

WHITE WEREWOLF KARAOKE

By

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To Satan, for sending me these poems in my dreams

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This work deals with whiteness, lycanthropy, and karaoke. By whiteness, I mean the speaker is caught up in his race: he's a cracker, trying to express himself in a world where white men, let's face it, really should be restrained; he's a cracker and he knows it, and, moreover, he still thinks he's fly. By lycanthropy, I mean, this speaker does a deal with Lucifer, becoming a werewolf. His favorite meal is yuppie-flesh (he craves himself). When he's not actually howling, the speaker, empty and distracted, moonlights with the voices of famous poets—"karaoke maneuvers," to quote Michael Hofmann—with a kushed-out jazz, an A.D.D. mimicry. When this speaker, lifted on his own vibes, is overtaken by his sickness, his race, and his own impressions, the effect is crackling, kind of sloppy, and, hopefully, rather emotional.

## AFTERLIFE

I slept off the luau, woke alone on a love seat.  
To die young is what a poet wants, I thought,  
but would the True Poet die in a rec room?  
I rose off the sofa and drifted out back

to the pool. A silver sky misted. The deck  
was a world of leftovers: Tiki torches,  
Solo cups, the gutted remains of the pig roast.  
The night before ended in darkness:

shots of hot sauce, Jesus talk,  
skinnydipping—now it was yesterday's shit show  
entering the flesh to be born again.  
This was the instant of hangover,

when my upset digestive tract struck  
its mean god, the brain. A gassy stab, it was awful.  
I took a sip from an already-cracked can.  
I hoped to find a ride home.

## NEW STATESMAN

A product of the late eighties,  
two weeks overdue,

I'm cut from a ProChoicer's belly.  
Outside, in February's half-sunny/  
half-denim sky, birds float like spy satellites,  
ice comes close to melting.

    Dad forgets the oil  
on the news, flicks ABC off,  
and runs to purchase apolitical tulips.

Sobbing and sedated,  
Mom clutches me like a decisive vote.  
The OB/GYN says, "He's a moose!"  
Welcome to Arkansas!"

## RIMBAUD AT ELEVEN

All night he sat up on his piss-  
stained mattress, on the bed  
of shameful blemishes his mother,  
like a Molly Maid,  
had tried to bleach out in vain.  
Charlesville's moon,  
a grey-toothed druggie  
in the window,  
coaxed his skull off the pillow.  
He counted sheep  
or doodled decapitated  
stick-figures in his hymnal.  
That jaundiced suburb  
looked worst in the hour  
right before dawn.  
It turned his mind's cock  
into a capon, awake and clucking.

## MEMORY MOTEL

Bits of wallpaper ripple,

furniture curves slightly,

A Magnavox tunes  
to the green blur  
of desert combat,  
something digital  
croaks  
*Black and Blue.*

You're here,  
passed out in the bathroom.  
Poor discarded baby, they  
shaved your eyebrows and Sharpied  
a penis on your cheek.  
You've been left in the tub

on New Year's Day. Free recall recalls the balcony:  
too many beer cans,  
sandpipers,  
lotion smells,  
and a storage hungover with weeds.

Downstairs  
is the Gulf Coast, where the teal surf  
tears up.  
The view pearls

like a steel guitar solo,  
you curled up in there, asleep, unknowingly  
repressed again,  
sucked and emptied like a beer bong.

## SIGN SHAKING

I marched the drag for minimum wage,  
strumming fake strings on a cardboard guitar.  
Rush-hour traffic honked sarcastic notes.  
My work orders: shake the Fender-shaped sign

for forty minutes, take ten off.  
For hours I shivered in the fast-food air.  
Before tossing the prop on the office desk  
to leave work, I cross-examined

the fake instrument: printed on the signage  
was a cartoon portrait of Julius Caesar  
swallowing a cheesy pizza whole.  
He looked demented, American, over sixty.

## IRISH GOODBYE

Some friends! Even after I knocked the bottle  
off the table—smash!—nobody took my keys.

When I ghosted out, slipping past my crew,  
I was a lonely cloud exiting Bear's Den Pizza.

