



# MILKING SCKLS

Justin Sirois



M L K N G    S C K L S



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# M L K N G    S C K L S

deleted Word documents from the laptop of  
Salim Abid, April 2004

excerpts intended for the novel

F A L C O N S   O N   T H E   F L O O R

By Justin Sirois  
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for Lauren Bender





94% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

Last night I dreamt about a mutt whose tail never learned how to wag, and under a sun that gagged us with heat, the mutt sat stoned with its mouth belching cones of pot smoke. Sometimes the smoke shone orange – sometimes it had the texture of *keffiyehs*. People passed it in the street, not looking between its ears. No one ever pet the mutt. Men on bicycles swerved around it. Cars pulled U-turns. Busses sped by. It was part something, but mostly something else.

Its nose was badly burnt.

It jiggled like cooked fat.



91% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

We left Fallujah as half of Fallujah was fleeing too – everyone hefting canned goods, bananas, Pepsi, and prescriptions in packed book bags with only enough room for one book. I brought my laptop. I brought a knife and a toothbrush. Khalil brought whatever he was wearing at the time.

We had no choice.

Our city will suffer for the men who were lynched. Their charred forms hung torn and naked from the bridge.

Now black skies burp fire and the water boils poisonous. Boot heels collapse the necks of doorknobs. Men go and go missing.

Now we go – follow the river.

88% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

We hadn't seen too many vultures on the second day of walking. We hadn't seen much of anything.

Mostly, birds circled the bombings, where the cities barfed up body after wet body, mangled fighters or family members crushed on their sofas. The vultures swarmed, sallow in the heat. Overstuffed and grimacing. Big bloated turkeys with grimreaper smiles. Fat as shit birds that would send a jackal screaming in the other direction. And the frantic vultures clocked, in gangs, along the outskirts where all the other derelict animals scavenged, burrowing into sopped pantleg and sleeve, pecking out and picking clean. They weren't crazed by what they were feeding on, but by the volume and variety of meals available – *al dente, flambé, all fucked up*.

We'd left all that behind us, we'd thought, Khalil and me.

But we spotted our first bird in the early afternoon. A beauty. Its wings snapped like black sickles, crimping into the dimpled clouds and soaring down, banking against the breeze. A real beauty. A real fatty, too.

Stalking, it doesn't make a sound.

Khalil, not really looking up, says – Never see 'em alone like that.

– Yeah.

– You tired, man?

– Yeah. Kinda.

– Swim?

– *Don't* have time, man. I told you. C'mon.

– *Fine*, Khalil sniffs and we keep walking.

And he's silent for a while.

There's no time for swimming like there's *never* time for swimming. That's all he wants to do. Every time we stop walking, that's all he ever wants to do.

But we agree to rest for half an hour, choosing to lie under some loosely bunched palm trees far enough from the river to be safe. There'd been no boats or patrols and the opal waterway sparkles as we spread our blanket and savor the shade. Khalil stretches out on his stomach with a balled t-shirt pillow. I sit, drink some water, take off my shirt too. And I sponge my face with my *keffiyeh*. We drink river water from tin cans. Sweat and sand coat us like hummus.

My lips are cracked. Armpits itch.

Khalil's snoring by the time my can is empty. With his bare feet exposed to the sunlight, his body jerks every few minutes in thin dreams. I drape my *keffiyeh*

over his heels, making two patterned hills. Sunburned feet would slow us down. We can't slow and we have to keep going.

I'm not tired.

The vulture appears again, revolving lazily in the distance. Standing, I squint, my palms laced into a visor. The vulture's inspecting something. Maybe something we should avoid. I leave my backpack, but my folding knife comes with me, unfolded because there'd be no time to open it if I had to in a hurry.

The only thing I've ever cut with it, accidentally or otherwise, is myself.

Walking away, it's impossible to gauge the subtle changes in elevation. I know tiers of fertile land patch the water's edge and they grow on forever, but from here all I see is rock and sand and the spiky hats of palm trees beyond the hills. The vulture dives below the horizon for a second, then reemerges nervously. At first he looks hurt, but he's not. I step slow. The handle of the knife feels like the old banisters from middle school – oil-coated and graffitied with names I've long forgotten and names I never wanted to know. My thumbnail revisits the same groove in the wood. I press the cold blade against my forearm for no reason. It leaves a pinkish band that vanishes.

I duck at the hill's crest. It's no more than a body

length down. And down the little cliff, a beard of wheatgrass hangs off the chin of the river as it bends southwest, and the rest of the land is sand dusted rock. The tan landscape is only interrupted by squat huts built further up along the highway running adjacent to the river and they look like shortbread cookies – sturdy and strong – good roofs for good people.

The sun whitewashes all detail. I have to cup my brow with both hands, knife in my teeth; I taste the cedar handle. I see the stupid bird. Plummeting again, he kinks the tubing of his neck and lands with a *gong* – a sheet metal *bang* – and his talons tap-dance on the hot surface of a hood. And then there's a truck. A truck parked just before the wheatgrass. I can barely hear the engine idling. A pack of vultures ransack the vehicle. From the hill I see the back of the pickup, tires blown, both doors yanked open, and the ruffled ass of a black bird rocking back and forth in the driver's seat. He's tugging on something. More birds fill the bed. Feathers and wings and the heads of un-dead turkeys writhe, bumping steel with wet thumps, squabbling over scraps, and there're so many birds that it looks like the driver was hauling a shipment of pillows that happened to explode.

From the passenger's seat, another vulture takes to the air and completes the same circuit as the first bird I spotted. He swoops down, settling in the white

sand, skittering after another bird with a sneaker in its beak.

I can't see what they're eating. Don't want to. But at least we'll know to detour around the truck and maybe further from the riverside for a while. The truck's tracks lead to the highway, though the highway's probably far enough to avoid, too. We'll be careful.

Using the tip of the blade, I scratch under my beard before folding the knife away. My watch says I've been gone almost half an hour.

The birds keep slamdancing the shit out of the truck, shouldering each other for position, snapping and scratching. One of them flips out of the bed with something sagging in his mouth and he flaps frantically into the air, twisting in the wind. I watch him pass overhead in the direction I came, the weight of his prize making him bob like a balloon. It drips. A swatch of flannel flaps underneath his meal.

