

ZADIE SMITH

REBECCA CURTIS

MOHSIN HAMID

R. L. STINE

RIVKA GALCHEN

NICHOLSON BAKER

Arts and Letters

## Exquisite Corpse

Taking their cue from the Surrealist parlor game, 15 renowned authors take turns contributing to an original short story.

ARTWORK BY LISA KOKIN

THEIR MOTHERS WERE DISTANT COUSINS long estranged. They gave birth within minutes of each other, same hospital, different rooms. (I was not there.) The boy grew up west of the interstate, on the outskirts

JOSHUA FERRIS

of the university; the girl in a high rise with a balcony overlooking the water. He won scholarships; she dropped out. Both married, had children, worked hard, suffered losses. In the end they were alone. She had an early-morning flight, he took the overnight. The next day they found themselves, before the small explosion, across from each other in the cafe, in a foreign land in the grip of turmoil, strangers still.

He was talking about the war now. The war! The war! It was all the men ever talked about. (*Was it coming? Was it coming? Hell, yes, it was coming!*) He spoke darkly of beef jerky, peanut butter, disposable wipes.

JENNY OFFILL

He'd trained himself to eat thistles. "Get guns," she said. "I hear guns are good." She thought of her precious hoard: seven cans of creamed corn, chocolate frosting that NEVER expired. He urged her to study herbal medicine. No, no. She

already had a backup plan.

*Did you hear about the suicidal homeopath?  
She took 1/50th of the recommended dose.*

Neither of them took much notice of the waiter, which was perhaps strange, since the waiter had a glass eye, a marked undertow in the rolling tide of his beard where a bullet had removed half his chin and a limp so pronounced it made his pelvis shimmy with every step, side to side and up and down, thrusting lewdly like that of an unhinged and particularly horny salsa dancer.

MOHSIN HAMID

No, they had eyes only for each other, those two. But my eyes were everywhere. I had taken notice of the waiter. And the waiter had taken notice of them.

I eavesdrop. I observe. I record everything. That is my life's work. How interesting, how fortunate, that a pair of solipsists could be sitting across from one another in the same cafe — now they're standing — babbling out their life stories. I take it all in. The glass-eyed

JAMES PATTERSON

PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARKO METZINGER



ANTHONY MARRA

DAVID BALDACCIO

ELIF BATUMAN

JAMES PATTERSON

waiter, at one time a mercenary soldier, wounded in the Sudan. The chain-smoking shrew crouched behind the cash register, bored out of her small mind, observing nothing at all. There are so many competing images, so many shrill voices echoing inside my head. I feel as if I might implode.

But enough about me.

The man and the woman were still in the cafe, making small talk. The glass-eyed waiter was sizing them up for something. He was remembering the Sudan.

ELIF BATUMAN

The man and the woman were inadvertently annoying one another. The woman was showing off, in her way, about being a lifelong bad girl, done now with her third husband. The man was showing off, in his way, about being a lifelong scholarship kid, suddenly a widower. She thought he was a pussy (for all his thistle-eating); he thought she was a brat. They were talking at cross-purposes.

And then I overheard her say, “Look, let’s make the wager. The only way to find out what we honestly believe, and not just what we wish we believe, is to lay a wager.”

RIVKA GALCHEN

There she had me. I was on her side now, maybe because I like people who make things plain, or coerce them into a seeming plainness.

“My ethics aren’t about statistics,” he said.

“I could give you the location of Anderson,” she said. “That’s the wager. I’m sure I don’t have to explain to an intelligent man like yourself, having Anderson would change everything. But I wager, when you understand just where Anderson is, you’ll not find it in yourself to take action.”

He spoke lowly, he seemed to be saying something about the elephants, I’m not certain, I lost my

concentration for a moment, it’s true, how could I not? I also knew the where of Anderson.

They left together, each assuming the other had paid the bill. I followed. A half-block behind us, the glass-eyed waiter limped out the cafe door, shouting, a ribbon of receipt paper held overhead.

ANTHONY MARRA

Then, the explosion: a concussive detonation; white heat; smoke charcoaling the pink evening skies.

Broken glass had repaved the road outside the cafe with a jagged luminosity stretching from one side of the street to the other, save for an elongated patch of empty asphalt in the shape of the waving waiter.

