

**Anisse Gross**

## **Dear Methheads**

**I**n the mornings we would wake up and stand in the Edwardian bay window, wearing our robes, and address them, as if addressing the nation. Those two words: dear methheads. What kind of people start their day this way?

We'd say things like, "Dear Methheads, Good morning. What are you planning on doing today? Oh right, staying home and getting high. That's what we thought."

The Methheads were a gay male couple that lived in the apartment building across the courtyard, directly across from us on the top floor. The backsides of our buildings faced each other like in the movie *Rear Window*. Their apartment was far away enough that we couldn't make out all of the details, but close enough so that we could watch them moving around like figures in a dollhouse. I could see them drink water, put on shirts, kiss one another, but I couldn't make out the writing on their shirts, or what the large painting above their couch was of. It looked like some kind of seascape. From across the way, when I measured them with my fingers, they were about three inches tall.

One of the Methheads was a tall blond man probably in his late forties with tan skin. His hair spiked up on the top, like it was at attention. We got the feeling he was the one on the lease, perhaps by the way he walked with such purpose, or perhaps because of his age. His boyfriend, a tall, lanky brunette, was much younger than he was, maybe twenty-three, and he spent a lot of time walking around the apartment with his shirt off, and sitting on the back steps smoking.

We decided, with basically no evidence, that they were methheads because of the way they sat out on the back steps and leaned over, smoking something out of a pipe. I mean they could have

been smoking weed or something else, but something about their industriousness throughout the day said meth.

Every morning, no matter how early I got up, they were always up before me, cleaning the windows, watering the plants, typing on laptops, drinking coffee, which after a long series of weeks and months became very off-putting. I was always waking up late, around ten in the morning, always with an empty feeling of not wanting to do anything, and there they were, already doing things. It felt like they had accomplished so much. There was this feeling that they were always awake, that they never slept, that they'd never go away.

In the morning, we'd sit in our apartment, drinking coffee, smoking cigarettes. I could see the piles of ash left over from the night before, sad reminders.

I couldn't bring myself to do the dishes, and we'd wait until we were starving to eat. My boyfriend would sit in the large brown velvet wingback armchair in the living room and read the paper, while I'd lie on the sage green couch looking up at the ceiling or pretending to work on my writing. Then at around noon, I'd have more coffee and some toast and then soak in the bath. I often cried in the bath. My days never really began until about two in the afternoon.

They watered their plants, which were everywhere. You could see their muscular arms reaching around the house: drawing back curtains, shaking out towels, pouring coffee into mugs.

In our apartment there were two plants struggling to stay alive. They were either too dry or water-logged. One was a small little succulent that looked like a satellite dish, and the other a small fern. The two plants began to lean in towards one another, as if looking for a hug, as if seeking solace from our negligence. My boyfriend was unemployed and I was a graduate student, and yet we couldn't manage to keep two little plants alive.

The day would turn, with the sun always setting behind the Methheads' building, blaring in at us, its radioed orange and pink, and then it would be night. The nighttime, when their apartment was

lit up like a diorama against the dark sky, was a great time to watch them.

Against the dark sky, they would walk around shirtless eating what I imagined were fancy meals, and lighting candles. The inside of their apartment was really beautiful from across this distance, with deep red walls, chandeliers, comfortable chairs, long wooden tables. They would entertain long drawn-out evenings with each other, often stopping to kiss one another, and from what I could tell there was no television in their house. We lived in the exact same kind of apartment as they did, a large Edwardian top floor apartment, in a building that looked exactly the same. I imagined that their layout was identical and that we were on two sides of a mirror. When they disappeared into parts of their apartment where I couldn't see, I knew they were in the bedroom or in the hallway. I could see them inside of my mind, moving around.

Sometimes one of them stood in the window looking right into our apartment. It felt like they were looking right in at us, and because we hated to live with the curtains drawn, in fact we refused to, we just let them stare in, but it grew more and more on our nerves as the months went by. We refused to draw the curtains, because no one was going to tell us how to live, no one was going to dictate our lives. So instead we started talking at them.

All throughout the day and night we could hear each other saying, Dear Methheads, please stop fucking looking at us. Dear Methheads get a job. Sometimes I would hear my boyfriend saying those two words in the bathroom, or in the kitchen, Dear Methheads this, and Dear Methheads that. We were insane. On occasion, we would even say it falling asleep. I found myself beginning to say it outside of the house. To anyone that bothered me in the world I would say, Dear Methhead.

Every single day, we watched them in their industrious nothingness: eating, smoking, watering the plants, moving around their house like dolls in a play with no plot.

Days and weeks and months we spent staring at them saying, Dear Methheads.

But then one day, standing in the window, hiding behind my robe, watching one of the Methheads sitting in the window reading, I wondered, Dear Methheads, is there something you want to say to us?

I wondered after all of these endless days of watching them, of standing in the window addressing them, sometimes even yelling at them, if they had been talking to us as well.

And if they were, what were they saying?