I double back. I untangle the T-Shirt from my head and drape it over scorched shoulders, and it's nice not having the sun in my eyes. Khalil's probably drooling all over his makeshift pillow. Hopefully he's not covered in ants.

I walk at first. The vulture leads; seesawing over the sand, and weighted by his cargo, he beats his wings whenever his shadow threatens to catch its toes. I jog.

The knife clacks the back of my thigh inside my pocket. Sandals clap against heel.

A piece of whatever he's carrying flops to the sand. I run around it, not looking. Bumbling upward, the vulture decides to climb, and nearly capsizes, but flaps hard enough to reach the treetops. He knows it's safe there. When I get close enough, it's our camp, our palm tree he's chosen to nest in.

– *Shitty bird*, I pant, almost running now.

The fronds above Khalil rustle as if someone's strangling the tree. Leaves rain down. Khalil's still on his stomach, dead asleep, mouth open.

– *Retarded turkey*, I hiss, prying a rock out of the dirt.

And when I get within firing range, I sling the rock high into the leaves – surprised by my accuracy – and pop either the tree or the shitty bird because it unhinges its feathers and leaps, talon running in place. There's nothing in its beak. A few feathers spiral free. Two more stones rocket past his wings, but he's too high up to hit and all I want to do is scare the thing anyway. Cracking its hemorrhoid-looking head limp would be fine too.

I stand next to Khalil, out of reach. He'd take any opportunity to grab my ankle, try to scare me, but he's definitely asleep. He snores lightly, mouth agape,

drool glistening around the ring of his lips.

Standing at the base of the trees, I lean back to see what the vulture carried all that way, but it's buried in the salad of leaves above. Sunlight twinkles between swaying green, the translucent olives and teals fanning methodically. I stare. There might be a cufflink shining starry and silver, maybe a ring on a finger that scratched the bird's beak with every peck, but I can't tell. Something taps the sand. Dull taps from a leaky faucet above.

Of course there's blood, I think.

A shiny red saucer clots in the sand. The center puckers and congeals each time a fresh bead drops. More red speckles the perimeter of the blanket, and, when I bend down, I see that Khalil's messy hair is marinated with blood and the maze of his ear is clumped syrupy. A blob the size of an olive slowly flattens into his scalp. It's so dark red that it could be motor oil and I look closer to make sure Khalil's not really hurt. Two final drops land on his cheek – *tap, tap*. They sorta make a smiley face, a little blood face with two red eyes and Khalil's nostril makes an oval mouth. My fingers move to touch his earlobe, but draw back.

For the most part, the tree has stopped bleeding. I look back up one more time before kicking as much sand over the blood puddle as possible, covering up every fleck. A little gets on my foot, but at this point I don't care. A few drops stain the blanket. I'll wash them out



later.

I ease my sandal onto Khalil's shoulder, pump it. His eyes stutter open. He sits up and yawns so hard he shakes. I think he's gonna scratch his hair, but he doesn't.

I ask – Wanna go swimmin'?

He smiles. The little blood face on his cheek smiles too.

*Make it quick.*

73% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

*In the video, it'll be different.*

Lying awake.

Sleep repels itself, allotting only an hour's sleep. And what shallow sleep settles is disturbed by weird dreams of men tossing dogs from roofs – terriers and German Shepherds and newborn Rottweilers yelping and spinning ridiculous – and when the men run out of dogs they throw themselves. They don't scream. They just take a step and disappear. When the last man leaps, I wake up, splintered with shivers.

The night has no soundtrack but creaks and snaps. Every bird chirp could be a radio squawking *attack*; every splash becomes boots rushing us blind. I've sat up so many times I probably have a six pack from paranoia – it could be marketed as *The Ultimate, 480 Minute, Don't Stab Me in My Sleep Workout*.

An hour or so before dawn, I nudge my laptop awake. The screen's low, folded down like a basement window. It's the only thing glowing there. Flaring pixels remind me my cargos haven't been washed in weeks. There's no

one to impress, anyway.

Shoulders popping, I knead the wet plums in my sockets with my palms – palms that smell like soaked teabags – and I web my fingers and thumbs over my nose and teeth and sit cross-legged on the blanket. The laptop's fan hums. I enter my password. The welcoming chime from the speakers is made to sound like a doorbell, like you've been invited in, but I've never had a doorbell and no one I've ever known has, either.

So much of what we learn we learn from movies.

What's that video with the singer-guy suspended from video tape or something and he's all screaming all insane? Khalil and I watched that on a cassette someone dubbed over a cassette that someone else had dubbed off satellite TV a long time ago. It was insane. Insanely awesome.

Khalil let someone borrow it and we never saw it again.

I lean against the cold, hands cradling both elbows. In an hour, the sun will vaporize what little dew has managed to mist wristwatches and lily, tin roof and boat sail. Heatstroke will be the only thing on my mind. Sand dries my eyes. I try not to rub them. Sand finds its way into everything: armpits and gums and toenails and the swampy foyers of our crotches. We spend all day digging it out. Blinking and blinking,

I tear out the grit, too. Overhead, the moon rolls over tissue paper. And then the night.

Windless as an aquarium, the night stretches itself from rim to rim with no beginning or quit. Forward past the darkened shoreline, beyond scrub brush and burr, the horizon is replaced by the river and only the river. North to south, it feeds the desert. Black water inks seaward across the prairie. The outstretched wingspan of water is endless with tributaries feathered into marshland. No one rides or floats. All night the water's calm. The glassy black flows placid and quiet, and I stare hoping no one comes. No one has and no one will. Across the calm, at the river's edge, palm trees and poplars poke the sky like crude weaponry.

A hawk embarks for breakfast. He slipstreams back and forth, arcing easy. He'd make a good video, but it's too dim – the webcam's not sharp enough.

He's gone.

My yawn smokes the cold. Alone.

On the adjacent shore, buildings sag like dropped wallets. Some have been bombed. Some are just old. I throw a stone and can't see where it goes. There's a splash though, crowning a hollow plunk. The river gulps it down. Quiet dark follows.

My knee pops and I slap the sand from my thighs, heels sinking into the spread blanket. Whatever little rock was stabbing my ass all night gets smudged into the

sand.

I turn away from the water.

