

Culture Mulcher in the Wasteland

by Michael Larkin

illustration by Emily Oinen

COMPOSING: They sit in the classroom, Berkeley undergrads under protest, fighting to stay awake. They're in this course—composition—because the university has told them, much to their chagrin, that something in their writing is lacking. Just let me sleep, some of them are thinking, let me dream this class away. It's hard work, this composing, this staying composed, so hard that it sends their hands shooting to their hips like gunslingers quick-drawing their cell phones, desperate for an ephemeral shorthand to affirm that they are alive ("UR hot"; "CU ltr"). Anything to escape having to put their thinking—their selves—onto paper in words that might mean something to them five, 10, 50 years down the line. They're afraid, maybe, of what they might see.

In the halls they come and go, talking on their picture phones.

Decomposing: The guy from the plumbing company is 10 feet below ground, the hole in the middle of the street revealing that he's a few inches of clay pipe from being knee deep in a city block's worth of waste. He straddles my sagging sewer line where it hits the Oakland city line. His sewer spy cam has exposed multiple invasions of juniper and camellia roots that have forced cracks in the pipe. Up until now, unbeknownst to us, my family's wastewater has been seeping into the earth at the side of the house for months, while above ground, we primly drop our coffee grounds and banana peels into a composter; our daughter's cloth diapers into a reeking bag for the diaper service; our recycling into bins that someone spirits away every Friday morning to who knows where—maybe to some magical trash barge that ceaselessly floats on the sea. We delude ourselves, thinking that we've contained our garbage, composed it, kept it neat, policed it up, controlled and respected the environment, while the ground at the side

of our house goes squishy in the rain, the dirt incapable of containing our profligate selves.

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Composing: They rush to avoid the containment of the classroom, embracing a welcome break in the three-hour session. They flee to the vending machine, to the café, to fight the gnawing in their stomachs. Others speed to the bathroom, where those entering the men's stalls will find that other young men have sprayed the toilet seats with piss. They're in denial that they're not little boys anymore, that target practice went out with puberty. Or maybe lifting the seat is just too much of a formality for them, too composed a maneuver. Leave it for somebody else to clean up. Though girls mature faster than boys, I'm told the women's rooms aren't necessarily much better.

In the halls they come and go, talking of *The O.C.* and Foucault.

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Decomposing: AC Transit as sociological study. The homeless guy holds forth articulately on the lost tribes of Israel even as he clumps a leaden dolly containing decaying mounds of graying and yellowing bags—his earthly possessions perhaps—down the bus's hydraulic stairs and into the world. The bus lurches forward again, dislodging a half-eaten Pop Tart from its perch on the window sill, crumbs littering the seats, ersatz berry goo sticking to pant legs. A group of middle school kids giggle at one of the boys who, encouraged, hurls garbage out the rear door of the bus as it hisses open at each stop. Crumpled paper, wax cups, plastic tops, chunks of fast food—it all flies out the door, some of it hitting passersby. The kids snicker. They get off at their school, and the boy who tossed the garbage is the only one of his bunch without a backpack or so much as a book. He's unencumbered by educational materials. What's

