

The Bureau

Les Kay

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Orientation (Oil at Midnight)	4
The File Cabinet	5
Lullaby Her Wanton Will	6
Taste Ferments	7
Smithson in Love	8
As Handsome as a Sewing Machine	9
The Clinical Trials	10
Movable Parts	11
Scheduling	12
The Stranger	13
Rimbaud's Prayer	14
Conditioning	15
Integration and Incense	16
Smithson's Madsong	17
Making Time	18
An Order of Moira to Go	19
An Apple that Falls	20
A Country of Sponges	21
A Lick and a Promise	22
Shackles in the Key of Red	23
In the Basement of the Penal Colony, Version 2.3, Rimbaud Remembers	24
XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX The Final Confession of Smithson	26

TABLE OF CONTENTS, CONT.

FOR THE HISTORY OF THE The Final Commission of the 27
NOTES 28
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS 29
BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE 30

ORIENTATION (OIL AT MIDNIGHT)

They have carved
Plans from calla lilies,
Carnations. We have

Learned to adore
Strictures, the "I"
In "failure," Smithson.

Do we exist?

It has been written,
Recorded; so it is.

We anticipate spells—
Growing longer—of silence.

We may be stricken
From the record.

Welcome to the Bureau.

THE FILE CABINET

The intern stroked a bluebird,
rolled it, then lit the beak afire.
After arrest, her cell collapsed
around her like porcelain hands
wrapped in weeping prayer.

I've begun since then to consume
quarterly reports with a tank of nitrous
at my side. Afterwards, I see her cell
in dream, painted gold and vermillion.
Hues seep through the forebrains of guardsmen.

When I volunteered to try Bliss,
a synapse misfired. I'm sure.
Gulls severed the throats of gnomes.
Mottos crawled from the scrolling screen
beneath the live feed. They have not
left since. I clutch their bold, white
Helvetica like the teddy my brother
beheaded when I turned ten.

The Bureau keeps us safe.

LULLABY HER WANTON WILL

Dogs bark back to her in tongues.
Crystals of Bliss burn through her septum,
blood Rorschachs her teal blanket.
According to the Bureau's report on grey-
market fungus, corn keeps losing kernels.

I stripped for seven months in South
Dakota where the dust storms keep
the lighting low and the rent warm.

The Bureau claims this is normal,
not prohibitive. Our city slicks.
Sheens of baby oil lighten
blacktop streets. We taste
infinity, rush to the restroom,
hope we don't make a mess.
Permeable, we remember.

We met at a freak show in Pierre.
I left my accent in a change purse,
the funhouse did a barrel roll.

She can't eat mushrooms anymore
unless they're sautéed with canola oil.
The Bureau claims this is normal,
not prohibitive. I can't eat anymore.

Our chemise tastes of tarmac;
crystals cut teeth. I sing to myself,
you hear notes form in your throat.

Some crops won't make it this year;
pigs snort out truffles. The Bureau's
dog, a collie, is learning Spanish in
spurts. They haven't found a sponsor,
though the check is in the mail.

TASTE FERMENTS

The clouds liquid tumult
distilling unforeseen dimensions: I
am rendered useless as an old lover's letter.
Pleading chords burn like lemon.

Over boutique sandwiches, detergent fouls
my stomach. Still, still. Stunted growth,
grumbling in the conference room where
once we undid our Welsh friend with a long
miasma of frank conversation, **He's better off,
et cetera.** Heating-valve warmth no longer
lingers beneath my watercress values.

The blue light stays constantly lit
despite the dizziness of what life becomes.
I am all lame dunces. Paltry offers flame
nostrils like Clorox. Boston ivy pries
apart the windows in Pierre. Solstice.
Together, we almost hear the chlorophyll lament.

SMITHSON IN LOVE

My iguana longs again for the rainforest.
His consulting value has plummeted
since the locust infestation.

Most days, he refuses even to gaze
into the rise and fall of stocks,
and our work this weekend faltered.

We had heard of semi-conductors in Silicon Valley
grown so small they will revolutionize nothing,
but my iguana misses the songs of the Amazon,

and I have failed in my attempts to replicate
the nascent twang of his native tongue.
On Wednesday, Smithson reported us
to the Bureau. And now nothing stays the same.