Our camp is ample, but barely a camp. Stones anchor the four corners of a spread blanket; our toilet paper wags from a nearby branch. My open backpack sits in the middle of the blanket and the tin cans we're using as cups make the water taste like peas. No fire or lean-to or tent – nothing to give us away to river traffic. Khalil sleeps with his head nuzzling my backpack; curled tight, knees to his chest, mouth like a wrinkled mitten waiting for a fist. He's snared most of the sheet we're sharing. I don't care. If a tank rolled over his legs, he'd keep snoring.

There's a video with a very sweaty girl in a boxing ring – singing all insane too – but I only got to download a minute of it before the electricity went out. She's amazingly hot in a typical American way. If I had video editing software I'd make something crazy like that. Minus the sweaty girl.

I *really* have to piss. Maybe it was that that woke me up and not the men lobbing dogs off roofs.

I look for the hawk, but he's nowhere.

Standing my laptop upright, I turn it toward the shore with the camera focusing outward. The screen's huge. Someone could easily see it from the river, but no one's out there. Once the tiny camera's recording, the screen dims mostly black, anyway. My *keffiyeh*

covers the keyboard, shielding out the sand, and I tuck its corners snug underneath. With the fabric so thin, the glowing letters are almost legible through the scarf. I click *record* then turn around, record myself disappearing to the water.

I know what's there on the screen – nothing at first – only black and then the outline of my zombie legs shuffling away. Suddenly, my figure appears against the deadened backdrop, barely a body. Barely anything.

In the video, I slow to the river and from the high moon there's enough shimmer to light the way. Fighting the temptation to look over my shoulder or walk backwards, I imagine myself onscreen – the distance between real and video bodies expanding, my sweatshirt and hood and heels shrinking into the opal river – and it feels like someone's watching except no one's there watching.

Ferns tassel at my elbows, nursing the water. The outline of my nose appears. My head must be turning. My head's turning to study something. I pause before the shoreline.

Farmers lived here once. Herdsmen, maybe, too.

Old fences box an overgrown swath of grass a kilometer upriver. Severed irrigation pipes end impotent and rusted at the shore, and if I followed them backward I'd find water pumps rusted too, raided for their usable

parts after the first war. A motorcycle's chain loops like prayer beads around the neck of a tree stump. Unnaturally green, a tree-shaped air freshener sits perfectly upright in the mud. Khalil's doing, I'm sure. He walked down here before sundown. The air freshener's string dangles in the wind. The air freshener's not part of the video so I leave it. A pair of headlights and a smashed grill sink submerged in the wetness. They're not part of the video either.

Arms and neck straight, I walk. I walk with benign and patient purpose, but it only looks that way on-screen because I'm really purposeless, I guess.

Loose sand sloughs along the shore's slope. My sandals sled then steady, gathering gravel underfoot. Large rocks muscle out of the ground, anchoring loose sand, their rims ornamented by sprig and weed and I almost look back, but stop myself – *would ruin the shot*. I never look back once.

I unzip my fly and shove my hands back in my sweatshirt pockets and know I'm going to be shivering there a while. We've been drinking from the river all day, trying to hydrate, wetting our backs and hair. We've guzzled liters and liters and who knows how many billions of parasites. I try not to think about tiny worms burrowing through my guts.

In the video, no one would be able to tell what's

going on. I'm standing too far from the camera. There's no way the laptop can hear me pissing either. The wind kicks up. It's like aluminum foil crumpling over the mic, but it's mostly quiet and my body's just a blue blob in the stillborn dawn. It's like I'm just waiting for someone though you never see that someone.

The river bubbles and then the sand bubbles. My eyes close.

I'm still pissing when something grumbles in the distance and I disappear from the frame like I've been airbrushed out with the swipe of an eraser – gone.

Nose in the dirt, I hold my breath. Hold and don't move. My sandals dangle in the water, chest stamped with cold dirt. I'm still pissing, pissing in the dirt. It pools underneath, drooling towards shore. I crawl away from it, shivering silent, elbows in the doughy sand, and keep my face ducked. My forearms and face smear with mud, and the silt dries into sand the further I inch away from the river.

The sound growls again, faint and far off. Winded, I turn my nose in the damp and breathe in the clay and look. Blackness envelopes where the sound repeated. Downriver, silhouettes of fronds and fern obscure my view.

Could be a bullfrog or a cord pulled on an outboard motor – a patrol boat stalled in the current. There's no way to know.



I've *never* been so fucking careless.

In the video, the river brightens to a bruised maroon.

Beyond my reach, the laptop glows like a bay window of a house I'll never enter. Anyone on the river could see it. A scout or ranger would have to be sleepwalking to miss the white rectangle hovering in the night. Any minute, tracers could crack above my scalp, orange beams thwacking into the screen, our camp, Khalil.

Under my hood, I scan the water again. Still nothing, nothing at all.

I zip my fly, its teeth grinding through the caked mud.

It takes me ten minutes to belly crawl through the straw and sand. Detouring rocks and hills quilted with fire ants, scraping my knuckles raw on a stone fixed in the dark, I finally reach our camp where Khalil's snoring into the blanket and I slap my laptop shut and huddle inside the cotton sheets until daybreak.

The video stops. The sounds stop.

Those dogs in my head stop somersaulting to the sidewalk.

I dream whatever.

*It might be a Wednesday.*

While her newborn squirms against her ribs,

cooing and giving off sour aromas, a woman would watch the video. She'd take long drags off a cigarette, dangling the butt out her bedroom window where the breeze filters the smoke from the baby's pawing. The baby would be drawn to mouse clicking for the rest of its life. The woman watches again:

*It's well after midnight.*

*A young man walks on the beach toward a lake or river or some body of water. You can hardly see him, his hooded head. You can see his breath and the tips of his fingers through long sleeves and he's so alone. Then he turns his head to the left and stares at something for a while, maybe a sailboat or someone else on the shore and he keeps walking. It must be so cold.*

*Wind rubs the microphone. It's all you can hear.*

*He stands at the water for a while. You think he might dive in. You kinda want him to, but it's probably freezing. Then you expect there to be some lame viral video trick where you're staring intensely at the screen for thirty seconds and a gremlin face flashes outta nowhere and you spill coffee all over your new laptop.*

*But he just stands there. No gremlin.*

*And then he disappears, totally.*

*That's it. Totally gone.*

The new mother would repost the video on her

profile – prominently displayed where the clip of a talking dog was. Friends she'd never meet in Seattle and Lebanon and Lincoln might comment and link and blog about the video and an exchange student in Edinburgh would splice parts for a film project, managing to ruin the mysticism implicit in the original image's ambient and understated ambiguity.

