

DECLINE AND FALL

by Richard Oyama

Along the south side of the chain-link fence in Los Lunáticos Dog Park that paralleled the interstate crawled Kurt Schwarze and his motley collection of dogs—a grumpy Chow named Moe, an obstreperous chihuahua named Taco, and a Samoyed with a suppurating wound in the middle of his brow like a third eye. Snow Dog, the Samoyed, shuffled on arthritic legs and duck-footed paws. It would have been merciful to shoot him.

Kurt was an unsightly figure. Though well over 200 pounds, his balding head was tucked into his chest. His florid face was frozen into a bemused rictus. A transistor radio was affixed to his right ear where he listened to conservative talk radio. The tails of his red flannel shirt were not secured by a studded belt, flapping like sheets in an errant wind over a distended belly. He occupied his dead mother's mobile home out on Tramway and Central in Albuquerque. He claimed that his mother's brain had been infected by worms and parasites.

The procession at the horizon-line was emblematic not of a star-spangled parade but rather of despair and madness incarnate throughout the land.

“Hey, Kurt,” Ron Guadalupe shouted. Kurt gave him a near-imperceptible wave. If Ron was a Bible-thumper, he was also a hale fellow well met and David's friend. He and Kurt were the park's odd couple. What they had in common was trauma—Ron's son served multiple tours in Afghanistan and was homeless, while Kurt was a walking poster child for undiagnosed clinical depression. They traded dubious factoids from the Internet about hydrogen peroxide as a cure-all for your system. They ignored the

warning label that the contents should not be taken internally. Ron drained a shot of whiskey to go with his morning joe.

City workers dumped a hillock of wood chips in the middle of the park but had not yet redistributed and raked them evenly across the ground. Kurt abruptly picked up the chihuahua and hurled him like a football onto the top of the pile. He just felt like it.

“*What the fuck,*” Dale Bucholz said.

“That boy has a screw loose,” Dick Duckhorn said.

“Some people don’t deserve dogs,” David Shimamura said angrily.

“Some don’t deserve to live,” Dick added. “They should be strung up on a tree.”

“Let me talk sense to him,” Ron said, hobbling over to the parade on two titanium knee replacements. He had wrecked his joints from a lifetime of squash.

A souped-up racer growled on the interstate.

“OK, we’re impressed,” Dale said. “Asshole.”

“This is what our lives have come to,” Duckhorn said. “Watching cars zip up and down the interstate.”

“It could be worse—always,” David said.

“Yessir,” said Dick, “your balls could accidentally get caught in a vise, for instance.”

“Nice image,” David said. “Where do you get this shit from, Dick?”

“I was born with a clubfoot,” Dick explained. “Roswell was home to the KKK in New Mexico as well as the site of Area 51. Granddad was a Klan member. Burning crosses on the lawn were like fireworks on the Fourth of July. Kids teased me about my foot. They called me Chester and Gimpy—like the character Walter Brennan played on ‘The Real McCoys.’ I weren’t no good in English but my brain was a backed-up port-o-potty and this polluted sewage of words spills out.”

“It *does* have a sort of profane poetry,” David admitted, “like Charles PUKE-owski. If you dig that low-life shit.”

Mabel Trebinski and James Buck entered the holding pen with their dogs, Mabel’s Jack Russell terrier Bush and James’ border collie cross, Dorothy.

Mabel, 83, rolled her wheelie walker over to the group.

“I want to invite you all to the gun show at the fairgrounds this Saturday,” Mabel said. “I’m volunteering at the Tea Party booth. We’ll have all variety of guns—handguns, antique Winchester rifles, shotguns, Glocks—whatever your freedom-loving heart desires and you don’t need a background check.”

“The only country that has more guns per capita than us is Yemen,” David said. “What do you need a semi-automatic weapon with a banana clip for, unless it’s to blow a deer to smithereens? What’s meat left to eat? I don’t get it.” He was truly baffled.

“What are you a Socialist, man? Don’t you know your Constitution? We’ve got the right to bear arms.”

“Didn’t that refer to a militia in the 18th century?”

“Obama wants to take our guns away,” Dick said. “The other day I was at the Old Glory Shoot Shop on Central. The boxes of ammo were flying off the shelves. It’s Armageddon Time.”

Al Oswald, who had been leaning silently against a lightpole, walked over and pulled out a small derringer from the pocket of his flak jacket. His jeans were too big. Oswald served with the army in Hamburg and was currently out of work after harassing a fellow employee at the Rio Grande Nature Center. He filed suit against the city. It was currently pending. The courts were awash in suits. New Mexicans loved litigation.

“I carry this wherever I travel,” Al said, cupping the gun in his hands like a sacrament.

“Shit,” Dale said. “Will you put that fucking thing away?”

“It’s handy, particularly when the NSA is harassing you like they are me,” he said, seeming not to hear her. “You don’t think I’ll go out of the house unprotected, do you?” He patted the gun affectionately like a pet gerbil. His beagle Remington was roaming the perimeter of the fence. Oswald ignored him. Al Oswald’s dream was to work as a ranger outside of Juneau, although it fascinated him that Bangkok was the top spot for gender reassignment surgery. He often mentioned that fact. He told David about a gaudy, ambiguous night at a transvestite bar in New Orleans. David thought of the Kinks’ song “Lola.”

“Allan, *girlfriend*, please put that away,” James said, fingers snapping in the air, his mentholated eyeballs twitching uncontrollably behind apricot-colored shades. “You may shoot somebody in the family jewels and we wouldn’t want that now, would we? Where would my short-lived modeling career with Calvin Klein be without a dick?”