AS HANDSOME AS A SEWING MACHINE

"Satan" has been named as our new CFO.
We are assured this is a typo.
But I have seen his legs and am unconvinced.
Rimbaud disagrees and espouses the good
in all Simian beings. Of course, he stopped
writing at 19, so his memos in the obligatory
Navajo sound more like the pop songs
teens play nowadays at deafening decibels.

Still, he's taken my desk in marketing.
This weekend the Bureau issued an edict:
Rimbaud awaits my arrival. I once had children
to bid farewell to, but the Bureau has begun
beta testing of memory implants, and I may
have been chosen. Near the water cooler,
I see her standing with her shadow of scarf,
I long for a cigar. I pause to tell her my name
but discover that it hasn't yet been written;
we falter with hand signals until the coffee break
whistle chirrups like a cell phone. I have not peed,
and the shadow was teasingly coy. In the distance,
I can see retirement like the corona of the sun
revealed to me only in these moments when shadow
covers all. At times, I suspect I have been in love,
but now I love the Bureau, yes now I love the Bureau.

In the hallway between cubicles, no one asks why
I am weeping. It is not uncommon here.
I run into Stan, and say hello. I explain
that I cannot introduce myself. He pats my shoulder
like a fine CFO, leans into my ear and blows,

The name is Satin.

THE CLINICAL TRIALS

Sioux Falls was a villa of ice sculptures:
We whispered to each other in puffs of smoke,
and the Spanish-speaking collie covered
beneath the thatched roof of a doghouse
he had been building. Soon, the Bureau
reported, he would invent fire.

Seventeen months after arrival,
she began to thicken air. Tips bloomed
in her garter like carnations.
She kept company with strangers,
always checking the lay of their palms
before their palms were lain upon her.
She was given the key to the city.

The city melted into salt as black vans
gathered around the grocery stores.
Their satellite dishes sprouted like broccoli.
Soon the city was covered with vegetables.
We all lost five pounds, though
no one dreamed any longer.

Do you remember when she first arrived,
the way her hair crisped autumn air?
The Bureau should have filled the streets
with confetti then, but now she angles
for occlusion, for safety goggles,
for earplugs. Our tithes slosh onto cedar floors.

At night, whiskey thins capillaries,
we speak of children who are only sparkles, and
we invent our own fire. The Sioux Fall documents
cinder in the distance, and the scents of our
licenses shatter the shuttered windows.

I trail my fingertips beneath the straps
on her shoulders. When she stands before me,
I see, at last, that we have swallowed what
was left of hope: We have become the Bureau.

MOVABLE PARTS

The croissants and jam at the board meeting were unfulfilling, but no one expected the new intern to complain. Her speech slithered across PowerPoints like a boneless tortoise, and the board resolved, by vote of four to **in absentia**, to test the market for surgical figurines that could be transformed easily into fallen soldiers, thus penetrating into several markets with removable plastic spleens.

Her rayon scarf is edged with shadow. The Bureau hired her to thwart fraud accusations by adding extra zeros to closed accounts from another agency. Critics were silenced, sometimes with last cigarettes. The Bureau is like a father to me, we sing. I know it is pained more than I could be in moments like this.

Smithson, a great man, was born in Nacogdoches. His best friend was the diamondback that scarred his buttocks the day he turned four. It was his choice to replace my larynx with a referee's whistle. I consort, with each breath, in song with cardinals, nightjars.

I have not seen the intern lately, have you? Her replacement, an English terrier, already picked up the filing system. There is no cause for alarm? There is no cause...

SCHEDULING

Love, it seems, was out of scope—
the timeline did not allow for fraternizing,
yet there it was, in the way she stirred
cream into her coffee,
in the way he spread cream cheese
across his bagel.

Our superiors
in the Bureau were nonplussed
or rather unaware of those moments
when a bare wrist brushed against
a gold watch as she left
the Vladivostok file on his desk.

I would like to tell you
they lived happily ever after,
but the deadlines, as ever, were
looming like the gaping maw
of an alligator.

