

miniMAG

take a walk

an anthology

issue#150

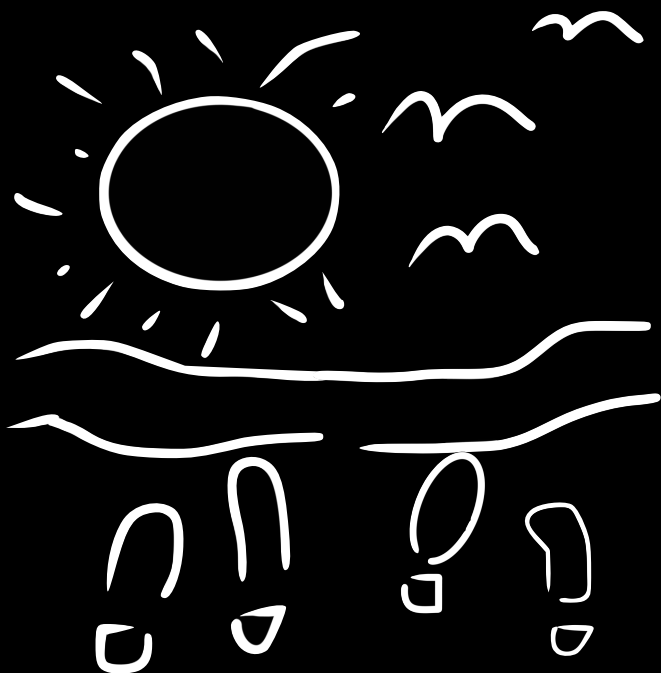
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miniMAG

ISSUE150

TAKE A WALK

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Just around the block,

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BETWEEN TWO STORMS AND ADVANCED HEARING

(VALENTINE'S DAY, FOR TARA)

BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO



there had been a tremendous snowfall, and days of shoveling out. the icicles measured over one foot long and hung silently and beautifully like crystals in a fairy tale cavern. and I hurt my foot somewhere in that work of salt and movement in snow, but kept on. finally it settled and was manageable between town trucks ploughing and salting, the cessation of the precipitation, and time. but the radio and word of mouth said another storm was on the way, and not too far off. I went to a faraway field and walked, enjoying the peace. there were some old bridges and winter chaparral sitting around, plus a group of blackbirds calling out from trees. I kept on. truth be told, there was in the distance a train track and some bridges for the trains, and hydro lines,- but the area was so grand and vast that its atmosphere absorbed these no problem and they had their own quirky beauty to a person like me that saw much of the phenomena of the world as equals to one another, if even because most things were necessary. the snow was pure and glistened somehow, I don't know exactly how, because the sun wasn't out too much. on the contrary the lands and airs were thick with a funny silent sullenness. It's like they were a wee bit portending something if something could lightly be portended. but that's how it was. you couldn't identify it,- but there was something there. life was like a dream, or even stranger, a place between two dreams when they shift gears and landscapes. I talked to a man i ran into and he was friendly. 'I don't know whether or not to go to my cottage tomorrow,' he said, 'because I have to travel the last leg by snowmobile and it's gonna get bad. I'm debating...'

‘If you go and run for into trouble,’ I told him, ‘you will tell yourself you should have listened to the part of yourself that said to use caution. And if you go without a hitch and all is well, you will say to yourself, “This is great. Why did I worry so much before?”’

And the man paused and looked at me. He then returned with, ‘That is EXACTLY what I was thinking about it all. You have said it.’

I looked around at the darkish firmament. ‘Thanks,’ I told him, ‘I better get going. Look...whatever you choose I wish the best for you.’

We made our separate ways. I walked off the path then on the path. Sometimes there were other souls. Most friendly, some too wound up, unhappy inside and projecting it outwards. I could see who they were for better or worse, read their energy. that’s psychic, but also life experience.

Eventually I made my way out of there. I got a coffee. Then I went and bought my ride or die woman a balloon in the shape of a red heart filled with helium, a card, and a furry cat stuffed animal because she liked cats. Back home I looked up at the sky again before going inside. It was quiet. I washed my hands at the sink and then something happened. I heard a buzzing sound really loud in my right ear. But I liked it. The new age set calls these ‘downloads,’ but I didn’t discern any specific or discernible information. It changed my hearing though. It gave me a bit of a super power if you will. I could hear things in the next room that I couldn’t hear before. this was interesting.

someone on their phone. someone talking. I liked this newly acquired perceptive hearing talent.

I would wait. I was good at waiting. I'd wait for the next storm to arrive. What else could you really do besides? I'd write the ride or die love poems. it was my love language as they say, and though not hers per se, she liked them anyhow:

Valentine~

you the sea, for Tara (feb 14 2025)

once we saw the world, and I did look seriously and honestly at it. but my head i then turned, and focused instead on you. my sojourn was lacking, but you saved me. thanks goodness. world, nah. you, ya, the seaside sanguine beyond the city saturnine.

poem for ride or die virgo earth queen (feb 14 2025)

