _____ vow to live a healthy lifestyle. I _____ will eat pescetarian, Instagram kale and quinoa, juice gingerroot-blueberry-avocado on weekends, and never eat pepperoni pizza again. I _____ will stay fit or risk unremarkable death in the public eye. I _____ will yoga, crossfit, tai-chi, jog with my dog, yoga headstand with my dog. Above all, I _____ will take headshots yoga headstanding with my dog. And I _____ promise to Instagram photos of my very best photos, trade likes for followers and flattering comments for reposts. Furthermore, I _____ will repost:

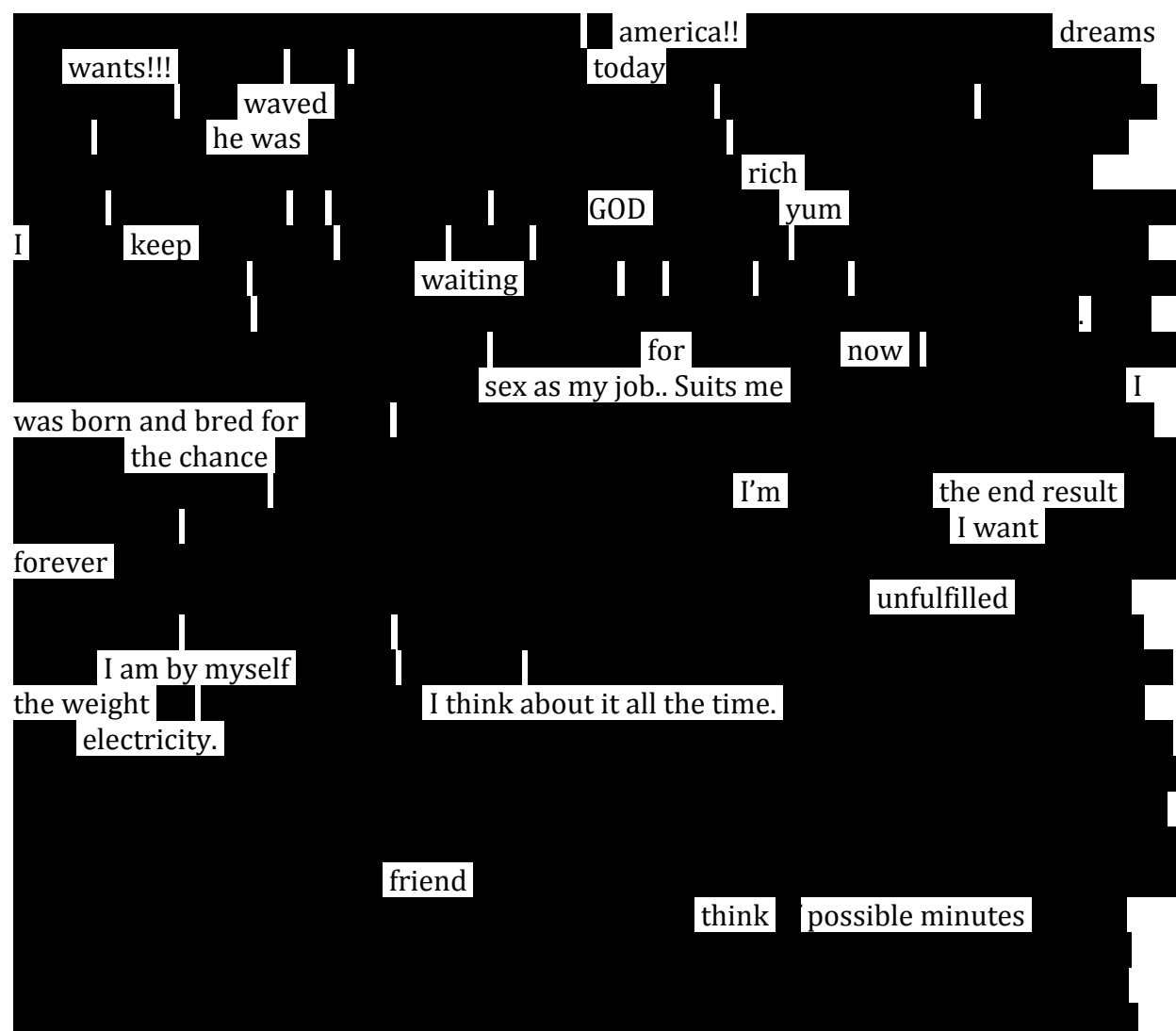
Kanye__ Beyonce __ Brunch __ Kanye's and Beyonce's Brunch __
Dogs Belonging to Anyone Tagged in Kanye's and Beyonce's Brunch __

I _____ will brunch with executives older than my parents and quell notions that they resemble wax figures and powdered mummies. Over bloodies and pistachio-arugula salad, I _____ will give them my business card, headshots, my dogs' headshots, forkfuls of my appetizer, and lifetime supplies of flirtatious schmoozing all for the price of to-die-for brunch. I _____ will volunteer to wipe croutons from their mouths and enjoy this more than beach vacations. If they advise, I _____ will acquire:

Botox __ Rhinoplasty __ Therapist __ Senior Citizen Romantic Companion__

With this, I _____ hereby renounce age disparity and economic motive as passé stigma impeding on intimacy. I _____ renounce the unenlightened people-folk outside the city. I _____ embrace Los Angeles unconditionally as child does doll, wanderer does native tongue, nun does wooden rosary tangled between closed fists. Like prude to thirsty newlywed breaking bed, I _____ will forfeit with gratitude what the metropolis demands: thirty pounds, nervous tics, musty stench of evidence from previous residence. Accordingly, I _____ will acquire new license plates, vernacular, history, and name _____ at which point this contract reduces to artifact.