Then I was a sad drunk white wild goat, drifting  
in my Mitsubishi Mirage down Dave Ward Drive.

Like Dad with Mom, I'd fallen in love  
in grad school, but ended jobless,

so I moved back home to drink and mope.  
*This road is worse than the bar*, I thought,

looking at myself in the rear-view, my pupils,  
watery and small. I was being pulled over.

MRS. O'LEARY'S COW

Petroleum pepperboxes melt,  
trees bake, the business district goes up,  
and newspapermen cook a folk song.

As the conflagration tears over the river—  
before shrieks were muffled  
and bodies tallied—

the name of an Oirish dairymaid,  
a Nativist's wet dream,  
buzzes down DeKoven Street.

## JIMMY MILLER LYNCHING

Missing his signature  
diamond ring,  
which he asked the sheriff  
to mail to his wife,  
the gunslinger hangs  
in a livery stable.  
Sunlight bleaches  
the cracked rafters.  
Leaves mat the dirt floor.  
Miller's black frock-coat  
dangles on his drooped  
figure. Behind the body,  
a white horse hovers.  
Behind the horse, there's  
a hole in the wall,  
through which a kid peeps—  
a boy who's decides  
it would be worth it  
to die like old Jimmy  
if every person in Oklahoma  
knew his name.

## WAKE

Outside, January spat ice.  
Inside, lampshade light sulked  
against wood paneling.

Death, death, death  
hovered in the air like reefer,  
everybody sampling the joint,

holding somebody close.  
We on couches, on chairs,  
and on the floor,

listening to ourselves, twenty  
twenty-somethings, crying out loud.  
All of us knew

we'd inherited a ghost.  
I never wanted to feel like this  
until I hosted the party.

## JOHN CARTER

The body of a dead white girl found  
in the church belfry: that's why a mob

searched the countryside for Carter.  
When they found him, they tied him

to a telephone pole, shot him, then  
took down the corpse and set it on fire.

A riot ensued; and, when the Governor  
ordered in the Guard, soldiers found

a young man directing rush hour  
traffic with Carter's charred arm.

## DIXIECRATS

Assured I was a pro historian,  
righteous mansplainer pondering the depths of the Milky Way,  
I read of souls whirled and tossed—dead voices sounding  
like too many white folks on a ghost ship afloat the human sea.

*The Constitution will be run over and mocked.  
Stooges are coming to storm our banks.*

I worked late, alone, copying  
with a pen, giggling like a silly boy at the hate, drowning  
in bad faith.

*Thousands of little people in Oklahoma  
are thinking just what I am thinking.*

## DECADENCE

The pet leopard at my feet purrs  
while my chariot driver, Ampelus,  
discretely jerks my junk.  
We're out on the private balcony,  
me and my blond entourage,

with a view of the banquet hall below:  
it bubbles in pink-red-white.  
I'm a teen emperor, you know,  
a sun-worshipper, here to refresh  
court life with a death-orgy:

roses and roses and roses, a trick  
ceiling dumping roses into the hall,  
fifty naked slaves drowning in roses  
for my amusement, suffocating gurgles  
and lute-music in the air.

I come just as the last gurgling slave  
disappears beneath a petal wave.  
The music skips. My sloppy mother,  
the strap on her gold robe loose,  
is already ordering staff to clean.

## GENERATION ME

After Will killed himself,  
nothing was the same.  
A privileged gypsy, I steered a caravan  
through campus, got a DUI.

Yes, reader, I made bail, lawyered up,  
grew out my hair, and graduated;  
a lonely cloud, joblessly gazing,  
I rocked a purple bandana

and wrote Soledad O'Brien an ode.  
I moved to the city, then moved back home,  
then moved to another city,  
rechristened my bong "The Sultan,"

typed poem after poem after poem  
to my friend's ghost.  
Unlike other mourners,  
I never dropped a tear. Not one.

## THE WHITE NEGRO: SUPERFICIAL REFLECTIONS ON MYSELF, A HIPSTER

### **First Book**

My second book of poems will be posthumous.  
My third book will be composed  
while I crucify on a black anarchist cross,  
my voice breaking out of death's jail.