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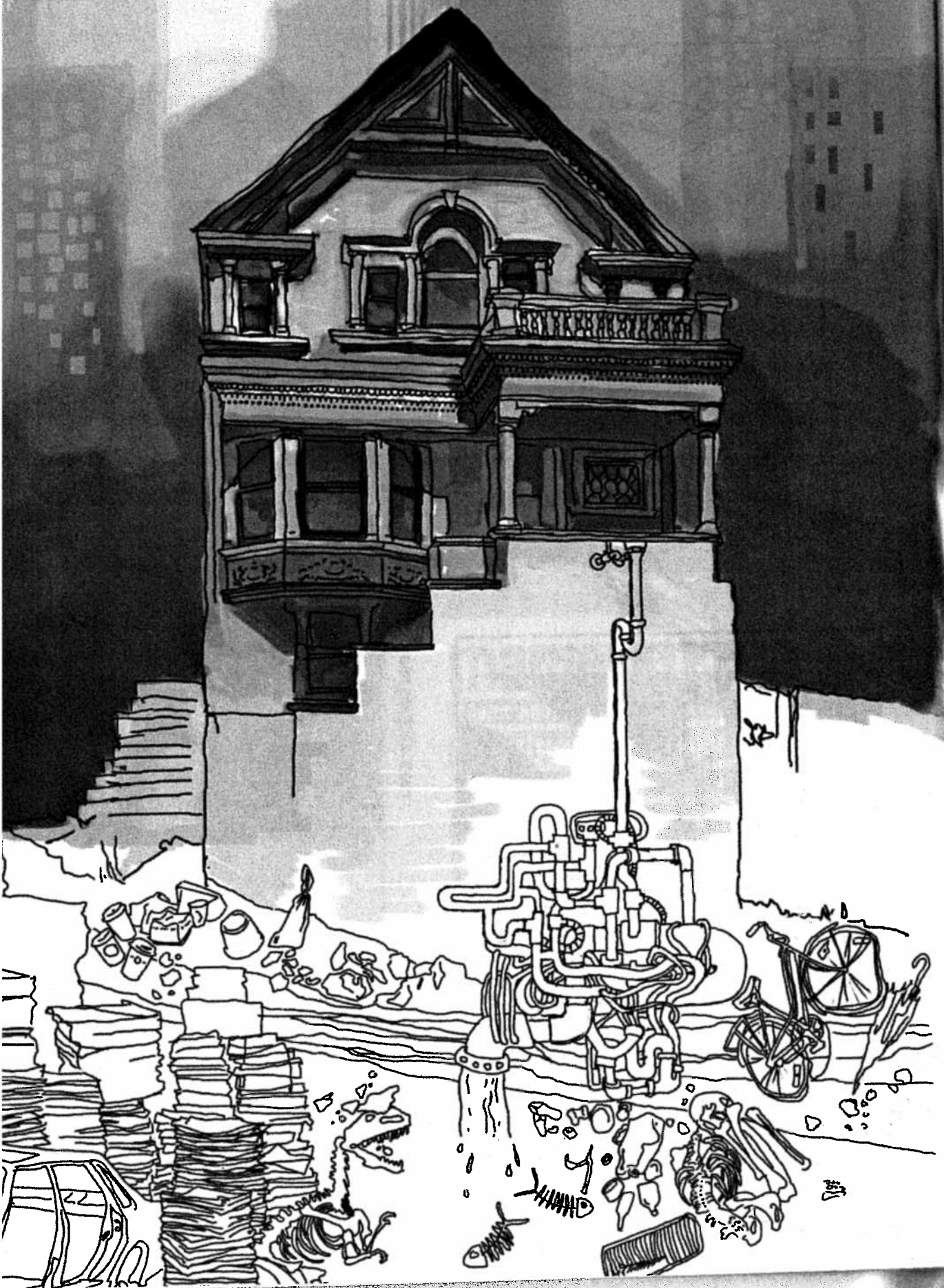
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it like being his teacher? Is he just being a kid or does he need some composition? Maybe both. Across town, a middle-aged man pauses before getting into his car to throw an empty glass bottle of Starbucks Frappuccino over a chain link fence. The bottle settles into the high weeds of a vacant lot. The empty vessel of a coffee monolith's profit left for others to find: someone else's archeological dig.

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Composing: They're back, anxious to get their latest compositions returned. They're nervous. They sense what they already know: Their sentences are sometimes nonsensical, their arguments simplistic or illogical, their paragraphs only sometimes hanging together in a recognizable form. The grades aren't good. It's tough to judge them like this, to tell them that they lack rhetorical form ("flow," in their vernacular) without them mistaking it for a permanent assessment that they've no hope of composing themselves, that they're decomposing and will never be otherwise. They're not surprised, but they're not happy either. Their compositions have been judged lacking. There are consolations, however. It's Thursday. And Thursday is

As much as we'd like to marshal the confusion and detritus into something that has a fixed, manageable meaning; as much as we seek the easy, reductive answers; as much as we might like to write with controlled grace, to be composed, it's tempting just to let it all go because we know that life is hard to get a fix on.

the new Friday, as it has been for years on college campuses. They're going to get good and decomposed tonight, boy...

In the halls they come and go, talking of Everclear Jell-O.

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Decomposing: Mountain View Cemetery—the dead rest here between two cities of different compositions: Poor old Oakland is barely holding it together, while rich old Piedmont remains tightly structured. (It's not by accident that the cemetery rests on Oakland's side of the border.) Mountain View is as composed a civilian cemetery as you'll ever see, the circling lanes created by Frederick Law Olmsted, designer of Central Park. The dead lay in grand states of decomposition, every headstone a story. The old marble and cement borderlines erupt in spots, displaced by earthquakes and the roots of ancient magnolia trees that resist this human attempt at containment, at formal ritual. Ashes to ashes. A sign has one descendant offering his family's crypt for sale for a quarter million dollars—a Bay Area real estate bargain. Urns and bones included? A paramedic emerges from an ambulance and lies down for a nap in the grass between two cement slabs; his partner stays in the truck. Here a marker for a couple who lost most of their eight children in a two-year span in the 1800s. I wonder at the story there and grip my daughter a little more tightly. Nearby, a neo-goth teen with a notebook open on his lap sits in a circle of graves—a poet composing amidst memories of lives and deaths. Maybe a student of deconstruction, too. I nod. He waves.

