

Three Cartoons

Kit Schluter

[Walking along the Avenue of the Suicides, the Cockroach]

Walking along the Avenue of the Suicides, the cockroach takes the ant by the arm.

“We’ve been spending too much time together,” she says.

Leaves fall over them like circus tents.

Intimacy, suddenly.

“I know we have,” she says. “But it’s my birthday on Sunday, and I wanted to invite you to the park with some friends.”

“I would love to come.”

She tightens her grip on her arm. “—Tell me, were you ever with a man?”

“Now and then, yes. With one.”

“Ohh, and what was it like?”

“I never let him inside me, if that’s what you’re asking.”

“But didn’t he want to?”

“Well, he never talked about it, but I could tell it was the only thing he ever thought about.”

“How could you tell?”

“When he spoke, his words were thin, like panty hose pulled tight over a robber’s face.”

[While the Two Slugs Take Turns Drinking Shots of Vodka]

While the two Slugs take turn drinking shots of vanilla-infused vodka, the Spoon nibbles at the sugar in whose container it sleeps. On the interior wall of the outhouse, the Drunk scrawls, PUKE OUTSIDE, and collapses. “It’s not even easy to write e-mails anymore—,” says the Poet.

“Then, quickly, just say it,” urges the Spoon.

“I always end up feeling disingenuous—only makes me want to disappear.”

“Ah.”

“But! I don’t want to have a secret life,” says the Poet. “No. There are simply parts of my life I need to keep private.

“I do so many things I’d rather not tell anyone about, you know.”

“Like what?” asks the Pelican.

“When the whole world thinks I’m reading, chances are I’m on the Internet . . .”

“That doesn’t sound so bad,” the Pelican reassures.

“Yeah, that’s really nothing to worry about,” says the Spoon from the sugar bowl.

“. . . masturbating!” cries the Poet.

A grave silence.

“I think what you need is—,” says the one Slug who is still more than half-conscious.

“—a life coach!” shouts the Drunk from his dream.

“Exactly—how did he know what you were going to say?” murmurs the less than half-conscious Slug.

In walks the Life Coach, who resembles a life-size cardboard cutout of the Forty-Fourth President of the United States of America: “Did somebody say my name?”

The Drunk wakes up and sprints away, suddenly sober as the Judge.

The Slugs crawl into a glass of beer, in hopes of a quick end.

The Pelican showily offers the Jeweler the Fish from his sagging bill.

The Poet says, “Yes,” as he fishes the two Suicides from the glass of beer with his index finger. “Yes, I’m afraid someone did say your name.”

“It was him!” gurgle the Slugs in unison, pointing to the Drunk speeding out of the parking lot in his Dodge Durango.

“Why call the Life Coach if you think you have nothing to live for, my good slugs?” asks the Life Coach.

“Not for us. We were telling the poet he needs a life coach because whenever the world thinks he is reading he is actually on the Internet . . .”

“Now, that doesn’t sound so bad,” reassures the Life Coach.

“. . . masturbating!” adds the Poet.

“Ah, I see,” the Life Coach whispers, snapping his fingers to some unheard beat. “That is rather grave . . .”

Through the door parades the Raccoon in a doctor’s coat, the Cup of Coffee driving a garbage truck, and, in the hull of this truck, the Dozen Patches of Human Skin with tattoos of mermen and other mythical depictions of the male figure on them. “What you need, I’m afraid,” says the Life Coach in a suspiciously fearless tone, as if he has given the same prescription a thousand times—as if it were the only prescription he were

capable of giving—, “is electroshock therapy.”

“But . . . he’s still just a boy!” screams the Poet’s mother as she rushes out of the bathroom, where, we can only assume, she had been canoodling with the Drunk.

“It has to be this way; it’s the only way,” say the Dozen Patches of Human Skin.

“Yes, if your son truly wants to change for the better, there is only one treatment,” says the Cup of Coffee resignedly from the driver’s seat of the garbage truck. “And that’s electroshock therapy.”

“Here!” says the Raccoon. “To reassure you, let us introduce you to the teenager we treated just last week. A true success.”

From the hull of the garbage truck crawls the Teenage Guitarist with a stringless guitar. Although he is covered in fruit peels and appears to have been drenched in many flavors of rotten lassi, he is wearing only a large sweater, its colors dulled by filth.

“He’s . . . absolutely disgusting,” words the mother can hardly articulate.

“I used to sit in my basement writing love songs to myself,” the Teenage Guitarist begins, “but I would pretend they were written for a little girl named Karen in my math class, and we would listen to them together, and we would kiss, and I would take her hand and put it in my pants and tell her exactly what to do with it, but the whole time I would imagine it was my own hand touching me, my own body I was holding, my own mouth I was kissing, and, God as witness, what a waste of time it was for her to be there as a means for me to access my own touch, my own body, literally nothing makes me more ashamed of myself, but, now that the Life Coach has treated me, my legs hardly move, I can hardly move enough to get out of this garbage truck, can’t you see how I have to drag my body along with my arms, I can’t even walk, can’t walk to the bathroom to piss,” and the crowd notices a deep yellow stain in the sweater where it falls over his crotch, “can’t walk to school, to math class, can’t walk from my house to hers, not even to my old house, and it’s so wonderful because no one knows where I am, so how can I bother anyone anymore, how can I mistreat anyone if no one knows where I am, I’m not a nuisance anymore, I’m ethically pure, purified, and the thought of my own body makes me so sick that my hands rush away before me like terrified animals because I’m afraid to touch my own skin, but it’s so confusing because, being made of my own skin, my fingertips are always touching me, so can’t you, please, Life Coach, can’t you please take off my fingertips, just burn them dead, or cut them off, anything, please, slice them off my fingers and put them on toothpicks and stick the toothpicks into the wounds—anything to distance them even just a little from my body.”