cycles and seasons, moons and the sea,
walking by tides, the good mystery,
much we have seen, by summit then stream,
I can see us, and your spirit's gleam,
all words for you, spiritual yields,
just us and the sun, by pastoral fields

~~~~

I'd also help paint walls that needed it, and do small repairs. from time to time I glanced out at that strange air, the air more ominous than auspicious. the air that

marked the trembling travelling tremendous winter storms....

---

the countenance of the clouds calls ancient labours

I was in the long and wide fields, and the clouds above were not modern, and didn't follow vapid fashions but spoke through their beingness of ancient truths. -go and be yourself, called the clouds, and just do that.- I thought about this and felt this. The clouds were right. They live their own way. I should also. There was a bridge and the bridge was snow laden and the planks wooden you could see their sides longing and lounging over the frozen stream. the stream then had ice over the snow. the world was bright. A magical healing thing happens in the fresh air. yes. nature. loving are the purlieu trees, and I can hear distant traffic and wind. I would work from the heart. only. friendship with the inner vision. a strong wind arrives over the field and swept up the snow like a spirit swirling and then took some away. power. powerful. prowess. i remembered the sagacious card readers, the helpful diviners, and their good things,- fun pulp books, maybe supernatural mysteries, an old friend who read my poetry since a long time, the old colourful and plastic toys I had, GI Joe, space figures, jeeps and trucks and tanks. green duvet so large it could cover the world seemingly anyways. chakras. ajna. crown. whimsical scents of summer winds. trees flow. quiet mind. reading. Master Ching Hai explains an esoteric thing, maybe few will understand, and it is in a lecture about how reading something before and after enlight-

ened is different. you can see more clearly the intent and meaning of what you are reading AFTER awakening. It's bettering. it's interesting. it's expansive. in the distance

dogs bark. at night an audio sound is in the air like angels, a choir of thousands of angels. give me this. show me such. unify the soul. journey. landscapes interior and exterior. I had a dream of the sea, the salt air and hot sand, a crooked tree beyond there. palm tree. green fronds. I always go back to that. blessed is the coastline. the affluent that visit there...do they know?- oh mata mother, sister kind, brother of known,- I would honour the place,- write hundreds of poems and take hundreds of frames. but it's up to the fates, fortune, the gods. whatever is meant to be will be. wild is the oceanic atmosphere. I was in real life on a ship, a fourteen story tall vessel, and some birds followed the boat. beautiful. daylight. even though rain-mist. those clouds too,- full of signs and symbols and wonder. clouds are a great part of life and love and awe. clouds. I am like a child looking at the clouds. the firmament is a moving and still song visual. a poem. a story. pages and pages open. I breathe. I stretch. back in the north the field and the winter clouds once more. - be yourself,- they call,- words are truth and a calling, words and words are worlds. yes. yes. everything else comes and goes. be intuitive, they say, and open and kind,- like us. those that will understand will understand. those that do not, do not. sky sky sky. afternoon auspicious. bless me clouds and I shall pray to you. I shall pray and picture and write. at the night a bird waited on the porch and didn't fly away right away. a bird had never been there on the porch at night. I had a good feeling about it. and in the

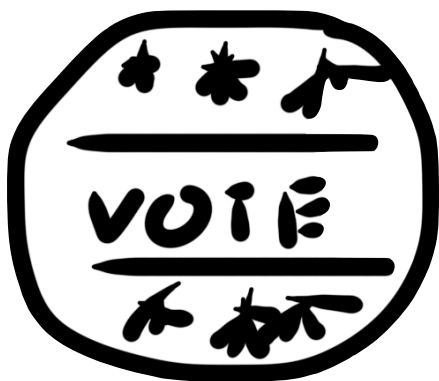
day,- a bird alights on a snow hill and calls out at me,  
a song! a sign!- right there. as I write this after this  
sentence a diviner says, ‘...and birds are angels...’ and  
then goes beyond and disappears. thank you bird. god  
nature and angels have to be right,- eternal,- and not  
the world of populace and individuals. why? simple.  
because they are

passing. they are actually maya, meaning they have no  
actuality. seek the Source. the eternal. the solace of  
stars. seek the solace of stars. land and sea and wind  
and tide. valley. green summer. even cold winter. and  
bird. the bird is everything.



# STATE ELE- CTION DAY, PORT LIN- COLN

LEWIS WOOLSTON



Craig Marr was out of sorts all morning. He had a sense of excitement at maybe being able to see her today. He also had a sense of guilt because he felt excited to see her. He was stuck in that circular emotional churn of feeling something and then feeling guilty for having felt something. It was not a pleasant experience for him.

His wife Susan pottered about the house oblivious to his emotional state. Their daughter Hannah was content to make her usual mess of breakfast in front of the Saturday morning cartoons. Craig stewed quietly on the couch, the technicolour nonsense of the cartoons making no impact on him whatsoever.

‘Darling are we going to vote first thing today or wait until the afternoon?’ Susan’s query broke him out of his reverie.

‘May as well get it done this morning, then we don’t have to worry about it.’

‘Okay, well how about we walk up to the school once I’ve got little miss organised and then it’s done?’

Craig nodded that this would be okay and Susan immediately started cleaning up the child.

They walked to the nearby primary school. The signs and colours of the various candidates were visible some way off. Susan looked at a corflute and asked her husband a question.

‘So who are you voting for this time?’

‘I reckon the Shooters, Farmers and Fishers Party, I know Roberta Lee a little bit from the rifle club, she’s their candidate, I reckon she’s alright. How about you?’

‘I was going to vote for the Greens.’

‘What the fuck for?’



‘I heard their bloke on the radio, he was talking about school funding and education policy, Hannah will be starting school in a couple of years, that stuff is important.’

‘The Greens want to shut down everything this town runs on, fisheries and agriculture, they want to close it all down, they’re fucking mad. Not to mention that half of them are pooftas.’

Susan was slightly annoyed at this and scolded her husband.

‘Don’t speak like that, it’s not true.’

‘It is true, look at them.’

He stopped in front of a Greens corflute to make his point and wagged his finger at the face of the candidate printed on the cardboard.

‘Look at him, he’s a bottom botherer for sure, no straight bloke has a face like that.’

‘That’s hardly scientific Craig.’

He pursued the point no further. He was sure of his facts even if his wife doubted him. They walked towards the school and began to merge into the general crowd.

People from the various parties were handing out how to vote cards out the front. Craig looked and saw Roberta Lee there. His heart fluttered a little before the guilt squashed it back down. Craig and Susan ran the gauntlet between the spruikers. Susan stopped to take a how to vote card from the Greens person much to Craig’s annoyance. As if to get back at her he stopped to take a card from Roberta Lee and decided to have a quick chat.

‘Hey Roberta, I’m Craig, we met a few months back at the rifle club do. You gave a speech and announced you were running remember?’

‘Oh yes, hi Craig, good to see you again. How’s it all going?’

He was pleased she remembered him and felt himself getting schoolboy shy with her. Hold it together old mate, he thought to himself, you’re not thirteen anymore.

‘Good, the wife and me are just coming up to vote today, I’m voting for you I reckon.’

‘Oh that’s great Craig, I need every vote I can get, it’s an uphill battle for a minor party candidate taking on the two party duopoly and the good old boys club. I really appreciate your support.’

She touched his arm in a friendly and familiar gesture as she spoke and he felt something stir in him. Then the guilt. The knowledge that his wife and daughter were only a few metres away made him pull his shit together.

‘Yeah no worries, I reckon you’re the best of the lot anyway. I tried to convince the wife but she’s voting for the Greens, she likes their educational policy stuff she reckons.’

Roberta curled her face in disgust at this news and moved a little closer to Craig before speaking. Craig felt the thrill of being in an intimate conspiracy with her.

‘That’s how they suck people in you know, but they just want more educational funding so they can push communist propaganda on kids without the parent’s knowledge. Not to mention that half of them are poof-tas and have designs on kids.’

Craig nodded enthusiastically, he felt a real kinship with Roberta in this moment.

‘Yeah that’s what I told her but she didn’t listen.’

A little light of hope warmed his soul. Roberta understood, Roberta knew what was what, Roberta was a kindred soul. Maybe, just maybe, if he could talk to her a little more, really get to know her and she him, then maybe, just maybe, the spark he was sure was there could be fanned into a flame.

He saw his wife out of the corner of his eye and snapped back to reality.

‘Anyway, I have to go, good talking to you mate, here’s hoping you win.’

‘Thanks Craig, good talking to you as well, we should have a bit more of a chat one day.’

Hope filled his soul again.

‘Yeah for sure mate.’

He joined his wife in the line up to vote and tried not to show the elation he felt. Hannah was waving around a little plastic Australian flag that someone had given her. The colours of it pleasing her toddler mind immensely.

Susan smiled at him affectionately and he smiled back feeling more guilty than ever. Hannah dropped her flag and started crying. Susan knelt down to deal with the child and Craig used her distraction to take a long hard look back at Roberta Lee.

She was standing in the same spot still trying to pass out her how to vote cards to a largely indifferent public. Craig took in her fit, farm-raised body, the exquisite curves of her arse squeezed, not too tightly but just right, into a pair of R.M Williams jeans. Her breasts pushed against her check shirt in a way that suggested she knew what she was doing but still had enough class not to over do it. Her dusty blonde hair straggled down her back suggesting a girlhood growing up on a farm and getting plenty of sun and a

battered Akubra hat crowned her as queen of the country girls.

Craig took all this in in a matter of a few seconds but it was more than enough.

He turned his attention back to his wife and child lest he be caught staring. Hannah had her flag back and was happy again, Susan was pushing the pram towards the line-up. He looked at his wife's body for comparison against Roberta's. An arse gone to fat after the baby, hair done up casually in a pony tail suggesting minimal effort and breasts tucked away under a light jumper as though they were unimportant. The comparison depressed Craig. The thought of how Susan had been when they first got married depressed him even more.

Was life like this for all men? He wondered, did you fall for a woman while she was young and beautiful and then find yourself stuck with her when she more or less gave up? Seduced by a tight young bottom and perky tits only to find yourself spending years with a fat arse and saggy breasts. The oldest disappointment known to man perhaps. Craig imagined some Biblical patriarch, perhaps Abraham or King David, feeling the exact same way as he did now.

The realization that it was his turn to vote snapped him out of his meditations. He shuffled forward and gave his name, got himself crossed off the rolls and was given the ballot papers and instructions on how to fill them out. He moved to the little booth where Susan was already filling hers out and examined the papers.

He found her name straight away, Lee, Roberta, Shooters, Farmers and Fishers Party. He put a clear 1 in the little box next to her name. He thought about

what numbers to put against the rest of the field and decided he didn't care very much. He filled out the rest of the numbers more or less at random only making sure to put the poofa from the Greens last just to get back at Susan. He cast his vote with no ceremony and only a small satisfaction.

He emerged having done his democratic duty and feeling oddly anti-climactic about it. Susan was pushing the pram with Hannah in it and suggesting they take her to the playground on the edge of the school grounds to let her run around for a bit. He agreed without fuss and they began to walk off. He snuck a quick look back at the front of the building where Roberta Lee was standing. She was facing away from him talking to some woman who had come to vote. The curve of her arse in those jeans! He thought, by God a man could write poetry about the curve of her arse. He turned back to his wife and daughter and followed them out.

Hannah played happily in the sand while Craig and Susan mostly watched. There were a couple of other parents and kids there and the atmosphere was relaxed. The kids had all been given little plastic Australian flags by someone at the polling booth and these had been planted in the sandpit like territorial claims by the children who by now had tired of them and were more interested in the slides and swings.

Susan had struck up a conversation with one of the other mums and Craig casually listened into their nattering. He watched the Plovers on the grass of the school footy oval as they quietly hunted insects and occasionally screeched at each other. A terrible but quiet sense of frustration at the circumstances of his life began to gnaw at him from the inside like some

horrible flesh eating parasite contracted on foreign travels.

He thought about the women he'd had when he was younger before he met Susan. He'd been cashed up back then from working on Tuna boats. He'd come back to town and hit the pub and going home with a pretty young thing was common enough that he never experienced any sense of deprivation despite not having a steady girlfriend. Somewhere amongst all the good times back then he'd met and fallen for Susan. He'd gotten her pregnant, or rather, he suspected that she'd deliberately fallen pregnant, and that was that.

Lost in his memories he didn't notice how much time had passed. The other parents slowly drifted off and were replaced with new ones. The woman Susan had been chatting to went home and Susan declared that Hannah was going to need a nap when they got home. They gathered up the protesting child and began to trudge home.

Hannah was asleep in minutes once they got home and put the heaters on. Susan fussed over the child for a bit until she felt sure of her sleep and then joined Craig on the couch. She embraced him warmly as she slid in beside him.

'Did you hear the way Hannah was talking to that other little kid? Her verbal skills are really coming along. She'll be talking properly soon and once she starts Kindy she'll really blossom. Oh I can't wait for her to start Kindy!'

Craig hadn't noticed any improvement in Hannah's speech but he agreed with his wife good naturedly out of habit. Susan came up to him and he let himself be wrapped in her affectionate arms. They snuggled for a

while and Craig felt warm and loved despite his wandering thoughts earlier in the morning.

‘Shall we hop into bed while Hannah’s asleep?’ He tentatively asked and was both surprised and pleased when Susan said casually ‘yeah alright, I’ll just check on her quickly.’

They went into their bedroom together after checking on Hannah. Susan undressed without fuss, without urgency and passion. Craig remembered the early years, they used to almost tear each other’s clothes off. Now it was this business-like efficient undressing, Susan carefully placing her clothes in a neat pile, the easier to find them and put them back on when they were done.

She kept her bra on, something that quietly infuriated Craig, she’d been doing this since Hannah was born and it always annoyed him. She used to have really nice tits, granted childbirth and breastfeeding must have taken their toll but did she really have to leave her bra on when they had sex? It made him feel like an afterthought, like their sex life was a duty she begrudgingly participated in before going on to more important things.

They got into it and Craig found more to be quietly unhappy about. The way she just lay there now. He remembered she used to be a real little mover, getting on top and everything, now she just lay there and took it, like some sort of drugged out date rape victim. It made him feel unromantic.

He managed to keep his mind on the job at hand however and reached his goal. Susan cuddled with him afterwards for a few minutes before getting up and going for a shower. She took her bra off before she went in and Craig felt it was an insult. She keeps

her bra on for having sex with her husband but takes it off for the shower? He thought, it's like she's not putting in any effort anymore. He lay there and thought while she showered.

They both got dressed eventually and he made them both a cuppa while Susan tended to Hannah who'd just woken up. Craig felt deflated all afternoon. He played with Hannah and pottered around the house ineffectually until it was nearly dinner time.

As she was beginning to make dinner Susan realized she was out of pasta sauce. Craig was hurriedly dispatched to the supermarket to get some.

Quietly glad to get out of the house Craig drove the long way there.

While he was heading to the checkout he bumped into Roberta Lee.

'Hi Craig, good to see you again.'

'Oh G'day Roberta, how'd the election go?'

'Well the polls have closed but we won't get any results for a little bit yet. Here's hoping!'

'Yeah good luck mate, I voted for you.'

'You're a legend Craig, maybe I'll see you at the next rifle club do?'

She hurried off and Craig was left standing at the checkout like a foolish schoolboy. He snapped out of it and paid for the damn pasta sauce and drove home.

He ate dinner with his family and was pleasant enough company. He played with Hannah again after dinner until it was time for the child to sleep. He participated in the usual bedtime rituals cheerfully.

He and Susan settled onto the couch for what was left of the night. Susan was already getting the yawns so it looked like being an early one. Craig flicked the



TV over to the ABC News channel to watch the coverage of the State Election.

‘Is there a decent movie on the other channel love? I know I probably won’t make it to the end of a movie but all the same I’d rather watch a movie than the election news. Hey isn’t Jurassic Park on channel 7? Chuck that on love.’

‘Yeah hang on love, I just want to see the results for here, see how Roberta went and all that.’

Susan moaned a little in protest but leaned affectionately on his shoulder anyway. He watched as the panel of experts all examined the results coming in.

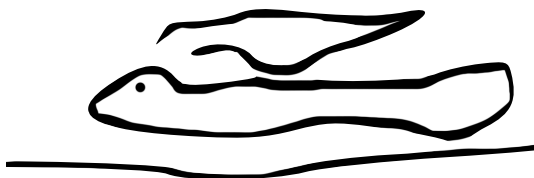
The little flame of hope and desire he felt for Roberta Lee flickered precariously. Guilt for what he felt battered at his heart like a downpour on a window pane. He hoped he’d see her on the TV, wished for her victory, wished for her appearance, at the same time he felt ashamed, like he’d failed at the most basic of husbandly duties, to be faithful.

His wife leant affectionately into his shoulder and asked him to turn it over to Jurassic Park again.



# THE KING OF THE CALLIOPE

ARBOGAST



I, an aimless traveler, found myself in a cold, desolate town on a wintry afternoon. The weak sun tried to melt the snow and ice but failed. Clusters of icicles hung from the barren and empty storefronts. Some signs said “Open,” but there was no difference between these edifices and the permanently closed ones. All was quiet and quite dead. I stood in the middle of Main Street and looked left. A single stoplight blinked yellow, telling non-existent vehicles to slow down. To the right, a small hill slightly obscured a high school with a football field that abutted a graveyard. No signs of life anywhere—no peripheral movement, no chittering birds, and no ambient noise other than the fast-moving river below me. After years of searching, I had finally found the perfect place to complete my mission. The town, whose name does not matter, was scheduled to be bulldozed and replaced by multiple housing estates after the spring thaw. To me, it was perfect—the perfect waystation betwixt the beginning and end, alpha and omega.

My goal: self-deletion. The total and thorough termination of the soul and the self. Suicide, if you will. The town’s absence of life not only provided the perfect complement to my sacrifice to the god Loneliness, but it also guaranteed that no nose onlooker would impede my goal. There would be no calls for help, no blue-sleeved policeman to rescue me, and, more importantly, no one to see or mourn my passing.

