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## The Humiliation of Beasts

Robert Kulesz

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## The Humiliation of Beasts

### Abstract

I'm drunk in the bar car, deep in the spirit, sitting across from a toothless old cripple at one of the yellow tables bolted into the floor. He wears a black cowboy hat on his way back to Colorado after burying his grandson in California. We're staring sideways out the long train window. Two walking canes hang on the back of a bolted chair next to old Bill.

### Keywords

disagreement, travel



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December 2, 2011

## The Humiliation of Beasts

A Short Story by Robert Kulesz

I'm drunk in the bar car, deep in the spirit, sitting across from a toothless old cripple at one of the yellow tables bolted into the floor. He wears a black cowboy hat on his way back to Colorado after burying his grandson in California. We're staring sideways out the long train window. Two walking canes hang on the back of a bolted chair next to old Bill.

'He was a surfer' he says. 'Drowned in them storm waves offta Orange County.'

'Man' I say.

He shakes his head. 'Why in hell would anyone wanta go out in storm waves. Them guys really think they're that good?'

'Maybe some of em are.'

'Shit, man, he was from *Colorado*.'

This reminds me. My seventeen year old neighbor on La Mirada Avenue in East Hollywood climbed on a chair and tightened a rope around his neck then lit up the inside of his skull with a shotgun. 'Eddie always had a backup plan' his girlfriend told me at the funeral, referring to the gun *and* rope.

'Where you gettin off?' Bill asks.

'Chicago, I guess.'

'You guess, huh?'

'Chicago.'

We're the only ones in the car except for the bartender. Bill lights a Pall Mall, takes off his hat and puts it on the empty chair next to him. A threadbare net of white hair is combed straight back over his skull. He's drinking black coffee with Jack Daniels. 'What you doing in LA?'

'I live there with my girlfriend.'

'She with you?'

'She stayed home.'

Bill grins through the smoke. 'She kick you out? That where you got that?' He points to the square white bandage on my forehead.

'Bumped into a door.'

We're coming into the high desert and the temperature's starting to drop. I can feel it when I press my face against the window.

A couple hours ago I was in downtown Los Angeles. It was hot for February: palm trees slumped in the late afternoon light and the streets baked in a brown smog. Laura dropped me off at the station after we'd spent the night licking our wounds from a barfight.

She'd been attacked by Julie, my high-strung ex, and as far as I can remember there was no good reason for it. We'd run into her by chance in a place off Hollywood Boulevard and everything seemed okay at first. We were all leaning on the bar acting civilized when Julie just lopped the end off a beer bottle and zing! slashed Laura's forehead with it. Seven stitches and a lot of blood but Laura refused to deal with the cops, having been raised in a radical political family where police were rejected outright as shock troops for the ruling class. She has principles.

After the emergency room I dropped her back at the apartment and sped to Julie's place, filled with a helpless rage that made me want to break her arms. She didn't make a squeak when I smashed into the door but her shadow stained the crack of light coming from inside and the floorboards sounded: she was there behind the wood, holding her breath.

'Psychopath!' I shouted and again rammed my forehead into the door. Yellow sparks fizzed off in my brain.

But I'm thinking now that maybe Laura's through with me too. When I got back I told her I'd bashed up Julie's car as payback: smashed in the headlights, windows, keyed the paint, punctured the tires but that some of the neighbors might have seen me and called the cops.

'I love you but you're always getting us into shit' she said as we sat in the apartment, dazed by the violence, drinking a jug of red wine out of big coffee mugs. 'Even if this wasn't your fault.' She had a white patch over her stitches and I'd fixed a little one on my own forehead where I'd hit the door. 'It's like everything's a joke to you' she looked down at her hands folded in her lap 'nothing matters day to day and I'm just sick of it.'

So morning found me sitting on a low table opposite the bed where she'd finally fallen asleep wearing her yellow t-shirt rusty with blood. Her long red hair, stiffened with the stuff, was spread over her face like dead grass.

When she woke up we agreed I should leave town for a while because there was no way to know when or if the cops would come looking for me. I was paranoid: I'd gotten arrested a couple months before in Tijuana for getting into a drunken argument with a federale and it was then I discovered I didn't much like jail, even for a night.