The new mother would probably leave to buy tea and return some DVDs to the store down the street. She wouldn't be able to tell if the couple walking by were marveling at her designer stroller or what it ferried. She'd stop at the market where the owner, if he was around, would always give her a free Clementine, wrapping his gift in a rotating trio of jokes about people named after fruit. In a paper bag: herb-roasted focaccia, a single daisy, all-natural deodorant, the Clementine, bowtie pasta, ricotta, the WSJ.

It'd be impossible to carry the stroller up to her second story apartment. The vestibule's two deadbolts were always locked and the recycle bin overflowing with junk mail. She'd have honest neighbors who always talked about organizing a building party, but never followed through, and she'd prefer it that way.

When she'd sit back down at her computer, five people might have left comments about me pissing in the river:

Dude should put some sorta soundtrack behind this. Maybe something weird like *The Monkeys*. Where'd you find this?

watching this makes me miss you – how's motherhood? you getting any sleep? - ttly.

is that a hawk swooping overhead? DID IT EAT HIM?

Beautiful. This reminds me of Matamoros in the late 70s, the Rio Grande, waking up in the eyeless night, and the time our oldest Collie was too weak to fight the current. We cried for days.

R U kidding?! *The Monkeys* would completely ruin it. What happens after the man disappears?

61% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

It's dawn.

Khalil's tracksuit pants and T-Shirt hang from a branch like the tree's trying them on. The roots of the tree want to slip on his repulsive socks. It holds both of his Adedas up, sunshine blazing through one rubber sole. But Khalil doesn't care what the tree does with his off-brand sneakers.

He swims.

Every time we stop walking he's in the river. Khalil was born with gills. Hovering over the crib, his father took engine oil and slicked Khalil's neck every night with his mechanic hands until baby Khalil learned how to breathe human air. The gills slowly faded into flat skin. But Khalil never forgot the water.

I want to join him.

Half-dressed, the tree watches in envy.

54% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

Why did I let him tag along?

Wasn't part of the plan.

Days before I abandoned Fallujah – and I'm not sure why I'm remembering this – I'd always imagined someone walking behind me, though I was supposed to be alone. Out here. Sandpaper skin stretched around my scalp. Heat rash bone-deep.

Khalil's here though, stomping on my shadow's neck.

And sand is everywhere.

Hot. Crazy hot.

It's like a whole stick of butter's melting between my ass cheeks.

46% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

I can't get thoughts of home out of my head. The *Jolan* hemorrhages with olives, oily bread, brake pads, shoes shined with butter and ink, chicken pens with chickens thrashing rabid – and hovering silver trays like spaceships, tea kettles, tea glasses, tea – motorbikes backfiring, cabbage choking tailpipes, Mountain Dew drizzling through gutters, and children, dozens of shoe-less children pitting dates. Their fingers look shit-stained, but it's just date juice.

I smell it in my sleep.

The market.

Men milking sickles.

The unemployed barber, General, welder, masseur.

I'll have deleted all of these entries before they have a chance to breathe.

44% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

To show Rana how much I love her, I'd uncook an entire meal, the whole thing, just for her. Anyone can cook, but uncooking – that's hard. That's really hard. But it'd be *so* worth it.

My stomach *glugs*. Guts are bunched rugs.

Rana's watching.

I'm not the best uncook in the world.

It'd have to be a recipe I'm familiar with. Something simple. Chicken curry something or something.

And that's what I do: go to the *Jolan*, grapple through the crowds to get some chicken and carrots and red onions because we already have everything else – the spices, a little flour, the rice. All we eat at the house is rice. I cook it all up, using my mother's old recipe – which tastes like every other curry – before Rana gets to the house.

My hands spread flat on the kitchen counter.

Rana sits cross-legged at the table, facing me. She smiles shyly out the window when she feels embarrassed for all my efforts. I haven't even started uncooking and



she's embarrassed. Her nose sniffs the spiced air; she keeps smiling.

Everything's cooked and ready to eat. No corner of the house is left untouched by spiraling aromas – masala and cumin dampen curtains and sofa cushions. Soon it will all be gone.

Uncooking the curry will be hardest, I'm sure. The thought of it makes me nervous; the notion is so ambitious I should be ashamed. No reason to delay. All I have to do is take my hands off the stupid counter.

Rana stretches – cracks her back, taps her ring against a water glass.

Everything's ready. Different sized bowls, trays, a baking sheet, several wooden spoons, a spatula, a peeler, and a whisk all line the counter and there're even spare dish towels that I washed especially for today because we never have clean towels.

Potholders on, I lift the pot off the stove and pour my sauce into the baking sheet. The red slurry oozes like chunky lava. Some of it splashes my forearm. When Rana's not looking I lick it off, delicious. When it's all poured and settling, I flick a power strip by the toaster. Electricity hums through the kitchen. On the counter, several dehumidifiers point at the baking sheet, suck out every drop of water from the curry, and they rumble the linoleum and scoot loose change

off the counter. A coin bounces off my big toe.

A space heater placed between stove burners chugs away, and I flap a dish towel over the baking sheet, trying to dispel the steam. Sweat saps my brow. I pat it with the towel and keep flapping. Guess it's working. So much of uncooking is guesswork.

Next, I pick out each cube of chicken from my stew with tongs, place them in a bowl to be rinsed, and set them aside. That doesn't take long. Whatever residue drips off the chicken will have to be strained and dehumidified, too.

There isn't a lot of counter space, but I get the meat far enough from the heat as possible. Then I pick out the sliced onion and carrots from the baking sheet and put them in separate bowls, steam rising as if they were little caldrons.

But the potholders are clumsy. I drop the tongs twice on our old gas stove – the oven that my dad and I never clean, with molten layers of black soot baked to its walls. The potholders slam into the olive oil, pepper mill, and broken blender that we've never thrown away. Whatever, though. I'll have to touch it all soon – the tendons of phlegmy meat, the mucus-coated carrots. Can't hide behind these fat mittens all day.