L.A. Instagram #3



STAR WALK

Dear Los Angeles,

I'm still that eager astronaut
in pursuit of Hollywood's celestial
cobblestones, overcome by wanderlust
and the desire for gold.

And Dear

San Gabriel, I don't mind
if your starlets, silicone seraphs
of the Big Red Son, burn out
my eyeballs with an innocuous slip
of the bra or skirt, so long as they giggle
something genuine when I ask for directions.
I admit I never paid attention in Sex Ed class
or minded the porn industry and its ten-
inch dick. I mind misleading Craigslist
casting calls & the lack of long-
haired, scrawny guys to win AVNs. I mind
you recruited my latest Tinder match,
checks tucked in her Gucci purse like love
notes from god.

Dear Hollywood,

I never fell for Craigslist ploys or tried
to buy out a porn producer's girlfriend.
Yes, I devour the fits of heavy petting
in RomComs, but harbor plots to sabotage
Ron Jeremy's cock—That's why I'm training
a flea circus fleet force from hell, to infest
predatory dick wigglers.

Dear San Gabriel,

despite the cosmic metaphors and references
to astronauts, it seems more like I'm buried
beneath piss-stained comforters & a beer spit
underpass, rotting with skid row sewer rats.
Among Third World stunt doubles, the squalor
of souls, the soul of their squalor, I admit
to greater mishaps than a blind limo driver
ten shots deep but somehow forget
the alibi for my latest fender bender—

Perhaps

I came to start fresh, to plot my next
address—Disneyland or SeaWorld—
& forget the rest, a kid who's lost
interest in Lego metropolises, a fly-
by-night vagabond, a blank vessel

for you to dress up or down
like a mannequin in motion.

Pizza through the Ages

When a short-circuited Venice burnout shouts,
the pie's a fornicating communist! I almost laugh.
 But if Brad Pitt once wandered this boardwalk
 in a chicken suit, am I not obliged to test
 my skepticism's fabric? I chew on a slice

of free-range chicken barbecue, hand-tossed
 by Hollywood's next star or statistic, and consider
 its disparity from the pepperoni marinara I call *home*
delivered, boxed youth, the taste of a girl I fucked
moving out or The reason our hands touched

the first time. Centuries ago in Naples,
 nobles called pizza *peasant food*. Then Queen
 Margherita took a nibble and climaxed in her
 mouth. Today pizza's supreme lord of the internet
 while a nearby gelato vendor hawks royal blood

to talent scouts who order *strawberry*,
make it snappy! I slide my feet into sand,
 watch the sun parody Hollywood film endings,
 wondering when light over the Pacific
 became *lucrative cliché*. Disgusted with myself

for once calling a big-budget trope *catalyst*
for transformation, I point at the horizon,
 roar *the sun's a sentimental capitalist!*
 and swallow my remaining pie.

Hunting James Franco

is hard work. Unlike the revered Cape Buffalo,
James Franco's hide does not deflect blasts
from elephant guns. If you open fire on the wild
Franco, it explodes into meaty red paste

like a Mortal Kombat avatar.
Then you're no better than that dunce
who capped the last Dodo—and for what?
Taxidermy? So the Guinness Book of World

Records can say *First and only hunter*
to slay the mighty Franco? Sure,
mounting his head in the dining room
would make for snazzy home decor.

At soirees, over escargot and chardonnay
you could play Pin the Dildo on Mister Dicknose
in Paris; but every Franco enthusiast knows
a live Franco has more use than a soiled/Zero HP/

dead-as-velociraptors Franco. Imagine the secrets
his double-wide, diamond-walled skull vault holds:
how to send poverty to extinction photoflash quick;
how to flawlessly recite *Howl* and prepare gluten-

free foie gras for two—all this knowledge
stacked like golden ingots, ripe for the filching!
But before harvesting the Franco, you must crack
the code: You must tickle it with feathers

or force feed it clam chowder 'til it cries *Franco!*
and hot potatoes its every jeweled datum. Of course,
this is weatherman speculation. No one's ever captured
the Franco. Despite *Gawker's* countless photos and video

footage, fellow Franco hunters' eye-witness reports remain scant
or questionable, even though we've staked out its bohemian habitats
and baited Brooklyn haunts with avant-garde art solicitations.
The cardigan-clad Franco continues to elude us, like the sheep

wearing a costume of golden fleece or the fabled White Stag
only arriving in times of need; the Phoenix soaring without notice
from the dust of the red carpet; or the great Loch Monster turning out
to be nothing more than the tip of an elephant's trunk in a vintage film.

L.A. Instagram #4

my street 5am

*boy *

what are you

"waiting "

"wanna have sex "

"no"

"come on "

"no "

this goes on

"no"

"no"

etc etc

"please"

"if I don't ?"

" "

he rides away :(

I'm harassed all the time

my answer

I'll taze him in the dick if I ever see him again.

Versus Charles Bukowski

Up and at 'em like the morning wood,
septuagenarian pig fuck. Make cocksure

you've fastened oxygen mask to crotch.
Digital age air aims bazookas at bravado.

Wouldn't want your slimy bullfrogs rotting off.
Feed me another McProverb, Top Dog, artisanal

chicken nugget baked in gold glitter. I need
reassurance my next blackout will fuck me genius

bad as kitten-crazed librarians on Singles' Night.
Surely, my roach-palace studio holds more

than smoky essence of celebrity-style slum:
kitchen sink bogged in congealed beef grease;

saccharine Jack flask fruit fly tenements; a six-inch cock
-bugger that fell out of a granola box this morning, asserted

as main ingredient to the year's most vital meal: Hank,
how the fuck long must I swallow sleeping with squalor,

before it money shots my face into something hopeless
enough for stardom? My bootleg self-esteem dangles

from a billboard by the nail. You're the one who guided me,
Poor Man's Pied Piper, Skidrow Psychopomp Laureate.