'Besides' she said 'I need a break, man.'

We borrowed cash from Laura's mother for my fast exit. She was happy to see the back of me. Ever since Tijuana she's been pushing Laura to cut me loose— she says I'll never be able to give her daughter the serenity she needs. I was glad to take her money, the phony. She sits on a beanbag chair in her redwood house high in the hills and talks about giving away all her possessions because they "slow her soul." She flies off to India for three months every year to forget about her swimming pool. Who is she to judge me?

'I think you should work your chakras' she said when she handed me the money. 'I think you should go away and I don't think you should see my daughter anymore.'

'Mama' said Laura.

'He's a very young spirit, Laura' said Most Serene Mother standing in the driveway under a eucalyptus tree. 'He is far from Understanding.' She headed back inside to watch the Discovery Channel.

Laura dropped me at Union Station. It was no big scene: we sniffled numbly and pushed our lips on each other.

'I'll see you soon' I said. 'Call you when I got my new identity.' It was a joke.

She rolled her eyes and smiled, wiping tears away as she looked in the other direction.

A poor joke.

'I'm really sorry baby.' I put my hand on her arm but she didn't turn around.



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## The Humiliation of Beasts

Inside the big marble station human voices floated out from behind the frosted glass of the ticket booths. A few bodies drifted at the far end of the concourse. Newspapers lay scattered on the benches and floors, yellowed by a sun that bled through dirty cathedral windows. Ashtrays were filled with butts and used gum. A massive schedule board hung over the platforms for DEPARTURES.

A couple of cops stood talking to a porter. I folded my arms and hunched away from them.

‘What can I get you?’ asked the lady with horn-rimmed glasses at the PURCHASE booth.

‘Chicago’ I said. I knew that if I went back to NYC it meant that life as I’d known it for the last six years was finished: at least going to Chicago gave me the illusion of making a move because I didn’t know anyone there and it meant I was committed to nothing. In reality of course it was cowardice: I couldn’t go back to NYC and face my father and friends who would only make my failure worse by loving and mocking me without condition.

I had no real faith that life could start over simply by pointing it in a different direction and asking it to but it seemed the only way to go: I had

a hazy idea of what I'd done back there and knew it was only a matter of time, maybe a couple days, before the cops came looking for me. My girlfriend was fed up with my antics. Plus I was still drunk and possibly in the middle of a clinical nervous breakdown.

'Chicago' she repeated, punching it out on her keyboard. She had her eye on my polyester shirt and thin houndstooth jacket. 'You don't look dressed for it. It's cold there.'

'Is it really' I said. I hadn't thought about it.

The sun's almost down on the palomino rug of the desert. Snow's pooled in the hills and it circles the scrub plants; stunted black trees shake in the blowback from the train. Up ahead darkness floods the sky and the first hard stars are out. Behind us an icy pink-gray light rims the horizon.

I pull out my wallet to get money for another small bottle of red wine and there's a picture of Laura and me on the boardwalk in Venice Beach wearing black sunglasses and mugging in front of the bodybuilder's cage. We're both wearing hats: she's got on a wide-brimmed Pollyanna straw number to go with her yellow dress and mine's a green pimp model with a black band and gold buckle. My hair's dark and hangs in my face like a veil.

That was our first weekend together. We spent our money eating shrimp cocktail and drinking margaritas in a beachfront restaurant then went swimming off Zuma Beach. Driving back to Hollywood she climbed onto my lap and stuck her long legs out the driver window, nearly crashing us.

But the picture in my wallet is changing. Now it's just me: mummy-gray with wine-stained lips, sitting with a toothless old man, headed god knows why for Chicago: a picture of me looking at a picture.

'That all you got?'

Bill points to my half-filled duffel bag sitting on the floor next to me. If he was a younger man my twinkling paranoia might make me wonder at his question but I can see he's just drunk and looking to gnaw away at the hours, sorta like me.



I stare down, pick up my bag and drop it with a thud. 'Yeah' I confirm 'that's all I got.'

He streams smoke up to the green fluorescent lights. 'That's good. That's admirable. Seem like most people gotta drag along TVs and radios, little flags and postcards and shotglasses to show where they been...I got a collection up here' – he taps his temple – 'one they can't steal when I ain't lookin.'

