

Jason Calsyn

Black Rock (excerpt)

I. Construction

Odor of **flame**: kerosene, citronella, wafting. Two chains, tipped with Kevlar wick, dipped in fuel, lit at distance well away from body. Minimal clothing, hair cropped, tied tight, nothing to set alight by error. Enormous man with multiple facial piercings vigilant, two damp blankets in hand, jug of water alongside, haunted. The woman, his wife, in green bikini, dark, lithe, introduced as Layla, has a serpent tattoo: begins at back of right knee, wraps round thigh several times, extends around back, sweeps over shoulder, ends at left breast. Its mouth devours her heart. She hefts poi chains, spins them in simultaneous motion, forward and back, slowly at first. Allows momentum to build before finding alternate rhythms, left hand then right and reverse -- **flames at chains' ends** blur into solid orange and white lines. She rotates, maneuvers chains under legs, behind back, **traces great arcs** over uptilted head, bellows into sky, stamps feet. Stars through smoke.

Stick-figure Man seems to perch on her shoulder, climb her contours. His blue radiance sears wide pupils, leaves blinking imprints. **Layla's twirling fire overlaps him, consumes him**, spins away, leaves him intact. Enormous, far off. **He burns and doesn't, then does.**

Destination: parking lot. Holding area for final hours pre-entry. Absolved of slow road, RVs depopulate, spill humanity into desert. Awaiting gates - hours early.

Incoming cars kick up dust, coat air in fine sheen. Behind, headlight trail obscured by particulate clouds. Naomi, RV pilot, climbs down to soil. Other side, passenger cabin opens, reveals Mick, Responsible Dave, Saul, myself. I step outside, kneel, kiss ground twice, coat lips in pale gray playa. Sputter, wipe mouth, smile. Alicia, Rachel, from other car. Crack Tecate cans -- cheers. Dance to digital beat from near truck.

Wander between vehicles, investigate neighbors, their playthings. Trailers, old cars, buses, golf carts, transformed into Mad Max-style post-apocalyptic transports and dream conveyances (sea creatures, chariots, a mobile eyeball) through feats of welding and paint.¹ Gifts from fellow travelers: stickers, necklaces. Dozens of small keepsakes of peripheral use. Random shouts and cheers. Bull horns.

Our group, known as the Loose Birds, sings a nonsense song as a round, does a jig:

*"Work, schmirk
I don't have to work
I don't have to work today!
Workin's what I'm shirkin'
And I'm smirkin' 'cause you're workin'
I don't have to work today!"*

Inanity, rotation collapse us one by one into heaps of helpless laughter. Then: cars in motion, slow crawl to entrance. Tire tracks. Void.

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¹ Event is perception of event. Hydra is perception of hydra.

Admittance.

City spokes -- semicircle layout. Streets identified by clock face. 3, 6:30, 8. From interior circle outward: A, B, C, and on. Slow along central streets, 6:30, 7, in search of unclaimed land for camp. Pass elaborate geodesic structures, tent villages. Signs identify camps: Absinthe, Dave's Not Here Camp, Animal Control. Numberless -- dozens, hundreds. Pre-assigned campsites marked with small flags. Avoid upwind Port-a-Potties, extreme proximity to large sound installations. Block after block, all occupied. Then, bare rectangle, maybe 40' by 30'. Point, pull in. Position our RV -- *Space Express* -- to block inevitable wind. Alicia's Land Rover establishes far boundary.

Construction of central dome structure begins. Rebar stakes, tennis balls to cap them, prevent foot injury. Rubber mallets, old rugs, beanbag chairs, tarps. DomoSaurus -- large canvas structure, black mesh atop to deaden sun. Pinch fingers in PVC pipe. Bicycles, electroluminescent wire, cases of coconut water. Large plastic tubs with snap-on lids, shiny and animal clothes inside. Backpacks, camelbacks, water bottles, beer and champagne and liquor and wine. Deflated air mattresses, mounds of blankets. Bright headlamps to sort through it all. Blind one another when we speak. Loose Birds busy building nest.