How about some wisdom I can't score at the dollar mart?
Like, *Check cereal bowl before placing spoon in mouth*

*to avoid eating what you can't digest. Or, Insert
ear plugs before bed, lest a fool's prophet occupies*

cranium. Or are you Hollywood's celebrity deadbeat;
glamorized tale of high life in slums? I bought you sure

as boys snag brown-bagged bottles, not knowing where
you'd take me or that my night had just begun.

Tourist in Planet Your*For Miley Cyrus*

Seven minutes until show time I shrink
to a barely visible crumb and tuck myself
onto a peppermint beneath your tongue.
I ride through your nervous mouth, sailing
in a sea of lukewarm saliva, soak
my hair in the mist, let your hot breath beat
my face like northeasterly breezes.
I feel the tumult of your tongue rock
my body and the foundation on which I stand.
Suddenly I plummet, drop down the chute
of your throat. I tour the tautness of your larynx,
your tired trachea, warming themselves awake.
I dive into the depths of your diaphragm and
esophagus, wondering how long it will take
to reach the ecosystem of your gut.
Is it winter or summer in your stomach
when I arrive? The pink-lined sky
rains torrents of gastric acid. Nestled deep,
I burn into a million pieces, disintegrate
like a dying star—explode into every part
of your body. Parts of me pump into your veins,
do backstrokes in your bloodstream, experience
the tension in your tendons as you dance.
Other parts scatter into the synapses
of your brain—shatter upon contact
with neurons coming my way. But the better parts
are lost in the chambers of your heart—absorbing
the pace of its beat and pulse: quick but steady
like a hummingbird's wings: tireless slave
working to remain fixed in the same place.

Versus Los Angeles

I.

Two!—I kick out before *Three*

-count, the ref's hand a heart

-beat away from the pounding mat.

This ain't my last stiff bump

tonight. I grapple for breath.

L.A. hoists me in its Belly-

to-Belly suplex—rockets me sky

-bound. Hanging mid-air, stars

flash flood like snapshots

in my rearview. The audience

erupts. I blink, bask in electric

applause, before crashing

back to earth. Ref: *Are you fit*

to continue? I drag myself up

by the seams of Los Angeles's

glitter-stitched chaps. Eyes level

with gold crotch, I'm smacked.

Stay. Down. I blink. The crowd

expects me to fall, as if it's scripted.

Of course L.A. blasts my skull

with running boot. Ref: *Can you—*

(stars)

II.

The Rewinds: Making an Entrance

Pyrotechnics pop. The crowd falls
up like waves of whack-a-moles,

while Vernon Reid fingers demons
on a treble-charged electric guitar.

Cannon-esque speakers boom *Cult*
of Personality's first thick licks of bass

& I moonwalk across the steel entrance
ramp to the galaxy's grandest stage.

Overhead, a Jumbotron documents
in real time: metronomic breaths,

fists balled to star-mauls jonesing
for a swing at sparkly teeth, ivory

mask of composure fractured
by sweaty deltas. Everyone worth

a cameo: screen-drunk, slack-jawed—
Enough. My televised presence will not

eclipse me. I bullet to ringside,
peppered in gas-bagged boos

or woos, & unbutton blazer
center stage. Sitting full-lotus,

I wait for L.A. to mosey inside.
I have less to lose than moguls

gone broke at penny slots, time
like Mojave sand. In the aisle seats,

has-beens cling to their last
threads of fame, brandish posters:

Welcome to House Los Angeles!

III.

Wrestler Bio: Los Angeles

Mathematical facts: Los Angeles—aka L.A.—is 10 feet tall, 500 pounds, & morphs appearance often as rappers change names. Sometimes, L.A. rocks top-knot & beard braided with marquee lights. This L.A. snaps shirtless mirror selfies & calls itself *Big Sexy* or *Coachella*. Other times, L.A. looks like an Amazonian Lucy Lawless: Xena Warrior Princess set to slay machismo horn dogs. Alias: Cosplay L.A. 2.0. No one knows from where L.A. hails, but die-hard fans—those miserable gawkers who hang around for free popcorn, *El Pollo Loco*, & the view—claim it burst from cosmic rift in Hollywood, Ganymede, or Thomas Edison's asshole. Perhaps L.A.'s mysterious origin explains its super-mutant power to withstand age—each bona-fide slobber knocker showcases incisors more seizure-inducing, abs & jawline of sharper cut. While clearly life-enhancing, elephant stocks of spinach & meditation gurus worth more than the third-world account for L.A.'s prowess as much as Slim Fast accounts for weight loss. Secrets be damned! L.A. is shit-yourself -sinister & *big*: colossal doppelganger that dwarfs its TV likeness. When L.A. marches to ringside equipped with Gucci handbag, Doctor Truffles the Toy Poodle in tow, quick as dick-diddling brat caught mid-act, the chortles cease. The audience becomes a slew of sweaty voyeurs too enthralled to turn away. L.A.'s cinematic assault starts, with weapons—sledge-hammer, crowbar, steel ladder & chair—beaten against the back of another deluded bit player, convinced he's god-blessed just to share the same ring. When the cage lowers around them, L.A. becomes architect, warden—one with the chain link lattice. Escape amounts to privilege marginally more benevolent than pin fall or submission. Mathematical fact: L.A. is the arbiter of exit. The show revolves & stops on the will of its golden watch.

IV.