“I don’t want to be like him at all,” says the Poet, whose mother, weeping, proclaims, “but he *is* you—don’t you recognize him? He is who you used to be.”

And the Teenage Musician drags himself to the Poet, begins to kiss his shoes, unlaces them. And after removing his shoes, he begins sucking on the Poet’s toes. And the Poet recognizes that he is witnessing his own past, witnessing himself sucking his own toes, and he knows that, ten years ago, when he was this Teenage Musician, he had kissed and unlaced this very Poet’s shoes and, after removing them, had sucked on his toes.

The Life Coach laughs. "Tell us what you're thinking, boy."

I'm not ready to speak, the Poet writes in his notebook, showing no one.

"Now I don't want you getting the wrong impression about me, or what I want from you. I'm not looking for anything serious . . ." says the Teenage Musician.

"I know just what you mean," says the Poet, who places his foot on the Teenager's head, turns it face down, and presses down into the floor with all his might until the Teenager's arms wriggle.

The mother rejoices. "You're cured!" she exclaims.

". . . For all the wrong reasons," whispers the Bowl of Peanuts.

". . . Yes, for all the wrong reasons," hisses the Life Coach, licking clean the four crooked prongs of a chocolate-covered fork.

The White Plastic Bag floats by, falling over his head.

The Gust of Wind ties it shut around his neck.

[As Soon as Phul, the Humanoid Form, Returned from Work]

As soon as Phul, the Humanoid Form, returned from work, his life partner Chucha, the Massive Pigeon, spit up the very fern he had been instructed not to eat.

“How . . . many . . . times . . . !” screamed Phul.

Their adoptive son Jedd, the Honest Mannequin, rushed through his bedroom door without opening it, and body slammed Yolanda, the Television.

“No! Fucking! Relief! In this house!” were this honest mannequin's last words before Yolanda, the Television's exposed innards electrocuted him to death in retaliation.

In walked their neighbor Franclin, the Executioner, who, although late, still boldly demanded to be kissed on the bare shoulder by everyone present. (He had recently won the game show *Who's Gonna Paint My Wood?*, each episode of which involves the ritual sacrifice of hundreds of otters, so he was feeling pretty good.)

All of the paint on the walls had long since chipped away, and lay in dusty mounds at the edges of the floor.

“I would love to be on drugs,” confessed Phul.

“Dad, couldn't you find a cooler way to say ‘on drugs?’ You sound like a middle school math teacher who wants to fuck her students,” answered Jedd's still-steaming corpse.

“—Right, mom?”

But Chucha was too busy choking back down the fern he had only just rejected to offer an opinion on the matter.

“Next time, dad,” he scoffed, “try ‘festooned,’ or ‘baked,’ or ‘mackerelled.’ That's how Mitch Anzuoni says it.”

Through the windows poured a thirty-foot wave of grapefruit pulp from the nearby forest. Their deaths were assured.

Instinctively, Chucha's wings turned into red-hot coils as they sheltered Phul's body. Yolanda, the Television, reconstituted around Jedd's torso, causing him to look like one of those magician's daughters whose head and legs, during a magic act, lie beyond the confines of the coffin, awaiting the saw.

Speaking of which, when the Executioner was a boy, the family of pine martens who lived in his backyard would take him down to Beverly, a town famous for the peculiarity that all of its residents wore coffins in this way—everyone except one magician, whose name no one ever knew. Instead, he accumulated countless nicknames, such as “10-Fingered Nealie” and “The B-Town Magus,” and was rarely referred to by the same name twice.

Once father marten told young Franclin a story about this magician:

“Sometime in the late 60s ‘Mr. Wand’ was riding a train from Edinburgh to Glasgow, when into his car walked another magician, a middling Italian named Federico, known for his less-than-hifalutin performances on the streets of Venice, in which he would drag loose, soapy strings through the air while strolling languidly around, producing slimy, phosphorescent bubbles half the size of your average car. (Remember, this was the 60s and, across the pond, that wasn't actually all that big.) It fascinated the children. Anyway, when ‘Señor Virtuoso’ recognized this Italian, he knew the threat

this man represented to his primacy on the Glaswegian streets. He wasn't, after all, a very good magician,—and certainly not a confident one. So he invited Federico to coffee in the café-car, planning to poison his cup with an untraceable snake venom he claimed to have purchased in Libya from 'a wizard who wore armadillo skin epaulets studded with dwarf crocodile skulls.' But as Federico raised the poison to his lips, 'The 'Chusetts Charmer' regretted what he was about to do and cried a spell to rid the drink of its mortal spirits. Of course this spell didn't work. (As I said, he wasn't a good magician.) And Federico, minutes later, lay expired on the café-car floor in a pool of his own excrement. The weak-willed magician confessed to his crime, but, having thrown the glass vial of unknown venom from the train's window, had no proof of it, and was released, against his will, from custody. Some say his later obsession with escaping locks and chains underwater came from his desire to be at last punished for all this—that, by a misstep, he might die by his own hand, but in a manner beyond his control—not suicide, exactly, but self-murder. Others, that he just hated his mom. It's how he died, anyhow, so make of it what you will. I don't know. It's all the same to me, as long as we know we have enough to eat today and are all going to die sooner or later. Who are we to judge?—The dead are so secretive!"