Set up my small pop-up tent, step away from camp, onto bare playa street. Slow stroll along F street to port-a-potties, a few hundred yards. Skeletons of geodesic dome structures surround, wood and metal support beams support nothing. Under construction. Ladders, nails, scaffolds. Some sleep, some build through night. Filthy cars roll slowly by, in search of home, windows down. Tires kick up dust. All wave and sing. Offer high-fives as they pass, hand me beer.

Dust in eyes: rub with side of hand, make matters worse. Squint and tear, red sting, cough. Sputter, wipe eyes with corner of shirt, blink a while. Vision returns, reveals young lovely woman, dancing, languorous, no music. Midnight, middle of street. Naked but for blue glowing wire necklace. Hums, watches me, smiles. Pale breasts slope, not sorry. I near her, try to speak. Glance away, embarrassed.

Pile supplies in corner of tent. Air mattress occupies entire floor, sags under backpack, weight of water bottles, batteries. Write a few lines in worn black journal. For a book. My purpose. Capture something perhaps fatal. For vaccine.

Stretch legs, indent tent walls. This first night: rare coincidence of darkness and silence. Calm before. Splay under mounds of blankets, try to sleep, fail until morning.

Roused by Responsible Dave, stacks of pancakes. Mojitos and sunglasses. Crusty eyes, bleary, unshaven. Orange sarong. Immense amounts of coffee. Organize Domosaurus' innards, assemble trampoline. Doze face-up on trampoline's black fabric, bulge it down. Wide-brimmed straw hat on face to shield from sun. Restless still hour, until skin starts to sizzle. Rouse self, lumber into shade. Leave sweat silhouette of self on trampoline canvas. Dries in minutes. Can see stain shrink.

Arrival of guest, friend of Saul's: Scumfrog, mega-DJ, here with crew of vehicle known as Robot Heart. Tall, Dutch, blond, wears cowboy hat, large orange-and-blue reflective goggles, necklace with heavy pendant, [Man icon](#). Bears gift: fresh roasted green chiles, in large ziplock baggie, from his New Mexico home. Dinner looms with new importance. Premature saliva.² Scumfrog lounges a while, chats with Saul. Wanders off.

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² Saliva glands respond to external stimuli, odors. Also, internal stimuli. Dreams, visions.

And we're beneath it, him, **The Man**. Take pictures, necks angled up, crane way back to encapsulate him. His base, some sixty feet high, narrow, has stairs inside, several stories of platforms, railings, people climbing, up, down. Penultimate platform, where stairs end, rests fifteen feet beneath **the Man's feet, his sharp straight footless legs**. He reaches forty feet from upper platform, **exposed ribs, near-triangular head, faceless, handless**. Outskirts of a man, x-rays. Arms, stiff as legs, low at his sides. Thick ropes of **blue lights line his limbs**, off now: morning, not yet noon. **He surveys, perpetual. Dust blows in the gaps between his crude bones.**

Naomi climbs stairs ahead of me, into him. I follow her black corset and tutu up. From upper vantage, we glimpse Black Rock, whole. Horseshoe curved: **Man faces** circus tent of Center Camp, center of semicircle. Behind, past the edges, the Temple, under construction -- curved tan walls resemble dunes. All being built: individual camps, kinetic sculptures, tall phalluses of barren welded metal, soon to don skin of tarp or cloth. Sparse.

Far, far off, cars trail beyond vanishing point, incoming, cloud of dust. Drawn to **the Man**, thousands of miles, to **torch him, burn him to ash**. **He sees them coming.**

Two men with djembes start to drum, softly at first, then louder, more urgently. Small throng assembles around Layla, circle at thirty-foot distance, give loudly lewd encouragement, to which she twirls chains faster, hollers louder. Second figure, younger blonde man, bare-chested, pale, steps into circle. Wears long metal extensions, claws, over his fingers. Dips them in citronella oil. *Lights the fingers one by one.* Dances with Layla. *Fire cascades across her body.*

There's a thin black book which levitates at chest level, deep in nameless playa. This book is on fire.