I wonder who 'they' is and if half Bill's collection hasn't already gone missing.

He's seen me checking into my wallet and must think I'm broke because he leans back in his chair and drags a thick tongue of worn-out bills from the front pocket of his jeans. 'Gimme a favor, son. Black coffee and Jack Daniels and get somethin for yourself.' He pats his two walking canes and says 'it's a bitch to get up and down.' He puffs a cloud on his cigarette and stares through slitted eyes.

'Listen I got money' I say getting up 'I got next round.'

He waves his hand. 'Don't trouble yourself.'

'No trouble.'

The bartender, a tall stooped man with eyes the color of rainwater, blows smoke through his nostrils in a tight stream as I walk up. He nods. His nametag says SAM.

'What time you close here?' I ask.

'Mostly two AM' he replies 'but sometimes we bend the hours.' In the pale green fluorescent light Sam looks three days dead. We all do.

'Hear that?' I say to Bill. 'You stay awake that long?'

'I'm drinkin coffee, ain't I?'

'So where is everybody?' I turn back to Sam. 'This train— it's like it's

deserted.'

Sam shrugs. 'Winter's always dead.'

'Man, you ain't kiddin.' I tip him and deliver the drinks, sitting diagonally across from Bill. I put my scuffed black boots up on the table and lean back. Old Bill watches and then mimics me, putting his own broken brown construction boots up on the chair next to me. It takes a while. 'Table too high for these old legs' he says 'even when I'm oiled up. You got people in Chicago?'

I shake my head. 'Nope.'

'What you gonna do there? J-O-B?'

'Get away for a while.'

'Then it's back to the hole, huh?'

'Hole' I repeat tonelessly as my pulse explodes and Laura leaps up at me like a specter in a blood-stained yellow t-shirt— it scares me to shit and shakes me from my chin-to-chest funk and then she's gone. I drop my feet to the floor and stab my cigarette to pieces in the cheap foil ashtray.

'Means back to business is all, man' he says softly. He's looking at me with one eye closed as if he's just formed an opinion. 'Anyway, that's for you young fellas to worry about. That's what good about bein old. Nobody expects you to do a damn thing. I'm done.' He slaps his leg. 'I done enough.'

'You have, huh.' Bill's been sucking down the coffee and whiskey like a storm drain and I know he's ninety per cent bullshit but it beats watching TV. My own percentage ain't so hot either.

'I member once when my wife kicked me out I hitched from Pennsylvania to Vegas. Back when I lived in Allentown. Took me six days.'

'When's that?'

'Oh I guess twenty-five, thirty years now. It was Fall. Cold rain a good part

of the way.'

'How come she kicked you out?'

'She hated me goin anywheres, couldn't take the gamblin.' Bill looks up at the ceiling. 'She was a beautiful woman' he says to it 'a *kind* woman. Better than me in every way, and *deservin* of better too. Just *bein* with me made her sad. She stayed though.'

Outside the train is running alongside a highway and I can see snow coming down. 'Look' I point it out to Bill.

'Yeah' he grunts. 'Snow.'

I put my forehead against the window and a mist stains the glass down by my mouth. 'Been a long time since I seen snow.'

The last was six years ago when I headed for LA in a driveaway car, blasting through a continental blizzard that started in Roanoke and ended in Palm Springs. A silver Buick Riviera, the exact car I drove on that first ride, flashes past, heading west. 'I drove that same car on that same road.' I close my eyes and the glass is cool against my wine-hot skin. 'Probably bout the same time of day.' I see my own face floating over a green-lit dashboard, smoking to stay awake. I hear the beaten teeth of the transmission grinding down those cold white miles.

'Yeah?' he says and just for a second I know he's embarrassed for me.

I pull back from the window and put my feet back on the table.