The Rewinds: Match-Start

L.A. hits me with brass knux
 in gold gloves: a Mach-ten-star
 Superman Punch. Like slot
 machine dials, my eyeballs

reel. Aftershock loops my vision
 manic. As if filtered through kaleidoscope
 Los Angeles splits & swirls doppelgangers,

but propped against the turnbuckle, my concern's
 the ref reappraising my bankrolled tongue. Here come
 paparazzi who'll hawk this latest buzz-worthy jam.
 Front row: bombed wise guys belch on peanuts,

dishing two-penny commentary. Though
 my stellar visage flashes at critical, I'm just peachy
 when asking mister ref to muzzle the dogs. *No. Dice.*

But care for a cigarette? Each punch packs lethal
 potential. Intrigue hinges on cinematic appeal. I hesitate.
 To hell, L.A. awaits! From corner-ring, I rocket like a phenome
 forgotten by gravity. Rapid-fire barrages shatter L.A.'s optic

doubles: all of them counterfeit. In the nosebleeds, a choir
 of gasps. Of course I expected this, sure as seers divine
 tomorrows' train wrecks in a ball. My middle-finger

flashes for the watching world to swallow & I tilt
 -a-whirl haymaker Los Angeles out of its knee-high
 velvet boots. Time throws on the e-brake. Snap
 shots puncture the night. Cat calls carry

like the whistle of a steamer slugging
 across the horizon. Then, apathetic as the sun
 or machine automating motions, L.A. rises.

Silence backhands the arena. All of us
 bound at the throats await the next move.
 Ref: *Cinematic. Affect.* Is the blood
 on my fingers L.A.'s or my own?

V.

The Rewinds: Turning Point

How many times in one night
 can I slog this rickety
 ladder? The last
 rung: summit
 or rest point
 for fools—*enjoy the view*
 L.A. quips—
 it cracks
 and cracks sharp
 beneath my boot-worn heel
 dangled like bait over water
 I reel myself
 to top cap—curse
 my grip
 blistered from the ascent:
 gravity's anchor
 —*fly or*
fall, L.A. taunts,
 face turned to crowd
 Feet steady, back arched
 I launch into a Shooting Star
 Press—trajectory set
 to kiss the sky briefly
 before calculated
 fall stopped short by L.A.'s
 impeccable catch
 in mid-air—Los Angeles
 hoists me

over shoulders—

Powerbombs spine

through a wooden table

to the tune of the world's

canned cackles: a well

-oiled victory horn—L.A.

gathers me up

plays with my life

-less body center-ring—

I slouch in the spot-

light, at last.

L.A. Instagram #5

[REDACTED] my face, yeah it's asymmetrical, [REDACTED] my skull [REDACTED]
grew differently, my jaw [REDACTED] muscle(s) on the left side [REDACTED] are
shorter [REDACTED] my head [REDACTED] tilt [REDACTED] my jaw [REDACTED] worn
down [REDACTED] don't comment [REDACTED] please [REDACTED]

Funeral Glam

Another bff drugs himself stiff
& paparazzi forget the memo. Typical

red carpet, funeral protocol: half attending
own IOS 50 capable of capturing the grief

spectrum clear & nuanced as prism rainbows,
but not one pro cameraman's on hand.

I've dropped more than a winter's worth
of water weight in tears today—whored out

my heart's juicy secrets like blank checks
to wolves. Where's my tabloid tell-all?

Hollywood, I've wizened up:
Late night smack binges in red lamped rooms

& unexpected man-child casualties:
This stuff breeds losers into legend.

Now marquees bear the name of a friend
I called fuck up, lit so bright they block

the sky. Well I'm cashing these close calls
we shared in pill jars and hot tubs.

Give me my consolatory spotlight.
My blazer's made of 100% Beverly Hills,

stitched & woven with the brightest stars. I've got
raining dames married to my sides & not enough

of the world to notice. This eulogy I've turned
like a Rubik's cube for days deserves more

than bush-league Facebook fame & ear-lined
pews preoccupied with who sobs hardest.

The emotional resonance alone should afford
no less than grief-fueled one-nightstands

by the handful, but I'm aiming for more
free cognac & a big budget film

detailing my heroic capacity for loss.
Friends falling faster than stock market

crash or a stray fly slipping between my fingers.
Broadcast on a screen large & loud enough

for cosmonauts to see, that's how I'd fancy
all my woes & longings. Rendered so bright

they outshine every star,
burn into every eye in space.

When Loving a Mouse Becomes Too Hard

After Gary Jackson

Over a few lines of blow, Minnie rants that she occasionally makes Mickey do the *he-hup, golly*, and whistle while they fuck because she gets off on pretending that Mickey's just as charming and vivacious as the mouse he plays in the movies. Daisy can't empathize because she's only done the dirty with Disney's Donald Duck: the same feathered freak that everyone sees on the big screen: absolutely quack in the sack, bar none the best domestic male she's ever tangoed tails with. Minnie says that lately she's been curious about Donald and envies the idea of sleeping with one mouse: inseparable from his public persona. What does it matter if Mickey's hung like a hamster, when he's too hung over to make a mouse in heat moan? Most of the time, he just flops around meeker than a mole above ground. But once in a blue cheese, she concedes, it's *Fantasia* complete with floating furniture and fireworks. The way he shouts *God bless!* and *Oh boy!* mid-hump-n-pump morphs their mattress into something like the Magic Kingdom. Daisy chimes in that both their boyfriends are wild, sexy animals even if they're different breeds. But Minnie broods on the image of Mickey stuffing his fat fur into his red, button fly shorts in their bedroom before work, the familiar pre-nine-to-five frown pinning his lips and cheeks in place, while she hangs on the bed's edge—hoping that he'll have one of his happy-horny-furball, scurry into the sheets and rodent around moments, shout *pa-ha! Mouse me, Minnie!* then proceed to talk Mickey as shit to her—just before he heads out the door and turns into the mouse she longs for, a mouse that belongs to Walt Disney. Most mornings she doesn't even see him break into a smile. But she clings to the possibility like a fleeting tail.