Black Rock: find void land, build a city.
Establish roads, electrical grid, medical facilities.
Plazas and restaurants, roller rink, meditation
centers. Smaller communities, neighborhoods - share
salt, wrenches, rebar stakes. Shade structures and
hammock camps. Information center. Defy desert one
week, then: **burn down the city**, all of it gone. Leave
no trace of its existence.³ Again next year. And
then?

Purple sunburn, line along back just above
waistline. Sudden, inexplicable. SPF-45. Uneven
application, blind spot. Wince. Perils of
shirtlessness. Refusal to don clothing. Aloe on,
gobs. Skin drinks. Soothing cool. More sunscreen.
SPF-85. Fill water. Onward. Shirtless.

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³ In winter, playa floods. A species of shrimp hatches.
Desert is ocean.

Six men in women's maid outfits and gas masks push vacuums around, frantic. Back and forth, back and forth. Stir up dust around themselves, small Pigpen clouds.

"Man, this desert is filthy," one of them grumbles. Power cord trails from back of vacuum, not attached to anything.

See Saul passing, lull bike to halt, report findings. Aside Saul, dark-haired woman, slightly Asian features, Chinese or Korean. Dismounts bike, approaches as if to hug me. Slaps my stomach, hard, fingers splayed. Wince: sunburn there. Five white fingerprints on pink skin. Mischievous grin, her teeth showing. Saul introduces her: Katie, his girlfriend. She hugs me, climbs onto bike, rides ahead, towards dust, empty desert. Saul shrugs, rolls after.

Home. Half-functional RV: water pump, lights, stove okay, but no AC, fridge intermittent. Bedding in back, pullout couch, two swivel chairs, AM/FM. Bins overhead, crammed with cheese puffs, potato chips, bagels, drugs. In one bin, stash of faux fur coats, hats, sunglasses. Oven, non-functional, container of onions and potatoes and yams, forgotten until departure. More storage: under, over, aside sink. Coat closet, also for beans, canned pineapple, Tasty Bites, Annie's Mac and Cheese. Tuxedo coat hangs there, more fur, leather.

Space Express cockpit: Pedro the stuffed tiger keeps watch.

"Remember to drink lots and lots of water," Responsible Dave says, coaching Mick, excited to share advice. "If your pee is yellow, drink more. If you see someone else drink, take a drink. Whenever you think about water, take a drink. Eat salty food for electrolytes. And wear lots of sunscreen. Put it on a few times a day. Wear socks so you don't get blisters."

Saul leans in.

"And don't put your finger inside anyone without sanitizing it," he says, wiggling his eyebrows.⁴

Midday, eroded by thick heat. Side door of *Space Express* open: dim breeze couchward makes noon tolerable. By two, heat humbles one, pushes down. Outside said side door, open space carpeted in filthy tarps, staked overlapping for gapless ground cover. Blue, green, grayed by footsteps and wind. Across from *Space Express*, my tent. Costco bought, blue, small, stained and battered by years of this. Front zipper, hobbled, pulls only mostly closed, only if pulled from below, where teeth can't catch.

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⁴ Humans can't naturally form pearls.

Behind my tent, Saul's, green, new two days ago, already caked in gray, dwarfing mine, hardy. Left of me, more tents: Rachel's low one, Mick's aside hers, Responsible Dave's at back, ashramlike, awninged. Next to Responsible Dave's tent resides Evapatron, his invention -- evaporation pond. Wooden frame coated in tarp, large hamster-wheel-like apparatus which, wind-operated, rotates, wicks away water. Plastic canister coated with torn piece of panty hose catches particulate matter, separates solids and liquids. On other side of ashram, two twenty-gallon white water jugs. Facing ashram, right of my tent, lies Domosaurus, twelve feet high, constructed of interlocking PVC pipe coated in white cloth. This dome our center of operations, our Bird's nest. In front, trampoline, seven bikes, seats covered in furry fabric, LED headlights.