“Am I hurt?” the man asked as he pulled me to my feet.

“Thank you,” I said, brushing gravel from my suit and edging away. “I’m fine.”

I squinted into the crowd. Where had she gone?

Perhaps it was sexist that I’d expected more from him. Not that I’d expected much from either.

ADELLE WALDMAN

Fatuous American journalists — competitors — but both besotted with the idea of themselves as “war correspondents.” (Of course, he was eyeing a cushy editor post back home; for her, the job was just a buffer against loneliness after things blew up with number three.)

I had believed this assignment was a wild-goose chase, a demotion of sorts after what happened last time. Until she said what she had about Anderson.

“Anderson called me yesterday,” she’d said in the cafe, just before they’d left. “Andy’s one of us. He wants things to be better. He’s a man with grievances, justified grievances, but he tries to rise above them. He’s suffered,

NICHOLSON BAKER

but he’s still searching for the jewels in the plum cake. He doesn’t always know what to do with what he knows.” She’d paused, and then her voice had dropped to a whisper. “He knew that we would be meeting here. He told me that he’s a master of disguise.”

I grabbed the man’s arm and turned him back toward the cafe. “Look over there,” I said. “Look at the waiter.”

The waiter was standing, ignoring the crowd, watching us, waiting for us to address him.

Suddenly the man understood. “Anderson?” he said to the waiter. “It is you, isn’t it? Andy?” “Both of you should come with me,” Anderson said. He spoke with a faint, unidentifiable accent. He led us toward a long blue car. “I can take you to her hotel.”

I started to follow Ryan to the car. But a familiar voice rang out on the set: “CUT!” And our esteemed director, E. J. McRobb, burst off his chair, waving his clipboard.

“Rolph?” E. J. boomed, using the clipboard to shield his eyes. “Where’s Rolph? The explosion isn’t working for me. I asked for a blast, not a firecracker pop.”

Rolph lumbered over from somewhere, half a sandwich in his hand. “One of the detonators missed its cue.”

“I don’t want an explanation. I want an explosion,” E. J. said.

Ryan turned to me. “It’s going to take a whole day to reset and rebuild the cafe. Want to drive to Malibu? Get some beach time?”

E. J. stepped between us. “Where’s Marla? She isn’t supposed to leave the scene. She’s supposed to get into the car with the two of you.”

The three of us did a 360, but no sign of her.

A few minutes later, I found her lurking at the side of my trailer. “Marla? What’s wrong? Why’d you leave?”

She shuddered. “I’m scared, Todd. Seriously. That explosion was real. It hurt. I still have glass in my hair.” She locked those beautiful green eyes on mine. “It wasn’t right. I think we’re in danger. E. J. — he’s crazy.”

I started to protest, but she grabbed my arm. “Todd, don’t you wonder why E. J. has never been allowed to finish a film?”

Of course I knew why E. J. had never been allowed to finish a movie. Everyone knew why E. J. had never been able to finish a movie. But it wasn’t what Marla was implying, what she was hoping: those old rumors, most

HANYA YANAGIHARA

of them probably propagated by E. J. himself — that the reason the second lead in “Eastern Exposures” had had to be recast wasn’t because he had died of a drug overdose, but because E. J. had killed him. (Though no one actually knew how. Poisonous snake? It had been close enough to the jungle, after all. Arsenic, shot between the third and fourth toes? Rohypnol, a nudge onto Chonburi Expressway at rush hour before he collapsed completely?) Or how that little girl who followed E. J. from station to station at the craft services table, silent and slim as an ermine, wasn’t actually his daughter, but his slave, a souvenir plucked from a squalid apartment complex in Dushanbe.

Actresses, I thought, and not for the first time. And then came all the other thoughts, unfolding scroll-like before me: Why am I here? Why am I doing this? And then: My cowardice. Here I was, in L.A., when really, I needed to be 10,000 miles east, in Trieste. And I needed to be there by Thursday, or there would be no return, not for me, and certainly not for Francis. But that’s not what I said. What I instead said was “Marla,

then we have to kill him first. We make sure the explosives go off early while E. J. is standing there.” Marla looked at me, stunned but intrigued.