Rana's not looking, still.

Potholders scratch my beard. The inside of my nose itches, but I can't scratch. It'd look like I'm picking my

nose anyway.

– You need any help, Rana asks.

– I’m fine.

She hums something softly. She opens her magazine.

Rice is next.

It’s been steaming in a pot the whole time, ready to eat. I should’ve started that before the curry, but I use the oven to dry out the rice while my spatula chips at the cracking red spices stuck to the metal sheet. It takes ten minutes to get every crumb off the flat metal, but I notice the coconut milk separating, snowing into the bowl with the curry, and it’s impossible to tell how much flour is mixed in with the coconut, but I don’t care. I used so little flour anyway. I crush all that with a mortar and pestle. It’s the first time I’ve ever had to use them and it feels way more scientific than it should like my old thin t-shirt could be a lab coat.

I wink at Rana, but she’s lost in her reading. She’s always lost in something, but when she listens I know she hears twice the words I’m actually saying.

Now the straining. I shake the potholders into the sink.

Powdered coconut, flour, and curry separate in a colander, all the white setting at the bottom and falling through the holes. Coconut and flour pool

in the clay bowl. Even though some of the finer curry sprinkles through, I can spoon it out easily enough to preserve the sweet, white pulp, adding a splash of water, stirring vigorously until the putty sloshes into cream. I pour the milk, viscosity restored, back into the coconut and seal the hairy thing shut.

I spread it on a dish towel so it won't roll away. It wobbles, hairy and round. The duct tape is loose. It better not split back open on its own. I think about monkey skulls and monkey brains and The Monkees. I downloaded a Monkees song the other night when I couldn't sleep and it got stuck in my head until the hot water from my shower steamed out the beat and retarded refrain. *Hey, hey we're the Monkees*. What was with those guys?

I nod to myself, drumming the counter.

The song tries to sneak back in, but I drum it out. Bowls rattle.

The beat makes Rana glance my way. She's rearranging the sunflowers in the vase she'd brought for my dad. He'll love them even though he has a million sunflowers in the back yard, yellow gears wheeling in the breeze. If the house flies were planets and the sunflowers were actual fiery suns, we'd have a million solar systems in the back yard, too. If the Beatles had a submarine, did the Monkeys have some psychedelic spaceship to get blazed in? No. They probably didn't even get high. They

just had some big shitty American car, I think.

I drum the counter faster and ask her to rip off the back of the magazine sitting on the table,

– Make sure you get the whole thing off.

– But it's my magazine.

– We'll get another.

But we both know how hard magazines are to find. Especially good ones.

She tears the paper and eases her shrugging shoulders. Without her *abaya* shrouding her face, her squared chin demands acknowledgment while somehow surrendering to her more delicate features. She lifts her fingers often, inspecting the shape of it – ridge, faint dimple, jaw – in thought. A car honks outside. Fingers flutter to her lap; she turns away. Looks downward.

I look at the linoleum tile, too.

There's no funnel in the house. The only one we have is outside, reserved for the gas generators for when the power's out which is most of the time. We're lucky today. The refrigerator's cold; power strips glow. And those dehumidifiers dry my raisin eyes and I blink them back to normal. Rana hands me the torn back cover of her magazine. I twist a cone out of the glossy paper, holding it tight so it doesn't unravel. It works great. Red powdered curry trickles in a little stream back into the spice jar, and only I'd be able to

notice the flecks of white left from the coconut, which is totally fine.

I wash the baking sheet and use the same technique with the rice: dehumidify, flake, scrape, and separate. A fine bed of white rice seeds coats the tray. But while the rice dries I reassemble the carrots, stacking the slices in columns and blowing on their wet seams until they morph whole. Arthritic, the carrots sit crooked, but they're passable, destined for another meal. The onions are harder. My fingers bumble, fitting rings inside rings, mismatching mostly, and what's reconstructed are dizzy replicas of the originals.

Rana watches, flipping casually through a magazine. She cracks her big toe again, scratches both sets of ribs, increasing the pitch of her yawn. A door slams. She freezes. We both turn towards the front door, but the slam came from outside. My dad's not home. We're alone. We both relax.

I've never noticed, until now, how sounds have transformed after the occupation began – how screams of pain have grown mundane, but simple banging doors jolt us from chairs. Rana recomposes. I stare too long. Her hair glistens like frozen Coke.

My eyes itch now. I roll up my sleeves tight to the elbow, lean over the stove. Now the gross part.

I hold the bowl of cubed chicken under the faucet, adding a little water. In a skillet, I work the sinewy dough

of the muscle until they frump limp. Slime slicks my fingers. Snotty skin licks my knuckles. Goose bumps tingle my arms, making it worse, like my flesh wants to mimic the knobby chicken flesh that's been stripped off hours ago. The chicken gradually returns to life, or life just after life. It's hard to tell if its uncooking right so I add a little olive oil to the water, massaging the meat, soft as cheeks, feeling them loosen as they flex and soak. Pepper sweats out of their blooming pores, and gathers in a little pool. It's tedious, but I scoop the pepper out with a teaspoon, a few grains at a time, flicking them in the sink. But the chicken keeps slipping out of my fingers, skating around in the skillet from lip to lip and one of them slaps on the stovetop, but Rana doesn't see. I wash that one off.

Slowly though, two sliced pieces become one, tissue fusing back together. A long strip of meat suctions to another, forming new flesh, slapping wet. The dehumidifiers hum over the rice while the white rubbery chicken squirms and they're bloodless leeches flopping onto the cutting board. No matter how many times I've handled poultry, it still gives me the creeps.

Finally, two uncut chicken breasts sit in the pan – whole again. I poke their blubber; slimy strands cling to fingertips.

My hands need washing.

The dehumidifiers labor on, waterlogged and bored. They putter to a stop when the power strip's flipped off. By now, the rice is dry. I give it a stir. Mushy grains stiffen back to seeds and, keeping steady, I hold the baking sheet over the only Tupperware we have and let them rain, some of them skipping under the toaster. A few more stirs and they're dry as sand.

My palms land on the stovetop, exhausted. What delicious smells once marinated the upholstery have dispelled.