My fourth will take place in Brazil,  
told from a swan's point of view.  
My fifth will focus  
fully on my own good looks.

When I get to my sixth, I'll be  
bull-headed and biracial. Then  
by lucky seven, I'll be a she,  
I'll write what it means to suffer.

By 1948, an election year, President Harry Truman started upping the ante on his administration's civil rights agenda. Because many white Southern Democrats didn't want their institutions desegregated—and, unlike Truman himself, didn't give a damn about the black vote—the party split. The Dixiecrats formed, rallying behind South Carolina Senator Strom Thurmond and his segregation now, segregation forever platform. Arkansas' governor at the time, Ben Laney, emerged as one of Thurmond's most fervent disciples, giving speeches, keeping up correspondences, and actively campaigning against Truman and for the Dixiecrats' cause.

My alma mater, the University of Central Arkansas, is home to the Governor Laney Collection. Included amongst Laney's papers are numerous letters of support he received during the 1948 election season—letters complimenting and approving and validating his anti-civil rights position. When UCA's archivist gave my Senior History Seminar a tour of the library's special holdings, he read out loud from these letters. Their content was racist, absurd, shocking, and I immediately wanted to write about them for my Senior Thesis.

Argument-wise, what emerged from my research was a conjecture that the language and sentiment contained within many of these white-power epistles correlated and conformed quite neatly to central concepts in whiteness studies and the social construction of white identity. Many of these letter-writers—from all over the country, and the world—came off as both horribly ignorant and pitifully terrified. They were sure the advancement of black civil rights in the U.S. would deny their own privileges to property, liberty, and happiness.

During those long nights, alone in the special collections room, sifting through the hate, I developed something more than an honor's thesis: my poetic voice emerged; a voice determined to empty itself of its own vanillaness, renounce its guilt-driven privilege, and become authentically colorless.

\*\*\*\*\*

Ever since I copped my first rap album in seventh grade—Dr. Dre's *2001*—I've been obsessed with black American popular culture, particularly hip hop. My dream, from ages twelve to seventeen, was to be a rapper. I listened to nothing but hardcore gangsta rap, watched BET religiously, and, when I still prayed to God, I prayed that He might make me black—not because I wanted to really know something first-hand about the black experience, because I wanted street cred and to get away with rapping the N-word.

It was with a similar sentiment, at least in part, although jazz instead of rap-inspired, that Norman Mailer composed his infamous 1957 essay "The White Negro." And though he readily admits to not being able to follow Mailer's train of thought, James Baldwin suggests that his white contemporary's goal in writing the essay was, among other things, to emerge and be recognized as "hip"—or provisionally black—specifically by the black artists and

intellectuals he counted as friends, both in the U.S. and abroad. Baldwin considers Mailer's effort a total failure, lamenting that he (Mailer) was not "even remotely 'hip' and Norman did not know this and I could not tell him." Baldwin's reaction—contained in his own essay "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy"—really got me thinking. Has my poetic undertaking, with its appropriation of hip hop syntax and slang, and its striving for colorlessness, coming from an upper-middle class suburban white boy, been a wack, total failure?

\*\*\*\*\*

People have called me a hipster. Though on some surface level they might intend for such remarks to be complimentary (i.e. I dress well), this label, in the by-and-by, is meant to critique my emerging identity and to call my social motivations into question. White friends, in my hometown in Arkansas, a state where racial divides still very much persist, have even asked me why I dress "black," why I only listen to rap, why I rock so many pairs of Nikes.

Around the time I began work on my Senior Thesis, I started wearing a neutral color bandanna. This fashion statement was meant with immediate condescension in my inner circle—a friend of mine, himself a hip hop head, and white, started calling me "Tupac." Despite his obvious sarcasm, at the time I was flattered: my head was in the clouds, and, as a would-be poet with a love for performance, being compared to Tupac, however acerbically, could only sound dope. Four years on, I'm fast becoming a poet-at-rest, a poet who is, day by day, running out of things to write about. In my pursuit of colorlessness, I've hit a creative wall and am fast learning what James Baldwin

recognized over half-a-century ago: “One does *not* become something else: one becomes nothing.”