L.A. Instagram #6

I hate [redacted] this world [redacted] is in pain i hate drugs [redacted]
 [redacted] i hate [redacted] how every [redacted]
 thing makes me cry, i hate my brother [redacted] father [redacted] how i've felt sick [redacted]
 since i [redacted] remember, i hate that i've never had [redacted] girl [redacted] or boyfriend, i hate
 governments, i hate [redacted] hate [redacted] hate [redacted] how i look, i
 hate how addicted i am to sex and [redacted] hate [redacted] how i feel [redacted]
 [redacted] unchangeable

King Cobras Are Barred from Ringside

a WWE Survivor Series 91' cento

I spoke to God this morning. Go to the morgue.
That's where he is, with the rest of the stiff
wolfing down one of those lukewarm TV dinners.

You may have said your prayers. You may have
taken your vitamins. You may have walked
to the end of the earth with him, but now

it's over. *El Paso de la Muerte*. This Tuesday in Texas
everyone's going to forget about the Alamo.
The Undertaker has The Big Boss Man's number.

This ain't no tennis match. This ain't no hockey game
with pads. Nobody's impervious to pain. Sooner or later,
it gets to you. Ready the flowers. Sign the guestbook.

Action Hero's Dilemma

Throttling a bobber through rush hour,
the bridge volcanos to a smolder globe—
cosmic belch that ruptures normal men's ears,
fries skin crispier than fast food fish sticks,
breaks news, makes internet, signifies
the beginning of End Times.

Wheelie popped above the wreck, heels shy
of raining boot-sweat, I fish for a pulse:
evidence this all-natural-disaster-proof vessel
registers mortal when the mind can't
discern nuclear fallout from rose beds.
My year's five-minute flashback scene:

bullets chewed like bubblegum, quicksand
Jacuzzi; the blonde that followed
me from viper pit to labyrinthine to water
-bed motel—my pathetic respite—she was lovely,
loyally faulty, revved my chest's engine
shoddy as a short-term hotwire.

Now I trapeze between copters & Monday
Night Football burdened by exceptions death finds
unattractive. Blindfold or not, lack of thrill
thwarts me each time I charge at cataclysms
& murder the sidekicks I've ceased recruiting.
My vigilante tenure could extend to graves

but I don't envy the deceased so much—
I'd protect them. I'd elect to stalk supermarket
aisles & wait for something awful to happen:
a girl's face shot off a milk carton, bullet
gone awry, gazes of assailant & target
entangled in that curious limbo.

Super Mario in Hollywood

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars." – Oscar Wilde

But what dynamo predicted I'd chart the galaxy
via sewer pipes? One wrong turn racing rainbows
warps me to star-paved highways, pockets fat
with toadstools that balloon my ass wider

than Macy's Day. What I need to outwit
this world is chic overalls embroidered
with Norma Jean's teeth. Still the same rules
apply: every brick is a question begging

my skull to smash it open; given enough coins
I can spend the day dying as often as I please.
Fate, that linear aphorism, dangles overhead,
a hippopotamus dictating the rescue of Princesses

who smooch my moustache when I trespass castles.
I'd rather punt turtle shells at walking bombs
& anticipate sublime disarray. My empathy's
with sex workers who snicker at chivalry, my brother

who's far less marketable & missing. Am I missing?
Everyone looks primed to star on *The Bachelor*
but me: forever the exception among processions
of goombas. Doesn't a PhD in gutter drifting make me

exceptional? If not for earthquakes in my gut
that say I'll get god-seared by something glittery
& pointed, I'd ditch this ultra-luxe play world
for sex on the beach & *Caddy Shack* re-runs.

Maybe I've wasted too many lives travelling
excrement's avenues, but when shiny specks
that shatter the dark blink beneath my feet
I get this rush like a cliff-dive, like *O! Mama Mia!*

L.A. Instagram #7

i [redacted] never [redacted] kill myself [redacted] i live [redacted] this
endless loop [redacted] telling me [redacted] die. [redacted]

[redacted]

In the McDonald's Parking Lot When a Boy Shouts *I'm Galactus!*

the McNugget perched
between his fingers
becomes a planet teeming
with terrestrial bustle,
& biting into fried
lump of unidentifiable mass
feels more monumental
when battered skin's
no longer barren land
floating on seas of grease,
but vast nation networks
made of microscopic cities
built from blue-collar sweat
wrung from ages defined by warfare.
The miracles that survived: thousands
& thousands of skyscrapers,
Latinated objects of wonder,
only perceptible to the child's eye:
important people ant-like
in their industry: engineers
monitoring power grids traversed
by pick-up trucks sailing past
bus stops where a drunk
Zamboni driver searches
for his fountain pen copped
by a klepto vegan who's
blocks away, brandishing
a Meat is Murder! sign
at an idiot boy shouting
I'm Galactus! at a McNugget
which I snatch up and slip
into my jacket pocket.

Congratulations, Computer!

Street Fighter 2 (Ode to Chun-Li)

Long before I could lace sneakers
and bike without training wheels,
I understood how to buy violence

like instinct: feed the arcade
cabinet's slot a silver Washington;
punch the red button that signals

Start; select Dhalsim, Zangief, Ryu,
usually Blanka the green beast
from Brazil, though never Chun-Li.