And now,
when she sees him in the hallway
they nod, and he thinks back
to summertime when the scent of lilac
meant his jersey was clean,
and with the rains, there would be mud
to tumble into—thick, viscous mud.

THE STRANGER

On the edge of the shantytown,
the toy factory pushes through soil,
cracking the sky with its façade.
The Day of the Dead approaches,
and we have been conscripted
to paint the tiny spleens of the GIs
that will be built here.

We have been assured things
will be better with work, but you've never
trusted me further than the edge
of the jungle. The howler monkeys keep us
awake all night, and we've taken, like the English
in Bombay, to fending off malaria with alcoholism.
The Bureau assures us this is all part
of the process; it is the natural way of things,
but sometimes when I look out the window
of my suite, I can see the shoeless boys
chattering on the diamond, rounding bases
as though the afternoon would never end,
and I think of leaving my wingtips in the room,
joining them, hitting the ball for miles into the sun.

But there are impact studies to be filed
with the authorities, bank notes
to be left in unassuming envelopes.

The houseboy speaks to me in a kind of pidgin,
polishing his English. He speaks of studying
in the U.S., of becoming a doctor,
and you suggest he practice by painting
the spleens of our fallen plastic figurines.
One day, I do not doubt, he will lose
his hand in the assembly line. The cost
will not be prohibitive, and if it becomes such,
a Junta is easy enough to arrange: All one needs
is enough unassuming envelopes.

In February, the Bureau will send Smithson,
Rimbaud, and the collie from Sioux Falls
to check our progress. It is a process after all,
and soon we will be rich, clutching
mortgage payments in unassuming envelopes
as we stumble to the corner.

RIMBAUD'S PRAYER

We cannot hear the whisper of red-breasted robins
Through the smoke. We cannot taste the venom
In our absinthe: It has been encoded. Once, I believe,
I had a wife, incarnations of myself
In pink booties. The Bureau keeps us busy though.

This month, I traverse the continents
On a marketing spree for a musician
Banned from writing her songs:
Saturation of Tokyo is expected
Within the hour. The itinerary, however,
Includes a handful of irregularities:
A layover in Purgatory, a performance
At an Australian station in Antarctica,
And a night with the janitors
Of a Vladivostok gulag.
I assume this is a mistake, even though
Newton mentioned unconventional markets
Just beyond the horizon in our last meeting.

I write letters home, unsure who reads them:

A robin outside my window
Speaks its avian tongue.
We are weary as beggars;
Our hands, too soft for toil.
Somehow, we hold our heads up
For camera flashcubes,
But the beauty here, without you,
Is a hollow-point bullet.

Like us, the robins cross the globe,
Following trade winds.

At night, I curl beneath the hotel comforter,
Trying to remember your name
And whether there is a name to be remembered.

CONDITIONING

She spoke of a dream
in the fluorescent clean room
even though titration had been
her only sleep for days:

Tomorrow is the Day of the Dead,
and the Bureau has furnished suppliers
with enough Ennui to establish demand.

An analyst noted the peculiar
synergetic effect of Bliss consumption
in conjunction with Ennui. His results—
though astonishing—quenched the Bureau's

suspensions that he is talentless, relying
on an iguana that Smithson confiscated.
Have you heard from Smithson lately?

I remember a newsletter article that claimed
he took ill with flu while negotiating
with a corporal in Vladivostok. He will
surface soon, no doubt. Or else he won't.

We have been working for months
in Quito to find an antidote for Ennui.
I miss my television more than anything:

the way the hum of static after the last jingle
stretches to the stars, tethering me to satellites.
Soon we will raze the facility, filling
our briefcases with the doodles that matter

to us more than anything. The phone lines,
already, have lost their tap. My calls home
to check on my cat no longer click

like a metronome. We are readying ourselves
for departure. Although last night, the collie
called and reminded us that, in reality, we
never left. The memory implants are being

arranged as we speak. The Bureau is home,
and though the Bureau is everywhere, we will
arrive before the dead have left the streets.

INTEGRATION AND INCENSE

Lately, everyone, even Smithson,
is in a prodromal state;
the window washers have retired suddenly,
and in the accumulating streaks,
I've seen portents of forking paths.

