





Slaughter at the Sandman Buffet

Doug Raphael

Victory is the smell of perfectly pressed waffles,
shouts the father to his wild-eyed soldiers,

cream cheese painted across their face
as they plunder the buffet

of canned fruit and
pale thin cranberry juice.

A graveyard of half-eaten
peanut butter packs

litter their white porcelain plates
like slaughtered sheep,

stainless knives bloodied
in raspberry jam, lay by their feet.

*Can you taste the sweat nectar of the kill
on your lips,* he cries,

as the little ones shovel in Froot Loops,
pump their fists, howl at a florescent sky.

That's collateral damage, he says
of the syrup dripping from the table's edge.

Oh, to eat, to eat, to eat
to be the last ones standing.

Until the spicy sausage rises
like volcanic acid from their core.

Until they fall to their knees,
keeled over in cramps.

Until a chorus of cries
plead *no more*

Until his hand rubs their backs
while he whispers *that's war.*





JUST LIKE THEM

Stephen Philip Druce

They wished for
a baby boy :

tall,
handsome,
polite,
clever,
precocious,
virtuous,
noble,
successful,
triumphant, but

the boy turned out
to be just like
them.

Damn!,

damn?,

damn fools!,

who else goes
into the mix?. (The end)



Time to kill

Dorothy Lune

Janice needed to retrieve a red stiletto, & that she did. Her best friend Spark was hiding it away from the world for her. Janice waited for the shoe on a zebra print couch in the living room of Spark's mother's place. You could smell cigars, or something that smelled like cigars, on the walls. On the coffee table there was a flightless bird in a cage & a fishtank of five clown fish. Spark's mother once painted an oil portrait of Vladimir Lenin that she kept framed & behind glass, hanging on the wall in a spot where you'd expect a television. His mother was gardening as usual, he was upstairs in his room surveilling the shoe out of fear it might leave his sight. Funny thing, Janice knew Spark kept it in a shoebox without asking about it, without evidence or reason to know this. Janice clicked her shoes together in anticipation when Spark hurried downstairs. He held Janice's arm with his empty hand. "Even though this is hard for me, it's important for you to have your shoe back, so that's important to me too, here you go." He said while handing Janice the red stiletto. As soon as this happened, Spark's mother dropped dead in the backyard, garden gloves still on. Spark investigated the noise, Janice followed suit when Spark began to weep. She wrapped her arms around him & said "Oh Sparkie, I'm so sorry this is happening, I'm here for you!" She kept a tight grip on her shoe for a sense of certainty.

Janice called emergency services & helped Spark through the gloomy moment, acting as a distraction from the emptiness that he now thought of as life, all because she got a great idea: have Spark move in with the rest of their friends. There was a road trip in need, so after the funeral Alice drove her mini van to Spark & Janice in the cemetery parking lot. Noodles, Martha, & Jack sat in the back seats, the car smelled minty, Alice's wheel cover was once a bolt of sixties style floral patterning, the seats were always soft & cozy no matter the chaos they witnessed or even fell victim to. But what Alice was most proud of was a peace sign sticker on the rear window, she was aware it was corny, but she designed, cut, & covered it in plastic rhinestones herself, & the positive message was obvious, peace, duh! So she loved it for what it was. Nobody except Alice knew her mini van wasn't technically hers, because it was stolen. She kept many crime related secrets but came across as a law abiding citizen. Noodles & Jack were the most dependable & responsible of the group if we're being honest, they grew up in the same foster home & had a bond that made you wonder if they spoke a made up language with each other. Martha was a mouse-like, unintentionally hilarious girl. She wore her hair in a tasteful beehive. Noodles had holes in his t-shirt, by choice, & Jack had a xylophone on his lap, he really assumed Spark would be cheered up by it. This was minutes after the funeral ended, so Spark was absolutely not cheered up by it.

Spark noticed, when they arrived at the house they were renting, on the yard there was a lone metal rooster with no other garden decorations or any plants around for that matter. From the outside it appeared a little dingy, Jack was learning drums the year before & out went the drumsticks, he has butter fingers, he duck taped a piece of cardboard over his broken window. Janice had packed some objects from Spark's childhood: a Rope movie poster, & the clay bunny she made for his 18th birthday. She also brought over the remaining food that was in the fridge & pantry of his mother's house. It was the evening by then so Noodles & Martha cooked pasta, Jack placed doilies on their dining table, letting Spark get accustomed to his new home. He wandered around, lurking in the background was sounds of boiling water from the kitchen, he felt held, like love had an echoing quality to it, his mother used to make spaghetti on bad days. Sleeping that night was going to be tough but restorative.