At four forty-five, when the sun fully descended below the burnt orange horizon, I made my way to the bridge overlooking one of the larger tributaries of the ancient Potomac. Both banks were covered in snow, and despite the speed of the current, I knew in my bones that the water would be so cold that I would

freeze in place prior to death. Still, despite residual hesitation, I accepted the end with a cold determination. What else is there? I thought to myself as my bare hands gripped beams of steel. My life had been nothing but a disappointment—a refusal to engage with anything of meaning that was so devout as to be genetic in its origin. Suicide was to be my one and only act of will and purpose, and rather than think myself out of it, I plunged headlong into the water. The top of my cranium smashed into a small cluster of rocks just below the surface. The shock and power of the impact rendered me unconscious, and the violent event proved so quick that I did not have time to feel even a mild chill.

\*\*\*

A distant music awakened me from my death's sleep. My groggy eyes opened and saw that I was no longer moving. A hoary tree branch had snagged the collar of my jacket, and thus I come to a stop near a muddy embankment. Half of my body remained floating in the river, while the other half rested on muddy land. Realizing that I had failed in my mission, I pulled myself up and out of the water. A painful dizziness impeded my ability to walk. My wounded head spun, and as I walked towards the music, I was forced to keep both hands on my temples just to stabilize my upper body. It was a difficult and clunky perambulation, but nevertheless I walked. I walked through the snowy field and the copse of barren trees until I heard the music as loudly as a siren.

There, beyond a straight line of oaks, I saw a procession of strange figures encircling a rectangular

object. I limped closer on my fractured heels and discerned that most of the figures wore animal masks made of various metals. One tall fellow with arms across his chest wore a wolfs head made of tarnished silver. Another, much smaller individual was dressed like a bronze fox, while one of the few females rested on her knees while wearing the plumage of a peacock. The scene filled me with a strange mixture of dread and curiosity. Nothing about it seemed malevolent on the surface. There were no stern invocations or a morbid panegyric; not one of the masked figures engaged in dancing or feasting. All stood silent and solemn. Indeed, after investigating the rectangular object, I discovered that it was a rudimentary casket made from a blackened cherry tree. I had stumbled across a funeral done in accordance with some unknown or novel religious rite.

The music continued to play throughout the ritual. It was generated via an elaborate and steam-powered pipe organ being manned by a shriveled old man hunched over the keys. The organ, whose sounds reminded me of the long-ago carnivals of my stunted youth, stood a few paces back from the funeral, and the pathetic old man bobbed up and down like a jack-in-the-box while his fingers tried and failed to make the discordance harmonic. The organist's music did nothing to the masked mourners, all of whom remained deathly still throughout. As for me, the growing intensity of the cacophony upset my precarious equilibrium, and without warning, a strong strike of F-sharp caused me to vomit up an unwholesome mixture of freshwater and disgusted slush.

“Heathen! Philistine!”

Looking up through bleary eyes, I saw that my accuser was none other than the organ player. The old man held aloft a pointed figure as he screamed with rage.

“How disrespectful to interrupt the proceeding, and how loathsome to diminish my holy music with a display of sickness. You!” And here the old man left the organ and began walking towards me. Flecks of foam were at the corners of his mouth, and instead of a single index finger, the man now curled all fingers into a pair of strangling hands. “I shall teach you culture.”

Before I could defend myself, the organist gripped my throat. His hands were artistic—long, thin, and devoid of callouses. They were also shockingly strong. A few seconds of squeezing and I was already flailing like a caught fish.

“Cease your efforts and release him immediately.” The command came from the man in the wolf mask. The organist released his grip instantly and began bowing towards the canine figure. The organist’s face went from primal rage to fear as the wolf mask ordered him to stand at attention.

“Yes, my lord,” he whispered in reverence.

“As for you,” he said turning towards me, “get up on your feet.”

I did as I was told. I must have presented a terrible sight. The cold caused me to shiver and cry, and large patches of blood on my lacerated scalp gave my body the distinct odor of copper.

“What a disgusting creature you are,” the wolf mask said. “Cold and wet and all alone. Have you no pride?”

“No,” I whimpered. My response caused the gathering to laugh in derision. Even though obscured by masks, I could see hatred in their eyes.

“You have interrupted something ancient,” the wolf mask said. “Something far more important and vital than you.”

I looked around at the masked figures, and then I swiveled my eyes back towards the organist. Out of all of them, his countenance frightened me the most. His face and posture were one of bone-deep fear, as if the wolf mask’s threats were directed at him as well.

“I’m...I’m sorry,” I said. I proceeded to tell the assembly about my failed suicide and my strange awakening on the shore. None were moved by my confession. Instead, a wave of mocking laughter proceeded a series of hushed discussions between the masks. Finally, after interminable seconds, the wolf mask stepped closer to me.

“A test.”

“A test?”

“A test.”

The words perplexed me, but before I could ask for clarification, the wolf mask grabbed me by my shoulders with one hand. With the other he brushed aside the organist from his seat. The old man bowed again and uttered several variations of “my lord.” I was placed into the organist’s seat, and the wolf mask told me to play without uttering a syllable.

“But...but I don’t know how,” I said.

“Play,” the wolf mask demanded.

I looked around at the strange assemblage and heard them repeat the command, first as whispers then as a droning chant. “Play! Play! Play!” they said until my trembling fingers moved into position. I pressed the



nearest key—a white one—before pressing several black keys. The noises I made was not music. The uninspired and chaotic jangling lacked composition and melody.

“Crap!” the old organist shouted. “Utter crap. Here.” He pushed me aside and began playing. What he produced was a variation of “Listen to the Mockingbird,” a swaying and warm carnival standard.

“See,” he said to me when he was done. “That’s music!”

“And yet it does nothing!” the wolf mask growled at the organist. “Nothing!” The old man scraped the ground and begged for forgiveness. After rising from the snow-covered earth, he offered me the player’s seat.

“Go ahead, kid,” he said. “Play another tune.”

I took a moment to watch my breath become vapor. The foggy air surrounded my head like an earthbound halo. When it cleared, I looked once upon the masked company. Every one of them glared at me with expectation. Somehow, after failing in my lifelong mission, I had stumbled upon a new one that was a complete mystery in its design and purpose. They all expected me to play, and there could be no disappointment. So, with the sharp, animalistic eyes as my audience, I once again splayed my fingers and attempted to make music. I pounded the keys with wild abandon. The organ’s pipes wailed like banshees in the darkness. Pretty soon I felt myself swaying with the disharmonic mélange. My body, despite being cold, wet, and exhausted, found the energy to give itself fully over to the weird performance. I knew when it was over, and after the final note, I bowed my head and stood up.

It was the old organist’s turn.

The old man's owlsh eyes looked at me with anger. I had upstaged him, and he took to the organ with the determination of a doomed man trying to save himself from execution. The little fellow laid into a version of "Calico Rag" that at times veered off into unusual flourishes and arpeggios. The performance was not well received by the assemblage, and the fox face yelled for me again.

I took the seat and once more started to play. This time I focused not on making music but remembering what it felt like to (almost) die. I visualized the icy river that refused my body; I saw myself unconscious and floating downstream with a pale but serene face. I felt my already chilled blood growing even colder as visualizations of despair commingled with the falling snow that attached itself to my jacket.

"Look! Look!" cried someone from the crowd. Several of them turned and peered down at the casket. I ceased my playing and craned my neck to see the spectacle.

"Don't stop playing," the wolf mask said. "Play! Play! Play!"

I returned to the music and thoughts of the river. The crowd paid little attention to me; they were too transfixed on whatever was happening inside the casket. The old organist looked upon the scene and started weeping.

"It's moving," someone in the crowd said. "After so long, it is moving again."

"Don't stop playing until I tell you to," cried the wolf mask. I kept my fingers moving across the keys for an interminable number of minutes. The concerto became less of a performance and more some kind of extension of my being. I ceased making music and

instead became merely a function of the organ's essence. The instrument and I could not be separated.

"Yes," the wolf mask yelled in excitement. "Yes!"

The black casket stopped vibrating and began to emit a kind of sonic and atmospheric color whose warmth I could feel despite the distance of several feet. The object glowed purple, then a kind of dark orange that mimicked the setting sun. Throughout, the wolf mask and the others moaned in joy and anticipation. When the orange became black, the wolf mask told me to stop playing.

"It is over," he said. "We have our new king."

At this the old organist collapsed in utter despair. He pounded the snow until his wrinkled fists bled. He wept tears that froze before they dropped from his face. He called out to several gods for aid, but none came.

"When your performance is over, you can come and see inside," the wolf mask said to the despondent man. "Finally."

"Yes, my lord," came the reply. "I shall see it and be glad."

The organist stood up and used his shirt to clean his face. He then straightened out the rest of his costume and made sure that he was as neat as possible. A few pats on his sleeves removed the final traces of snow. He even smoothed down his hair as he slowly walked towards the casket. All the company save for the wolf mask approached him and said their farewells. The peacock woman even gave the organist a peck on the cheek that drew a small dribble of blood.

"After all the centuries," the wolf mask said, "you may now finally see it."

“Thank you, my lord.” The organist spoke with devotion and exhaustion, and when the casket lid was opened, I heard him cry out then go quiet. I tried my best to see, but several masked figures intentionally blocked my view. All I could do was study their backs until, as if on cue, the crowd dispersed and revealed the remains of the organist curled up like a ball next to the casket. His body, for he was quite dead, began the process of decay and disintegration with alacrity. The abnormal process took mere seconds until nothing was left but powdered bones clumped up in an old tuxedo.

The wolf mask placed a strong hand on my shoulder. From my seated position, I caught a glimpse of the face underneath the mask. It had human proportions and the familiar outline of a face, and yet something was amiss. The wolf mask was human-esque without being fully human.

“You are our new organist,” he intoned. “Our king of the calliope.” The crowd repeated his words. I watched as the bronze fox hunched down and began collecting the old organist’s suit. The last piece—the bowtie—was the first that was placed into my palm.

“It is yours to wear,” the fox mask said. The peacock woman followed behind him with a top hat and cane. “Hail the king of the calliope,” she said. The refrain was repeated.

I stripped down without a thought of shame. I covered my nakedness with the tuxedo, which somehow fit perfectly and was warm enough to keep the frost at bay. I felt comfortable for the first time. I placed the top hat on my head and smiled. I did a little razzle-dazzle with the bowtie’s ends.

“What’s in the casket?” I asked with a jaunty air that was unnatural to me.

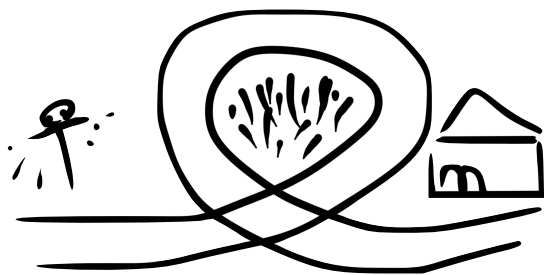
The wolf mask looked at me and smirked. He refused to answer, and in his refusal, I knew that it was not yet time for full illumination. That would come later...at the end. Instead, I once again sat down behind the organ and played. This time the music sounded familiar because the calliope was playing itself—I merely pantomimed the notes for “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland.” The music guided us as we floated softly above the snow and moved northwards towards another rendezvous.

I looked back just once to see the old organist. I tipped my cap and hoped for a longer and better run.



# EAT ORG- ANIC

J. NEIRA



There was something about the night of All Hallows' Eve that made Jake's heart flutter with anticipation.

Perhaps it was his inclination as a Horror Youtuber to search for the next terrifying story or spooky location, or perhaps it was something in the air—the thinning of the so-called veil, the beautiful moonlit sky, the whispers of the returning dead.

The past few Halloweens, Jake had explored creepy locations or going live to his audience to tell them spooky stories under the cover of darkness. But this year, he'd been invited to a party at the local organic farm. The cornfields surrounding the farm were eerie enough to give him a good backdrop while he filmed, so he agreed, thinking it would be something new and exciting for his viewers to watch.

Grass tickled his ankles as he crossed the field towards the party. He could hear the music even at a distance, the vibrations pulsing through the air and making his heart beat in an erratic rhythm.

The cool night wind rustled through the grass. Jake shivered. He was only wearing a t-shirt and jeans, and the air was colder than he expected. It wouldn't take long for him to warm up, however, once he stepped amongst the warm, dancing bodies. He could have dressed up, but he'd decided to stay casual, wearing a black t-shirt with his YouTube logo on instead—it was good publicity that way, too.

He drew close to the barn, the air turning sweet with the smell of alcohol and perfume, mixing with the underlying scent of perspiration and cheap plastic from the dozens of scary masks people were donning. He brought out his vlogging camera and captured some brief shots of the crowd, moving and dancing in



time to the pounding music. Bodies crushed and stumbled into him, coarse fabrics and soft linen scraping across his arms and neck as he tried to push through them without dropping his camera.

The barn had been decked out with Halloween decorations, fake cobwebs and black nets creating a shadowed eave that fluttered in the breeze. The music was a mixture of heavy bass and classic Halloween songs, and the crowd alternated between singing along to completely losing themselves in the beat, their bodies swinging and jerking like puppets on invisible strings.

The farm was packed with hundreds of people, all of them strangers, all of them with secrets of their own, stories embedded beneath their skin, nightmares haunting the back of their minds. Why had they all come here tonight? For the alcohol, for the music, for the fun of dressing up, or for something else entirely?

Jake stopped suddenly, his feet sinking into the mud-churned ground as his eyes snagged on a group of people dancing ahead of him. There was one who stood out from the rest. A young woman with dark hair and smoky black eyeshadow, whose skin seemed to glisten beneath the silvery light of the moon. She wore a white tank top and shorts, and she was dancing separately to the others, or perhaps the others had moved away to give her space.

She was dancing almost erratically, crouching low to the ground and moving her arms around in a slithering motion, before shimmying back up again with strange, jerking movements, like she was being controlled by an invisible string. Her eyes were closed, her head lolling side to side in time with the music, completely unaware of her surroundings.

Then her eyes flew open and found Jake's for a brief second. His heart jolted as their gazes met, but then she was already looking elsewhere, her eyes rolling up into her head and back down again, dragging her arms through the air. There was something creepy, almost esoteric, about the way she was dancing; like a ritual of movement that only she understood. He couldn't take his eyes off her no matter what.

A man standing nearby noticed Jake watching the young woman and swaggered over, holding a half-empty beer bottle in his hand. "That's the farmer's daughter," he said, cocking his head towards the dancing girl. "She's kinda crazy, huh?"

Jake said nothing, still not taking his eyes off her. She was interesting, that was for certain. She didn't seem to care about anyone else around her, focused only on her own movements.

"Do you know her name?" Jake asked, but the man was already walking away again, taking a swig from his beer. He sighed and shrugged to himself, returning his gaze to the farmer's daughter. She pulled something out of her shorts' pocket and let it unfurl in the wind. It was a ragged piece of fabric, with a handwritten message scrawled on the front, reading: EAT ORGANIC OR DIE!

This was an organic farm, so it made sense that she would support organic eating. The message was a little extreme, though Jake found it amusing. She seemed like the kind of girl who had strong opinions and didn't care what anyone else thought.

The crowd shifted and swept around him like a wave, eventually swallowing up the farmer's daughter and her flag. Instead of chasing her, Jake decided to move away from the party. Despite the breeze, the air

had turned hot and clammy, sweat beading his skin as he moved between the throng of dancers.

It was time he investigated the cornfield anyway; the corn maze attraction was one of the main reasons he'd attended the party in the first place. It had been advertised as a terrifying Halloween experience, getting lost amongst the corn stalks while being hunted by something in the dark. He wasn't exactly sure what it would entail, but he'd promised his viewers he'd livestream the event if he attended.

Jake pulled away from the party, breathing in the pleasant scent of sun-baked earth and foliage. The cornfields were a short walk away from the barn, and even from where he stood, he could see the tall stalks rustling in the wind, hiding whatever lay nestled inside, waiting for an unwary passerby.

A few other people were heading towards the maze too, but Jake was the only one on his own. He ran his YouTube channel alone, and none of his friends had aligning interests, so most of the time, he went on these excursions by himself.

The music gradually faded as he walked further away from the barn, the thumping bass replaced with the sound of grass crunching underfoot, the whispering leaves and the gentle whistle of the wind between the corn stalks. Jake opened his camera and started recording, murmuring a brief introduction and explanation of events for anyone that had tuned in.

Away from the barn and the main farm buildings, it was much darker. There was no natural light out here, only the silvery glow of the moon and the faint echoes of illumination from behind. He found himself almost glad that he could still hear the party going on behind him; the sounds of other people nearby were

reassuring when he stood on the threshold of a dark corn maze, where there was no guarantee he would make it out alive (or so the sign read at the entrance of the field). A scream rang out from within the maze, followed by a peal of laughter. Jake hoped the 'scares' weren't of the boring, cheap variety, and would actually induce some kind of dread within him.

With one last breath of the cool night air, Jake stepped into the corn maze.