Could they tell from that distance, watching our own three-inch figures, that we were profoundly unhappy? Did they stand in their window addressing us as “unhappy couple”? Did they say, Dear unhappy couple, we can see you?

Did they address us separately? Did they say, Dear girl of unhappy couple, we can see you doing dishes, reading books in excruciating loneliness? We can see you crying in the tub even though the door is closed? We can see your mascara run and run?

Did they say, Dear man of unhappy couple, we can tell that you’re unemployed and that you drink too much and snort cocaine off the coffee table when the girl is away and that you’re trapped at the bottom of a well?

Did they say, Dear unhappy couple, we know all of the things that you do and don’t do, and that your secret is safe with us?

Can you feel someone from a distance? Can you feel unhappiness from fifty feet away, through glass, lit up by lamps? Without seeing our faces clearly, the subtle expressions we gave one another, without hearing our voices and knowing which books we were reading, did they still know us?

The more time passed, the more we felt like we couldn’t do anything without them watching us. We moved the chairs around in our apartment so that we would be out of their view. My boyfriend put his large brown wingback chair in the walk-in closet, and I started reading in a little nook on the ground by the space heater, where I knew they couldn’t see me. We determined at what hours the angle of the sun cast us in shadow and it was during this time we moved freely as we liked. There were several glorious hours when the

sun blared against our windows so hard, that we knew all they saw was a blinding white light coming out of our apartment. Oh, the hours in which we were fully hidden.

We debated whether or not to put a sign in the window telling them to leave us alone.

We lost our minds.

I remember the disdain with which we addressed them. Something about calling them methheads made us feel better than them, even though between the two of us we drank and smoked and did cocaine.

But here is what I actually observed: They ate regular meals. And they always ate sitting down, slowly, never standing up or at the stove, and they took their time with everything.

The Methheads would often stop and hug each other. We never ever hugged anymore, unless it was something we had to do to keep the other alive.

They lit candles at night. We turned out the lamps.

They lived shirtless and maybe pantless. We hid behind our robes.

And they were high as kites. I'm pretty sure they were having the time of their lives.

And we were down at the bottom of a deep well.

We were so unhappy that we were unable to even look at each other on some days.

Did they know this about us? I thought this was our dark secret, that our unhappiness was contained from the world, like a controlled virus in a lab, but maybe they knew.

When we stood in the window, giving our morning address as if to the nation, when we said those words, who did we think we were? Who did we think we were fooling?

One day, in August, probably in a moment of looking for happiness, we went up onto the roof to have a glass of wine. We had never been on the roof before, in the entire time of living there. There was a staircase inside of our building that led up a tiny hallway, at the end of which was a door to the roof.

We opened up the door and there we were on the gravel rooftop. You could see the whole of San Francisco from there. The view stretched out over the entire city: financial district buildings standing up like little Bic lighters, the two orange shoulder blades of the Golden Gate Bridge, the whole green swatch of Golden Gate park fanning out to the ocean. The new De Young museum, like a large copper ballerina twisting up into the sky. The air was that perfect degree that makes you feel alive. And it was quiet out. We could hear the trees on our street rustling, and the low sound of cars like the drone of the ocean. We were looking out at the cityscape, with our backs to the Methheads' apartment. It was then that we heard a window open behind us. We paused before turning around.

When we got the courage to turn around, we saw the blonde man of the Methheads waving at us. I stopped, unmoving and looked at my boyfriend. Oh no, I thought, he's going to say something to us. And he did. He said "hello." We just waved back, petrified, stunned. Neither of us could move. Now, here we were, exposed, and now I could see his face more clearly, leaning out of the window.

"Finally you came out," he yelled across the courtyard.

I couldn't say anything.

My boyfriend yelled, "Yeah."

And then the Methhead said this: "You just walked out of the door to heaven."

I looked at my boyfriend.

"What is he talking about?" I whispered.

The Methhead could see that we had no idea what he meant.

"Look to your left," he yelled.

We turned to see what it was that he was talking about. We see what it was the Methheads had been looking at the entire time we thought they were looking in at us in our apartment.

What we see is a door against the sky. The door we walked out of onto the roof. It's a small illusion. The doorframe has little triangular sides sloping into the building, so that it looks as though there is nothing to its sides. But from their view, what they see is just a simple doorframe drawn against the blue blue sky, like a doorway

to heaven. This whole time, they had been staring at it, waiting for it to open.

And then we, of all people, came out of it. The people who had been callously saying Dear Methheads every morning and night. We, the people who had spent a year hating them, hoping they'd go away, we were the magical people who came out of the door to heaven. They had been waiting for us. To them, we were angels.

Anyone could have walked out of that door, but on that day it was us.

We turned back to face him. No longer behind glass, out in the open now, he could see our faces, and we could see his. His eyes were bright blue, and he was smiling at us.

*"Dear Mehheads" was the runner-up in the 2022 Patty Friedmann Writing Competition's CNF category.*