'Anyways, man' he goes on 'bout when I went to Vegas...I'm just outside Oklahoma City and I run into this other guy hitchin. He's hunkered under a overpass cause the rain is pissin down. Got a beat-up suitcase and he's dressed in like a all-white suit cept you can tell he's been walkin some cause it's awful dirty and his shoes are split. Bad day to be out I say to him and he says yes it is. Asks me if I got anything to eat. So I break out a can of beans, big family size, and we split it cold. I tell him I'm goin on to Vegas and don't you know that's where he's goin too. He knows people out there, says his name is John. You can walk along with me I say to him and we make it the rest of the way in about two days, maybe three. Two.'

‘A guardian angel’ I say ‘with the white suit and all.’

‘Well’ he says ‘it was me had the beans...anyways I had some money besides, enough to last two days at the blackjack table. That’s why I hitched my way out instead of takin a bus, cause that’s all I had.’ Bill makes a blue-veined fist. ‘My wife, she wasn’t gonna hep me out, hell that’s why she lef me. The gamblin. But then she come back and stuck.’

‘Yeah so you said. Where’d you end up stayin?’

‘Now that’s the beauty of the whole thing. This guy I meet, I figure he’s just another bum like me.’

Bill puts a hand to the back of his neck and closes his eyes.

‘But then he says y’know let’s go down to the Desert Inn cause I know some people there. Well we walk in and all these folks in red vests come runnin over, how you doin sir is there anything I can get you sir your room is ready sir.’

Bill’s eyes open and he gives the table a *knock knock knock*.

‘I thought I was hallucinatin! I said John what’s goin on here and he puts his hand on my arm and says Bill I got a confession to make. My name’s not John. It’s Howard. It’s Howard Hughes, Bill.’



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## The Humiliation of Beasts

Bill goes into his top pocket, hocks up phlegm into a crusty spitrag and peers sideways through his burning Pall Mall. He leans in on a forearm and drops his voice.

'I own this casino. But you didn't know that when you shared those beans with me outside Oklahoma City in the rain and Bill — I just want to say *thank you*. I got a little bit of my faith in human nature back. Thank you, Good Bill.'

Bill's glad toothless face shines in the overhead light as snow streaks past the darkening windows and the train rocks along. His eyes are closed again, wandering in the past or in a dreamtime that was never real. His wrinkled hands shake a little on the table as he thinks his thoughts. His grey spittled lips twitch and I think it's how a hanged man must look in the last seconds of brainlight before death; Bill is probably more alive right now in that toothless bulb of his than he's ever been out here in the world.

'And then' he says, hushed, eyes still closed 'Howard was kind enough to give me money to get back to Pennsylvania to my wife. I took him up on it and I swore off gamblin when I walked in the door and saw her sittin alone on that livin room couch. It was then I done quit for good.'

The train clacks along for about a half-hour with both of us quiet. The snow's blizzing down hard, tapping against the windows: you can see small towns getting buried as we flash by in the dark. We're far out in the desert now, there's no turning back and even if there was there's no place to go back *to*. The palm trees and searchlights of Los Angeles have disappeared behind the snow and the world of yesterday or last week is as lost to me as if it were dead centuries.

Maybe Bill's got it right, maybe the only way to deal with the present is to fix up the past. To hone it, whittle it, cut out the boring and painful parts, to invent the people and places as they should have been: like grafting and pruning a sick tree back to health. Then who knows— whole new futures might shoot up from anywhere: a rainy overpass outside Oklahoma City; the boardwalk in Venice Beach; even from the dead barcar of an empty train that drags like a chain through desert snow.

And that story about Howard Hughes in disguise, drifting around the West? Pretty sure I've seen that movie.

I'm sitting in a low-slung cloth chair on the shore of an ancient ocean. The wind is blowing hard and a hundred bodies in flapping robes look out over the water. Near me is a chalice flooded with dark wine. 'H'yah!' shout two servants, dressed in white suits. 'H'yah!' They whip a bony-shouldered old cow ahead of them, tripping her in panic toward the heavy surf, her eyes bulging with fear. Offshore a dorsal fin slices through filthy water. A woman sits on the sand beside me, long red hair wound in a beehive around her face, mummified but for the smile. Snow tornadoes spin in a web of trances on the surface of the sea. A hundred bodies clack their hands as the cow's skinny legs collapse into a wave and she's dragged out, upside down in the undertow. The dorsal fin disappears and the woman presses the wine to my lips. I push it away but it spills down my yellow chest. The beach crowd is a-swarm with laughter and chatter. The cow surfaces and sucks for air, her eye-whites aglow in the wave as the fin flashes beneath her. Her ripped udder belches blood into the sea and the white-suited servants fall into the surf, red foam circling their knees and coating their arms. They shoot spears, cinched to a threadbare white net, into the dorsal fin. The shark flaps and rolls, bleeding and spinning until it dies and drifts like an old bottle in the waves. Whistling applause mixes

with the shriek of gulls; the wind rises to a high whine and the servants take a bow.