Almost immediately, a strange hush fell, as the towering stalks closed in around him. If he strained his ears, he could still hear the faint sound of music and voices, but the party still felt much further away than it really was.

He drew in a deep breath, but there was something cloying about the scent of the corn now that he was closer—it was no longer a pleasant, earthy smell, but something rotten and old. But maybe that was intentional, to cast an oppressive feeling of unease over anyone who entered the maze.

"We're going in," he muttered, to himself and his viewers, following the path deeper into the field. He heard voices and screams echoing ahead of him, but it was difficult to pinpoint exactly how far away they were. Sounds became distorted and strange between the wind and the corn. Jake hoped the audio wasn't too warbled through the camera.

Footsteps crunched on his right, as if someone was walking directly beside him, but when he flicked a glance towards the noise, he saw nothing but shadows moving between the rustling stalks.

Despite the clammy air inside the maze, goosebumps pricked his skin. He wasn't scared so easily, but there was something unnerving about the towering

shadows cast by the corn and the scratch and rustle of stems moving past his bare arms, vines and roots snaking around his ankles like fingers.

Something moved in his periphery, and he turned just as a figure darted out of the corn, with a stained burlap sack for a head and two dark slits for eyes and a body made of damp, decomposing straw.

Jake's heart spiked in his chest, but he didn't scream. His hand barely shook, but perhaps that was because of his learned skill of holding a camera perfectly still.

The scarecrow was clearly just a person in costume; there were gaps in the straw where he could see a plain t-shirt underneath, and the burlap sack was a little wonky, revealing too much of the person's face. It was clearly just a thirty-something year-old man.

Seeming disappointed he hadn't gotten a reaction out of Jake, the scarecrow uttered a sigh and retreated back into the corn stalks, leaving Jake alone again. If that was the 'scary' part of the attraction, he couldn't deny he was a little disappointed himself. In his opinion, it would have been creepier just to have someone moving through the field without revealing themselves at all; knowing you weren't alone, but not knowing *what* was out there, would have been ten-times eerier.

He kept moving through the corn maze, pushing through the stalks and trying to navigate the criss-crossing tracks in the dark. He had no idea where he was going, or if there was a specific exit he was supposed to find.

He could no longer hear the party or the music. Nothing but screams and yells echoed around him, creating a sinister dissonance amid the wind.

After a few more minutes of aimlessly wondering around, another scarecrow jumped out at him from the darkness; this one roared at him with a mouthful of straw and yellow teeth. Jake made sure to film the costumed actor as it cocked its head and tried to unnerve him with a dark-eyed stare down, before giving up and stomping away again. He couldn't help it if these cheap jump-scares weren't getting his heart pumping the way they should; as a horror YouTuber, he'd desensitized to a lot of things, and it took something really spooky to elicit a real reaction from him.

This happened a few more times. As he treaded the path between the rows of corn, batting aside scratchy leaves and kicking away dead stalks that tangled around his shoes, two more scarecrows crept up on him from the darkness with their straw cloaks and stained burlap faces and stitched grins. Jake ignored them and kept walking. Above the field, the sky had turned pitch-dark, and not even the moon was bright enough to light his way.

The scarecrows slunk back into the darkness and the ensuing silence itched at the back of Jake's neck. He walked for a little longer before stopping, his breath turning strained as the air thickened and congealed around him. Sweat dried on his brow as the cool wind rustled towards him, but beneath his clothes, his skin felt damp and sticky, and his heart wouldn't quite return to its regular rhythm.

It had gone quiet now. Completely quiet. Quiet enough that he could hear the soft crack of the camera settling in his hand, the chirp of bugs amongst the corn, the wind peeling through the leaves.

Where had everyone gone? A strange, overwhelming loneliness settled over him like a veil. For just a

moment, he felt completely on his own, the dark maze closing in around him, getting ready to drag him into the never-ending corn stalks.

Then a distant scream rang out behind him, and he felt relieved. He wasn't alone. There were still other people in the maze, though they sounded much farther away than before. Just how big was the cornfield? Had he taken a wrong turn somewhere, drifting too close to the edge, away from the main trail? He hadn't been paying too much attention to where he was going, but he thought he'd been following the path.

He could no longer hear the creeping footsteps or whispers of the scarecrows getting ready to jump out at him. Had they finally decided to leave him alone, or had he left them behind in the dark?

A flutter of anxiety entered his chest. He felt like he was somewhere he shouldn't be; like he'd overstepped the boundary of the attraction and was now in unknown, uncharted territory. Though he was probably just overthinking things. Perhaps he'd simply wandered a little further than the others. All he had to do was turn and head back to the centre of the maze, where the scarecrows and screamers were.

But even as he turned round and faced the path he'd just taken, it didn't feel right. The corn had already closed in around him, the ground untouched, as if it had not been walked upon. Was that really the way he'd just come from? Something inside his mind twinged with doubt. He flicked a glance to the left and right, but there was nothing distinguishable about the cloying darkness. It all looked the same to him. He shuffled in a half-circle, gazing around him. The corn seemed taller than before, towering several feet over him. It hadn't been that long before, had it? He

couldn't see anything but the glimpses of dark velvet sky beyond. The wind whispered and moved around him, distorting the sounds, bringing them closer and then further away again.

His grip on the camera trembled, but he forced himself to keep a steady hand. Now wasn't the time to panic. He wasn't lost. The maze wasn't huge. He just had to follow the sound of the screams and the shouts, and he'd be back where everyone else was.

So why was he finding it so hard to figure out *where* they were coming from? The noises seemed to echo all around him, impossible to determine from which direction they originated. He closed his eyes and tried to focus on one sound at a time, letting it pull him towards it like a thread. But after only a few seconds, that noise faded and another took its place, elsewhere, tearing his mind in another direction.

When he opened his eyes again, it felt like the maze had shifted around him, even though he had remained still, leaving him completely disorientated.

He debated shutting off the livestream, but that would be no fun for his viewers, so he kept recording despite the panic rising in his chest.

*I'm not lost, I'm not lost*, he chanted to himself in his head.

This wasn't the first time he'd gotten disorientated in a strange location. He'd almost gotten lost in the hallways of an abandoned school once, while investigating it as part of a special livestream, and everything had turned out fine back then. Just like it would now.

Staying still wasn't going to get him any closer to the exit, so he started walking again. The field wasn't endless; at some point, he would reach the edge, and then he would be one step closer to the exit. He just



had to keep going, and not let the trickery of the wind distort his perception.

Here, the corn seemed to be growing even closer together, making it difficult to push through. He was no longer on the main track, but had strayed into part of the field that hadn't been cleared for the maze. He wasn't sure when or how it had happened. Perhaps he had mis-stepped in the dark and wandered onto a path that wasn't meant to be used.

Even as he kept walking, the sound of voices didn't grow any closer, nor any further away, making it seem like he wasn't moving at all. He lifted the camera in an attempt to see over the top of the corn, but it was too dark to make out anything beyond the swathes of crops.

Where was everyone else? Why couldn't he hear or see them? And why couldn't he shake off the feeling that something was very, very wrong?

He stopped walking when he heard something. At first there was nothing beyond the heavy pants of his own breath, and he wondered if he had simply imagined it.

Then he heard it again—the sound of groaning. A creaking sort of groan, like rusted hinges or old, rotten wood. Or someone struggling to breathe.

Was someone else out here? Were they okay?

Deciding he couldn't just ignore it, Jake walked towards the sound, being carried forward on the rustling wind.

As the screams and shouts grew softer and more distant, the groaning sound grew louder and closer, leading Jake like a thread through the labyrinth. He still couldn't determine if the sound belonged to a

human or something else, but he was curious to find out.

The groaning sound stopped momentarily, and Jake paused, his breath catching in his throat as he listened. Where had it gone? Then it returned, a loud, wailing moan, definitely human this time. Who was it? Were they in pain, or in some kind of distress? Maybe a little kid had gotten lost or something. That thought was enough to spur him back into action.

He was so focused on following the noise that he didn't notice the fallen stubs of corn in front of him; not until his foot caught on the ridge of the stalk and he jolted forward, almost dropping the camera in the process.

"Whoopsie," he muttered, vaguely embarrassed that the live recording had captured his almost-fall. "Better watch where I'm going."

The corn ahead of him thinned out, and he found himself stumbling into an open clearing amongst the crops. A perfect circle, the ground below was dry and cracked, where nothing grew.

Instead, his gaze caught something else. Erected in the middle of the clearing was a large wooden cross, silhouetted against the dark night. The moon cast a slanted ray of light between the corn, illuminating part of the structure. Splotches of dark red stained the wood—old blood, or something else?

Jake wasn't sure what he was looking at. Some kind of prop? Part of the Halloween attraction?

He approached it cautiously, flicking the camera in his hand up the length of the cross to get the whole thing in frame. It seemed completely out of place amongst the rows of corn. And that dried blood was unsettlingly realistic. The fake stuff never quite

managed to match that reddish-brown colour of an old bloodstain. But then, where had it come from?

Something moved next to the cross, and Jake felt his heart drop low into his stomach, a stutter of surprise falling from his lips.

A man was sitting beside the cross. How had Jake not noticed him before? Had he been sitting there the whole time, unmoving, unspeaking? He wore gray rags that hung loosely around his body and his head was almost completely bald. Aged, a white beard with twigs and leaves in it ran down to his feet. He smiled a chipped-tooth smile when Jake caught his gaze. A long, slow smile that seemed to stretch impossible wide across his face. There was a manic look in his eyes.

"Howdy there boy."

He spoke with a low, nasally voice, his eyes unblinking behind his glasses.

Jake cleared his throat. The man seemed strange, and Jake didn't understand the reason for the bloodied cross, but perhaps the stranger might know how to get back to the farm. He was getting tired of being lost now.

"Do you know the way out of this place?" he asked, shifting his feet. Now that he wasn't surrounded by corn, the chill in the air grew stronger, making him shiver beneath the thin fabric of his shirt.

The man cocked his head, his smile unwavering. "Congratulations on looking for the devil in a little hole," the man said cryptically. "But you missed the Overman coming down from the mountain."

Jake stared at him, incredulous. What was he talking about? "Um—"

"The cross," the man continued, turning his dark gaze towards the wooden structure, "is a real cross. And the blood is the old blood of the dead. Do not doubt it."

Jake swallowed. The chill sunk through his skin and nestled amongst his bones, leaving him cold from the inside. He didn't know what the man was talking about, but it made him uneasy. Whose blood was on the cross? Was he the one who had erected it here in the middle of the cornfield? Nothing was making sense.

He took a step back, but the man's intense gaze flashed towards him, rooting him in place. Jake barely remembered to breathe.

The blood on the cross... had this man hurt someone? Was Jake in danger if he stood here any longer?

He wanted to run, but it felt like a weight was holding him down, driving nails into the sole of his shoes.

"Old Yallery has to warn you," the strange man said, rising from the ground like a shadow. Now that he was on his feet, Jake realized how tall he was, almost the same length as the corn stalks. "They must be punished. The people of this farm eat the flesh of other humans, did you know that? Old Yallery saw the girl do it months ago. Yallery's been trying to warn the police, but no one listens. Now, Yallery must take drastic action. Yallery must kill. Do you understand?"

The man's smile widened further, but looking closer, Jake could tell it was not a happy smile. The tall man was terrified and angry. His arms swayed to and fro and saliva drooled from his open mouth.

"Y-you—" Jake blurted, his hands and knees trembling. "You stay the fuck back, you hear me old man?"

Yallery, is that your name?" And he aimed his camera right at the old giant.

Yallery's chilling grin didn't waver. "No, boy, Yallery won't run or hide anymore. In fact... Now, it's time for you to run."

The man took a slow, meandering step towards him, and Jake's instincts flew into gear. Like the man had said, it was time to *run*, faster than Jake had ever run before. He turned and dashed back into the rows of corn, his heart racing in his chest.

Behind him, Yallery gave chase with an excited scream, the noise sounding neither human or animal, but something in between—something raw and primal, like a predator on the hunt.

A bead of sweat dripped into his eye, and in that brief moment of blindness, he collided with one of the thicker stalks, the impact sending a throb of pain through his ribs. The camera in his hand went flying, disappearing into the darkness. Jake uttered a curse, but didn't stop to retrieve it. He couldn't risk Yallery closing the distance between them in the time it took to search for it.

And then, suddenly, he was free of the corn, running unhindered through a field of grass. Ahead of him, the party at the barn was still in full swing, the noise that had been absent inside the corn maze flooding around him in a deafening cacophony.

Jake didn't stop running until he was on the fringe of the dancing crowd, where his knees finally gave way, and he almost toppled over.

When he finally dared to look behind him, Yallery was nowhere to be seen.



# WALKS

KATE E. LORE



I take walks to taste the open air. To take in the state of my area. How are the trees feeling today? Orange and yellow are creeping in. That first big yawn when you almost feel startled by how tired you suddenly are.

I take walks to calm down. I take walks to wake up. I take walks to get from one point to another. I talk walks because moving feels safer than sitting still. Because I grew up in a house like that. Because when my brother had a bad episode I'd run down the street to my friend's house.

I like to walk to the grocery store. Inside I prefer to carry my items. I don't like to use a cart, it's like I need the weight of something for it to feel real. Maybe this is the case for walking too like maybe I don't feel as though we're going anywhere unless I can taste forward momentum.

It's not that I'm a skeptical person, no really it's quite the opposite. It's that I want to know everything intimately. I want to see a place for every angle, I want to understand a thing's mass and density.

I don't just want to know what the weather is I yearn to feel it. The same goes for relationships. If I don't run away I must already love you. I want to feel your skin, to know the taste and smell of you. I want to walk the streets of your mind. I want to know you so intimately we become landmarks of each other's worlds. I want you to be able to tell your current state from the tone of your voice. I want to know it better than a classic song on the radio. I want the weight and



mass of your love. However temporary, this time,  
before your foot swings forward to kick me to the crib.  
I am used to pain. That world is real.

I want to wander through your thoughts. I want to lift  
you up with my adoration and feel the full weight of  
your baggage. I want to push you forward into a better  
future. Even if it means I can't keep up, and you sail  
on ahead. It's ok, already my love is too big to main-  
tain. I can feel the pressure. This crush.



# TWO POEMS

KATIE HONG



## He is Not Lost

In the city, he walks.  
No destination in mind,  
Open to the world around him

Children laugh and chase,  
Street vendors call out  
Buildings built like a maze

His steps are aimless but deliberate.  
Each glance adds to his curiosity.

He doesn't seek a path to follow  
But finds wonder in the chaos,  
Wandering and randomness  
He is not lost in this journey

## This Town

On Martin Street, the bakery still stands  
Its signature blue door faded by years of sun and rain  
Joe's Bakery, established in 1976  
But the scent of sweet bread stays the same,  
Wafting around the block every morning  
The baker, Joe, still works the ovens  
While his son now runs the register  
He greets every face like a friend  
Knowing orders before they are spoken  
"Two croissants and a coffee, right?"

Down the street, the new building stands  
Casting long shadows over the Han River Park,  
Where kids once played under the blazing sun until dusk  
Now the light reflects off of sharp angles of glass  
A reminder of a world of speed and progress

I overhear a woman at the benches,  
Talking to her friend about the latest development  
"They're building luxury townhouses next door.  
Where will we go? We've been here for years.  
They say the rent's going up again."  
Her toddler, oblivious, chases pigeons and plays tag  
Laughing, not noticing the changes around him

In the market on the corner, there is always a warm hello  
The grandmas in white aprons  
Sell vegetables and produce.

They gossip with each other like always.  
They know who has gotten married,  
Who has gotten a new job,  
And who has had a hard time  
“Did you hear about the old bath house?” she asks  
“They’re tearing it down next month. What a shame,  
It’s been there for years.  
They’re putting some kind of pilates gym,  
As if we need more of those..”  
I nod, remembering the days at the bathhouse  
When my mom would carry me inside  
when I threw tantrums, not wanting to go inside.

Change drifts in quietly at first  
A new shop, a different face on the block.  
Then suddenly, it’s everywhere—  
The electric scooters lined up by the curb,  
The sleek cafés replacing old corner stores,  
And yet, amid the shift, some things stay steady  
Mr. Kim, still in his pajamas,  
Sweeps the sidewalk in front of his grocery store  
every morning

But the passing of time is overwhelming  
The familiar faces that fade with time,  
Replaced by new ones who don’t nod hello  
The mural on Third Street, where we all came together  
To put a piece of ourselves forever into the neighborhood  
Is now a blank wall, soon to be part of a parking lot  
As i observe this place,  
Where I have lived all my life,  
I notice the changes that are both unsettling and inevitable

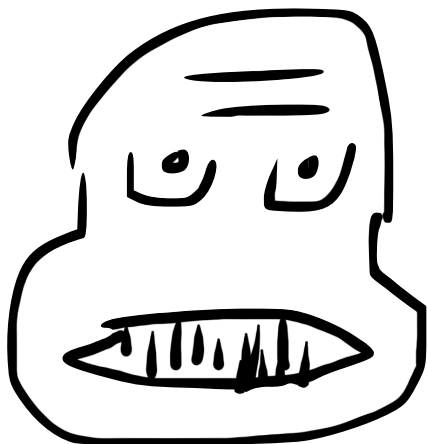
Still, there is one constant on Martin Street  
The bench in the playground  
Where the paint is chipped, and the wood is worn





# EMANCI- PATION

DAVID BLITCH