It was then I realized I’m no actor. I’m a cold-blooded killer, like that bastard Francis already was. Like I would have to be if I ever made it to Trieste.

DAVID BALDACCI

I gripped her shoulders. “And you’re the key!”

“Me? How?”

“Sex. He wants you. An assignation. Then, boom.

We’ll give a great eulogy. The performance of our lives.”

Actually, I would give a great eulogy. Why leave loose ends? Goodbye, Marla. Damn, this killing thing was addictive.

“You’re no techie.” She yanked me into my trailer.

We stripped.

She’d ask E. J. to “rehearse” with her, I said. At night. I’d hide offset. Mid-“scene” she’d need

REBECCA CURTIS

to “get something.” I’d hit “blow.”

I bent her legs back. I thought, She’ll make an exquisite corpse.

“Not sure,” Marla said.

“E. J.’s got warts.”

I saw wadded C-notes in her purse.

“You’ve had sex before,” I said.

“Don’t you want sex that’s explosive?”

Francis, I thought.

It was eating babies.

We’d wanted roles in this flick where there’s nothing left on earth to eat but cockroaches and babies. Verisimilitude, Francis said. To win great roles, do great stuff. We picked Trieste because the exchange rate was good. But rumors gypsies sold babies were false. So we stole one. We ate it, but got caught. I escaped; the gypsies chained him in a basement. He had to get their “queen” pregnant in six cycles. Five had passed. They let him send me letters. The “queen” weighed 500 pounds. But the problem was him. They’d tested. His morphology was only 2 percent. “Americans,” the gypsy doctor said, “have lousy sperm, due to podcasts, Kindles, iPhones and chemicals in their lousy water.” They fed Francis creamed corn. The “queen” was ovulating Thursday. They had a “mystic” who’d know if she’d conceived on Sunday. If she hadn’t, Francis was dead.

Marla stepped off the plane in Trieste, her face aching. She touched above her lip, where Ryan’s mustache kept growing in. It felt sharp and soft at once, and she couldn’t keep her hands out of it. One of Ryan’s eyes

BEN MARCUS

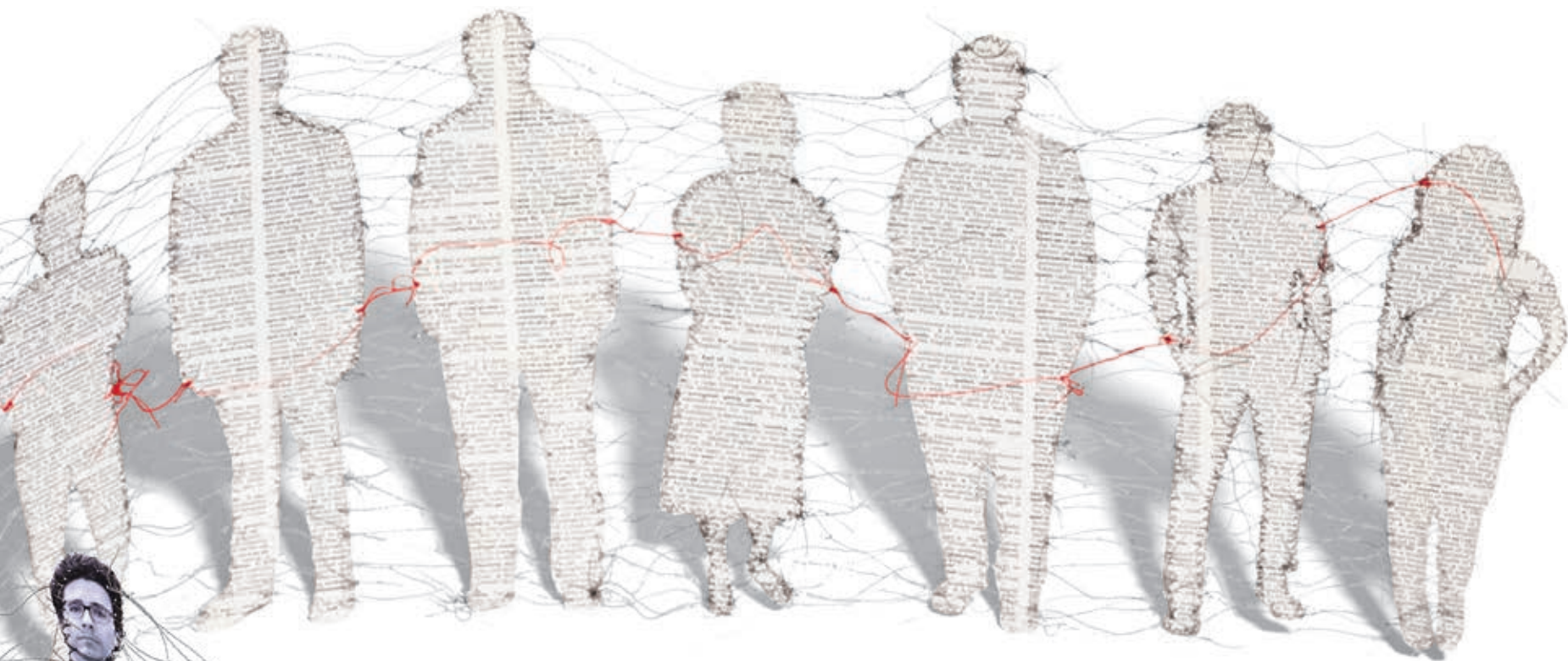
wasn’t behaving, which just figured. At the hotel Marla tried to wash it out, and she very nearly did. The water made it go vacant and white.