The snow's stopped and the lights are way down.

Bill's dozing with his head on the table and Sam the bartender is nodding on his stool, a newspaper spread open on the counter. The dim fluorescent light makes a wrinkled line on the oil-spotted surface of Bill's black coffee. Outside the train crosses a bridge beneath a cold quarter-moon that just jumped out of the clouds. The rock looks like water frozen in midstream, like somebody snapped their fingers and everything just stopped moving. Laura must still be sleeping, some thousand miles behind my left ear.

Morning splits open in gummy pink beams on the frozen desert and our faces reflect in the windows as we speed through it. Me and Bill are sunk low in our seats. The first thing I remember on waking is sitting here at the table and Sam the bartender with his rainy eyes in our direction; he must've bent the hours for us last night. The car's empty again: I can't recall seeing a conductor since I got on. I have a glass of water in front of me, and Bill's smoking.

I remember the dream: the wind and clacking bodies: humiliation of the beasts. The way we watched the cow driven down in panic and brute confusion, slaughtered by white-suited servants, and us nothing but a gang of low clowns and phonies. How we drank and taunted the animals and made their deaths desperate because we were dull and thinly comic. How life was disappointing so there was nothing left but to mock it.

Sam's staring at me through his water-eyes. I want to get up and crawl away into another car, see other faces. I want to see Laura again. I'm stuck in this green morgue light that gives way to morning; I get up and go to the bar and back to the table, to the toilet at the end of the car, but that's all I can manage. The sun flashes on the windows and I can smell that Sam's got a new pot of coffee going. Bill's been talking since he woke up but I'm only tuning in now.

'Is how I lost my teeth' he's saying. 'Workin' in a steel mill. I seen guys burned, skin melted like ice cream so their own kids wouldn't recognize em, no noses, hair, legs, arms, hands ripped right offa them. Liquid steel in big vats, gigantic beams swinging through the air, shit...' he shakes his head and grinds out his cigarette. 'It was worse than the fuckin war.' He's waiting for me to ask how his teeth went missing.

I watch him like I'm watching TV but I'm not in the mood for back and forth yet so I say nothing.

'I'm sittin at home lookin at that show where they spin a wheel' he says finally 'with the good-lookin gal, an I holler for my wife to gimme the cookie jar.' Bill wheezes and his pink gums split wide. 'She thows it, man, she musta been mad at me for somethin. Knocks me right in the face! Twenty years in a steel mill, man, coulda got busted up sixteen ways to hell and the old lady knocks out my teeth with a cookie jar!'

Bill laughs until the wheezing stops him; he leans back with one arm over the nearby chair. 'Sam-u-el,' he calls finally, wiggling his white eyebrows.

I'm still slumped in my seat, staring at him like he's a painting or a postage stamp. I hear Sam moving behind the bar and after a minute I get up and fetch Bill his coffee and whiskey because he's an old cripple; I get a wine for myself. Apparently the hours are permanently bent.

I can see Laura sleeping on her mama's couch, a pillow imprint pink on the side of her bandaged face. Most Serene Mother's up early, standing in the kitchen in the dark eating walnuts and cooing to a tiny vicious dog. Across town, well after the sun rises, Julie the Slasher will call in sick so she can wait for an insurance guy to show: no complaint will be lodged against me because that could get complicated what with the assault. Today in Hollywood it'll be hot and another low-grade smog alert will be issued.

It'll all be just the same, almost. Like it is when you're dead only now you think you're actually going somewhere down the tracks.

'So come on and tell me, man' Bill says 'your girlfriend kick your ass out, didn't she?'