I pack everything as best I can – there's no plastic wrap or aluminum foil. I rinse off the baking sheet and it goes in the fridge, laying flat over each bowl like a long lid so that we can re-cook the uncooked ingredients later in the week. Dad's constant snacking will deplete the supply of carrots before then. He's eaten red onions like apples, too. He's never uncooked anything in his life, though.

I search for an excuse to tell Rana about Dad eating whole onions, but there's no opening – never know what to say.

Rana closes her magazine and looks away as she blows her nose.

I wash my hands and dry my hands and curl my lip at the dishes.

Rana offers,

– I'll do them later, I guess.



That's a fine idea.

I unplug the power strip and wipe down the stovetop. Curry powder gathers in the cuts where I've accidentally sliced the counter.

When I'm through, we sit at the kitchen table with empty glasses and plates like full moons, with forks and knives and spoons gleaming clean – not a spec of food – and I hold her right hand in my right hand, looking at her and away again because I can't just stare.

I'm not hungry or full. The rugs of my guts finally unravel. They roll out, throwing plumes of dust in the mosques of my lungs. Men and women enter through my open ribs and kneel in neat rows, each of them kneeling with palms over their knees. I don't think they pray for me. They pray for other people.

No doors slam.

All the men and all the women are welcome.

29% BATTERY POWER REMAINING

— You know what'd be great right now, man? Khalil asks.

— What?

If he says swimming, I'm going to break his nose.

— A cigarette.

It's so cliché that I have to pass it off as small talk, just something to dispel the tension. We've been talking all day, staring at the river. I chew the inside of my cheek and look away.

— Whatever. You don't *really* smoke.

He snickers,

— Yeah. Shit.

But I know he'd smoke as often as he curses if cigarettes were as cheap as the crap that continually sails off his tongue. Khalil indulges vices only comfortable to his economic situation. And both our situations are shitty.

We keep walking.

The clicking starts again.

Ever since I let Khalil hold my pocket knife, he's been opening and closing it, over and over, exhausting

the hinge – snapping the blade out with a one-handed wrist-flick and thumbing the safety mechanism. The blade will loosen soon. Sometimes he stops, looks down at the sand, and lets the blade plummet like a tent stake, and he gives the knife an inquisitive squint before scooping it up, blowing off grains so it doesn't jam. He does this while we walk. But right now he's just clicking and clicking and talking.

– I smoke, he notes.

I pay no attention. It's too hot to reply.

– I smoke all the time. You've seen me.

I have.

Desert sand scorches my toes, and I'm careful, lifting my sandals only so far off the ground. Grit paints little black frowns under my toenails – haven't bathed in days. A briar snags on my leather strap. I bend down and pick it off before it burrows into my foot, and we walk around wild patches of dry grass to avoid thorns and fly swarms and I don't want to see any more sun-bleached ribcages of a dead horse like we saw a kilometer back. God willing.

The river bends left. It's the only contrast to the mundane ochre landscape that rolls endlessly in every direction. Widening blue bows westward, and we keep watch for waylaying troops stationed along the shore, but there've been no patrol boats or soldiers

lurking. We're thankful. We're quietly thankful.

Khalil snaps the knife open and slashes at some invisible enemy.

– Not a menthol or anything gross like that, just a regular cigarette. Smooth, Khalil continues.

I nod, eyes on the river.

– It doesn't even have to be a *Gauloises*. Whatever. I'll take anything.

He breathes in deep through his nostrils.

The knife *thunks* in the sand, straight. Khalil retrieves it, retracting the blade with the palm of his free hand, then flicks the blade out, teaching his hand how to fold the blade back with just a thumb. He'll cut himself sooner or later. That'll be his excuse to go swimming – wash out the cut in the water.

We detour the larger rocks cordoning the shoreline, and navigate the loose gravel where the grade positions us higher than the river – a perfect vantage point for kilometers. Scanning along both sides of the water, we stop and I crouch and take a minute to make sure we're not trespassing on farmland or open to ambush. The view is breathtaking. We're constantly beckoned riverward, called by the water and faithful to its guidance. It's the only jewel we've ever seen. I want to say how beautiful it is, but that would just give Khalil something else to comment on so I keep quiet.

– You're telling me you've *never*, never in your life

smoked a cigarette? Khalil asks, hands on his hips.

– I wasn't telling you anything.

When I get back on my feet, my backpack and the blankets rolled between its straps feel much heavier. We'll have to take a break soon, drink some water. My stomach sounds like a gurgling drain.

– C'mon man, *everyone* smokes.

– Well, when did you ever get the idea that I wanted to be like everyone else?

– Just sayin'.

– Do you do anything but *just say*?

He doesn't answer.

We walk and walk and it's boring. I think I see a jackal hunched in the dirt, stalking silently, but it's just palm fronds woven in a thicket, the thick blade of a leaf mimicking a tail. At least that would've been interesting some. Khalil picks up a long, straight stick, and, snapping off its smaller twigs, swings it with each step.

At least he's stopped clicking the knife.

Lowland sprawls forever. We descend, wiping our forehead, noses, cheeks, and armpits of sweat. It's like the sun has distilled every last tear from our bodies. We pick pebbles out of our hair, silt from the cabinets of our clothes. My *keffiyeh* is sweat-drenched, but I wrap it around my scalp. Passing a jar of water back

and forth, taking meager sips, Khalil and I slow and give each other knowing looks of fatigue.

He's always smiling though.

– It's just ironic, Khalil said.

– What's ironic?

I pass the jar.

– We're risking our lives walking through the desert, and you wouldn't smoke a cigarette if we had one right now.

– That's not irony, man.

– Sure it is. We're literally dying right now. If we wanted to, we could just not drink anything and we'd be dead in a day. Completely dead.

He upends the jar over his mouth, siphoning the last drops. Then he stashes it in my backpack. He's kinda right. If there's anything we're bringing to the desert with us, it's irony. Buckets of irony. Khalil takes care not to break the glass jar, packing it between clothes.

– You have any tape in there?

– Uh, yeah. Electrical tape, I think.

Somehow he knows to unzip the small, outer compartments like he's gone through every pocket before and he gets the little black roll of tape on the first try. I'm not even sure why I brought it.

– You're always prepared, Sal.

He zips the pocket back up, tugging hard.

We go.