After dinner Janice sat on a single seater sofa, alone in the living room illuminated by two lamps at opposing corners. Her thoughts rested upon her knuckles, drilled into her furrowing brows. "Those red stilettos..." she thought, "just what will I do, now that I've got them both? Wear them? Sure I'll wear them, that's what anyone would do! Oh. Oh

God...” she looked down where she had her shoes, noticing that the shoe she never lost had much more wear & tear, the difference was extreme. “No, I can't wear them ever again.” She concluded. After Spark emptied his bowl of delectable pasta, he found Janice sobbing, she didn't notice him, he kept his mouth shut. With her puffy eyes & red nose, she looked less human & more like a sullen reindeer. “Those idiot shoes, damned shoes...killer shoes, taking...killing, who would trade Lillian for a worn out shoe? I guess I did...” she mumbled to no one. At four o'clock in the morning Spark shot up in his new bed, his nose chilly & his heart racing, in his dream there was an epiphany: *my mother was going to die, that was supposed to happen sometime, she had poor health, but I'm so lucky to have all these people around me who love me, her death could've been so different, I could've been alone, but I wasn't!* Once his pulse came down to a manageable speed, he got out of bed to look for Janice, she wasn't in her room, or any other's, so he figured she'd have fallen asleep in the living room. Janice woke up on the sofa, reclined, under a fuzzy pink & green blanket, in utter dawn darkness. Spark sat down on another couch, they didn't speak, but they smiled at each other.





Baking Bread

Richard Puglisi

Family is coming
So I am baking bread for the feast
Into the bowl goes the flour
Salt, water, yeast

Thoughts of my grandmothers
Run through my head
On this day when I'm busy
Baking bread

Have to feed the family
I know I need more time
Soon they will be at my home
So I have to end this rhyme



Still Life

Neha Singh

It took Anita some effort to open the windows; their hinges, stiff and rusted with age, groaned in resistance, as if reluctant to let the light in.. But when the glass opened, sunshine poured in, and the lacy white curtains danced joyfully. The view outside was strangely peaceful—a cemetery with gleaming white graves lined up neatly, like soldiers waiting to be acknowledged by their queen.

Her father usually kept the windows shut, but Anita didn't mind. The silence of the cemetery, broken only by chirping birds, calmed her mind. With no buildings to block the eye, she could survey the uninterrupted blue sky dotted with puffy clouds. A replica of Rodin's *Le Penseur* on the window sill mirrored her pensive mood, while the cactus beside it mirrored her father's prickly temperament.

This room was on the first floor of their two-storey house. It used to be her father's bedroom and study but lately he had had to shift downstairs. He had served as a doctor in the Bihar government, a profession that had kept him relentlessly busy. It was demanding, frustrating, and often heartbreaking. He had seen sickness and poverty up close—the helplessness of patients, their gratitude at simply meeting a doctor, and his own anger at how little he could do with scarce resources. Worst of all was the apathy of those in power, which convinced him that the system was rotten beyond repair.

Anita recalled how, when she was little, she was never taken to a hospital, even when she was very ill. She smiled ruefully as she thought how ironic it was that, although he was a doctor, her father hated hospitals, having witnessed horrible negligence, incompetency, indifference and corruption.

It had been ten years since he retired. He was seventy but looked even older, asthmatic with a heavily wrinkled face. He would tell anyone that cared to listen that he felt all his age, and more. Not that he had many people to talk to now. He used to be a chatty person when he felt like it, and he especially found it easy to talk with people like shopkeepers, the gardener, the cook, and the rickshawallas who ferried him to and from the local market or even to his office. But ailments related to old age restricted his mobility and made him grumpy. He had to leave his sanctuary on the first floor because he could no longer climb the stairs, but he hated shifting to his new room downstairs. He could walk short distances but had to sit down frequently if the pain in his legs got too much.

Because of the pain, and the accompanying frustration, Anita's father would lash out at his wife for trivial reasons, and that led to a freezing of relations between the couple. They had long had separate bedrooms; that was just the way it was since they had children. But now, there was a mental separation that was harder to overcome.

Anita's mother was also seventy, though her soft, rounded face concealed her age. Physically she was fitter than her husband, but mentally she fought her own battles. She often confessed that the smallest irritations now felt unbearable, like an itch that consumed her mind until she lashed out. The angry outbursts seemed to relieve that itch, but the irritation rarely stopped with her husband. It spilled outward—snapping at the maid, bristling with a shopkeeper—until the house itself felt tense. When Anita and her brother visited, they learned to walk on tiptoes, never knowing what might trigger a flare of temper.