The mallrats called her names
I didn't know, said she's designed
for girls to play and boys to ogle

or beat. With Blanka's gnarled claws,
I could K.O. Ken—the fair-skinned
blonde boy who fought by the docks—

but Chun-Li's Hundred Rending
Kicks hauled my fevered monster
to corner screen like a sandlot bully

who groped the wrong girl. If Chun-Li
was built to beat on, why did she fight
more relentless than her swollen male

counterparts? Didn't my defeat assume
her name and figure? Baby blue skirt,
brocaded ox horns, sheer panty hose

hugging her most sinister weapon:
sledgehammer legs bashing Blanka's
brain 'til golden chicks fog his vision.

Congratulations, computer. *Perfect*
still flashes after every bout against
Chun-Li. Thank you for teaching me

to treat thighs with reverence, to never
underestimate giggly girls in short skirts.

Oregon Trail Meltdown

a floppy disk soliloquy

You laid Uncle Elmer
out with dysentery, splintered
the wagon's axle, cracked
my oxen's hooves—and where
the fucking shit did you hide
all the buffalo! I've a banker's
family, dammit! Not farmers
and carpenters. Do you expect
moguls to subsist on squirrel?
They expect Aunt Agnes's
Shepherd's Pie. We're out
of tourniquets and if she
suffers one more rattlesnake,
my entire privileged lot
roughs the dust blown road
on cold jerky. The nearest
town's weeks away and no
Sioux or Crow trading post
registers on your oracular
map. Speaking of Native

Americans, did you vanish
them along with the buffalo?
I've seen neither sign, nor
heard whisper of their bloody
battles with manifest destiny.
The badlands' quiet seems
pre-programmed, engineered
in some unspeakable language
and your interface doesn't
possess the option to raise
questions. Every face I've found
on this forlorn trail's a scripted
white scowl that speaks strictly
of wares for sale: boxes of bullets,
raw beef by the pound.

Upon reaching Snake River,
an indeterminate tribesman
decorated in billowed robes and lone
hair feather pointed out the crossing.
Placid as a statue, useful as road

sign, his goodwilled silence
so unhackable, I mistook him
for the landscape—a savage
of such nobility, he passed
as historical monument for all
this country's coded to forget.
Your mark of civility stamped
on his face like a copyright
for every player to witness
on the westward way to victory

or untimely death by typhoid,
spoiled buffalo flesh, another
rattler bite—this time, Sister
Hazel. And without mystical
Native medicine she's absolutely
fucked. Damn you, death wish
of a game. You've been rigged
to kill from the beginning.
No more. If I raft upriver
and anyone rolls overboard,
I'm chucking your floppy
ass into the microwave!

Congratulations, Computer!

Harvest Moon (Nintendo 64)

*It's easier to land the hottest girl in town when you serve her
some of that special soup in the kitchen of your giant mansion. – Aaron Boulding, IGN*

Once per lifetime,
you may trade fish
for the blessing
of the Lake Goddess.
Successfully hook the elusive
blue trout, throw it back.
The Goddess emerges,
green-haired specter
over water, and boosts
your choice bachelorette's
affection fifty points.

Say Karen's the reason
you give gold
to the bar. Next time
you're floating eye
-balls deep in merlot,
her heart will swell
a shade brighter—banter
perfumed in flattery
as she refills your glass.
You fight to keep face
from smashing table.

If she remarks sour, if she's
not one big-bright-sunshine
emoji, the system's
haywire. Bachelorettes
with high affection
should never speak ill
of your presence. You're the hero.
Barring crackpot anomalies,
gifting's best for winning
a woman's bubblegum heart.

Most women love two things
tops. Karen loves wine
and fish: ten points each.
With fresh caught
fish writhing in hands,

hoof it to her house
 every evening unannounced
 for one year.
 If she's not home,
 sprint to the bar before close.

Nudge Karen's noggin with fish
 to gift her on the clock.
 Her awe and surprise
 won't diminish, no matter
 how often you do this.
 If she sighs or rolls eyes
 after your thousandth fish,
 the game's glitched. Women
 never grow sick of gifts,
 least of all yours. Assuming

the system works, her heart
 will turn pink by summer. See pink
 valentine flash when she speaks?
 Call the lumber
 -jack, order King-Size Bed,
 wait one week,
 and remember to deliver
 fish—by the satchel
 if you can. Once the bed's installed,
 scour General Store
 for Blue Feather. This is classified

under Tools, like Axe, Hammer,
 and Watering Can.
 Next time you see Karen,
 wield the Feather
 to propose, and don't forget
 to give her fish!
 If you own the King-Size Bed
 and her heart's pink,
 she's 100% guaranteed
 to say yes. If she rejects you,

reset system. Call mother.
 Increase fish-gifting
 to ten satchels daily.
 She'll only say yes
 after receiving enough fish.
 If the game functions

properly, you'll kiss Karen
outside the white-steeple
church on Sunday.
Once you shack, do not slack.
For healthy marriage
and children, bring home

fish: as many and often
as foreseeable. You're the provider.
This means fishing away
hours in the most sinister weather.
This means packing home
to the gills with fish for famine
or flood. Your domestic
success rests on a fridge
overflowing with fish,
cupboards choking in fish,

fish bleeding out the windows,
oozing from front door
to flowerbed for neighbors
to marvel. Do not tire
'til wedding bed and baby's crib
are buried in fish.
The Familial Dream trophy
will remain unattained
'til you, wife, and child drown
beneath your catch.

L.A. Instagram #8

[REDACTED] :(tell me [REDACTED] a [REDACTED] concealer [REDACTED]
tested on [REDACTED] yucky scars

**Baby, When I Step into a Postmodern American Lit Class,
I'm Triple H Live on Monday Night Raw**

Dear reader, listen to the first 90 seconds of "The Game" by Motorhead.

Triple H requires his [entrance music](#).