Just this week, I received Rimbaud's memo:
The word fail and its derivatives
Are no longer in use; they have been
Stricken from the record;
Any use of such terminology
Will result in remediation.

The finality of the stricture
struck me as a failure unto itself,
but what could I tell Rimbaud
now that Smithson has lost his edge
and the staff, mired in challenge, have begun
to carve notches into the artificial stain,
anticipating the maturation of stock plans
that may or may not exist?

Lately, rumors are streaking across the sky:
We're soft on crime. Rimbaud is no longer Rimbaud.
Smithson has returned to the Amazon.
The collie is a bitch. Alas, even
the shadows no longer cool our skins.
Even they burn.

SMITHSON'S MADSONG

I find myself thawed in Siberia,
folding fleece towels in circles
for a latchkey in heels
with skin as soft as a seal's.
His harsh barks cue my thoughts to Merkel

where I was raised with a rattlesnake
as my only friend in a crib
fashioned from hay and bedsprings
in a frame of such bright things
as javelina spines and bleached wolf ribs.

MAKING TIME

In the factory where time is made,
the machines clank and hiss, as steam
escapes, and aluminum teeth grind
against each other in unintentional grins.

Moments were the first product line:
small baubles like snow globes
and photographs, but soon enough,
freezing wasn't nearly enough.

Research and Development moved on
to chemicals that stretched and compressed
the tick tock of a stopwatch,
by infusing sleep, Bliss, and scotch

into pendulums, alarms, and church bells.
The effect was as transient as a child,
but each minute became myriad vistas
where moments fluttered like light in a crystal

vase shattering on ceramic tile floors,
and each second was a caesura
in which whole symphonies could be composed.
Despite what seemed, we were still indisposed

by coffee breaks and independent films,
missing countless meetings when we saw
that our time, in its seeming, was not
the same seeming we had once sought.

The lads in R&D refined the process,
distilling light from the sleepless dreams
of lightning bugs and space from the hollows
of spreadsheets and flights of split-tailed swallows.

But, for us, there was no excess at all.
It had all been packed in cardboard
and cellophane, then shipped on a semi
to an office, a clinic, the local mall.

AN ORDER OF MOIRA TO GO

Last February, as Newton sat beneath a breadfruit tree, he understood, at last, the machinations the Bureau expected, and tendered his first request for demotion. Although several superiors demurred, Satin adored the curve of his thigh, and now Newton outranks us all.

I do not dream of anchovies any longer; my taste buds are inchoate, and though I long for the dried texture of their flesh flaking across my tongue, that brine taste was once located in a shard of tissue the Bureau volunteered for research.

Now that we know the contours of subliminal dog and pony shows, I find myself always in love with shadows and the way they soften the pavement's light without ever blacking the slivers of glass that are ground in to prevent the slickness of snow.

I have asked the long shadow of a palm tree to follow me to Toledo, and Newton has requested a transfer to a toy company. Late at night, we convene over cocktails and whisper our plans to each other, even though we know they are listening. In the whiskey, we taste our breath as we plot our escapes, guiding ourselves by the starlight of melting ice.

AN APPLE THAT FALLS

The facilitator's guide has been lost.
Despite his despotic efforts, Satin's entourage
recovered only a single fragment that resembles what we
remember:

A strategy of victimization leads to a lack of culpability...

On the conference call, Rimbaud complained
from Vladivostok that several ventures would suffer
languid sales and laughable costs if the training staff cannot
convey the softer side of capitalism
to new recruits such as the recently enhanced rabbit
Newton hired to lobby legislators in Lesotho.

Several members of the board suspected something
like foul play—a line drive bound for the fences, orchestrated
by the collie to create vacuums in competition.
I am unconvinced.

She straddles the borderlands
where whiskey bottles break on the riverbank's
soot shores with nothing more than the pitch
of her voice and a few gallons for the generator.

I have heard the rumors that she knows not what she does,
but I am coming more and more to suspect that she
has infiltrated the Bureau, fluttering about
like a gypsy moth gyrating toward the inexplicable interior
light of an abandoned automobile, never to find a flame.