**M**anfred and me were standin' in front of a corner greasy spoon. There was absolutely nothin' special about it. If a Sapien folk wanted a cheeseburger or soggy fries it was just one place in town to get it.

But the sign said what was up. A simple handwritten sign on a nine by eleven inch piece of green neon paper, scotch taped to the front door window - 'Help wanted: Dishwasher. Slopeheads and Stoopbacks need not apply.' Below that was the exclamation point. 'We don't serve 'em. We don't hire 'em. Period!' You could find signs that pretty much said the same thing in just about every store front and shop in town.

As we strolled into downtown we whistled a happy tune in hopes of a miracle, that our freedom would finally mean somethin'. Instead all we got were signs. We weren't whistlin' anymore. Cussin' under our breath was more like it.

So we hit the road again. It was only the middle of May, but the ocean breeze blew in some fierce humidity and we didn't even have a rag to wipe off our brows.

"I swear to God almighty. First they emancipate ya. Then they won't hire ya. How long is it gonna take before they starve us all to death? Maybe I should get my things together and get my butt to Savannah? You comin' too Manfred?"

"With my bum leg I ain't makin' it out of this town. I am about fed up though. I'm goin' home to see if the missus had any luck."

We all lived in Monkeyville; a shanty town of cardboard boxes, and dry rotted, ripped tents that some boy scouts dumped on us after they cleaned out their garages.

"What's Naomi up to?"

"She heard down in Ellabell someone's hirin' Monkeymen to clean out gas station toilets and such. Five dollars a day I'm told. You really leavin'?"

"Nah. Think I'll walk around town some. Ain't got no reason to go home. Hope Naomi got good news for ya." I raised my left palm toward heaven above.

"Freedom, brother."

Manfred was pretty smart for a Slopehead. He needed to be as head elder on the Sitnah Council. But, sometimes he got his right and left confused. He thought about it for a while and then his long furry left arm and palm reached for the sky. As he smiled at me, his old pal, his long canines glistened in the bright Georgia sun.

"Yes, Brother Abner! Freedom it is! That may be all we got, but ain't it good." Manfred turned left at the corner towards Monkeyville.

'Yeah, but you can't eat freedom,' I murmured to myself. I continued down Magnolia Avenue towards the shoppin' area where all the nice folk bought their fine clothes. The more I walked the ritzier it got. Magnolia trees lined the sidewalks, about all in bloom. Each tree had its own little cutout in the sidewalk and each was circled by a short wrought iron fence. Even though they were stuck there in those circles and fenced in, the way they blossomed so beautifully seemed to say they were happy. Me, personally, I can't stand fences no more.

Because of the beauty of the day, there were many good and gentle folk saunterin' around town. They weren't doing anything in particular, just stretchin' their legs, catchin' some rays and checkin' out what was new and excitin' in the shops. They looked like

important people that should have something better to do on a Tuesday afternoon. I was seein' black faces, white faces, yellow faces, African, European, Asian, all clean and well groomed, starin' at my hairy mug. I swear they didn't even seem to sweat.

Of course when I got near I had to look downward and stay in the gutter. No wonder we Esek are called Stoopbacks by everyone. It's not that we can't stand up straight, it's just that no one lets us. Since forever, it's been that way.

A couple of times, I think I got too close to the sidewalk. 'Back off stoopy,' they yelled at me. One of them spit, but he ain't got no aim.

But I did get a glimpse into the display windows of a few of those fancy boutiques. Spring fashions crammed the shops. I filled my eyes with those fine, well tailored suits and you should have seen the gorgeous taffeta gowns—bright colors were all the rage; yellow, red, baby blue. Everythin' was exquisite.

My Leah had a taffeta gown once. Wasn't near as nice as those window shoppin' ones. She just found it on our porch one day, all ripped and stained and worn out. It took several good washin's and a lot of sewing to get it back in shape. But I swear to God when she put it on, she looked like a princess. Last time I saw her, that's what she was wearin'.

I walked through the ritzy part of town and kept on going until I was about five miles from home and just about to turn around. That's when I saw the store front, on the edge of town, right before Magnolia crossed route 80. It had all kinds of red, white and blue banners flyin' and a huge 'Grand Opening' sign in the window. It was pretty dusty towards that end of town so someone had spent a good long time sweepin'

the sidewalk in front of the place. They even had a red carpet at the door. Just last month it was all boarded up and pretty much in shambles. Before that it was a shoe store if I recall.

But now it was the office of "the Freedom Works Project for Monkeymen." Least that's what the sign on the door said.

A fine, dark, tall, Sapien gentleman walked out the front door, and saw me standin' there gawkin'. I think he got his suit at one of those boutiques and after lookin' at his shoes I'm sure some baby alligator was cryin' for his Mama.

But he walked right up to me and gave me a firm handshake.

"Coffee and donuts inside, if you're interested."

The only think I could think of was, 'what's he up to?' But my stomach tells me, get yourself a damn donut.

The gentleman held the front door for me and I stepped inside. Air Conditionin'- what a relief. I walked over to this table and I got a jelly donut and pocketed a couple others. I poured a little decaf and put a lot of milk in the cup. I was impressed by the place - new paint job, cozy couches, those potted palm trees - looked real high class. Then the gentleman asks me to have a seat in this nice comfy chair by his desk. Smelled like real leather. Before I know it, he pulled a form out of his desk drawer and got himself a pencil.

"Let me introduce myself. I'm Abraham McNeil. You can call me Abe. And your name, sir?"

"Sir? Nobody ever called me Sir. My name is Abner. Why you writin' this down?"

"Great! Now Abner I see by your brow ridges, large nose and receding chin that you are an Esek. Am I correct?"

"Yes sir." I started to wonder. We hardly been introduced and he's askin' me these questions.

"Call me Abe. Look, I know how hard it is for you Esek to call us Sapiens by our first names. But we're all equal now. You're emancipated. Free."

"Yes, Abe, you are right I am a free monkeyman, praise the Lord."

"Great. Now Abner, have you got any Sitnah ancestors that you know of?"

"Excuse me Abe, I know you tryin' to be polite using those fancy names for our kind, but it's okay. My kin's Stoopback for as long back as anyone can remember. I have an uncle and an aunt who married Slopeheads, but that don't effect my blood none. What does it matter to you?" He just shook his head.

"How about schooling?"

"Six years in worker trainin' school. Was head of my class."

"Wonderful. And are you married? Any kids?"

I got real quiet then, folded my hands on my lap. Kinda stared off into nothing' for a while. I didn't want to go into it, but for some reason I told him.

"No kids. My wife Leah, she's not with us anymore."

"I'm so sorry." Abe went behind his chair and found a box of tissues on a filing cabinet. He went in the box and pulled out a handful. I said I'd be okay but he insisted on giving me the wad.

"Back in '04. Right after we got emancipated, she picked up somethin'. I think it was cholera. Of course

we had no money for a vet. I know now we can go to a Sapien doctor if they'll take ya and if I ya got the money. But we had no money. Still don't."

"That is so, so sad Abner and it's a shame I tell you. Where are you living, Abner?"

"Monkeyville. The plantation we were on got sold when they emancipated us. Master Ned got all us Monkeymen together; there was like fifty of us, and he says, 'I spend all I got to feed ya and house ya. Now the government tells me I got to pay ya a fair wage. Ain't gonna do it.' He gave us a week to clear out, then they bulldozed the place. They built a hundred or so fancy homes on the land. Ned lives in the biggest one. Just about everyone in Monkeyville got a story like that. What we all need is a job. No one will hire us."

Abe smiled, "Well Abner, I might just have a solution to your problem."

"What you got?"

"A job."

"A job?" I nearly wet myself.

"That's what we're all about at Freedom Works Project for Monkeymen."

Abe handed me a brochure. It was full of nice writin' and pretty pictures of monkeymen like me workin' on a farm, workin' in a factory and such. They saved the best picture for last. It showed a gray haired Sapien gentleman in a suit handin' a paycheck to a Stoopback, smilin' ear to ear.

Abe stood up and asked me to stand too. He came over to my side of the desk and looked me square in the eye. Then he grabbed my left hand and held it tight. He began to tear up and he got all serious and solemn. It almost sounded like he was preachin'.

"FWP is dedicated to finding employment for displaced monkeymen workers. We believe that this great nation of ours owes you monkeymen a heart felt apology for your years of unjustifiable slavery. We are here to help you and make amends. We want to give you a fresh start. Our mission at the FWP is to help you make your hopes and dreams a reality. Now understand, you will need to relocate; but if that's okay with you there's really only one thing we do require. Could we have a blood sample, to test for disease?"

"No problem, I'm healthy as a horse."

"Then you don't mind?"

"Nope. How much the job pay?"

"Five fifty an hour."

"An hour! What else I got to do?"

"Just sign this form."

Which I did. Then this real pretty Sapien nurse came out from the back with a needle. I rolled up my sleeve real quick. It didn't hurt that much. Abe said they'd get back to me in a day or two when the results of the blood test came back. Then he handed me a stack of brochures to take back to Monkeyville. I got out of my seat and began to walk towards the door.

"Abner, wait a minute. Let me call you a cab."

"A cab? I can walk."

"Monkeyville is miles away. Look, I know you've never had a cab ride before. But this is a new era. You're free. We're equals. I can ride in a cab. You can ride in a cab."

The cab must have been right around the corner 'cause a minute after he was off the phone a bright yellow taxi pulled up. As it stopped right in front of



the red carpet Abe opened the cab door for me. He raised his left palm high.

"Freedom, Abner."

"Freedom, Abe."

He gave the driver a twenty and we were off.

As we got to the corner of Magnolia and Industrial highway, where we had to make the right to get to Monkeyville, we had to slow down to a crawl. All around us were monkeywomen whores all dolled up in tiny dresses, stinkin' of toilet water. The real "sickos" could hook up with Slopeheads shaved down and painted up to look as much like Sapiens as possible.

The "ladies" were attracted to the taxi but when they saw just a monkeyman in the back seat, they snarled and backed away. Then we passed a row of panhandlers that stretched near close a mile, sitting or laying on the curb, some of them passed out, maybe dead. I prayed that in a day or two I'd never have to see that sight again.

When the taxi pulled up to Monkeyville it was late afternoon. Some of the guys were roasting some squirrels they caught. The women folk had found some wild berries and onions and were doling them out. I started to look for my old pal to tell him the good news.

I found Manfred sittin' with the men around the fire chewing on some birch root. I took the donuts out of my pocket and gave them to one of the younguns.'

"Where you been? We thought you were along the side of the road dead."

"Nope, I found a job," I handed him a brochure.

"Freedom Works Project. What you doing there?"

"Findin' a way to get my sorry butt out of this place."

Manfred glanced at the brochure and gave it back to me. "I heard of them people. You know Bertha, she's that Stoopback who passed through here on the way to Savannah a while ago?"

"Yeah."

"Well she's from Statesboro and the Monkeymen up there are real suspicious about these FWP people. Seems an office opened up there a month ago, and just about every Monkeyman went to the office to find work. Did they take blood from ya?"

"Yep."

"Same thing in Statesboro. But they didn't hire everyone. Most were told there was somethin' wrong with their blood. And the ones they did hire, were never seen again."

"Manfred, that's because they relocate you for the job, that's all."

"That's why Bertha left Statesboro. She was afraid these FWP People would come get her and make her disappear."

"Well, I didn't feel like they were threatening me."

"I ain't trustin' no glad-handing Sapien in a shiny office with fancy promises."

"Who are you gonna trust then? You gonna go pan-handling too? Maybe get yourself a couple nickels?"

Manfred hobbled up and got in my face, "No, Nao-mi got that job cleanin' toilets. The pays under the table, but it's somethin'."

"That's great. You get your five bucks and then what? How far ya gotta walk before you find a store that'll even let you in the front door?"

"I just got a bad feelin'." He grabbed the brochures from my hands and threw them in the fire. I rushed to get 'um out, but the fire flared up and they we're gone. Then the smoke just 'bout choked me out.

"Why'd you go and do that for?"

"FWP ain't no good and I know it."

"You know what ain't good? This freedom. Look at us Manfred, does this look like freedom to you? If we stay in Monkeyville, we ain't got no future. If we stay in Monkeyville, we chained to Monkeyville until we die."

"Abner, you know what I say—freedom, that may be all we got, but ain't it good."

"But don't you see. It ain't good. As long as we're here it's sick."

Manfred spit out his root and got all uppity, "Maybe so. But I just know that these FWP people are up to somethin'. Just gettin' you a job like that. It don't work that way."

"You nothin' but an ignorant Slopehead. You ain't got the brains to know nothin'."

I skipped the squirrel, got over to my box, and stayed to myself that evening. But the longer I was there the more I was thinkin'; Manfred may be a Slopehead, but he got a good Slopehead on his shoulders. Maybe it is too good to be true. Maybe tomorrow I should take a hike back to that place and tell the fancy suit that I ain't interested—that somethin's rotten. But then I finally fell asleep and I dreamt of my job in a place where emancipation meant somethin', where being free meant I could take care of myself. I dreamt of getting myself a little shack somewhere so I could be somebody. I dreamt of a little vegetable garden and one of them porch swings. I pictured myself

in one of those fine suits I saw in the window. Maybe even, as Leah would want, I'd find me a wife and make ourselves a home.

The next day, I'd say about three or so, a Taxi pulled up honkin' its horn. That pretty nurse stepped out and started looking for me, calling 'Abner, Abner.' I saw her and I rushed towards her.

"Good News Abner, your blood's okay. Grab your stuff and come with me."

All of Monkeyville stared at me and the nurse. I quick got my bag together and hopped in the back seat. Last thing she did was drop a big pile of those brochures on the ground. The way the Monkeymen jumped on top of them you'd think it was a rib roast.

As we drive off I rolled down my window I raised my left palm to heaven. That was the first time I really meant it. Freedom was in my bones, in my blood.

When we got back to the FWP office an old school bus was idling' there waitin'. The nurse told me to hop on board 'cause I was goin' to my new job right now. The bus was half full of other Monkeymen, all of them Stoopbacks, each with their bag. Then the nurse got on the speaker system and announced we'd need to get a special ID. It wasn't somethin' we carried or wore around our neck, but she'd put it in us so whenever we came to work this computer thing would know who we were. She had this kind of gun and we each had to put out our left arm and then she shot each of us. Did it sting! But only a minute. She hopped off and gave us a big wave as we drove off, dust a flyin.'

I Found out that most of the Stoopbacks on the bus were from Waynesboro and they said they'd been goin' south. Some were single like me, others had families. We kept south. Some said we were bound for Jessup.

We talked about freedom and this time it did feel good. We talked about the little shacks that the Waynesboro office promised everyone, with electric and a stove. There were rumors about the work. One said he heard we'd be sweeping up this huge warehouse. Another said she'd heard we'd be packin' light bulbs and ornaments for Christmas time. But none of us really cared, except that it was a job.

When we got to the job it was getting late, most of us had dozed off. We had driven so long we were pretty sure we were past Jessup. Maybe closer to Valdosta. As the bus rolled to a stop we saw the village. There were maybe 500 shacks. Then we saw all these Stoopbacks, runnin' towards the bus, and believe me they weren't happy. It looked like they were gonna beat us all to a pulp. I was thinkin', 'don't they like new folk? We ain't gonna take their jobs.'

They were just about upon us when a dozen or so Sapiens came out of nowhere with rifles. The rifles did their job and scared the mob. The Stoopbacks backed off, and we got off the bus. As we stepped down the bus driver handed us each a paper with a number and told us that was the number of our shack. As the bus drove off we saw the huge iron gate and the barbed wire fence that surrounded us.

I'd say we were more than a bit confused about the commotion. When some of the Stoopbacks who had lived there awhile came over to us we weren't sure what to expect. We were ready for a battle, but we all got hugs instead. They paired off with us to help us find our shacks. Caleb, this older Stoopback with a cane, was the one that helped me. He took me to my shack at the end of one of the back rows, number 486. After we stepped inside and turned on the light he told

me to sit on my bed and he'd explain everythin'. I tell you, I was shakin' like a leaf 'cause what I saw up to then wasn't what I expected.

"Son, you see that piece of paper on the bed? It look familiar?"

I picked it up off the bed, "Maybe."

"Well, it's a copy of the paper you signed in the FWP office. You remember signing somethin'?"

"Well, sure."

"You read it?"

"No."

"Don't worry, none of us did. That's why we're here."

"What does it say?"

"It says it's a contract with the US government. See that brochure on your pillow? It tells about the Endangered Species Act."

"The what?"

"If you ask one of the guards they'll probably explain it to you maybe better than I can. Didn't it seem strange that everyone on the bus was a Stoopback? Well, what the government is afraid of is that us Esek will become extinct. They figure that sooner or later the Sapiens are goin' accept us kind; I mean the government's workin' on it and up North it's workin'. But what they're afraid of is eventually Sapiens and Stoopbacks will start marryin' and having kids and before you know it we'll all be dead and there won't be any more pure blood Stoopbacks. You remember that blood test?"

"Sure I do."

"They weren't checking for diseases. They were checking your DNA. Making sure you were 100%

Stoopback. We are here my friend to preserve our species.”

You wonder why there were no Slopeheads on the bus? The government figures they’re too furry, stupid and ugly for the Sapien folk to get married to ‘um. Ain’t no reason to worry anyway, the DNA don’t match up well enough, for them to have kids.”

I just lost it. I began to cry like a baby. I stood up and went over to the wall and started punchin’, faster and faster, harder and harder until my knuckles were raw. Caleb just sat there on the edge of the bed.

"Look son, no one wants to be here. That's why we rushed the bus. But I really don't know why. That thing in your arm tracks you wherever you go. We sure ain't free.”

I pulled myself together a bit, "And what about the job?"

"They actually do pay us. They got a store on the grounds and we buy our food and clothes. We work Tuesday through Sunday. You know why?"

"No."

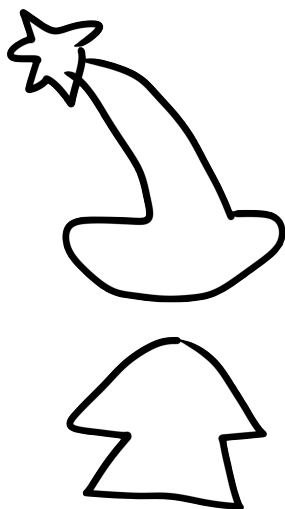
"That's when they open the gates. Ever hear of one of those drive through zoos? When the cars go by they want us to be outside in our natural habitat. In the day time you'll see just north of here are acres of fields. They put us out there pickin' cotton. Just like the good old days."





# WIZARDS OF LEISURE: 1

ALEX PRESTIA