I laugh the giddy hiccup that comes before grief. 'I got an old friend in



Chicago I need to see' I say.

Bill frowns. 'I thought you said you didn't know no one there.'

He's right. I did say that.

'I said I didn't know what I was gonna *do* when I got there. I just decided, just now.'

'Hmm.' Bill says. 'He from LA too?'

'Yeah. He's got red hair and he works in a shoe store on the South Side. He's an adopted kid, fucked up in the head. He's an idiot but I promised him I'd stop in. He used to play bass.'

'Adopted don't necessarily mean fucked up in the head' Bill says. 'I know plenty of good adopteds.'

I shrug. 'He is.'

Bill doesn't care about my fake plans. He wants to know what happened back in LA. 'So' he points 'who whacked your cracker?'

I press the bandage on my forehead with two fingers but my head's wine-numb and I can't feel the bump. 'Laura got attacked by a psycho bitch. My ex-girlfriend. I had to fight her off.'

Sam's got the TV on the bar turned up and canned laughter breaks like ocean surf through the car: this must be the ambient noise of Hell. Above the agonized groans, gnashing teeth, shouted blasphemies, mutual accusations, laments, above the tearing of hair and rending of clothes laughs an invisible choir of heavenly laughers. All that you knew on Earth, in life, on whose shore you lived and loved and hated: all gone, effaced by the ceaseless compulsive erasure of mocking waves of laughter sent down from on high.

'She got attacked? Wait a second, which one's your ex, the psycho bitch or Laura?' Bill asks.

'*I dunno*' I say shaking my head 'both, now. *I'm* psycho.'

I light a cigarette and peer sideways through the smoke like Bill did when he told *his* story. 'But this *first* ex' I say 'I knew her way before I knew Laura...we grew up together in New York and she's a nut. Once she told me she had a séance at a friend's house in the Valley and got herself hypnotized. Said she was carried down to Hell and forced to sit on the lap of the Devil's son.'

'Man' Bill says. 'So she was always a looney tunes.'

'He was twelve foot' I say 'made of solid gold. His eyes were chandeliers and his mouth was a fucking klaxon. He told her that if she ever thought a single impure thought, even for one second, she'd forfeit her soul and he'd suck her back down to Hell to serve him for Eternity. She said that ever since that séance streetlights go dark when she comes near and flick back on when she walks away.'

Bill's pink chops are half-open; he scratches a bat-like ear. 'How come?'

I put the heels of my hands over my sore eyebulbs and the soft yellow sparks float like butterflies behind my lids. 'Because they do' I say.

I look up. He's staring at me, wanting me to keep on with the story but I'm blank. 'It just happens...I don't know man.'

I'm lost.

'Anyways' he says 'that don't explain how come she hit your girlfriend. That part still don't connect. I mean, you got to assume she was jealous.'

'Could be.' I didn't think it likely.

'And it don't show how you got that bump or why it look like your *now-ex*-girlfriend told you to hit the road. What about that.'

He's right. The séance thing doesn't connect. But I'm not done living the story that Bill wants to hear and to tell it right I need to see how it turns out myself.

When it's really over, when I can see the busted glass and blood from a

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right distance, say down a tunnel of many years...when the faces don't rise in my sleep like queer luminous beasts that float up from deep water... maybe then I can go back and dress the story up and put strings on it and make it spin and dance and come out alright.

I swear on the grave of this toothless old cripple sitting across from me that someday I'll see Laura and the slumped palms of Los Angeles again and set things right. I'll see her and I'll be wise and forgiving and patient. I'll be rich and generous and I won't treat every day like a dimestore gag. I'll wipe the blood from her holy face. I'll raise her to heights of Serenity the likes of which her mother's never dared dream and I'll glorify those days and yank their nuts from the fire in the same way Bill's story set things right with his wife, with Vegas— with whatever was left of his own life.

Robert Kulesz has been published in The 22 Magazine, Electric Windmill, Scissors and Spackle, Juked, Busk Literary Journal, Short Fast & Deadly, 5\_Trope, and nominated for a Pushcart Prize. As a musician, he's played shows with the Circle Jerks, L7, Hole and Social Distortion, and toured throughout the US and Europe. He lives in Queens, New York.

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