Joshua trees and poplars crowd the shoreline. We see more palm trees than I ever thought possible out in the barren dryness – golden wheatgrass carpets their trunks where we mistake the occasional stone for a rooftop or outpost, but nothing's really there. Nothing is ever there.

Khalil sniffs, picking at the tape with his fingernail to find the end.

– You know Falah?

– Huh?

– *Falah.*

– Of course I do. Mentioned him yesterday. The guy with the crippled hand.

I stop myself from miming a crippled hand.

– Yeah, him.

– Why?

Khalil finds the end of the roll and pries its gummy skin, turns and says,

– A cigarette saved his life.

I rub my neck, shake my head.

– Khalil. Will you *stop*?

– No. I'm serious. Really. A cigarette saved his *life*.

– Whatever.

– I'm serious. I wouldn't lie to you about this.

Khalil mumbles this while holding the open knife against the end of the stick, and pulling the rubber

tape loose with his teeth, he unwinds a black ribbon that flaps behind him. A little drool gathers at his lip. He wipes it. He keeps the roll in his mouth while fixing the knife. Yanking the tape tight, he adds another strip for extra strength. When the spear is constructed to his satisfaction, Khalil secures it under his armpit. He skips, joisting invisible competitors.

- You’re gonna make the handle all sticky.
- I’ll clean the damn thing.
- It’s going to be really hard to clean. You’ll need lighter fluid to get all that glue off.

Khalil pays no attention. He stops skipping and pulls another long rubbery strip, wrapping a handle on the opposite end of the stick.

- Don’t waste it, I say.
- What, the tape?
- Yes, the *tape*.
- Like we’re going to need it, really, he says.
- We need tape more than you need a damn cigarette.

I shouldn’t have mentioned cigarettes again.

The spear drags while Khalil replaces the tape in my pack, and a long line is drawn in the sand like a contrail marking our path and I don’t like giving someone such an easy way to track us. It’d be simple to track us anyway. It doesn’t matter. But Khalil finally lifts the spear and says,



— Falah's walking the Jolan with his brother.

— Are you really going to tell this story?

— Yeah, man.

Khalil held the spear straight in the air. It's the equivalent of a lighthouse broadcasting our whereabouts. I can't tell him to put it down without upsetting him now.

— Anyway, Falah and his brother went to buy a few chickens for their mother. I think family was coming over that night. They needed more than just one chicken so they got like, three or something. Live ones. And they're walking home, you know, and they leave the market and they're getting close to their house.

While Khalil's telling me this, he's scanning the horizon, pointing the shiny tip of the spear at imaginary targets. When he turns away, I struggle to hear.

— Yeah, okay. I say loudly.

He shifts back towards me,

— Falah's got two chickens, his brother's got one. I'm not sure how Falah's holding two with his gimpy hand, but he's pretty good with it. Good enough. So, the chickens aren't going crazy or anything, they're holding those bastards around the neck good.

— How do you know?

— 'Cause that's the way Falah told it, man.

— Okay, okay.

We walk down to the gravel beach once the cliff is entirely compressed into shoreline, and Khalil pokes at the dirt with his spear, nicking little triangles between his footprints. He rambles. For some reason he describes the incredible size of Falah's brother's chicken in such great detail that I can't remember everything he said about it. I guess it was really huge. And Falah's brother spent a little extra — throwing in some of his own cash — wanting to impress his mother by bringing the enormous bird into the house with its maniac face cackling for the oven. I could understand. I might've done the same thing. Khalil retracts his arm like a javelin thrower, slowly faking a throw.

— Falah's brother lights a cigarette while he's holding that fat chicken and he's got the chicken's neck strangled in one hand and he's using his lighter in the other. So they turn this corner, maybe like, five, six blocks from their house. And from out of nowhere, out of *nowhere*, a dog starts running at them. Unprovoked. Bam!

— A stray dog?

— Must've been. Mad dog. Mouth foamed over like it's been licking detergent all day. And it appears like it just teleported there.

Khalil cranks an open hand in front of us like he's opened a portal.

— Did they run?

— Yeah. They had to.

— Did the dog want the chickens?

— Man, it wanted that fat-ass chicken Falah's brother had stuffed in his arm 'cause that dog started barreling down the street. But Falah can run, he's got a lot of practice running from things. When God curses you with a gimp hand, he gives you extra abilities somewhere else and Falah's never been caught by anything. So he takes off. But his brother's a little slower.

Khalil knows I'm enjoying the story now, and that's good because I've been ignoring him for most of the day.

— The dog got him?

— Well, Falah's about half a block ahead, both chickens have probably passed out, and he turns down this alley. Not sure why. The dog's right behind his brother. So his brother turns down the alley too, puffing and puffing on his cigarette and sees Falah frozen at the end of it where all this garbage is piled up.

— Blocking the alley?

— I guess it was a *lot* of garbage.

— Crap.

Khalil stops, still. With his palm blocking the sun, he peers out in the distance and he's standing with his spear erect like some conquistador defeated

by ungovernable natives. His brow wrinkles. He nods.

– What? You see something.

– Naw, not yet.

He walks.

– So Falah’s about to snap his two chicken’s necks and pick up a piece of wood or rock or whatever to cave in this dog’s head, but his brother’s running towards him with smoke blowing out the side of his mouth and the dog’s getting closer. Falah’s frozen. But his brother’s face is calm, you know, and Falah doesn’t feel that threatened. His brother’s taking long drags off his cigarette, pulling it out to see how short it’s getting.

– So?

– So the dog’s like paces away from burying his teeth in Falah’s brother’s leg, and he takes one last deep drag, sucks his cigarette down to the nub, crouches, turns, and flicks it, flicks the burning thing straight into the dog’s mouth.

I stop and look at Khalil.

– No *way*.

– I’m serious! Khalil yells.

– Why haven’t I heard this before?

– I dunno. I’ve never told it to you.

– Yeah, ok.

I keep walking and that lets Khalil know to keep telling or lying or whatever he wants to call it.

– It shoots straight down its throat and the dog rolls

over itself – runs away gagging. Crazy!

– I can't believe it, I say.

– It's crazy. I know. The way Falah told it to me, it has to be true.

– I guess. Gross. Man, poor dog.

– Dog was fine. Probably never chased a chicken again.

– Yeah.

We laugh a bit, but not much.

– And that's how a cigarette saved Falah's life.