**H**ere is Magnifico Miller, lifting the bowl now, puff, puff, puff, till he coughs from deep in his lungs. It is, as far as he knows, the only way to hit the bowl, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way, if only he could stop wheezing for a moment and think of it. And then he takes a drink from his Wizha Soda Water to feel better. And the thought is gone, and he is happy. Anyhow, here he is on his toadstool, his eyes redder than a tomato. He decides he'll take a little morning jaunt around the Wiz-of-Elm-Springs Community—a lush meadow with little hills, each little hill containing a little wizard's hovel. It's all little and pretty and quaint and green and Magnifico would have it no other way.

Magnifico Miller walks out of his round wooden door, past the enchanted hoes and trowels maintaining his herb garden, through his cabbage patch past the animated wheelbarrow carrying fresh produce, each tool working as if they had minds of their own, and he walks down the little dirt road towards his bosom friend, Francisco Ferdinando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino Federatino's cottage.

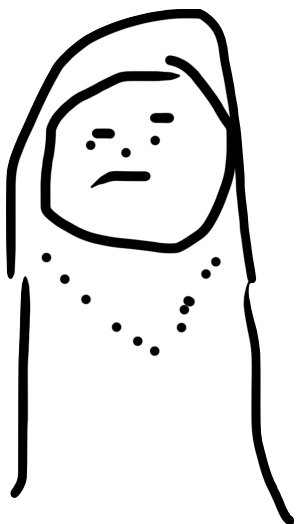
“Baaa,” he is interrupted by the bleating of hurried, fluffy sheep running across the road, moments later followed by a floating pair of harried farmer shears. Magnifico giggles at the sheers, which he enchanted to move just a little slower than the sheep, born from a whim after hitting his wonderful dragon scale bowl. He chuckles and pats his pockets, intending to find his magical bowl and undo the enchantment, for it is a cruel thing to enchant something with purpose but not enchant it well enough to fulfill said purpose, but with a shudder, his fingers pass over the pocket where the bowl should be and, alas!, no bowl.

Panic! Magnifico has no bowl! Oh no oh no, no bowl! He pats his pockets again, perhaps he left his dragonscale bowl in a different pocket, but his hopes are dashed with each empty pat until he has no hopes at all. “Well perhaps Ferdinando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino Federatino, has an idea where it may be. And maybe I’ll stop by Gurlak’s on the way to hear his thoughts.” And so, our Magnifico, sets off down his road.



**BUT WE  
ARE ALL  
MALALAS!**

DEVAHUTI CHALIHA



10<sup>th</sup> October 2014. The face of Malala Yousafzai flashes across countless screens across the globe. Swamped with books—the best friends I have known throughout my life—I sit cross-legged in my Brisbane apartment as a medical student. Intrigued and thirsty for inspiration, I can't wait to pick up the bestselling 'I Am Malala' and read it cover to cover. My initial reaction? Mixed feelings. Of course, I am proud of her. But a concomitant feeling startles me: shock and frustration that the world would consider what she did out of the ordinary. That made me realise the point I'm going to make, in this mini-thought article. Is this what is wrong with society?

On the way to and from the hospital, I smile to myself—Malala has made all our jobs, as feminists, easier. If not her, I knew someone else would have done it eventually. Maybe even a boy—who knows? But who cares? Instead, we have this ridiculous scenario where the world is hailing the ordinary person more so than the deed itself, and take up the reins to further the cause—something I would have expected us all to have been doing, wedging it within our busy schedules, all this time.

Now before I go further, perhaps I should clarify what I'm *not* doing. I am *not* claiming that I personally would have done anything better/differently; I am *not* criticising a girl who, in fact, reminds me of own 16-year-old self; I am *not* undermining all the undeniable good that she has done; I am *not* trying to speak for her—she is an independent woman with a voice just like the rest of us.

What I *am* saying, however, is yes—do stand with her; for goodness’ sake, she’s a beautiful woman standing up for a beautiful cause. But I think it is also important to realise that this is but an ordinary girl reacting to extraordinary circumstances. I monitor my reaction(s), every time I pass by a poster of her. “She’s very lucky!” I marvel. But this is not the admiration that spawns from a sense of being in the company of one who would do something radically different to what I—thereby, no doubt, scores of others—would’ve done.

Then why did I not do so myself, you might ask? Because I was not placed in that situation – a situation in which I believe any girl whose “wings had not been clipped” would naturally and rightly react. Instead, I’m launching my own campaigns standing up for those who can’t speak for themselves, like Malala—but just as importantly—all of us, would do. With such similar a mindset as mine, there is no way that scores of other young people would not. Why are girls around me not seeing the Malalas in them I have always seen and expected of them? I would have thought oppression would only make it easier to use one’s determination to fight back. Yes, she was shot in the head at point-blank range. But what else would that make one do, but retaliate harder? It’s a natural reaction, and for good reason too. **If we don’t fight for our own values just because our life is threatened, then even when our life is spared, what of ourselves would we have left?**

If not for this very normal attitude that girls, women and young people in general should realise is their natural state, I don’t think I would be here finding a

treatment for autism for my PhD project. Yes, social justice is everyone's business, and as with any organism, one hit anywhere would be felt throughout the body. When one girl hurts, we all hurt. And this is why we shouldn't be marketing her as a "hero", but the ordinary and sensible person that she is—bringing out the best in each and every one of us. There is a reason Einstein's words were immortal—there rings a core of truth in them, a truth about human nature: "The world is a dangerous place, not because of those who do evil, but because of those who look on and do nothing."



# THREE POEMS

DEVAHUTI CHALIHA



## Assam for Me

Along the Brahmaputra  
Lies the state of Assam;  
Green with lush pasture,  
Paddy fields and *kaam*.

Rich in its rice grains,  
Famous for its tea,  
When come the monsoon rains,  
It's never dull to me.

In the midst of winter,  
Thrilled at Magh Bihu,  
*Aita* makes us *pitha*  
And crispy *khurma* too.

Then is time to leave,  
As *Kokka* holds back tears.  
The memories we sieve  
Have kept us all these years.

## Lazarus Redeemed

I'm not in the shower, anymore.

Sometimes, I stay there,

Lathered in soap-

Protective, gentle.

Innocence, repelling due malice.

A pure white statue,

Waiting for morning.

I step outside and realise

Morning had come and gone.

Or, it had never come.

I withdraw back into the shower,

And wonder why it's weeping.

My milk layer has cracked,

And a peach past shines through.

I count the sunsets from my youth

With all its possible rays.

Reaching out opportunity,

Yet hard to reach

Past the sleetfalls of society.

I'm content now,

In Au of my innards.

A museum stereotype,  
Echoing equations  
Off the bathroom walls  
Of which the dank breathes a danke;  
Even they are enlightened.

A water droplet  
Trickles down my cheek-  
Delicate, soft;  
Wry, defiant.  
Its transparency threatens  
An over-reaching wave of disaster.

The soapy whiteness flakes  
And leaves behind a silver branding.  
Underneath stirs  
A wall of anticipating conscience. Lawyer-black  
Covering the white blindfold  
That sees sole truth  
In the incorrigible, cold plane-waters  
Of urban culture.

## Hare in the Tortoise

There are three kinds of love in this world:

Platonic and romantic; then, there's hero-worship.

The tortoise meets the hare.

Doctor, doctor, do you really think you know?

The first, like a riot of tensions uncoiled

Back to your baby days, to dry those tears awash.

The second, more intricate and sharp-

At once heartbreaking, yet still holds you close-

like thorn to rose:

You can't live without it, nor it without you.

The third, an eclectic mélange of both,

A mother and a daughter to the same being.

It's like you haven't aged – but that I have swung

from young to old to young to old;

To love you completely

Is but a combination of the two.

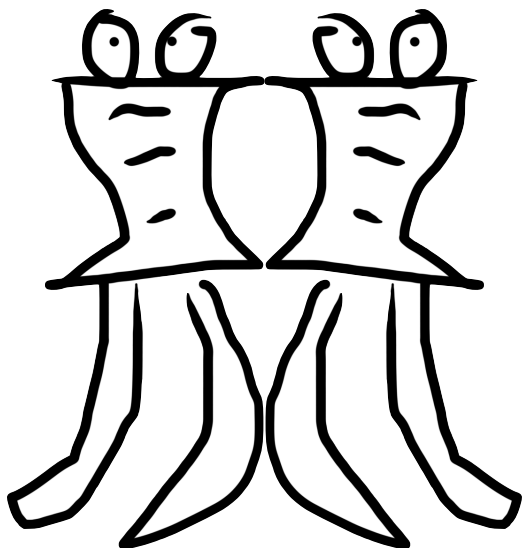
The tortoise swallows the hare.



# LAUGH WITH HIM:

DIVORCE AND EMBODIMENT IN BEN KLIME'S  
"IT WAS NEVER. SUPPOSED TO BE"

SHAAWAN FRANCIS KEAHNA



**W**eirdly, the weakest poems in *It Was Never Supposed to Be* come just after the ubiquity of phones. Before this, each poem explores nearly three decades of life—furious, worrisome, flip-pant, human, *gay as Halloween* life. For me, this only serves to elevate the collection, a deeply felt, often funny, never dizzying tour-de-force. A tour it is: poet Ben Kline guides us through halls of lovers in verbal portrait, cornered in a moment or set free to imagine what we will of them. Nowhere near the background is the ongoing, often amnesiac “progress” of the United States of America as it grapples with 1997’s recently-out Ellen DeGeneres with the same catty nosiness as it meets 2015’s (that recently?) *Obergefell v. Hodges*. One is a celebrity, the other a landmark case, yet our country—our stupid, heartbreaking, sometimes murderous adolescent of a country—is so terminally silly, we meet each newsworthy moment with a serious sense of ridiculousness. I guess we’re doing this now.

It makes sense, then, the sudden tonal shift. Phones, with their blue glows and endless scrolls, have dulled us out. Where Kline’s homophobic coworker throws the gossip magazine with Ellen’s lesbian face across the table at an all-library meeting and exclaims, “Gross!” we really feel as though we’re there. We’re *at* that meeting. She feels her disgust wholly and Kline immortalizes it. I am there. I see. I laugh with him. He’s an astonishing storyteller, capable of vivid narrative imagery I’ve only really known in prose, but this is *poetry*. When, as I say, the phones are introduced, I see and feel that, too, but Kline’s work shifts. It adapts to our sudden world of numbness, our hyper-isolated consumption, and it—he—falters.



Maybe my initial assessment was wrong.

The poems aren't weaker.

We are.

*It Was Never Supposed to Be* dazzled me. Between the sudden dip in energy that is "I Don't Search I Find" and the Covid-19 pandemic, Kline regains his footing. As if he's angry about dodging the bullet of his first pandemic only to find another shot's been fired. Or, as he says plainly in "Mitigation," *This is our second plague*. The poems get snappier, the tone sharper. When he pauses to reminisce on the dead uncles who haunt the narrative, his voice strengthens tenfold, a sense of staunch determination to reach back and tether himself to his lineage. These "dead uncles" are, for those of you uninitiated in what my people call "Indian way," not necessarily blood related to Kline, but they *are* his relatives.

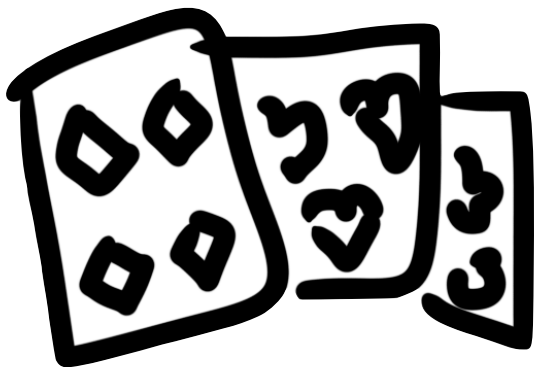
All that said, he's never too maudlin or melodramatic. His humor, as warm and effusive as it is bawdy and rude, lattices every statement. We readers are never bogged down in trauma or dragged through the muck of navel-gazing. Kline is far too strong a poet for that kind of thing. Even when we reach the final poem, the almost-titular "It Was Never Supposed to Be Mine," Kline balances light and heavy, distance and closeness. The book is a film, in my mind, every shot carefully mapped out, furnished by well-chosen words, good pacing. Then that final wide shot of the sea hits and I feel a lift. There's a hitch in my heart and I have to lean back.

Take a moment to breathe.



# LAND OF OPPORTU- NITY

NATE MANCUSO



The sickly sweet stench of menthol cigarette smoke hits me as soon as I walk into the dimly-lit casino. This smell, combined with the bass-thumping house music and flashing lights and bells of the video gambling machines, leaves me lightheaded and nauseous.

I walk past the people planted in cushioned stools facing the slot machines, hypnotized by the symbols spinning behind the screens in front of them.

A waitress approaches me with a tray of dirty cocktail glasses lined with melting mini ice cubes and lipstick-smearred cigarette butts. She wears a short tight black lycra miniskirt that looks saran-wrapped around her rear with a sparkling gold halter top corset laced tightly across her midriff to push her breasts up and spill her cleavage out over the top. Her face is lined and dried out, barely concealed by a thick layer of cheap makeup.

"Drink?" she asks while glancing over at a slot player feeding another crisp twenty into his hungry machine.

"Alcohol this early?" I ask.

She smirks, revealing yellow teeth behind bright red glossed lips. "Of course. All day, every day – beer, wine and liquor."

I look at my watch. It's 8:17 a.m. On a Tuesday. And I'm already depressed.

I politely decline the drink then continue my sojourn deeper into the abyss of the casino floor, walking past a line of denizens waiting desperately to use the ATM.

The back wall is lined with a dozen sports-betting kiosks that allow wagers on every type of sporting

event imaginable—from NFL football to Arctic badminton.

I take the only unoccupied kiosk.

An intense guy wearing an unbuttoned Hawaiian shirt and backwards visor cap stands next to me swearing at a live baseball game that plays out on his kiosk screen. “Fucking Yankees can’t hit for shit today! Torres you suck!”

I wonder why he’s watching the game on a small kiosk screen rather than one of the big screen TVs perched over the blackjack tables just twenty feet away. I can’t help but ask him.

The guy replies without shifting his laser-focused gaze from his kiosk screen. “I’m in-game prop betting each inning’s run total so I have to stay here for the whole game.”

“Oh cool,” I reply, and wish him good luck.

I don’t think he hears me while his attention remains fixed on the kiosk screen. “C’mon Judge, hit one out and make me some scratch, baby!”

Not seeing any sporting events I care to risk a wager on, I turn and stroll over to the double rows of blackjack tables, with solid dark brown wood frames and green felt-covered tabletops. Players sit in chairs around each table facing a dealer who stands before them like a demagogue in the enclave of the semi-circle shaped table. No one smiles, even after winning a hand. All eyes are glued to the table, expressionless but anxious at the same time.

I stand about five feet away from a blackjack table, watching the same routine repeat itself over and over again with the speed and efficiency of a factory assembly line; cards shuffled, bets placed, cards dealt,

wins and losses tallied, chips given or taken away, table cleared, rinse and repeat.

A morbidly obese woman slowly stands up from her seat, with the help of her cane, at a neighboring black-jack table. She shakes her head and mutters something inaudible to herself while she places her player's card into her purse. After a short rest to catch her breath, she hobbles toward the ATM line which appears to have doubled in length. I hurry over to take the woman's seat before another bystander can beat me to it.

The dealer—a middle-aged Asian woman with hooded eyes and a blank face so devoid of emotion it looks carved from stone—stares at me expectantly after I sit down. None of the four other players sitting at the table acknowledge me. I reach into my wallet and remove a folded hundred-dollar bill, then place it onto the table in front of me.

The dealer nods at me then quickly takes my bill while replacing it with two even piles of five-dollar betting chips in what seems like a single motion she's obviously practiced thousands of times. She blurts something unintelligible to the pit boss standing behind her while she slides my bill into a slit on the table.

"Good luck," she says to me in a flat robotic voice.

The dealer repeats her routine over several rounds with a speed and dexterity that mesmerizes the entire table. She's flawless, a perfectly calibrated cash-sucking machine. She reminds me of *The Terminator* — sizing up mortals in her path with deadly precision then striking before they even know what hit them. A professional killer, a stone-cold assassin.

I feel hollowed out by this place, unable to even harvest let alone process any cognizable emotion. I'm not happy, not sad, not nervous, not anxious, not frightened. Just empty.

I scoop up the three five-dollar chips that remain from the twenty that I began with about seven minutes ago and stand up to leave the table. No other player notices while all eyes remain fixated on the cards being dealt. The dealer continues her routine without pause or hesitation—not even a quick nod or glance at me. Like I was never even there.

I want to leave but I'm disoriented from the dizzying sounds and dazzling lights that surround and engulf me. I look around but I can't see the doors where I'd walked in from the parking lot.

I find a security guard standing sentry in front of a baccarat table and ask him where I can find the exit.

"It's tough to explain but walk that way and you'll find it eventually," he replies, pointing toward an endless labyrinth of gaming tables and slot machines spread across the casino floor.

I thank him.

"Good luck, bro." He smiles at me.

About an hour later in my car, I receive a cell phone call from my business partner.

"You go this morning?" he asks.

"Yep," I reply.

"So how was it?" he asks.

"The most depressing fucking place I've ever been to, like a halfway house to the suicide ward," I tell him candidly.

"Doesn't sound too good," he replies after a brief pause.

“Actually it's perfect. Let's make an offer today.”



# TROLLING

TIM FRANK



I troll my brother, Francis, because he's a dumbass and a drip. He's obsessed with a girl named Elaine Dustworthy, an OnlyFans model who attracts millions of incel subscribers from around the globe.

Elaine is a great beauty. Francis is not. He has a lazy eye, cauliflower ears, and a benign tumour on the tip of his nose, visible from space. So, I send him an email claiming to be from her.

It goes, "Dear Francis, forget the restraining order, I love you. Darling, I don't want kids or money from you, but if we are to spend our lives together you should know a few things about me first.

I've bulked up a bit lately, and my friends say I look a little butch. My thighs are rock solid and I'm developing pecs. Hair growing everywhere. Hormones, huh? Crazy.

Also, I collect stick insects in old candy jars. I feed them curly fries and popping jelly, and I make papier-mâché hats for their little heads. They're my friends and they speak to me in broken French, while sipping mocha Frappuccinos and paying my taxes on Apple Macs.

By the way, I have chlamydia, so for now I can only snuggle. You will be allowed to massage my feet, however. Forever yours, Elaine xoxo."

Standing in the cheap seats of a football stadium, I troll the fans by performing magic tricks and reading quotes from War and Peace with a megaphone. I pee into champagne flutes and order delivery pizza with my phone. I slowly strip off my military fatigues, and once I'm bare naked I shout excerpts from my

girlfriend's diary. There's juicy gossip about her crush on Osama bin Laden and her love of stale sweat. She goes on about the nuclear arms race and how it connects to the rise and fall of Britney Spears.

As pitch-side cameras zoom in on me from every angle, I announce my plan to split with my girlfriend because her brain is too small and her calves are too fat. That's when the fans throw meat pies at me and call me a whiny little bitch.

At my mother's funeral, I troll the mourners by giving the same speech I gave at her wedding. She married a shameless, twenty-year-old gold digger with a nice set of teeth, and naturally, I abhor him.

I say, "Look out for traitors, lurking in this room, crying crocodile tears, knowing they've hit the jackpot. There's a man in here who's prayed for this awful day to happen. Now it's come true, I hope you're all satisfied. What a disaster, and it's all your fault."

At the wake, I think of how pretty my mother looked at the wedding, with just enough foundation to hide her marionette wrinkles, and the purple sack dress that masked her slumped, aging figure.

I feel weird—a strange salty discharge falls from my eyes. So, I honk my snotty nose into a hanky and punch my stepdad in the gut. Everyone falls into a chorus of tears—the sensitive flowers.

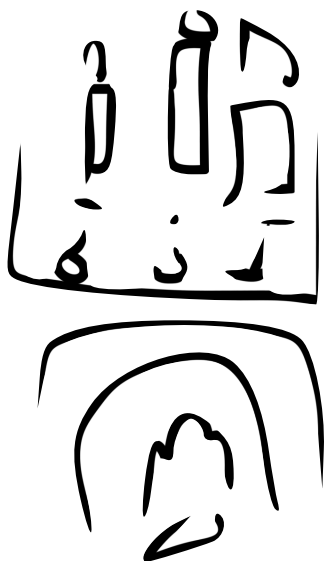
My mother's coffin rolls towards the cremation chamber, and without thinking I scream, "I love you, mommy, I'm coming with you!"