## INVADER

Relax, relax, I'm thinking.  
December's sunset stares like a stalker.  
The new moon is an eyeball sliced in half,  
jiggling above my old home's  
plastic satellite.

I should reholster  
and get back into the car.  
I should return to Little Rock.  
The basset hound next door  
is woofing alarm. Relax, relax.

## THE WOLF'S ORIGIN

Jove broke bad, dove down  
to go ballistic like an F-15 Eagle—  
but I saw him first at the bar, did a devil's deal

for immortality and a modest stipend.  
The catch: when the fat moon hits,  
I'm a superfreak.

I black out till dawn, wake up  
hungover in pinewoods, with flesh-breath  
and adulterers stuck in my teeth.

This keeps happening—  
month to month, that's the sadistic lease—  
and it doesn't come with dental.

If I could, I would rip Jove's throat out  
for what he jinxed me with, spit back at him  
this endless terror and finger food.

## WEREWOLF VEGETARIAN

Nothing but chickpeas until  
the full phase unleashes me.  
Then thighs are soy, I lie.  
Breasts are artichoke hearts.

When the moon stones me  
with chicken-liver munchies,  
I creep to the fridge and take  
whatever looks bloodiest.

It's hard for one to sympathize,  
but all month I've gone green.  
Don't try egging me out of it.  
I've already sunk my fangs in.

## WOLF AND BABE

The wolf with a broken jaw  
gazed at the poor babe.

The wolf and babe were  
blank protein states.

The babe had a feather brain;  
it giggled like a kid at the wolf.

The wolf grinned at the babe,  
a stupid, gangrenous grin.

The wolf took the babe  
whole and ran.

The babe's cry  
was the sky's ringtone.

## LYCANTHROPY

I have a disease,  
a devilish disease.

When we wake up,  
my hiccup

is the only thing left  
of you. Nothing left

of me, nothing human.  
I call a human

like you Easy Prey.  
You want to pray

for me?  
Ha! When you come

to the woods, again,  
I'm eating in.

## TAO QUAN'S UNMOVING CLOUDS

Clouds spread like sprawl.

    Heavenly pursuits are geocoded.

I'm a permanent resident of the symbolic East,  
sucking from a bag of THC.

My white friends are stuck down south  
    in the river valley.

I'm desperate to mock them.

I'm quiet at the south-facing window, watching  
the river valley become suburb,

    watching my friends' lives ironing flat,  
as concrete malls blossom over pinewoods and New World  
    bird species tweet.

I leave the window and open another browser.

Clouds maintain a culture of loitering.

## LIKE XIE LINGYUN INSPECTING FARMLAND

Uploaded displays of Guangdong's seascape  
nest inside the fluty solitude of watery audio,

stretching light-emitting vistas beyond knowing.  
Here, the hotlinked beaches, jade and lossy,

intone with phosphor and grief. The Great Valley  
of liquid-crystal refreshes. Windows close.

## HERACLES OPENS UP

It's because  
My sickle's so sharp  
That the hydra  
Looked at me  
As if I'd done it a favor.  
When I strangled the bull,  
It too looked pleased.

But the folks at the forum  
Hardly noticed  
When I shipped  
the beasts' heads back home.

Why sacrifice me-time  
To steal girdles and deer  
When nobody cares?

I mean, shit, I slay  
The guy who invented  
Melody and rhythm,  
Yet I'm the king's bitch!

If I die tomorrow,  
I'll take folks with me.

## I'M THE KING

I'd shrink three inches in order to crown  
myself co-Prince of Andorra and Protector of the Rhine.  
Holy titles would be worth an unfortunate hairline.  
Plus, if I had a Maluk-styled saber, nobody would call me a clown,

even if I tumbled like a jester off my war mount, or got exiled  
eight days in a row. When I'm Fashion Czar, rocking all white  
like the Pope, thinking Napoleon thoughts, I own the night,  
rivals hide in the suburbs. Near the throne, I'd pile

laurels around me, keep them stored like important emails.  
It might be fun to invade villages with a squad of illiterate gunmen  
ready to die for me; unlimited cannonballs; even some women.  
I'd put down every battle with Cognac and details.