– Hardly.

– He would've been eaten by that dog.

– Very unlikely.

Khalil laughs through his nose, wipes away snot that's not there. We walk to the shore. Feet disappear into mud. He asks for the sheet that's rolled under my backpack and he dampens it before folding it and draping it over his shoulders. It'll dry before we camp tonight. Clouds dispel the sun with their vapory curtains, giving just enough relief for us to uncover our heads. We drink from the river with our hands, watering the backs of our necks and shoulders. I give Khalil half of my bread; he thanks me with an elbow nudge, says,

– If I can find a cigarette, will you smoke it with me?

– What? I say, chewing.

– Right now. If I can find a cigarette, will you smoke it?

– How're you going to find a cigarette?

– I'm going to hunt one, he explains, grinning as he tests the tip of his spear with the middle of his palm.

– You are going retarded, I say.

– Oh, you'll see retarded.

For the next fifteen minutes, Khalil crouches and slows. He must know it's infuriating; we don't have time for this. We're losing the daylight as the sun shifts in the direction we're headed, a radiating spotlight in our eyes, but he stalks, squinting, one foot sidestepping over the other through the gravel. His off-brand Adedas have turned from black to chocolate brown. I can't even tell if he's laced them.

Khalil's spear points us forward. It's the needle of a compass pulled by forces invisible to anyone but him and I wonder how much lead paint he's ingested in his childhood to trigger these endearingly deranged bouts of weirdness. He splays his free hand towards my chest, keeping me back. A rush of wind flaps the white sheet over his shoulders like a cape and it snaps in my face before I wave it away, backing off.

The tightly rolled hems of his tracksuit choke his knees.

– We don't have time for this shit, man.

— Wait, just wait, Khalil hushes.

— This is ridiculous.

A few seconds later, he perks up, neck extended and rocking. He gestures for me to keep low.

— *Ridiculous*, I hiss.

— Stay here.

Khalil waves his fanned fingers one more time before he bolts, cocking the spear over his shoulder, mud flinging off his sneakers. Sand clouds spit and disappear behind his heels. *Fast bastard* – this is all about showing me how insanely fast he is or something – like it matters, *like I give a shit*. He dashes straight, then sideways, leaping. And he spins around completely, scratching his ass or digging in his pocket for just a second and continues straight.

His body shrinks. His little, far-away body climbs a rock and chucks the spear and it's just a toothpick from here. Watching intently, Khalil waits for it to pierce the sand and when it does he turns toward me and pumps his fist in the air, calling,

— I got one! I got one!

I don't run. There's no need. I watch Khalil circling the spear, and he waits over his kill, arms crossed, occasionally rubbing his chin in thoughtful self-congratulation. He's nodding, glancing up to read my expression – I'm trying my hardest not to reveal

one. It doesn't look like anything is there until I get close. A pack of Marlboro Mediums crumple under the tip of the knife. Soft-pack. Sun-bleached. Cellophane crackles in the breeze.

– Lucky, huh? Khalil gloats.

– You had it all along.

– Yeah, if by *it*, you mean the ability to fend for myself in this openly hostile terrain, then yes. I do have it.

He bends down, pokes the cigarette pack with his finger as if he's checking to see if it's still alive, and yanks out the spear.

– In your back pocket the whole time, I note, pointing.

Khalil flips the spear, frees the pack. The knife shines above his greasy head like a star burning in the late afternoon. He flips the lid with one finger, displays the two cigarettes inside; one of them is crushed. Pinching out the surviving smoke, he puts it in his mouth and draws deep, holding and holding before his nostrils flex with outward air.

The corner of his lip shrivels into a smirk.

– We don't have a light, I say.

Khalil sucks another drag and passes it to me, says,

– Guess we don't.





JUSTIN SIROIS is founder and co-director of Narrow House, an experimental writing publishing collective. He received Maryland State Art Council grants for poetry in 2003 and 2007 and lives in Baltimore, Maryland. MLKNG SCKLS contains deleted scenes from his latest novel, *Falcons on the Floor*, written in collaboration with Iraqi refugee Haneen Alshujairy about displaced Iraqis living in Fallujah in April of '04.

HANEEN ALSHUJAIRY fled Iraq in 2003 with her family, leaving behind extended family in both Fallujah and Baghdad. After seeking asylum in Jordan for three years, she relocated to Egypt where she is finishing a degree in Dentistry at the Modern Sciences and Arts University in Cairo.



Sirois' masterful MLKNG SCKLS is not just a travel narrative, not just an epistolary, not just a war story. Instead, this is desert madness made universal, a coming of age rendered apocalyptic in language as sparse and beautiful and ultimately perilous as the desert passage it describes.

Matt Bell, author of  
*The Collectors* and *How the Broken Lead the Blind*

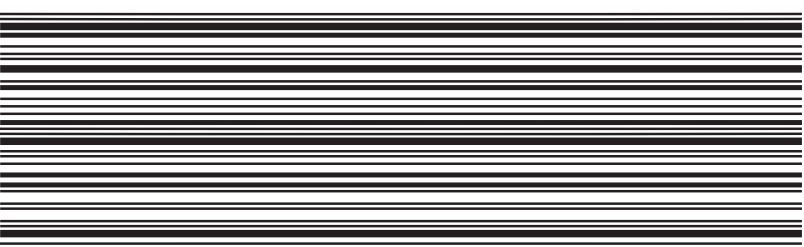
If Beckett's characters stopped waiting for Godot and went, walked into a sunned horizon, their feet would make the dust of MLKNG SCKLS. Sirois' writing is artful and slender in this beautifully sparse novella.

J. A. Tyler, author of  
*In Love with a Ghost* (willows wept press, 2010)

Justin Sirois knows that for many Americans, the U.S. War on Iraq has been little more than one long Scene Deleted. The dynamic between what isn't seen or can't be seen or doesn't want to be seen becomes essential to MLKNG SCKLS, a book comprised of deleted scenes from Sirois' novel *Falcons on the Floor*. In playing peek-a-boo with the desire of readers to know all from some Cheney-style safely undisclosed bunker, MLKNG SCKLS wants us to recognize that in Iraq, peek-a-boo is played with disinformation, weapons, and lives.

Mark Wallace, author of  
*Haze* and *Dead Carnival*

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