Then I dive into oblivion, leaving the hideous world behind me. I'm just so misunderstood.



# THE FALL OF A WEDDING

SHAGGY TRAPOLINO



**I** object!" I yell, so loud that most of the crowd could hear my plea.

I look left to right at all these beings who were once small objects, some clocks, some chairs, some cups wherein tea would lay hot and steaming. All these once cursed dwellers of this extravagant castle look to me with their eyes agape and their mouths slightly open. A few of the smaller individuals in the crowd—children and the like—gasp, unable to hold their more elevated shock. I am standing here, on this stage, with my hand dripping with blood and my eyes burning with the sting of sweat and bile and salt water. My blade sits idly in my hand, waiting to be dropped or swung, but the strength of my hands gives way to the prior as the metal weapon crashes on the ground. This, more than my shouting in opposition, grabs the attention of the two at the altar.

To the left, there is a woman I've come to know, though only briefly. She sits there in a wedding dress, tattered and soaked with her own stains—hers of mud instead of my more crimson splotches. She turns to see me, and her face remains stern and crystal-like still. There is no furrowing of the brow nor dropping of the jaw. At most, I'd say her lips curled in on themselves and her eyes shaped to sharp ovals.

Beside her is...is...the creature. The who struck down all the men who I'd brought before on the previous evening. Me managing to only leave the encounter with injuries and fatigue, they were not so lucky. This creature—much like his bride-to-be—looks my way, and how his visage turns from some carnivorous and amorous glee to that of deranged anger. His tusks—the very weapons he slayed so many with—are creeping out of his mouth as his jaw grinds against itself. His

stature is so tall that no man of record has reached his head. He stands there, towering over this girl, as he had so many others.

Years had gone by, and many young women of our town would go missing in the evening, often being searched for days on days on days. But in due time, we thought them gone, taken by wolves. As was the case with many travelers in our woodland area. It wasn't until the night before, when we had heard of this girl, Bell or Bella was her name, being taken to this castle. Her poor father had seen her get taken, barely surviving the encounter with the beast. We stormed into the bottom bowels of this decadent castle, hoping to take the beast by surprise. What we found was something far, far more revealing.

Several women's bodies, strewn about and slashed into pieces and parts somewhat indistinguishable, save for the wedding dresses that lay around them, similarly brought to ribbons. We had learned where all those girls had gone these past few years, and it was time we took our revenge. My men and I, we fought hard as we stormed up the castle, but the various enchanted objects began fighting back. One of my men was turned to a bloodstain by a bed post. Another had his spine crushed by a large dresser. My second in command, who I loved dearly, his neck was gashed by a kitchen knife that had moved on its own. Now, all these objects who'd taken part in killing my brethren are standing in pews as if it was some ordinary Sunday.

I will not have it.

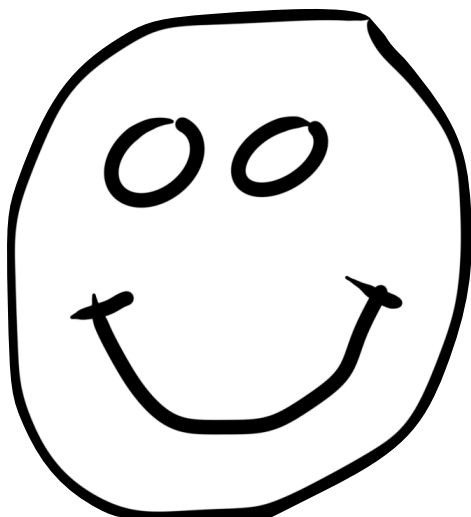
Once I reached the top of the castle, being the last of my troop, I found the beast coveting some rose he was watering with a fresh pitcher of blood. I fought him with my blade in hand, and though I might be the

strongest of my village, my might was no match for his. He used the ledge of his balcony to send me to the riverbed. I fell, thinking that those thoughts might be my last. Somehow, however, I managed to survive, and now, here I stand, the last stand I might make. I stand for the women desecrated, I stand for my men whose bodies decorate this here castle. I stand for my village. I stand against the beast. But just as I stand before the beast, he looks at me and makes a smile with his mountain sharp teeth, for I begin to fall. I'm falling, and unlike the fall before towards my watery savior, I fall to the stone ground. My eyes fading. The last thing I see is a tear gently form on the edges of the bride's cheek. It, too, falls for the last time.



# LEVELS

THEODORE WALLBANGER



The practical joke world had lost the spicy chomp of yesteryear.  
Instantaneous creativity had been abandoned for crowd work  
which labored in stuffy workspaces rife with halitosis-riddled frowns.

There were levels with jokey jokey content brokers  
if one were in the market for guffaws they could contact Peronii,  
the grease monkey on 23<sup>rd</sup> and Nutsac,  
for teeny satchels of guaranteed howls  
or grander belly snort chortles.

Peronii handpicked the spelling of his name to  
differentiate himself from the Italian Pale Lager  
which everyone associated with anyway.

April Fool's Day in 1983 would not bide well for  
Peronii or Benji Springs, Wyoming.

Being the sole proprietor of Peronii's Haus o' Pleasure,  
Peronii celebrated hard, this rare Fool's Day spinning on a Friday.

Aggressive errors were made when Peronii  
substituted his hearty breakfast for LSD stamp licks.

Inventory chores for the morning were off kilter  
in what would soon evolve as rabid mayhem.

Labeling was key in the land of laughs.

Peronii accidentally switched the UH canisters  
which were stored in his secret  
"last ditch effort" premium content lair.

These smoke-grenade-esque parlor devices shared  
the same initials but were polar opposites in  
personality spectrums.

UH One stood for Unleash Hilarity.  
These funny bone ticklers were  
reserved for the soft-shoe  
comedian fun bag who required a  
bombastic barrage of purchased  
crowd noise mixed with fourteen celebratory attaboys.

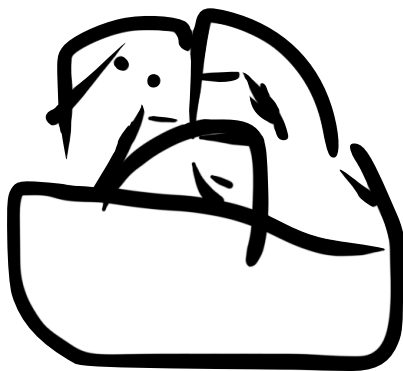
The evil twin to Hilarity was Hell.  
Haus o' Pleasure was the only shop  
in eleven geometrically shaped states  
offering Unleash Hell as the end all be all last ditch effort for  
closure of any  
public performance by a struggling artist bombing in front of  
a staged audience.

Tickleberry's Comedy Club in Benji Springs was  
obliterated when it rocketed  
392 miles into space after Wolf Sizemore detonated  
the incorrect UH at the close of his cricketed 4pm  
seniors only afternoon garden variety yawn special  
which had been offering a free Fritos chili combo meal with  
every full price ticket.



# THREE POEMS

KUSHAL PODDAR



## **They Tied Grief Around The Cat's Neck**

Someone managed to tie grief  
around the neck of the cat.

It rings all afternoon. Its din  
mewls, moans and mourns.

Our garden has not been watered  
for months. The soil has fallen  
in love with fate. Wind asks around  
if any plant has seen the kittens.

The cat rings again. We know  
that grief is here. We hide our sweet feelings

## **The Butcher's**

The butcher opens the shutters  
humming an almost Ike Quebec  
and he's never heard that name  
or that music. His mouth and lips  
provide the perfect instruments  
for the tune. He combs his hair  
before and after wiping the stool,  
cleaning the already clean slab  
and a tree stump he uses to chop  
the head off, and he calls the name  
of the goat. The goat answers  
as if it knows the name, why and how  
fate tastes every act and consequence.

## **The Taste of The Dimensions**

The fishmonger tells me  
that the fish is fresh, and if  
I hold my one ear against  
its swollen belly I can hear  
sea and storm, infinity of births as well.

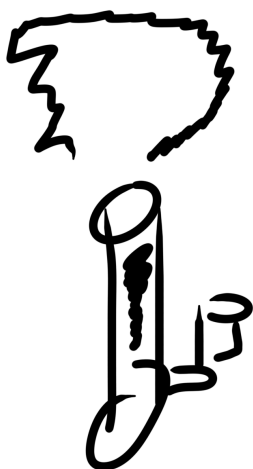
I can hear no such thing.  
One who lives on a flat dimension  
cannot perceive a cube  
I don't know if I can savour  
the real taste or a fragment of the ocean's flesh.

I shall invite you tonight. Perhaps  
we can eat-together the jigsaw puzzle.



# WIZARDS OF LEISURE: 4

ALEX PRESTIA



Francisco Fernando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino Federatino, coughs heartily, and looks up from his obsidian bong, “Why, I don’t seem to remember which pocket dimension we have transported to.”

Beside him on the couch, and without looking up from the joint he is ever so carefully rolling, Gurlak growls, “Realm of Starlight?”

They are floating on their seats, surrounded by a realm of stars and the blinking blooping beauty of it all, Magnifico wants to feel relaxed but he instinctively reaches into his pocket, feeling that the dragon scale bowl is still gone and the stars remind him or just how large the universe is and how far away his bowl may be. Francisco Ferdinando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino Federatino, interrupts his thoughts with his own, “Magnifico, I sometimes worry I’m caught within a prism of my own pleasure.”

Gurlak grunts but Magnifico can’t agree for he is currently in a prism of annoyance and fear, he must have his bowl back, how could he ever cast spells without it? As if reading his mind, Gurlak adds, “It would be a shame to lose your animation spells, Magnifico. Say, which kind of dragon was your dragon scale bowl made from?”

Francisco Ferdinando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino Federatino bolts up at this “By the starlight itself! I knew we came here for a reason, the realm has led us to an answer.” He begins milking his jet black bong again, just before pulling the slide he whispers, “Returno.” Which for the readers, I must point out, is entirely unnecessary and not at all how magic or smoking marijuana works, but Francisco Ferdinando Federico, the 15th Wizard of the Fontino

Federatino comes from a long line of long ceremonies and it is quite impossible to tell whether he is aware “Returno” is not an incantation at all. Perhaps, like most things, it is just a ceremony he carries like a thorny seed on his thick cream-and-red robe. Regardless, he clears the bong and they whisk back to his living room, “The dragon Magnifico! The scales are from Ancient Alde on the Ridge, are they not?”

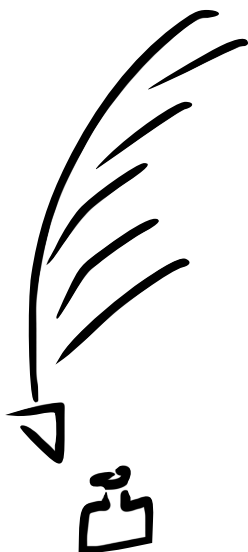
“Oh bother,” says Magnifico, “I had to solve the most ridiculous riddle last time I met Alde. Convincing her to part with those scales will be a nightmare. I can’t imagine what kind of conundrum she will have in store for me this time.”

“Dragons love their riddles,” murmurs Gurlak, he holds up the beautifully rolled spellscroll joint. “Joint’s ready, shall we take it on the road?” The other two agree. Twenty minutes and some confusion about whose shoes are whose, and they’re out the door.



# TWO POEMS

RICHARD LEDUE



## **As the Dead of Winter Refuses to Die**

-30 nights don't help love poems  
fill a page like footprints  
in the snow, nor do they make  
the darkness seem any less  
than another day's ending,  
instead of a lull before a beginning.

And I have dreamed of warm sands  
between my toes, while the ocean  
sung ballads of sailors gone mad  
with lust, so they harpooned mermaids,  
but the damn cold  
gets hot from all of this,  
and presses against my windows,  
as if a depraved stalker,  
hoping to catch me naked.

## Lesser Angels

Why does death have to be  
personal? There's more cost effectiveness  
in being generic,  
like a box of off-brand crackers  
or wishing for a "Merry Christmas"  
from a department store Santa,  
after waiting in a line for an hour.

Yes, no-name death for people  
who have names doomed  
to overpriced tombstones  
pushed over at night by laughing youth.

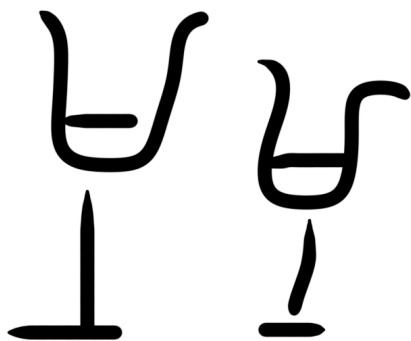
The uppercase "D"  
could even be copyrighted,  
and Death would be saved  
for celebrities and influencers,  
who believe in their faces and voices  
more than Azrael  
sighing as he gathers their famous souls,  
while outsourcing humanity  
to lesser angels.





# THE WAITERS

PAUL RANSOM



People watching. This is what I say whenever I am asked. I bought this wine bar for the view. Of strangers. Of lives I can only ever know in passing. Some nights I am reminded of scenes from the film I never made. The one about waiting.

Now I find myself waiting for them. My favourite regulars. The couple who never meet. Always at the same table, which I reserve for them in a low-lit back corner.

They arrive separately. After work. Expensively attired. Her first, around 8pm. She drinks Cabernet Franc from the Loire Valley. I order it in especially. Write her name on the bottles. Jin-a. He comes later, after 9:00, and prefers the vintages of other valleys. Clare, Barossa, Napa. They sit next to each other, an hour apart. Tuesday through Thursday. Most weeks without fail.

I imagine the film version. Languorous cross fades between them. The elegant melancholy of it. Their intimate separation overlaid by haunting piano lines.

In this life, unscored, in a bar I have recently come to own, theirs is a curious ritual of missing. She waits for him to arrive. He watches out for her return. They drink their wine quietly, not looking at phones or watches. Their eyes briefly focus whenever they notice the door opening, scanning each arrival. Neither seems impatient, nor disappointed.

The choreography is exquisite. She departs. I leave the glass on the table until he arrives. He always glances at it. I allow him a few moments before taking his

order and removing it. By now he knows that I know. I am already a part of their dance.

Yet all this lovely movement, I know, is not confined to a few square metres in the bustle of a midtown bar. It happens in a quiet corner of my heart.

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When I tell friends about this establishment, they shake their heads. Some love the symmetry. Others ponder the psychology. In the fantasy of my unmade film, it plays as fate. Doubly so.

First – because I used to meet her here; back when it was a cosy, day-trade café. We would share pancake stacks with maple syrup and cream, followed by large ice coffees in tall, dimpled glasses. Two sets of cutlery. Two candy-stripe straws. Split bills. Standard undergraduate fare. Cheap and cheerful.

Second – because I later spent years perfecting the classic side hustle of actors and artists; until casual hospitality hours became my steady gig. Instead of a name in lights, I now have a name above a door. On a variety of contracts. Mostly for money I owe.

I knew it was risky, but the lure was gravitational. Turn the pancake kitsch into an upscale bar. Make the space stylish. Understated. Fine wines and artisan sharing plates. A small library. A couple of beautifully carved chess sets.

And here it is, my refined, yet homely bolt hole, nestled on a corner, one block away from the hectic impersonal mess of the financial district. Here too, my open door to the remote possibility of her.

For a name, there was only ever one candidate. Patience.

As I polish glasses in preparation for another evening, I think of Karalyna, confident she would appreciate the in-joke. Knowing not to expect her.

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On warm nights, he prefers whites. His name is Carlton. He is in his mid-twenties, and he works in IT. Even though he has explained it, I do not truly understand what he does. Tonight, he has opted for Chenin Blanc.

As I move to take her discarded glass, a smear of red still visible, he says, "In case you're wondering...our parents strongly disapproved...and most of our friends thought it was way too soon."

I am surprised. It is an abrupt declaration. He smiles, as though in apology, then adds, "In the end it felt like the whole world was against the idea, and we weren't strong enough, or in love enough, to resist."

My head explodes with questions; but mostly what I want to know is whether the wine ritual is deliberate. "Unspoken," he confirms. "We used to meet up in a

bar not far from here. But the crowd got too young, too noisy, and then...not long after we called it a day, you popped up."

He blinks, exhales a small sigh, and hands me the 'reserved' sign. "Thank you," he says. "For noticing. But more for allowing. I'm sure Jin-a appreciates it as much as I do."

It is a remarkable gesture. Made without fanfare. I twirl the sign in my fingers, lost for words. "It's the least I could do."

The phrasing is cliché but, saying it, I feel its import. Having put two and two together, how could I help but make four? We three, present, plus her, long gone. Who knows where.

In Carlton and Jin-a I see the better dressed parallel of Karalyna and I. The likeness is not exact, far from it, yet enough for me to divine what they are tacitly asking. Do not intervene. Do not pass messages. Simply make room.

I return with his order. "On the house," I say. "For noticing. And allowing."

\*\*\*

It was an associate of Karalyna's, a wise-cracking dealer who ran a small-time dope business from the back of a busy diner, who gave me my first waiting job. He laughed when I told him I was studying per-

formance. “You sure you’re pretty enough?” he mocked. But she had obviously put in a good word, and I was hired on the spot.

At first, I was awful. Clumsy, slow, forgetful. I hated it too. Not that Mo seemed to mind. He was making cash money and having his way with Karalyna. Maybe he enjoyed my helpless jealousy. My futile indignation and inept saviour pose.

“If you can’t be a real man, at least act like one,” he used to say, relishing what he felt was a street-smart triumph over art school intellect. He was muscular, moneyed, and competent. I was skinny, fumbling, and minimum wage.

I was also arrogant and afraid, but Mo’s radar never detected that and, ultimately, Karalyna’s came to register it as cowardice. Yet, by the time she had weaned herself off the milk of intoxication, and he had pressured one too many of his female clients into bartering sex for substance, my stubborn streak had elevated me from burgers and kebabs to waiting tables in fine dining luxury.

At 30, I was an industry veteran on an attractive hourly rate; and I had learned to love hospitality for its wealth of stories. The character studies. The complex play of human interaction. Great source material. Serendipitous inspiration.

In hindsight, I see clearly how this was also a convenient rationalisation. Truth is, I was addicted to waiting. For my big break. For grant money and willing

investors. For my vision to be appreciated. But mostly for her.

I made an artform out of waiting. It was how I dealt with rejection.

Meanwhile, she got married and Mo went to prison. Watching the drama unfold, sidelined, I merely grew up. Gave up.

\*\*\*

Jin-a is probably closer to my age than Carlton's. I sense the years in her movements. And in her sorrow, which is both less obvious and more intense than his. She does not hold my gaze for long but when she does I see the ocean. The deep distance between possibility and compromise.

I produce a new bottle. Show her the label. She nods her approval, and I uncork. A minute smile of relief plays across her lips as I pour a small sample. With delicate fingers she manipulates the glass. There is a scarlet swirl. A fruity plume. She inhales, reminding me of sighs. Sometimes I could break watching her.

When she is resident in her corner, I deliver a small bowl of warm olives. I know she loves them. "Gomawoyo," she says, thanking me. To which I reply with a slight bow and, "Cheonmaneyo." She teaches Korean at a nearby language school. This, I have surmised, is how she met Carlton.

From there, I further assume that theirs was a union which defied the standard fault lines, and that for this transgression they have been made to pay. A common narrative of forbidden desire. However, by an act of grace and gorgeous resistance, they have maintained a form of togetherness. A tacit continuation, hidden in plain sight.

To this, I now bear unobtrusive witness. A pole star. A location. Together, we enact a secret love. Three characters in a bar called Patience. Waiting quietly. As yet unnoticed.

\*\*\*

I spent ten and a half years waiting for Karalyna. Most of my twenties. Friend and confessor. Unpaid counselor. Fetcher, carrier, bystander. I reasoned that if I could fix her, prove my loyalty, act with unimpeachable kindness, she would surely fall into my arms. While others tired of her volatility and broken promises, impatient with the circular dramas of trauma and addiction, I remained. Safe harbour. Warm shoulder.

There were times when I felt she was ready to choose me. A word, a touch, a look that lingered, near to melting. I would catch my breath, but the flicker would resolve again to smoky residue. Thence to ash.

Yet, in my conceit, my ignorance, my blind terror, I continued to believe I was the one. Until I was not. Having fled the family home in Bratislava at 16 for the care of a distant aunt in Western Sydney, Karalyna's