Strapped to *Space Express's* grille: black flag, constructed by Alicia, made of thick EL wires in yellow, orange, red: three chirping birds, beaks uplifted, atop a nest which is Domosaurus, our home. Flag brightly visible in deep night. Beacon for wanderers in search of 4 a.m. solace, when beauty of shatter and skull light conquers one and routs into bed -- those few cool hours surrounding sunrise when closed eyes remain possible, before sky orb bastes our mostly-naked bodies, indents them into flat hardscrabble earth.

Old man materializes from nowhere.⁵ Long wispy white hair, tie-dyed shirt. Pulls ocarina from pocket, plays "Flight of the Bumblebee", *allegro agito*, hops in circles around me.

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⁵ As they are wont to do. Events arise from void.

At appointed time, appointed coordinates, Saul, Responsible Dave, Naomi, myself, near naked, roll in playa until white head to foot. Stand still in early afternoon sun, swelter. Frozen, statuesque. Curious passers stop, try to draw reaction. Dance, make faces, kiss cheeks, sing. No motion. Man slaps Responsible Dave's ass hard. Slight wince, maintains silence. Woman bites Naomi's ear. No motion.

Woman in orange furry bikini approaches Saul, stares eye to eye a moment, close, on tiptoe. Says a code phrase, gives small kiss on lips. Activates motion. Saul, as if robotic, slowly moves right arm to hip pouch, unzips, pulls out salt-and-pepper shaker set. Hands them to girl, says, "One is filled with playa dust, the other has ashes from last year's [Man](#) in it. They're gifts." Lowers arm, freezes again. She kisses his cheek, bounces away. Half an hour: several more people approach, say the phrase ("I love playa dust"), small kiss, receive shakers. Naked man in gold body paint stares down Responsible Dave, twenty minutes.

Becomes performance theater, to freeze this way. Two people imitate, then a few more. Roll until saturated in playa. Stand still. Statues accumulate. Gift seekers come and go. Eventually, shakers gone, we, overheated, allow selves motion, gulp water, walk in direction of camp. Others remain. Some distance off, glance back, see fifteen or twenty in stasis, various postures, as if Pompeii.

Happy Camp: yellow, smiley-face flag. Lookout sits on very tall chair, spyglass. Wears kilt, gigantic white costume glasses. Beer in red cozy, potato chips, traffic cone on head. Someone passes -- he calls out, "Happy!" Person inevitably smiles, waves. Calls back, "Happy!" Hello. Pass by Happy Camp several times today, learn to shout "Happy!" without prompt. Better than "Hello." Why not?

Dusk ritual. Slow, silent, sixty or seventy walk double file. White robes all, **flame patterns** at ankles, white cowls. Carry stout wooden poles, horizontal, on shoulders, ten feet long. Somber, like roods. Hanging from poles: **oil lamps, lit**, six per shoulder, a dozen per person. Some, at edges, carry thinner poles, hooks on ends. Dust swirls at ankles, sun plummets from sky. Stride in unison toward open playa. Eerie, lonesome. Seems someone should wail.

At intersections, plaza areas, one with thinner pole stops, hooks single lantern to tall metal spire, rejoins group. Center camp straight to **the Man, Man** to Temple, many spires lining main path. Lantern for each. Slowly, slowly, **city lit by a thousand small fires.**

Daylight gone, last crumbs of sunset. Head lamps, lantern in dome. Tonight: "White Party" at Opulent Temple, Scumfrog spins at midnight. So, white stretchy pants, white coats, white lights -- matching dusty skin, white hair, playafied. Saul and Katie, in *Space Express*, prepare tortilla concoctions using giant block of crumbling cheese, various vegetables. Green chiles, Scumfrog's gift, the key ingredient. Spice waft.

