

William James Austin

highness

city of new york
street level.

I

lowball looking up.
no cloud formations,
not since the twin towers imploded
and
flushed
the
sky

bottom burnout. even the wind tunnels offer no relief. too long in the blast path your
skin peels from bone. spend most of my time crouching. overhead carpet
bombing. a clean sweep to precede the invasion -- that's what we hear. that's what
gets on my nerves

less a military reduction than a psychic one. the spectacle of organized carnage was
long ago fashioned by media appetite for new images, new product, leaving
nothing to fracture save the individual brainpan

the last real idea was to waste the romantics, those eyes in the skies, so to spook. first on
the scent unscrewed the language. there was little under the lid, of course.
instructions in pigeon japanese wrapped around a second screw driver -- that's all. no
engine for the thinking machine, the wordworks, at least not anything
sensible. faces exchanged for digital flat-screens. *spiritus noblesse*, if
such a thing ever existed, somewhere lost between zero and one

the brain-bombs produced mass illiteracy. language incarcerated. techno fads
and megabytes pass for art. analysis gets you nowhere while the
crime of passion is, well, a crime. really, there are laws. and

literature a phenomenon occult. writing goes on, yes, but its insides have been scooped out. a few charlatans still roam the city, trading empty suitcases

so the days line up. one by one they drop off the board. sun and moon trade glances. the tides rise and fall. stores open early and close late. work, rest, wake and sleep. cornflakes in, culture out. the occasional "deformity" elicits sympathy and aspirin. everyone's infected. no one will admit this, of course. it's always someone else whose impression needs sharpening. we worship anything sterilized: the images, the images and the machines

411 from overseas that the euro has been counterfeited. a second news flash involves the occupation of third world nations by capitalist armies. huge populations of pissed off underclasses. all they want is their "god given land," and maybe give the wife a good slap without some foreigner making a big deal out of it. anyway, it's pretty obvious that god, or whatever, is a brutal master. where's the morality in that

okay so I go cautious down high broadway, thinking backwards. I'm flashing on how things went after the breakdown. right away I lock onto this rusted image of wescott, the one I call "highness," swinging his 1950s ragtop to the curb. never been out to his place, but heard it was end to end antiques. wescott worships the old ways, so we have that in common. "been hunting for you since lunchtime. I need a favor. get in," he says, a bit annoyed. "well, I'm around, here and there. what do you want?" I shoot back edgy. "just get in," he says. I look him over for about five seconds and get in. wescott owns a housewife and law firm on long island, the north side where most of the money is. he specializes in corrupted files and had cleaned up some shitty business for me a few years ago. seems I strolled out of a new england university library a tad heavier than when I went in. rare maps of the colonies, or some such, taped to the lining of my raincoat. guess I owe him since he had my back gratis. don't feel too guilty, though. the guy's got an endless list of favors he wants doing, and I'm always the one doing them.

did I mention I did some time as a teaching assistant at a major university? did I mention I left that gig for the nam? wescott and me, we've been around awhile

anyway, the favor's a familiar one. he'd been too long in the burbs, needed a thrill or two. so he rattles some insipid conversation in my direction for a few minutes, then gets to the needle point: drugs . . . and sex. the drugs kicking, the sex as wicked as a pony on speed. there's no mystery here, no reason to play it coy. I know that he knows that I know where to go

it was a way of feeling something, of repairing the micro chipped day-to-day. my only problem with wescott is that he never commits. he hunts me down when the mood strikes him. otherwise I'm a former client

too pro bono to bother with. don't mind too much. like I said, I owe him - but I still had my rules. like I always insisted he ditch the gucci shoes. that sort of presentation just jacks up the fee, and I got to maintain my reputation as a sly negotiator. naturally I always insist on a taste. I lick the edge of everything he does

for decades I've been a familiar down in the hole. I always bring repeaters. so when I turn up with wescott, again, eve skips the third degree she shines on most of the moles. she pumps us a quick nod and aims her thumb at the back stairs. "what's on the menu?" wescott asks when we reach the cellar. his eyes fill with drool. "well, I know eve came into some designer coke a few days ago. and there's a new girl in town. either that or the altar boy you liked so much. he's still around." "what do you mean, designer coke? coke is coke." wescott challenges, knee-jerk suspicious. "I just mean that it tops the regular. this stuff really gets you off, and lasts a really long time, not the usual twenty minutes of low altitude flight. plus a hard-on to crack bricks." wescott smiles. I know he'll be satisfied whether or not I'm selling the absolute truth. he wants a lift. he wants it bad. besides, complaining might put him out of my loop, and that's something he definitely isn't going to risk. no way eve hands over the keys to the kingdom without my say so. so we walk the dim light down the hallway. a door opens, slowly. w e g o i n

no doubt true what freud says about sanitation, that if you don't pay for it, you don't clean up. now that's an antinomian bumper sticker. my own tour of duty in the nam, for which I -- if you can believe it -- volunteered, taught me a few things about wringing out dirty laundry. the more I debased myself, the better I felt. it wasn't too long before I was dreaming the formalists away, lost in narcotic reveries, thinking fondly on my psycho family whom I hadn't contacted in years. war was hell, but I'd found my bit of heaven among the ginkgo. and though the smack is easy enough to come by here in the states, I've never felt that good, that protected, again. as if god looked at me, gathered me into his eyes, and shut the lids