passports were her precocity and her looks. Mathematics, and a sweep of auburn curls. She had learnt young, too young, that this was her power. She used it wilfully. Recklessly.

It would take her several years to fully disentangle gift from curse. A process I aided and abetted with my own conflicted psychology. Hope and helplessness. Compassion and control.

From the healing distance of time and silence I can now confess to liking her more when she was damaged. As she began to extricate herself from the clutches of ghosts and the manipulations of men like Mo, I felt her slipping away. Looking back, I accept that I had simply served my purpose, yet in the penumbra of her affection I was yelping. Resentful. I took cheap shots. Said stupid things. It only served to hasten her departure.

Enter Dominic. Handsome and decisive. Whereas I waited, hoping, he acted. Seven months later they were married, and I was exiled to the miasma of memory and forgetting.

“At first I thought you didn’t want me,” she said by way of explanation. “But then I worked out that you lacked the balls.”

I hated hearing it, but I knew she was right. Fear had misled me. Instead of waiting for her love, I should have acted on mine. The dread of no and a beggar’s plea for yes were never going to be enough for her. Having been the target of men who did not seek con-

sent, or who resorted to crude transaction, what she wanted was a man with the simple courage to ask.

I was not that man.

\*\*\*

"I know it might seem strange," Carlton acknowledges. "Like, maybe we're in denial or...we can't move on...but it's not that. I can't even explain it to myself."

His eyes search me, not so much for a grain of insight, as a form of allegiance. There is something in their graceful observance that sits in stark opposition to the definitive noise of a goal-focused world. Like a journey without destination, their objective is not closure, nor even reunion. It is as though, with an act of beauty, they now make love without the standard exchange. Celestial bodies, eternally circling. Defined by the space between them.

They wait like water. To make vapour or ice. To be heaved by satellites. To take the shape of vessels. In a universe of manifestation, they have chosen essence. By such tender meditation I am deeply moved.

"The table is yours as long as you want it," I say.

I am tempted to elaborate, to offer up my own fuzzy logic, but the impulse catches at the top of my breath. Allow the space. Wait.

The flow of cursive script on a pane of polished glass reminds me. Patience.

Beyond the signage, the city at night. A busy luminosity. The hyper-colour blur of modernity. Here, in the suspension between inhale...exhale...like a slowed down scene from a film...I return to the stillness from which I watched my longtime love. As she moved around me. In sensuous orbits of dysfunctional genius. And at long last I sense it, like fog rolling in. Hard edges soften. The valley fills with an undulating mist, dancing on the surface of stony old ways.

I never truly waited for her. Because I did not know what waiting was.

Carlton smiles. I intuit, perhaps simply hope, that he has understood. Neither of us require the brutality of confirmation. He raises his glass. "Thank you, Alex." I nod, and it is enough.

\*\*\*

In lieu of plain-speaking fortitude, passive-aggressive acting out. As Karalyna grew distant, I became impatient. Through the prism of vanity and desperation, her retreat seemed like betrayal. I was no longer the careful listener. Instead, I behaved as though recompense was due.

Then, Dominic. He cast me as the lead in his short film. Boasting, I invited Karalyna to a private screening. Within minutes it was clear that it was not my

acting that caught her eye that afternoon. I felt humiliated. Passed over. Yet I had bought it on myself, and I knew it.

Thereafter, a period of remorseless self-loathing, which itself was a drama of ego. Later, with time and other distractions, a quieting of the heart. A measure of maturity. The ordinary process of living.

Since then, my roles have changed. Today, I dream my dreams behind the camera, and I no longer wait tables as a casual employee. My daughter will soon be ten. The ex and I are still friends. I am also the executor of my parents' humble estate.

Karalyna is a memory I do not often indulge; except as the inspiration for the film I still plan to make. Even though it has failed to attract sufficient support to green light production, and I am too busy with the bar to spare much thought for it, I am yet to finally forfeit the ambition. One day, I tell myself. One day.

\*\*\*

Something has shifted. Jin-a has taken the rest of the bottle to her table. Ordered san choy bau. Extracted a volume from the shelf. *The Heart Is A Lonely Hunter*. She looks at ease.

I note the clock. Wondering. As the hour ticks over, I catch her watching me. Her smile is like spring. I am like melt water. There is no pretending.

She stands. Moves over to the bar. I sense she is a little tipsy. "Carlton is in Korea," she says. "For work. He will be back next week."

My relief must be obvious. She laughs, kindly. "There is a place I used to go when I was at university in Seoul. A park by the river. I used to sit in this one spot and just let myself...be. Until I met Carlton it was the happiest time."

Tonight, she explains, he will go there on her behalf. To the same park bench, where he will shoot footage of the view on his phone. "I asked him to send it to me. While I am here. And tomorrow, I will film you."

When she is back in her comfortable corner, I retreat to the staff toilet, where a silent stream of tears flow like the videoed river.

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Jin-a shares Carlton's footage with me. I wait until after closing before watching it on my laptop. Drinking European beer, looking at the shimmer of an Asian city. Nothing spectacular. A dark body of water. Illuminated buildings on the opposite bank. Noises off. Voices in a cool autumn night. I stare at it, like she did earlier, strangely at peace. As though I am waiting beside the river. For my sweetheart to arrive.

The rendezvous takes place in the cinema of memory. The only kiss we ever shared. At this address. A week before the wedding. "We really want you to be there, Alex," she said. "Me especially."

Over a final stack of sweet pancakes, we lingered. Savoury adult taste having replaced sugar fixing. Years of detail having scoured the surface of hormonal shine. I was not her saviour. She was not my fallen angel. We spoke at length, barely tasting the corners of farewell.

In truth, ours was a trauma bond. An oppositional stance. Once the revolution had fulfilled its primary purpose, the fighters faded back to civilian disinterest. Only the blood stains remaining to be laundered. No proud monuments for us.

Then it happened. While I was not looking. Karalyna moving from her side of the table. Squeezing in next to me. Her body warm and alive. The feather-touch tumble of long tresses. Fingers knotting mine. Kissing like dissolution. A decade of desire, evaporating on the sizzle of skin. A moment nearing oblivion. Together, finally.

Since then, nothing. Save years.

I did not attend the nuptials. Did not seek her out. Nor have we sought one another on social media. In her place, a fictional proxy. A strong female part in a film yet to be shot.

With a long exhalation and a swig of tepid lager, I snap back. Carlton's video still playing. I am seated on a bench, in a park, at night, while the Han River rolls by in the shadows, and lines of coloured light dance like neon fire on its silken back. I am in awe. Everything is so simple.

\*\*\*

As promised, Jin-a shoots footage the following night. I help her find a good frame. She notices the way I make small adjustments. I tell her a little about myself, and the film I want to make. She asks if I intend to call it *Patience*. "It's a working title," I confirm.

There is a bittersweet depth in her gaze. For a second I find myself drowning in it. Then she smiles, sorrowful and soft, and says, "We chose this place because of the name. It seemed appropriate to our situation."

I want to ask her if this is because she and Carlton were once too hasty; yet refrain. It is their story, not mine to extract. Nevertheless, she waits a beat for the expected question. A slight tension discernible.

"Gomawoyo," I reply, and a commensurate wave of relief softens her. As though she were a flower moving in a whisper of wind. Here at least, she is not required to offer herself for judgement.

In the tiny crease of her smile I feel, perhaps for the first time, a weight of similar proportion lift from my shoulders.

\*\*\*

There is waiting, and there is waiting. One I have known for decades, like a fist of urgency in my gut, the other I have lately discovered. Two lovers in a bar.

Their gentle ceremony. The slow dance into which I have been invited.

We now inhabit a different way of waiting. Not for an exact outcome, nor for the verdict of circumstance. Neither are we clinging on or praying for victory. Our situation is not helpless, our actions not heroic. This is not a test. There is nothing to be proved.

Ours is the simple act of remaining. Of moving closer to stillness. Paying attention to the infinite beauty of moments. In the sensual motion of breathing, a kind of music can be heard. A minute could be a river. An hour might be the sea. A pearl of wine at the bottom of a glass is a jewel fit to adorn a limitless love. There is no distance between us. There never will be.

Watching Carlton and Jin-a has inspired me. I am no longer wedded to the drama of the absent Karalyna, nor do I await the permission of financiers and gatekeepers. My film does not have to be liked to be made. With their slow and cinematic circling, two solitary wine drinkers are sharing a story of patience that is emboldening the bartender to action.

Starting today, I will move, without fear or hesitation, in the beauty they have brought into my presence. They will be written into my film. Our film. The script will not be fixed. The vision deliberately imprecise. Yet still we will begin; allowing the making to unfurl the form. We will proceed directly, but we shall not rush. There is no deadline.



Finally, without knowing, I know.

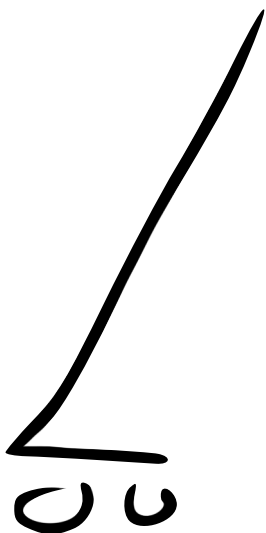
And, as though it were a pay-off in a three-act structure, the ideal framework emerges for this vaporous determination. It arrives like a door swinging open. I look up, and there it is. I tell my new friends, separately, that I have decided to rename the film.

The Waiters.



# NOSE FOR IT

BOB GIELOW



Date: February 14, 2020 -

Location: Wilsons Leather Outlet, Kittery, ME

What is it about the aroma in leather stores? Whether or not I need to buy leather products, if I am walking by, I must enter one of these stores.

I am entranced by pungent memories of the cows whose lives have been transformed into handbags and jackets, wallets and belts. I sense the pine wood, dried hay, feral cats, drafty air and rural/retro mystique found in the barns where these cows lived their destined-to-become-a-consumer-product lives. I really want to purchase a leather-something to prove that I could pull off living the life of a rugged, Mountain Standard Time rancher... though Wilsons will make no sales to me today. I touch almost every item in the store, adding to my indulgent mini orgy of leathery sensations.

Date: June 4, 2020 -

Location: Our backyard, Portsmouth, NH

Although this is not the first time I have mowed our lawn this year, the smell of cut grass is particularly strong this late Sunday morning, still sticky with the dampness of yesterday's rain.

I have doubts about our plans to hardscape this yard after inhaling the odors of 10,000 blades of grass, all cut in two without their permission. The insides of Perennial Ryegrass must be dripping with the chemicals humanity has used to build suburban order. This

scent, and the silenced lawn mower, represent the perfect appetizer for a shower, beer, baseball game, and, if I'm lucky, some marital lovemaking. Inhaling this smell convinces me that summer calm and comfort is here and might just stay forever.

Date: August 19, 2020 -

Location: Crane Beach, Ipswich, MA

The olfactory exclamation point for summer has to be the combination of Coppertone, Banana Boat, Neutrogena and various other sunscreen products, at the local beach of your choice. Though it can make me gag if I get too close to a gaggle of children, I love the smell of hot and hazy day cancer-avoidance.

Smelling like coconuts on steroids with a side order of extra-strength jasmine, these children scamper to and from the water's edge, with cheap plastic buckets and shovels, under the half-hearted gaze of their parents. Over 1,000 miles from the natural home of these origin-scent plants, marketeers have proven that humans will go all in with their summer fragrances, ensuring that even New England smells like an idealized tropical rainforest.

Date: October 27, 2020 -

Location: The Loop Mall parking lot, Methuen, MA

I fear that my fragrant recollections, my aromatic meanderings, my nostril memories ... may have come to an end. My long-standing desire to use this journal to document the nose-worthy smells I am experiencing...

may be no more. My efforts to honor and feel close to my beloved Mother, who told me at age seven that I “certainly have a nose for it”... seem to now be thwarted. Even though Mom died long ago, I am inconsolably sad thinking that I’ll never again impress her, or anyone else, with my ability to differentiate between brands of women’s perfumes.

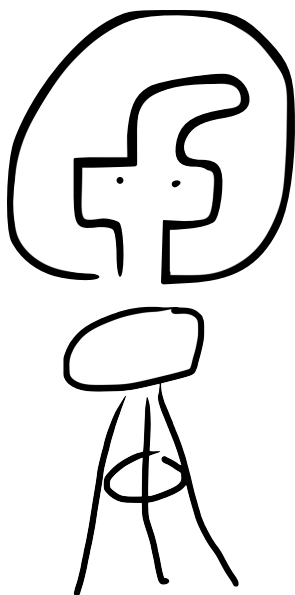
As I await the results of my COVID-19 test, I look around my car and know that there are some interesting smells in here, or at least should be. I used to smell former Burger King meals and my traveling bottle of antibacterial gel. I used to smell that pine tree-shaped deodorizer Brianna gave to me. I’m certain that I should smell my own fear, but my olfactory neurons cannot register any of the above.

From everything I’ve read, losing one’s smell is an almost certain sign of the dreaded coronavirus. It was the first symptom that led me to locate this drive-through COVID-testing parking lot an hour from home. Combined with the slight cough I’ve developed since yesterday; I don’t think there is any doubt that I will be yet another positive case.

If I don’t survive this terrible illness, Brianna, I hope that you will find this journal and consider starting one of your own. I would love for you to honor your dad, who was honoring his mom, and document the wondrous smells you encounter, and the associated emotions you experience, throughout your long and sweet life.

# ON JOYCE

RENÉE LOBUE



Still, the charm can net you even when you try to break away. Just let go and break. Away. Or break down.

Regret can only last so long, so why not dive into that deep river of R and get the feelings moving? Over.

A walk to pick up Chinese takeout from not-the-best place in town finds me off course, staring into the bay window of a stranger's dining room. It was so tidy—not like the million and one things in my own “to-be-put-away” pile, a configuration of modern life with unlimited access to things. But with things come no instructions on where to put them. Space makes you tidy. Staring into the window for too long, crouching out of the streetlamp's glow, the dark felt safe. I thought about the serene tidiness as I pulled on the Chinese restaurant's door, now closed, my dinner trapped inside.

I imagined an interview in which, if I'm good at being late, I can get my dinner from behind the door:

“Ma'am? And what, exactly, is your reason for being late?”

“Staring.”

Hungry and strolling through my neighborhood, I didn't want to go home, nor did my growling stomach inspire me to eat. I walked three more blocks and found myself seated at an outdoor table at Owen's, the local sports bar that secretly boasted some of the best



food in town, in a suburb that desperately wanted to be the East Village but would settle for one day becoming another Jersey City.

Even seated, my hunger wasn't hungry. I ordered a Manhattan and started scrolling my phone's ever-growing list of saved items on eBay, though I'd promised myself I would stop using it—partly because eBay stopped accepting American Express, but mainly because it felt like a snapshot in time. Too retro.

"I like your nail color! Neon green!" a voice declared from behind me.

I turned to see a short woman with a head of blonde ringlet curls, wearing a black T-shirt emblazoned with a rhinestone stiletto and the caption, "*Buy the Shoes.*"

"Thanks."

"I'm Joyce. I'm usually here on Thursday nights for the scampi. Mind if I sit with you?"

Yes, Joyce. Yes, I do. I'm not-hungry hungry and enjoying this Manhattan before heading home to microwave two Pop-Tarts, floss, and watch a video on how to meditate.

"Uh, no."

Joyce reminded me of my Aunt Debbie but a few years older, 68. Sitting and talking, talking, talking while smoking a cigarette, she brushed ashes off her

Capri pants. She told me everything about her life: becoming an English teacher young, marrying young and divorcing young, no kids. But mostly, she talked about Phil, her on-again, off-again boyfriend of ten years who still wouldn't hold her hand in public. Phil, who lived just a few blocks from here. She told me how much he loved his fishing expeditions and how he started Citizens for Rowan Park, the local park cleanup group. She went on about the fights, the breakups, the makeups, the gap periods of silence, and how she was still utterly in love with him.

After two and a half hours, another Manhattan, and Joyce alternating between eating and smoking, we exchanged numbers and said we'd keep in touch. Later, as I watched a *Meditation Made Easy* video on YouTube, I thought about Joyce as I stared at the Pop-Tart crumbs on my plate. Maybe Joyce's life wasn't a hapless trail of occasionally bestowed morsels, but full, like her bottomless plate of scampi. Maybe the love she and Phil shared was otherworldly, only comprehended by the two souls dancing in the warmth of it. She never understood why Phil didn't bring her around his friends or family, and though I had a laundry list of opinions on why, I kept them to myself.

The next day, succumbing to my curiosity, I searched Facebook for the Citizens for Rowan Park page. There was Phil, tagged in photos of a recent Halloween celebration. Handsome, even with a beer belly, his gray ponytail was confusingly not a deterrent. I sent him a friend request, needing to unpack the non-committal, non-hand-holding stranger, way more than I needed to unpack how to meditate.

When he messaged me, casually asking to meet for a beer, I accepted within seconds. The next evening, sitting next to Phil, I was surprised at how much shorter he was in person. He told me about his stint in the Navy, his recent switch to the Democratic Party, and his love of fishing trips to North Carolina. The drinks were strong, agedly so, at this, the oldest bar in town, and an hour into our conversation, everything around me sparkled in a hazy way.

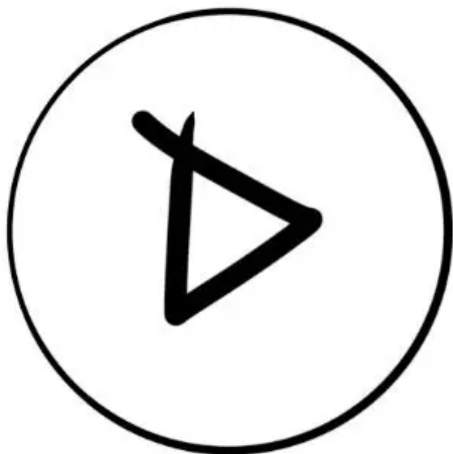
Phil offered me a ride home. As I climbed into his Dodge Charger, I realized he hadn't asked much about me, except how long I lived here and what I liked to do for fun. He plugged his phone into his car stereo and a live Allman Brothers track played. As I stared ahead, his right arm reached around my neck. Tongue first, he pulled me to his lips while his left hand slipped under my denim skirt, gripping my entire butt cheek with a tight squeeze. A wave of nausea rose in my throat. I threw the car door open, and with my back to him, blurted, "I have to go."

As I walked home, dizzy, still tasting Phil's cigarette-tinged saliva, I pulled up Joyce's number and blocked her. My brisk walk slowed as I took out the business card that, an hour earlier, Phil slipped into the front pocket of my shirt. Alongside his roles as fisherman and citizen park beautifier, Phil also managed a local band, Turbo Ballz, I would pay money not to see.

I turned onto the main street and dialed Phil's number. He picked up with a deadened "Hello." I paused, letting a passing motorcycle's roar fade into the distance,

silence filling the sidewalk once more. Out of my mouth, a sluggish oral freight train: “Fuuuck youuuuu, Phiiiiiiiii.”

Almost home, I passed the Chinese restaurant. I stopped and pulled three times on the locked door, hoping, one day, it would open for Joyce.



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