Searing blue light - the Man, tallest human-built thing, challenges perimeter mountains. Greets night with sorcerous glare. Visible from all points. Gradually, Black Rock illuminates, forms perimeter of neon and phosphor around him: greens, purples, reds. Belches flames straight up into sky.

Complicated series of wires, affixed to coat with safety pins. Battery pack in left pocket, four AA, black box with power switch. Switch on, wires glow blue, emit hum. Long underwear, layers: anticipation of frigid night. Loose Birds flutter about camp, assemble outfits, test lights, fill water. Alicia's mesh hat glows phosphor orange, looks like hair. Music, all directions.

Orgasmic chili flavor. Wash plates over Evapatron - *Space Express'* water pump broken, sink overflows. Small chunks of food on Evapatron tarp. Pepper seeds.

Departure time. Entire group, Opulent Temple.
Clean hands with wet wipe. Mick rides to port-a-
potties, then Alicia and Responsible Dave. Mick
returns, I leave, return, Alicia back, not Dave.
Rachel goes, comes back. Katie leaves, to her camp --
we're to meet her there en route. Saul tries to pump
up flat tire of bike, slow going. Rachel grabs some
glow bracelets for extra light, needs help attaching
around wrists, Mick and I fill water. Responsible Dave
returns. Saul's tire still flat.

"Should we walk?"

Thousands of bicycles. Unicycles, stand-up
scooters, tandems. Clog Esplanade: traffic. Not so
sober, riders bob left and right, occasionally collide,
capas and legs caught in confused chrome. Scraped
legs, bruises. All manner of lights: simple headlamps,
glow sticks stuck in spokes, elaborate LED patterns
that trace images of Pac-Man and **abstract flames**.⁶
Gargantuan rubber ducky perches atop forty-foot pole.
Flurry of yellows and laughter, wide blue light. **Woman
in hoop dress and parasol rides basket bike with large
wheels, does a kind of sitting curtsey, hides face
behind paper fan.**

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⁶ Persistence of vision. Frame rate of eyes. Rotation of
wheels conjures illusion of solidity.

What do feral robots fucking sound like? Motors, sci-fi lasers, winches. Ahead.

Cubatron: dimensions unknown. Perhaps 15 feet all sides. Hundreds of ping pong balls connected by wire, suspended midair as a grid. Cube. Colored LED light inside each ball. All balls, all wires, connected to small control system at base, on autopilot. Computer calculates patterns of lights: which on, which off. Faces emerge from the grid, stop-motion animations, geometric awes. Simple patterns gain complexity, accelerate, climax in epileptic cacophony of flashing color. New pattern starts, slow at first. Alive. Eyes closed, flashes redden inner eyelids -- binary code.

Layla's tattoos shimmer under burning claws. Half-illuminated faces, lips pursed, orange motion reflected in eyes; chains revolve as if by their own volition. Lights sputter, go out, one then the other. Layla turns her back on her partner, writhes away, heads to edge of circle. Slows chains, lets their momentum die, wiggles her ass as she stows them: pulse of drums. Claw man remains central, draws bright ovals before his face, traces along bare skin of arms with fire. Sticks tongue out. Crowd, electrified, bedecked in glowing wire, bustles. Passing bikers brake and stare. BOOM... ba-baa-da-da, BOOM... ba-baa-da-da. Layla performs muscular belly dance, arches her back. Man runs flames in caressing motion up and down the form of her body, devours her with eyes, licks her stomach. Shoulders and hips gyrate -- she leans her head far back. Wraps left leg around his torso. He raises his left arm above her, lowers one claw finger to her face. She opens mouth, takes in flame, purses her lips in an exaggerated sucking expression. Extinguishes it. Pulse of drums. Dancers repeat trick for other nine fingers, sexualize every gesture, linger at fire's near points. Moon, three-quarters full, casts the two figures in slow white light.