What happens if my Arab sword becomes a butter knife?  
Simple: when I'm the King, white flags don't exist.  
Even when my own entourage is tearing off my limbs, I'd insist  
that everyone within earshot call me First Consul for Life.



AFTER READING ARROWSMITH'S MONTALE

*e tanta*  
*e tanta e troppa roba, non so quale*

O Nobel man-poet of Genoa,  
you make it rain modern lasagnas  
of flour-and-egg historicism—  
your foxy gals sketched Capellini-thin.

O eel-wrangler,  
baby boy of chemical traders,  
pupil of "Hamlet and His Problems,"  
where did your love drown?

I'm told my poems  
feel detached—so I should stop  
reading your correlatives and focus  
on tomorrow's couple's therapy.

## SELF PORTRAIT WITH BERRYMAN

Baked with strep throat,  
jizzy as a wind through Calcutta,  
I'm THAT rodeo clown.  
Oh how my liver faces shutdown!

Put on my glasses  
so you'll know what I'm thinking.  
Tell me you'd speed to the hospital,  
with two springrolls and mutual feelings.

Policeman! Policeman!  
I've plagiarized. Strip me. Jail me.  
Night ightstick me with daylight.  
Beat out my fuzzy gut.

Miss Past, my ex, tells me  
not to call her that.  
I'm the creep hovering by fire,  
Offering to smoke out my editors.

Betty's, my date,  
hangs downstairs  
inhaling hot toddies,  
humping all the wrong things.

## BAT CITY

Sundown, Mexican free-tailed bats urbanize underneath  
the Ann W. Richards Congress Avenue Bridge:

scrawny wrinkle-eared bats, Venezuelan oil-brat bats,  
dubstep bats with benefits, bats with several advanced degrees,

bats possessing bloodlust for happy hour, snapped by tourists,  
short-muzzled bats flutter in a web, crossing Lady Bird Lake,

bats sucking up dragonflies, skinnyfat bats snacking  
on sugar-eaters, bats on bats on bats, spiraling, sprawling,

mostly bad-bitch bats kept in estrus, superfast bat-whoopie,  
bats ink the flash-drive skyline, blacking out the moon.

## KIND OF LIKE PASTERNAK

You're like a water lily, so I call you  
Water Lily. Then  
you dry like well water choked  
by drought. Is it because  
I ain't horse enough?

By June, our chances of an encore  
are equivalent  
to the chances of a wave vaulting up  
to give the North Star a high-five.  
We are willows

swaying through cruel Summer.  
No, I'm sorry, but I can't  
tell your mother I'm Catholic.  
I'd come in your soul,  
but I'm a hard materialist.

I miss your weekend bras  
and their downstairs neighbors—  
those rainbow-colored panties—  
and I hope you don't  
mind me calling them that.

Yes, we left the woods  
when the wild goats invaded.  
We started seeing other people.  
We could have been burned,  
or eaten alive.

## THE CADRON SETTLEMENT

Midwinter, purple evening breaking  
over the Arkansas, I arrived at Cadron,  
a quick row of blockhouses  
sitting on the bluff like an imaginary town.

The settlement looked hardly settled:  
a lone dirt road ending at a log church,  
a crude wall to keep out Indians, a mud square  
flooded with pigs and geese.

In the tavern, on my first night, I overheard  
boatman mention a hunter called Cusot,  
a Frenchman who'd raped his late wife's daughter.  
They mentioned the legal punishment, castration.

Four months I stayed at Cadron,  
hiking cliff beds, taking notes and samples,  
sleeping in a freezing barn attic.  
When I at last went downriver,

I was on a silver merchant's vessel,  
a Mr. Barber of New Orleans  
who spoke fondly of his hometown,  
of the warehouses and public gardens.