If you thought it was bad
when I foregrounded
Foucault's face
into an exposed turnbuckle—

If you thought for a second
what I did to Derrida,
when I DDT'd his skull
through a steel chair,
seemed inhumane—

If you fans, theorists and critics,
believe I've taken liberties
in the ring with my opponents,

this Sunday at Summerslam,
when I step into the squared circle,
when the steel cage is lowered
around the ring, I'm going to wish
you'd never asked me
to wrestle with The Text.

See, all of you,
you think
The Text is like The Undertaker.
You people scream *The Text is dead*.
The Text is dead. The Text
is dead. Well I say, Fuck you,
you're dead.

You see, The Text is alive.
And it's my job to kill it.
All of my bouts up to now
were minor aggravations,
mere interrogations,
but when I fight The Text on Sunday,
the world will witness absolute violation.

I won't stop until every limb
is deconstructed. I'll shatter

The Text's back boned binaries
with a spine buster against
metal grating. While you cheer
and pork down popcorn
like it's a Barnum and Bailey pony parade,

I'm going to jar The Text's ontology
with a poststructuralist sledgehammer.
You don't know what it's like
to see the blood burst out of The Text's
forehead courtesy of my running knee
after sling-shotting around the ring.

You critics have no clue what the sound
of The Text's structures snapping
does to a person. This Sunday,
I'm sending The Text home
on a stretcher, not because I want to

but because I have to, all for you
bumbling degenerates. I know The Text. I know
The Text's family—its mother and father.
You have no idea how difficult, how

utterly destabilizing, ripping the signifier
from the signified becomes, when you have to
look at its parents backstage: downcast
over the decentered-ness of their child.

But this has nothing to do with formalities,
and everything to do with the business
of eviscerating a stable body—of attacking
a living, breathing being for the sake
of entertaining your circle jerk shit show.

And if you don't buy that,
I've got two words for ya'.
And they are most certainly not
Textual Fallacy.

L.A. Instagram #9

[REDACTED] i'm going [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] dont miss me too much. [REDACTED]

Hell-Bound - Stage One

Name: Tom Kelly.

Level: 25.

Status: Quirky.

Race: White.

Sex: Boy.

Weapon: Compassion.

Other weapon: Hugs.

Final weapon: Critical Theory.

Potions: OG Kush.

QUEST: Find and destroy the source of fiscal conservatism and homophobia paraded as just “disapproval for the gay lifestyle, that’s all” in a house party full of Sorority Girls who are spiritual but not religious.

Bonus Objective: Refrain from using Critical Theory.

Bonus Reward: Your Secret Crush will reveal herself and join you as a follower.

Cue epic random encounter battle music.

You’ve been ambushed by a Feral Republican.

Strengths: 100% American Made.

Weaknesses: Manufactured in the Third-World.

Feral Republican uses Talk Over You attack.

-16 Minutes of Life you’ll never get back.

You use Compassion attack.

It’s ineffective.

Feral Republican uses Drink Beer And Argue attack.

Feral Republican is Drunk.

Feral Republican faints.

YOU WIN!

Loot: +1 Free Beer.

EXP: +3 Bragging Rights.

Proceed on to back porch for Stage One Boss Fight.

Fight Stage One Boss: Ki-Something President who is always tan.

Special Attack: Eye Roll resulting in instant KO.

Preemptive Strike on Ki-Something President.

You use OG Kush: +12 Calm. +4 Tolerance.

Compassion and Hugs are doubly effective.

You use Compassion and Hug combo attack.

Compassion is ineffective.
Hug renders you into a Creep.
Hostile Sorority Girls join Ki-Something President as followers.
Sorority Girls charge up for Group Eye Roll attack.
You use Critical Theory attack.
It's super effective.
Sorority Girls fall asleep from boredom and confusion.
Fiscal conservatism and homophobia: DEFEATED!
QUEST COMPLETED!

Bonus Objective Failed.
You used Critical Theory attack.
Your secret crush thinks you're a boring pedant.
Failure to fulfill ulterior motive: -15 Self-Esteem.
-100% Prospects of Receiving a Cuddle Boner.
GAME OVER.

But, wait!
This game can't be over.
You completed the QUEST. Remember?
Please, proceed on to

Hell-Bound – Stage Two

Divey, Overpriced Diner Replete With Rubbery Eggs, Burnt Bacon, and Hip Clientele

Name: Tom Kelly.

Level: Practically 26.

Status: Hung Over.

Weapon: Morning Breath.

Other Weapon: Sarcasm.

Final Weapon: “Actually, Correction.”

Potions: 1 Free Beer.

QUEST: Ward off the religious and dietary dogmatism exuded by the Hip Clientele who care more about what you believe and eat than the fact that you even exist in the first place. Eschew having your Will to Live completely and irrevocably removed.

Bonus Objective: Do not infuriate the Hip Clientele.

Bonus Reward: Hip Clientele will befriend you and act as a Summon, usable once per Battle.

You’ve encountered a Closet Christian Girl.

Strengths: God Given.

Weaknesses: Original Sin.

Powers: Of Prayer.

Closet Christian Girl uses Surreptitious Flirtation attack.

It’s super effective.

-7 Logic. +4 Trust.

Surreptitious Flirtation renders you In Lust.

Closet Christian Girl uses Casual Invitation to Youth Group attack.

You use Sarcasm attack.

It’s not very effective.

Closet Christian Girl uses I Sometimes Speak in Tongues attack.

You use “Actually, Correction” attack.

“Actually, Correction” renders Closet Christian Girl Infuriated.

Closet Christian Girl pops a blood vessel from seething hatred.

YOU WIN!

LOOT: +1 Chick-Fil-A Coupon.