wescott and I both feel that feeling when zohaib waves us inside and closes the door behind us. wescott's body immediately relaxes, as if it senses -- before mind makes thought -- the distance between its own desires and the public street. no one here to stir shame from adrenalin, not without an invitation. it's been said we become the thing we most fear. true, I think. the best defense is always offensive. "how goes it?" I say to zohaib the arab. "s'okay," he mumbles back. zohaib has the necessary skills for the job. he can break a man's back with one massive arm and still leave him orgasming on the floor. sometimes I'd kid about his monk's bald spot, but he knew not to go postal on the regulars. last time I saw him he'd converted to judaism. when I got up the nerve to ask why, he pointed at the top of his scalp and said, "the yarmulke." actually, he said "ya-mee ka," but whose counting

do I have a problem with zohaib? no. I like him. he's family. the
uncle bisexual every genealogy molts from one branch or another. good
with advice for the boys, good with advice for the girls. he's everyone's
confederate because he belongs to no one in particular. a sweet big-
bear. unless he's in a mood like now when wescott forgets to tip him up front.
"hey, bitch!" zohaib shouts, "if ya don't know how to behave, you can kiss
the fucking street." I should have been better paying attention. it takes me less than a
nanosecond to home in on wescott's mistake. I grab the back of his
shirt and fast drag him to a stop. "apologize," I tell him, "and tip him double the
usual." wescott's no fool. he knows he's crossed the wrong line. quick as a
panther he has five twenties in his hand and, eyes properly lowered, offers
them to zohaib. "don't ever do that again," zohaib says in a menacing
whisper, patting wescott on one side of his head. seems the street found wescott
after all

the "chamber" at the end of the hallway contains the
mechanisms. its metal door sports six locks of various sizes and musculature,
which zohaib undoes one by one. as this gateway to hell's intestines whines
open, we all notice the familiar insurance executive hanging by his wrists from
the door's backside. he says hello as we move past him into the belly of the
room. the dim light from the hallway leaks into the candle-lit space. the candles
do double duty, of course -- one had to see what one was doing when one
dripped hot wax on one's flesh, didn't one? à gauche the proud rack
stretches its joints, spinal hungry. à droit flagellation. iron masks and head
bangers hang from wires bound to the grease blotched ceiling. at the far end a variety
of wigs, gowns, panties, nylons sequined and striped -- beneath those a row of high
heels, pointy and open toed, canoed and sling backed. assorted shelves
cradle the usual restraints, skin rippers, bear traps and what not. two
wheelchairs face each other aside the operating table at the center of the
chamber. and bookcases filled with -- what else? -- books. I notice the
new acquisitions: william blake's collected, and nearly everything by derrida.
"so what'll be?" zohaib asks, scratching his crack. wescott, his eyes pleasure
wide, replies to the effect that some of that new cocaine might be a good starting
point. "then what?" "then I'd like a midget, a midget with really small hands"

I'm not a god believer, but every damn day I thank whatever hole he
vanished into for eve's gift to us all. where else may failed romantics go?
post-breakdown the city was as cold as a meat locker, and as tasteless. early
on I sided with the deconstructionists. obviously -- to me at least -- the
only humans still walking around with their trousers off. endless
questioning, endless questioning of the logic bone, endless questioning of the
logic bone and the impossible solution -- if that's not arch-romanticism
... trust me, it is. anyway, religion is bigotry. so is politics, for that
matter. right or left, it's wall to wall control freaks. luckily formalist
jets, when they napalmed the last real idea, missed irony huddled in the
corners. no left wing without a flap on the right, and vicey versey. each

the necessary in-side of the other's box. these politics all one under
their pointless steeple. acknowledging the solidarity of deviance,
worshipping it -- that's the only way to feel anything within this mad calculus. pain --
that'll keep you alive. role playing's good too, reaffirming as it always does
the alternate, secreted performance. as far as I'm concerned, perverts are the
leftover teeth of the human race. the rest is floss

we have to wait for the midget. his name's lincoln, and he lives in a \$6000 a month
rental on the upper east side. takes him ninety minutes to shove his chauffeur's
ass into a pair of pants, jam it into the limo, and bum per car uptown. midgets, it
turned out, were very popular on the sex for dollars circuit. lincoln, according to
lincoln, scoffed up a few hundred grand a year. no reason to doubt him. when he
finally popped in he looked like a web banner for designer everything, dressed to the
ninety nines -- obviously not a customer for his own product. by this time wescott
and I are both pretty wired on the good coke. lincoln would have none of it,
though. "never work with my head up my butt. unless I'm keepin' an eye on the
chauffeur, haaaa!" he says in a sandpapery voice. I leave him alone with wescott,
figuring they can spend the next few hours folding and
pressing without me

so I'm out of there -- and reinvested -- racked for the buying and selling. it's a long train
downtown. invasion the next sick thing

William James Austin is one of the greatest human beings to walk this
earth. His poetry moves the fuck out of me and a musician whose work
you probably know. He has always been a part of BlazeVOX, a contributor
to the first issue and a stalwart friend. This piece is the first
chapter of "DESOLATION PARADISE" entitled "highness." It's from his
new book, 9 Underwor(l)d 0, which will be out this Fall. His projects
include Blackbox and Koja press. All and more can be found at his
website, WilliamJamesAustin.com