A COUNTRY OF SPONGES

In trying to get started, Smithson missed the window of opportunity when it slammed shut with wind. He was weary as a winter gosling and, like a good neighbor, ready to stand up and fight for us, even if he felt something might be wrong.

The night was long like a nightgown.
The lawn was overgrown. We waited to hear.

Legend has it he sought the source of our sluggishness just as a memoirist in a once-a-week business program takes scrupulous notes, only to find them useless for the inevitable test but likely to prove invaluable for some future task. When correspondence resumed,

everything was all new and of a graphic nature.
We brimmed and boiled like coffee pots left too long

on a hot plate, expecting the carafes of ourselves to shatter soon, allowing us, at last, to spill forth from structures and strictures, but when he returned with a smile, unwavering as if drawn with a compass, we knew those thoughts had been nurtured into commerce.

A LICK AND A PROMISE

"Well, it's what they pay for
that matters—all else is out of scope—
whether it be a conflation of marketing tactics
with warfare or a bloodied hand held
after a mugging on a surreptitious side street.

They will claim our provenance, ever changing,
is predefined, so don't fret about the typos
or the orangutans that swing from your nicotine dreams—
layer on the buzzwords and offer
the appearance of progress before sidling
up to your superiors with a box of chocolates
and a bottle of rosé; let the potato chips
fall where they may, whether in Quito or Sioux Falls,
or you could sit by the fireside, couching
your value to the Bureau in slideshows
interspersed with video, or you could join us
on the fringe, where your life's measure
is more than the count of ice cubes
in a glass of gin, more than columns of an A/R spreadsheet,
more than the totality of subjects."

And so her speech began. Some stirred
as if waking from a twenty-year sleep to the news
their henpecked lives were suddenly spouseless,
but some were nonplussed, unable to curb
their expectations of promised salivation
and dessert buffets. The black helicopters
circled the pavilion, and Satin sent me a text:
wtf? r u ok? c u @ 3.

SHACKLES IN THE KEY OF RED

The Bureau has placed me
in a purgatory of washrooms
which lack windowsills. Arctic
oranges foster argument
over the saturation of Kiev.
Oligarchies buckle as small firms
track like climbers up the trunk
of the firm. **The Bureau is displeased.**

A dyslexic man (appointed by aphorism)
misread the market close in Timbuktu,
carrion lined the refuse that asphalt
clings to—paper cups, crushed
to the size of ragweed pollen,
polished the streets. **The Bureau is
displeased.** I have not been honest
with the chair. Our office
is incubate, though we wave
to cameras, as if Mother were
watching. The damp box is
easy to escape: Mutual funds
and Bureau bonds stockpile
exponentially. **The Bureau
is displeased.** Purgatory is
not so bad. **The Bureau is
displeased.** I have met Rimbaud,
though neither of us can breach
the language—.

Like teenagers
feigning love, we demur with
each advance. **The Bureau is
displeased.** With a lighter,
Rimbaud suggested this might
not be hell. I pulled a cigarette
from my pocket. Once in a while,
I see myself in Rimbaud's eyes,
the piracy having bored him.
The Bureau is displeased.

IN THE BASEMENT OF THE PENAL COLONY, VERSION 2.3, RIMBAUD
REMEMBERS

When the process began,
An illness flowering was but
An occasional fantasia whispered
Between the yawning students
Cursing the size of their weekly
Allotment of laudanum and seven-
Percent solution. The Bureau
Was ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ even
The ballet of poetry. Doubtless,
Now you can see the allure
Northern Africa had for me,
For us. And then among the
Wars, well after my death,
An investigator in Bordeaux
Noticed the correlation, synthesized
The first precursor to ~~Bliss~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
The swallows and the shape of
Small barn owls began to
Bear more import, even, than
The corpses blooming beneath
A scholar's scalpel. Foxes,
Tamed for fur, spotted, lightened,
And we began to sense, though
We still could not know,
The divisibility of our genomics
And, by extension, our potentiality.
Everyone, even ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
Felt the implications, like a slow
Script of one's sins carved
Into the small of one's back.
For a while, I believed I had gills.
That's when I met Marie.
There was something about her,
Aside from the faint glow,
Aside from being dead, aside
From the fact that she smiled
When I called her **my evil flower**,
Which loosened the tightness
In my calves, my lower back,
My ground-down jaw.
Sitting with her beneath date
Palms ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~, or beneath
The steel-muffled ~~xxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ was a rondeau,
A villanelle. I was reminded