By all accounts James Buck had led a wild and varied life though it was difficult to sort out a coherent narrative since booze and pharmaceuticals impeded his ability to tell a story without his ADD-challenged mind swerving off into the ozone like a UFO. The biography was a patchwork, an assemblage, a crazy quilt, like most Americans. David gathered that a grade-school friend’s closeted father had opened his wine-colored bathrobe to him, exposing his engorged penis, while his friend was on a paper route. Buck’s queer adventures began there. James violated Shimamura’s zone of privacy and discretion. He wasn’t into the confessional tell-all habit. Buck discomfited him.

Al Oswald approached David after months of fidgety silence. Why he did not know. David’s psychic antennae were registering the subtlest fluctuations of inner disturbance. There were a lot of discordant vibes around Oswald. His words confirmed those vibes.

Oswald cradled the barrel of the gun in his palm and sighted an unseen prey in the crosshairs.

“You know,” Al whispered seductively into David’s ear, “you’re a friend of mine. I could easily shoot you and put you out of your misery.”

“Gee, thanks a lot, Al,” David bluffed, “I really appreciate that but I’m not quite ready to end it all you know what I mean. When I am, suppose I let you know?”

“You do that.”

It was helpful that Shimamura had sucked up great draughts of cannabis deep into his lungs before going to the dog park, fluxing between the material and immaterial worlds. Oswald’s mercy killing offer left him calm and nerveless. At least, like the London Underground, there was a way out.

Al Oswald drifted off into the distance.

“That fella needs help,” Dale said. “He fits the profile of a rapist or serial killer. It gives me the creeps.”

“He’s certainly an oddball,” Mabel concurred.

“He needs to get back on his meds,” David said.

“My wife and I pray for him like we do unborn babies,” Ron said.

“I like babies,” Dick said, “if they’re properly cooked.”

“Are you trying to say something about abortion, Ron?” Dale asked. “Because I support *Roe v. Wade*—that’s still the law of the land last time I checked.”

“Abortion is murder,” Ron declared. “I’m pro-life and support the rights of the unborn.”

“What’s your definition of human life?” David asked. “Doesn’t it begin at the point of conception outside of the womb?”

“That’s my definition,” Dale said, good liberal that she was, “a bitch’s right to choose.”

“The fetus is a living thing,” Ron said.

“Do our founding documents uphold the rights of the fetus?” David asked.

“The law needs to change,” Mabel said. “The problem is big government, starting with Obamacare.”

“Social security, unemployment, workmen’s compensation, disability insurance?”

Dale said pointedly, knowing Mabel collected the latter. “Are those big government? Do you want to get rid of those too?”

“I knew a wetback on welfare that drove a Cadillac,” Dick said.

“That’s bullshit,” David said. “My sister is on SSI. So far as I can tell, no one gets rich on food stamps.”

“That’s true,” Ron conceded in spite of his penchant for FOX News, “My disabled son has an EBT card that I don’t know what he’d do without it.”

“Don’t leave the house,” Duckhorn added, “without your EBT card.”

“If you’re so concerned about the sanctity of human life,” Dale asked Ron, ferociously back on topic like a pit bull, “how can you condone the use of torture?”

“I hate sand niggers,” Dick said.

“Those Iraqis blew up the Trade Center,” Mabel said in outrage.

“They weren’t Iraqi,” David said. “They were our Saudi *friends*. The U.S. supported the *mujahadeen* in Afghanistan as a proxy war against the Soviet Union. They lost.”

“This is an all-out war of civilizations,” Ron said. “There are no weapons that should be banned for use if they aid the cause. That includes torture.”

“We’re exactly the same as the enemy,” Dale said. “Moral equivalence.”

“No,” Ron said, “we’re defending the American way of life.”

“What exactly *is* this American way of life?” David asked. “A life of endless consumption, the liberty to exploit finite resources, despoiling the planet?”

“Torture works,” Mabel said. “It’s yielded critical information.”

“Has it?” Dale asked. “The Nuremberg interrogators played chess with their captors and the Nazi officials cooperated well enough.”

“On top of that,” David said, “suspects are being held indefinitely without trial for years in Guantanamo. Some of them are innocent.”

“Arabs suck,” Dick said. “They should all be locked up. Or deported.”

“Would that include political exiles from Saddam, Saudi billionaires, Syrian refugees, Sikhs?” David asked.

“Let’s drop the big one,” Dick said, “and see what happens. Give war a chance.”

“When has there been a moment,” Dale asked, “in the first decade of this new millennium when there *hasn’t* been a war? It’s the new normal. Doesn’t that satisfy your bloodlust?”

“It cheapens the value of human life,” David said, thinking about his brother Frank after Vietnam. “The season of perpetual war. Its smog. It makes you choke and gag.”

“As my Alabama grandma used to say,” Dick said, “some people is just niggas. Same thing with Muslims.”

“Like some people, Dick,” David asked, “are just rednecks and peckerwoods and honkies?”

“Something like that, you jap cooley.”

“The difference is,” David said, shining on the slur, “that unarmed black men are the ones getting shot in the back by white cops,”

“What are you, Subaru,” Mabel asked, “a negro-lover?”

“It’s sickening that we have to express the sentiment black lives matter. It’s a symptom of the disease.”

“Mabel, you don’t believe there’s such a thing as racial profiling?” Dale asked.

“My son was stopped by a cop,” Ron said. “APD thought he was an illegal. There’s such a thing as driving while brown. But I don’t support driver’s licenses for Mexicans.”

“Because they drive so *loco*,” Dick said.

“You’re a fucking, straight-up racist, Dick, you know that?” David said.

“Thank you, Dave,” Ron said, “you beat me to the punch.”

Racism was a mutation of cancerous cells in the body politic.

“No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are.”

“Now, now, boys,” Dale said.

Shimamura stalked off. Bessie tagged along.

“It’s all Obama’s fault,” Mabel was overheard to say. “That goddamn Kenyan.”