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Composing: Several years ago, in another classroom, in Chicago, there's Earl, a 50-something man working towards his bachelor's degree surrounded by kids one-third his age. He comes with barnacles, some history. He'd marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in the 1960s, back in the days before he worked in his current job for Chicago's "poop shoot," as he calls it, the wastewater treatment plant. When he comes in to discuss a reading or his writing, he is always worried that he stinks of the city's waste. My waste. He's working hard at engaging, embracing the chance to compose himself as he gets a mental break from days of being surrounded by the Second City's noxious effluvia. He wants to make the case for slavery reparations. Maybe some kind of link there to his current situation, he speculates. These kids, man, they don't get it, he says of his classmates, they got it good and

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they don't appreciate it. As he says this, it occurs to me that not too many years ago I was one of those kids, struggling to focus in a discussion section with a nervous young classicist who tried to break down Ovid and Euripides, who read my horrendous prose that offered some painfully self-evident thesis about Plato's *Dialogues*. Yet things have changed. I'm older, composing and decomposing at the same time. Am I Earl now, or am I still one of those kids who urinates on toilet seats and ritualistically decomposes himself on Thursday nights? I am both. I am neither.

In the halls they come and go, talking of how 21 used to seem so old.

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Decomposing: The new pristine retail of Bay Street in Emeryville has engulfed the Shellmound, a burial place for the Ohlone tribe. Old Navy and J. Jill built on exhumed graves, only a hump of earth remaining as an architectural touch, an aesthetic flourish on the walk of commerce between the new P.F. Chang's and the state-of-the-art AMC movie theaters, while Ikea's big blue and yellow dog barks from its factory box in the distance, hard by clogged freeway arteries. Why do I feel compelled to join the neat procession into the store and to emerge with something I don't need made of blond wood and called a Gluken or a Kroky? The whole stretch is spotless. Dust free. Nary a decaying word in sight. Driving the chalk white street that's not quite a street, you can almost feel your car's wheels being locked into tracks that pull you along for the equivalent of a Disneyland ride. Here in the age of American empire we glide over the decomposing bones of dead Indians with composed, studious obliviousness. There are no fires of Rome burning in sight yet, but is that a fiddle I hear, or is it the music drifting out the doors of Victoria's Secret?

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Composing: I don't want to be here in the classroom either, not really. I want to have fun too. We are alike, my students and I—we don't want to compose any more than we want to decompose. As much as we'd like to marshal the confusion and detritus into something that has a fixed, manageable meaning; as much as we seek the easy, reductive answers; as much as we might like to write with controlled grace, to be composed, it's tempting just to let it all go because we know that life is hard to get a fix on. It's messy. There's an easy, reductive answer for

you: Life is messy.

Yet we're not nihilists. We naturally desire to compose. We desperately want to be heard, understood, contextualized if not neatly compartmentalized. Why else have we the bloggers amongst us? Why else this magazine? Why else this essay? We're fighting decomposition at every turn by composing ourselves before nature overtakes us, makes us memories and fertilizer for civilization's onward march.

In the halls they come and go, talking of their essays' mad flow.

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The sewer line is long repaired, our waste again joining the flow of the rest of the city's on its way to the wastewater treatment plant where someone like Earl is daily reminded that we are all too human. We wash our own diapers now, acutely aware of the ammonia stink of our beautiful little girl's bidness that rises atomized into the air and whooshes down through the flawless pipes. The city has dropped off new recycling bins that ask for an even wider variety of our leftovers and castoffs, trying to keep us from overflowing our banks. The composter, added to but untilled these many months, has stalled out. The rich decomposition I wanted is merely a dried-out pile of my own garbage, a pile I had hoped would disappear only to reappear transformed into rich, life-giving dirt. The raccoons who've pried the lid loose have found little that interests them. Even they know that I'm decomposing at a rapid rate, that I'm trying to keep it together. Just like my students. Just like everybody.

This is where the composition teacher would suggest an inductively presented thesis statement that neatly knits together the disparate pieces of prose.

Time's a wastin'.
Waste not, want not.
Oh, what a waste!
I am so wasted!

There is no thesis statement. ...

Michael Larkin hopes that T.S. Eliot isn't rolling over in his grave.