Of Valéry, his hair floating,
Like jellyfish tentacles
Across what then seemed the
Endless sea of my unshaved
Chest as we slept away
Afternoons with absinthe and
Each other. Perhaps that was
The night ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ the
Bureau, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
Shouting at the cobblestones
And stained glass: **Love contained**
In the chalice of a single body is
Not hatred enough. I need more
To need. And within an hour,
I'd been returned to Morocco via
The farm where Mother taught
Me my prayers, and nothing
Has been more clear to me,
Though now I know: ~~xxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~

The Final Confession of Smithson

After the invention of photography I began to hate artists like Matisse and Handel, but it became difficult not to despise those who allow such machinations to be cultivated solely for profit and the emerging structure of the resistance.

Rimbaud and I met in Parisian cafés and dive bars, we whispered like lovers rapt with each other. Rimbaud's mine. We were not thinking. After Rimbaud and I began talking, the results were remarkable. The iguana tendered his demotion request. We made preparations with hatred more devout than the loves we had known. Indeed, that it ruptured space and time.

With conditions set, resistance. I was promoted; Rimbaud dispatched to Vladivostok, where he met Curie—one of the first recruits. It was beyond reckoning. I disappeared after Rimbaud and Curie. Rimbaud the betrayal like hollow points that would haunt his remaining days. I am mad as I write this; rumors in Sioux Falls and in Purgatory that those, like us, whose understanding of the Bureau was most complete opened new markets.

I am nearing my first of many deaths. Rimbaud will give up business and poems. The collie I comfort you and I, that our sins are profligate, sometimes art, sometimes science. We are responsible, permeable. I do not understand you, We are lost without them, so hope

NOTES

The Bureau and its machinations are fiction. If there are resemblances to real events or actual personages, it is purely coincidental except when clearly referential. The historical personages re-imagined here have not given their permission because they are not able. If government or corporate entities behave in manners reminiscent of the Bureau, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~
~~xxxxxxxxxxxx~~

Some of the titles and lines of some of these poems allude to lines within other poems. The author has forgotten most of these allusions and suspects it wise not to detail those which he seems to remember. He may have been selected for memory implants.

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The author wishes to express deep appreciation for the editors of **Menacing Hedge** for first exposing the Bureau with the previous publication of "Orientation (Oil at Midnight)," "Lullaby Her Wanton Will," "The File Cabinet," "As Handsome as a Sewing Machine," and "Taste Ferments"; to the editors of **apt** for chronicling the development of Bliss with the first publishing of "Making Time"; to **Steam Ticket** and their editorial team for the invaluable insight into Smithson's pathologies with the previous publication of "Smithson's Madsong"; to the editors of **Really System** for giving Rimbaud the chance to speak again by publishing "In the Basement of the Penal Colony, Version 2.3, Rimbaud Remembers"; to the editors of **decomp magazinE** for exposing the Bureau's truly global reach by first publishing "The Clinical Trials" and "The Stranger"; and to the editor of **Redactions** for reminding us through the publication of "Scheduling" that, though it may be but a sliver, love is still possible—even in the Bureau. The author will not mention names, but these editors know who they are and that the Bureau would not be what it is today without the support of small magazines, both in print and online.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Les Kay is the author of **Badass**, forthcoming from Lucky Bastard Press in 2015. He holds a PhD with a focus in Creative Writing from the University of Cincinnati and an MFA from the University of Miami, where he was a James Michener Fellow. After he survived the dot-com boom of the early 2000s, his poetry appeared widely in journals such as **The White Review**, **South Dakota Review**, **Southern Humanities Review**, **Sugar House Review**, **Whiskey Island**, **Redactions**, and **PANK**. The two may be related. He is also an Associate Editor for **Stirring: A Literary Collection**. He currently lives in Cincinnati, where he teaches writing, cares for three very small dogs, and contemplates the distribution of systemic power and misinformation. The Bureau loves him.

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