Each time Anita visited, opening the windows and cleaning the dusty, abandoned room felt necessary, an attempt to impose order and regain a sense of control. She and her brother had long flown the nest, yet the house was still crowded with things accumulated over the years, their usefulness spent but their presence lingering. For an aging couple, this clutter only added to their mental and physical burden.

Often she had requested them to go to a doctor, or else she offered to get someone home for a quick blood test. But her father stubbornly refused, preferring to self-medicate with painkillers. Anita could still

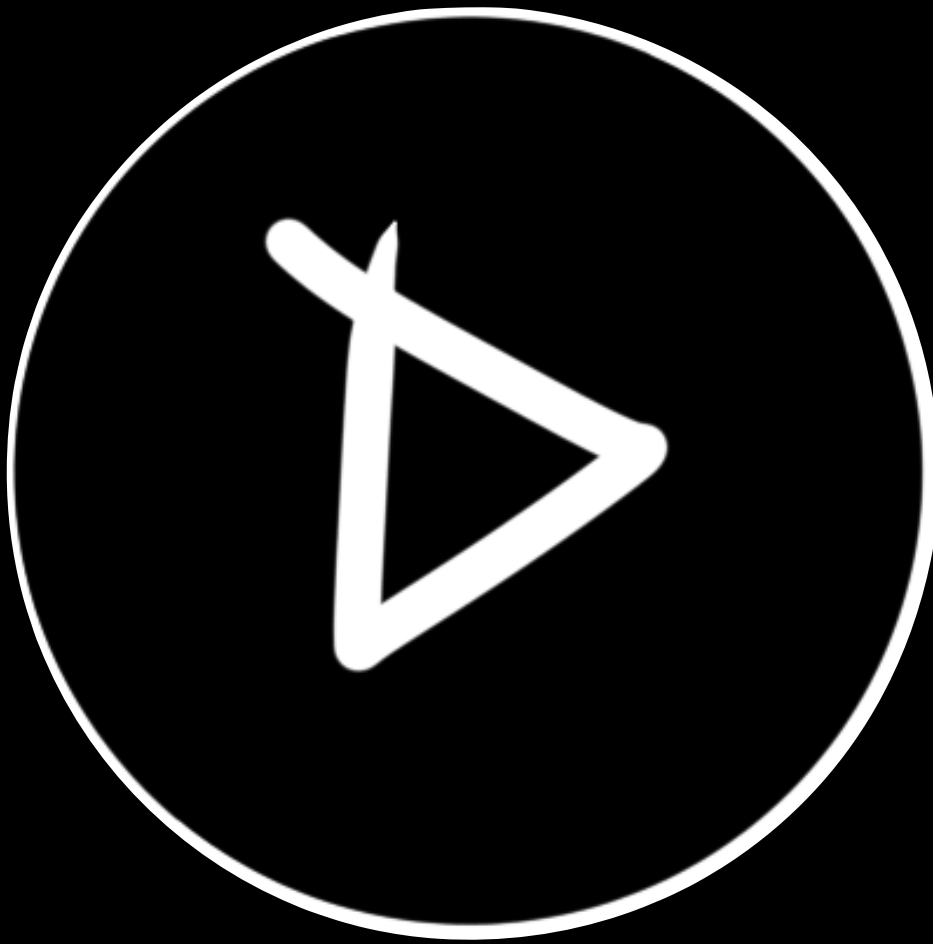
understand his frame of mind, but what about her mother? She felt angry that her mother seemed so passively resigned to her husband's will, not ever trying to coax him to seek medical advice, or to even go out anywhere. Things seemed to have come to a standstill in that household, and everyone seemed to be waiting for life to unravel at its own sluggish pace, towards some seemingly inevitable end.

Oddly enough, for Anita, looking out of the window of her father's room at the cemetery below seemed to bring relief from the pessimism and resignation that had gripped the house.. The trees that bordered the burial ground, the grass and flowers that stubbornly grew between the graves, despite the best efforts of the gardener, all the greenery that preened with such joy in the morning sun, engendered a sense of purpose. She stood looking at the cemetery, lost in thoughts of bygone days, when life had seemed simpler, lighter.

After a while, Anita gathered the thoughts that had run away down different memory lanes in her mind, refocused, and continued cleaning the room, clearing away the accumulated dust and any unwanted, forgotten things. She thought to herself how things that truly matter, and the people who are dear, must be cared for purposefully and with lasting love. Like the gardener's relentless battle against the weeds, Anita too had to fight, to keep the weeds of despair from overwhelming her aging parents.