She’d need to keep that eye closed. Was it enough to be riding shotgun inside that loser’s body, finishing the little bitch’s work for him? It wasn’t. Still, she had a few minutes, and she needed to be convincing to Francis, so she coordinated a final orgasm for Ryan, using the hallway mirror to calibrate her technique. It was hard to feel sexy with Ryan’s body. It felt like she was washing dishes, except at the end, when a feeling of live birth descended, as if she’d been shot through a wet cannon, ending up as a soupy mess on her hotel floor.

On the way to the museum, lumbering inside Ryan, whose muscles could barely command the body forward, Marla suddenly knew why he was so small-minded and bitter, so scheming. He was in pain all the time. It hurt to



HANYA YANAGIHARA



JOSHUA FERRIS



BEN MARCUS



JENNY OFFILL



ADELLE WALDMAN

be him. Poor Francis. This would all be his problem soon.

Marla arrived at the Piazza Venezia with a few minutes to spare. Across the street, at the Museo Revoltella, Anderson's "exhibit" would soon begin, and she needed to be ready.

She walked toward the big white building, playing childishly with the Italian: "the revolting museum." Actually, it was in the best taste: simple lines, a clean, classical facade. That was what was so revolting about it. All the provocations inside had been tamed.

ZADIE SMITH

Now the tourists came to see the ripped canvases and the blunt perspectives, the de Chiricos, the Fontanas. It was what you did before getting an ice

cream. She also wanted an ice cream — the sun was brutal. She kept walking. Crossing the square felt like being in a de Chirico, the shadow of her new body stretched so far. But no one found her strange; no one blocked her way. Perhaps everybody drags their body through the world with the same painful effort.

At the entrance she left \$5 in the box and walked the great stone stairs.

Again she had the sense of something flattened out: all these individual artists constrained to live together now under one roof, sharing rooms, sharing walls, gathered by Anderson's whims or by the dull rules of chronology and influence. Like a graveyard! Buried forever next to whomever.

"Can I help you?" asked a guard, rising from his chair. Marla turned and saw how close she was standing to him. Being in Ryan seemed to mess with her spatial awareness. Her peripheral vision was shot. She stepped back and worked hard to make Ryan smile.

"I'm looking for the Lucio Fontana?"  
"Room six."

And it was wonderful to approach that room, finally. To see, first, the slashes and the black shimmer behind, and then, on the central bench, Anderson and Francis, waiting for her. Waiting for him. She knew she had been brought here for Francis, but as she crossed the threshold it really seemed any combination was possible, anything might penetrate anybody, and the result would be the same. She watched them stand and begin clapping. She felt like a triumphant soprano. Both men came and took her hands. His hands. They faced each other. Then they turned toward the greatest of the Fontanas: one huge slash down a canvas of pure arterial red, leading to that shimmering black beneath. It was large enough that a man might enter it. A woman, too.

"Shall we?" asked Marla, inside Ryan. And they did. ▣