He said it trumped Little Rock,  
and every other place in the South.  
He told me how they'd caught Cusot  
in Star City, cut him on the spot.

## CATULLUS SEQUENCE

### *I. Song to Diana*

We boys and girls  
are abstinent and happy!  
Diana, may we sing to you?  
The mountain gave you a promise ring.  
Your olive trees and swamps  
in no way remind us of sex.  
Your silver buck won't make us horny.  
We wouldn't garble like rivers  
or lamely drone like a Methodist hymn.  
We'll never prostitute  
ourselves, unlike  
Lesbia at the crossroads.  
We'll avoid the area under your tunic.  
In the dark, we swear,  
we'll never call you Lesbia.

### *II. Song to Caesilius*

The Blank Word Document  
is becoming poetry, my new new shit,  
written to get you to hear me.  
If you're worth a damn, you'll eat time and space  
like watermelons to receive my song.  
I bet your lady friend  
will choke you to stay, break your horse's ankles.  
Ever since "Magna Mater," her marrow's  
boiled for you. You're so lucky.

### *III. Song to Old Girl*

You were so sexy,  
and you said I was too.  
We fooled around at noontime.  
Nine sex booms followed,  
then Trojans made way for the Pill.  
We did yoga together  
and ate yogurt together in a yurt.  
Nevertheless, you found someone  
who was less in debt, a steady craftsman  
who got the job done. You left me  
horny as a wild goat. Today  
I'm lying alone  
and my denim is a tent.

## SHELLEY EXPLAINS HIS CREATIVE PROCESS

We rode off, fast and tipsy, downhill  
from Este to Venice. We smuggled goblets  
of Bardolino into our gondola, snaking around  
the island madhouse at the very instant

the green pillowy hills  
swallowed up the grapefruit sun.  
As we rowed, he did the talking. I took  
mental notes, best lines I knew he'd lose.

By then he was so eagle-like, a noble-  
beaked elitist, so focused.  
We were off to meet his benefactress  
at an apartment beyond the asylum.

Above us: pang, pang, pang  
from the madhouse belfry.  
A signal for the maniacs to pray, he said.  
I made a remark. He chuckled

and called me an infidel.  
Oh, no! It was all becoming such a poem:  
wine-glazed, semiserious,  
a posthumous publication.

## SEAMUS

Sorry, only one thing must happen—  
Aurora is preprogrammed to pitch day.  
During my morning walk of shame,  
I spot her, working her sidewalk hustle,

He sparrows twitter for you,  
feeding celebrity death to Florida.  
Below, your old soul rots down Styx.  
I love you, but this news needs to be.

If I'm the best, you're not breathing.  
Yes, Fate, the raven, swoops  
with its defecating telos,  
to find a yew bough and croak.

It flew to Dublin and landed on you,  
but here I dodge what's dead.  
I just had sex. The sky is going all blue.  
Birdshit misses my bedhead.

## KARAOKE THEOLOGY

She slapped me  
when I said I hated Jesus.  
This was before  
I picked a song to sing.  
As I watched her leave,  
I felt a tear,  
maybe just menthol in my eyes.  
I could have blamed alcohol  
and I could have blamed  
loneliness, but I directed  
my anger at you,  
you whom I only  
chat with remotely.  
When my name was called,  
I sang for you.  
I wailed.

## SONG

Tonight my shitfaced mimicry,  
requested by the NorthFace crew,  
is gentrifying Ego's. I'm a sloshed mockingbird  
with karaoke maneuvers, my inner-diva

atomizing under Class C office space  
(Ego's Bar, a SoCo parking-garage dive).  
Then suddenly my single's remixed: a duet!  
You bum-rush the stage, swishing

a cocktail, twisting in your jeggings  
like a bad Christian. We co-produce the hook.  
Our dance, a white-people twerk, is the new poetry.  
Our kisses are sloppy. Our drinks are blue.

## BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Adam Stengel was born during the Oxygen Event. He enjoys Purp and Pabst and composing brief biographical sketches. He received his M.F.A. degree from the University of Florida in the spring of 2014. Like angels, he skates the clouds.