EXP: +8 Foresight

Proceed on to next—

W-WAIT!

You've been ambushed by Stage Two Boss Fight.
 Fight Stage Two Boss: Dirty Vegan who is simple yet complicated.
 Strengths: Outstanding Fiber Intake.
 Weaknesses: Toothpaste and Shampoo.
 Powers: For every attack you perform, Dirty Vegan performs two.
 Dirty Vegan uses Suspiciously Friendly Greeting attack.
 -6 Comfort. -5 Tact.
 Dirty Vegan uses Mooch Cigarette attack.
 You have 0 Cigarettes.
 You use Morning Breath attack.
 It's ineffective.
 Dirty Vegan uses Enter Personal Space attack.
 -17 Hygiene. -8 Breathing Room.
 Enter Personal Space renders you Aloof.
 Dirty Vegan uses Talk About Being Vegan attack.
 -6 Patience. -7 Will to Live. X2 Hang Over.
 You use Sarcasm attack.
 Dirty Vegan thinks you're vegan too.
 Dirty Vegan smiles and leaves booth.
 Religious and Dietary Dogmatism: Defeated
 QUEST COMPLETED!

BONUS OBJECTIVE FAILED.

You infuriated one of the Hip Clientele.
 Closet Christian Girl has asked God to banish you to hell.
 Failure to fulfill yet another Bonus Objective: -14 Resolve.
 +95 Feelings of Shame, Uselessness, Self-Defeat, and Guilt.

Nevertheless, you COMPLETED the QUEST.
 Please, proceed onward to

Hell-Bound – Stage Three

Faux High-End Gastropub Locally Famous for Overpriced Entrees and Mediocre Tap Selection

Name: Do we really have to go over this again?

Alias: Swashbucklin' Tommy.

Level: 26.

Status: Hell-bound.

Weapon: Cigarette Smoke to the Face.

Other Weapon: Firm Handshake.

Final Weapon: "O Rly?"

Ultimate Weapon: Hyper-Dramatic, Slow Motion, Jaw Crushing Uppercut.

Potions: 1 Free Beer and 1 Chick-Fil-A Coupon.

QUEST: Level the nepotism and smash the patriarchy exuded by a party of young professionals whose idea of a good time involves drinking cocktails in moderation and exchanging stock market banter. Avoid being smote by The Man.

Bonus Objective: Smite The Man for an instant KO. Tear his soul asunder.

Bonus Reward: Class upgrade to "Man Wrecker." Attacks on "The Man" are doubly effective.

Cue indiscriminate cat calls and obnoxiously robust laughter.

You've detected a Junior Businessman!

Strengths: Father's Name and Council.

Weaknesses: Mom's Banana Pudding and a Warm Glass of Milk.

Powers: Measured in horses.

Preemptive strike on Junior Businessman!

You use Firm Handshake attack.

It's ineffective.

Junior Businessman counters with Mid-Shake Super Squeeze attack.

-6 Grip. -5 Nerve.

You flinched. You lose a turn.

Junior Businessman uses Bite into a Bratwurst and Boast about Trust Fund attack.

You counter with "O Rly?" attack.

Junior Business replies, "Yes, really."

You repeat "O Rly?" attack.

Junior Businessman is Confused.

Bratwurst backfires as a result of Confusion.

Junior Businessman is stricken with trapped gas and heartburn.

You use Cigarette Smoke to the Face attack.

It's super effective.

Junior Businessman farts.

Junior Businessman faints.

YOU WIN!

LOOT: +1/2 of an Eaten Bratwurst.
EXP: +14 Bravado.

Cue a long, drawn out “WUH-OH!”

You’ve been ambushed by a Senior Analyst!
Special Attacks: Mysterious Phone Call that summons forth “The Man.”
Powers: Command up to Level 50 of “The Man.”
Status: His son just farted in public.
Senior Analyst uses Mysterious Phone Call attack.
High School Gym Teacher is summoned into battle!
Allegiance: An old friend from “the Golden Years.”
Elemental Type: Fighting.
Strengths: Bro Code.
Weaknesses: Free Beer.
High School Gym Teacher uses Glaring Unibrow Intimidation attack.
+17 Gender Identity Anxiety. +21 Shame.
You use Firm Hand Shake attack.
High School Gym Teacher counters with “The Hell, I’ll Shake Your Hand, Boy” attack.
High School Gym Teacher charges up for The Big 1, 2, Noogie-Knuckle Sandwich attack.
You use 1 Free Beer on High School Gym Teacher.
It’s super effective.
+87 Power of Friendship. +11 Clout.
High School Gym Teacher wants to Hug It Out.
You— *W-W-Wait!*
Senior Analyst uses Throw Money attack.
Senior Analyst drops Debit Card.
Senior Analyst gets away safely.
LOOT: +1 Master Card
Master Card grants access to Serious Funds—BONUS LEVEL Unlocked!

The battle may seem over and you may have almost won.
But your beef with a Senior Analyst isn’t quite done.
There is a door to your right and a door to your left.
You must enter one of them to continue the QUEST.

You open the door on your right and proceed on to

Loading...
Please Wait

VITA

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Thomas Vincent Kelly was born in the Tidewater region of Virginia where he has lived a majority of his life. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from in Christopher Newport University in 2011 with a concentration in Writing. In 2013, Tom entered the ODU MFA program where he served as a Graduate Teach Assistant in the Writing Center and, later, the MFA program as coordinator for Writers in Community. He is a Gearheart Poetry Prize finalist, Sutelan Scholarship recipient, and AWP Intro Award Nominee. In addition, he has served as a poetry editor for Barely South Review and Four Ties Lit Review. His poems have appeared or are forthcoming in The Southeast Review, Gargoyle, and FreezeRay.