It was evening and her parents were sitting around the dining table. The windows were open. The netting prevented the mosquitoes from getting in. A gentle breeze blew in, cool and soothing. Anita made some tea, took it to her parents and sat down to watch the sunset with them. In the rosy pink light of the evening their faces glowed together softly, but defiantly, above the impending shadows.





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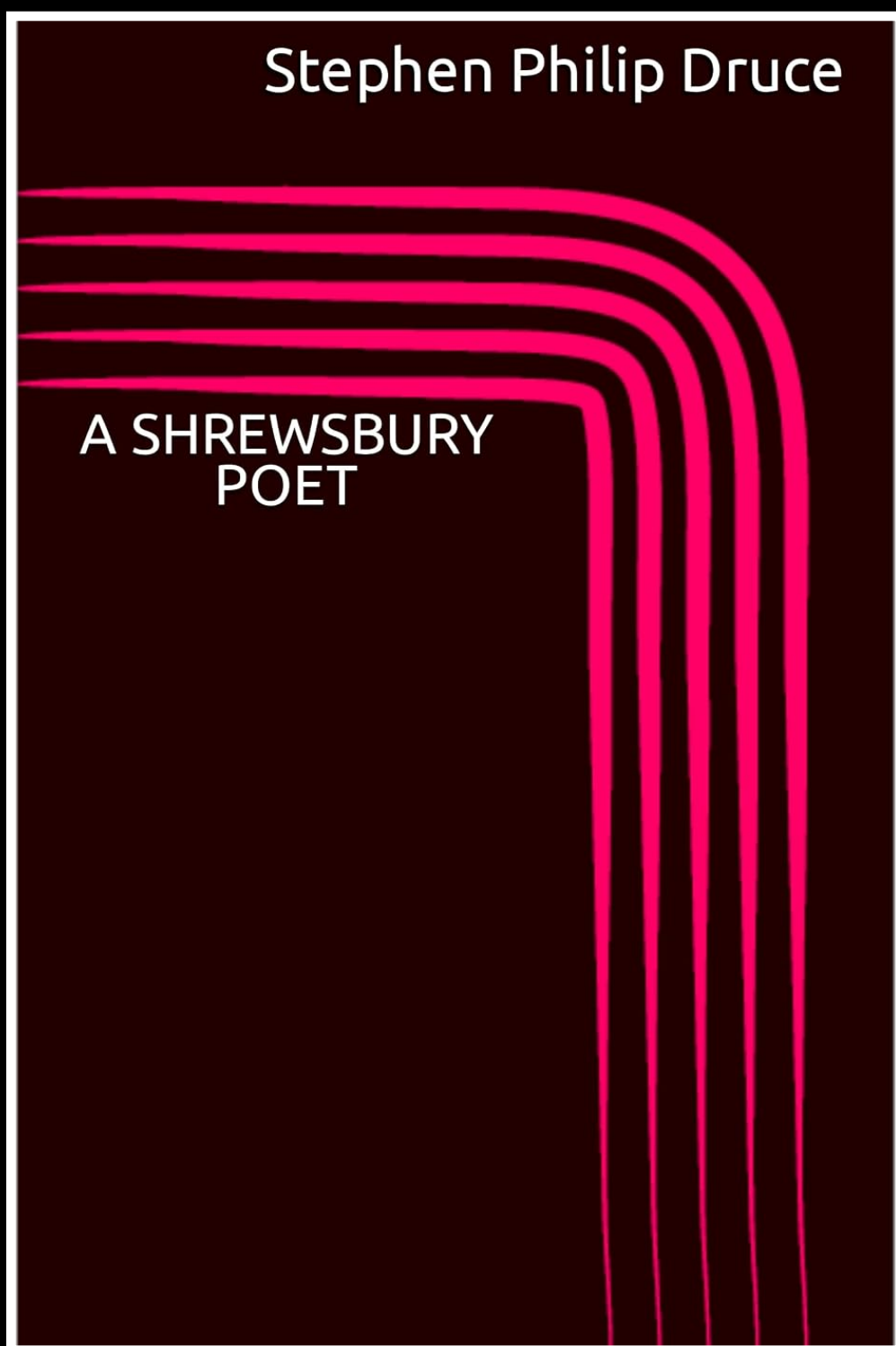
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Insta: @dorothylune
Substack: <https://dorothylune.substack.com/>

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Website: <https://rpuglisi.wordpress.com/>
Tumblr: <https://richardpuglisipoet.tumblr.com/>
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