



LOTUSEATER

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Prose



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Three Little Sisters Were We

This is a story of three young sisters, much older now.

Vanessa is the eldest. She is called Nessa and is the alpha if you think of the three as half a six-pack. When we were kids, she was the bully. When we grew up, she married and lived comfortably with her computer geek husband, who died early, heart attack after eating Dim Sum. The fatty roast pork stuff will kill you. She raised two kids through college and became the matriarch figure of the three.

The other sisters, we are twins. Marya is the elder twin. She married a sarge from suburbia. He was a hypochondriac, some say a little lazy. Spent his last 15 years sitting on a couch. He lost his job because he took too many sick days. Then he really got sick, kidney. Most days, he spent between dialysis and watching the Yankees, eating cookies on the couch. Heart ailments took him recently. No surprise. Still everyone cried at the funeral.

Marya is turning 65. She had a stroke a few years back. Her face is lopsided, but she doesn't slur. A few months after her hubby's death, she had another hospital scare. Her three kid rushed her to ER. She had been taking Advil regularly for three months, a big no-no when you are on blood thinners. She was bleeding from her nose and it would not stop. After the scare, she lost weight. Now she is bigger than ever. She follows in her husband's footsteps. Her kids complain to me that all she does is watch tv. On the couch. Eating cookies.

She has diabetes. Getting worse. We have had discussions about there not being a cure. The meds are just aids for control. She needs to take control, I tell her. I ask her on my last visit what she eats for breakfast. Donuts, and a cinnamon bun, she tells me. Her son, Tommy, says she goes to the gym with the membership he bought her, buys a smoothie, and watches his workout.

The eldest sister has visited a week after I have. She calls to tell me, 'She looks Chinese now.' We are Filipino. 'Her face is so fat; you can't see her eyes.' A little exaggerated, I think. 'And she eats everything in sight. Granted, it was her birthday. But she just didn't stop eating. By the end of the day, we were sitting watching tv, and she put her legs up. Her ankles had swollen. Double the size!' Wildly exaggerated, I think. My older sister, she suffers from Schadenfreude. She gets off talking about the misery of her family. Her son just got fired from teaching at The Naval Academy. 'It's because he kept saying 'Fuck Trump' on Facebook!' She goes on and on.

I am the younger twin. I used to be a brother, I used to be gay, turned trans, and now I have transitioned. The third is a charm, happily married to Gary now for 11 years. I write food articles. I was going to write about Tommy, Marya's son, and his newest smoking success. Smoked Ribs and Boneless Skinless Chicken Thigh pillows. Tommy is developing into quite a pitmaster. He has three smoker sets in his yard.

When I visited, for dessert, he made double stuffed Oreos, wrapped in bacon. Three easy steps. Wrap the bacon 1, around the Oreo 2, and smoke them for 3 hours at very low heat to not melt the double stuffed center. Marya snuck one cookie. I watched her steal another one, looking around to see if anyone was watching. I approached and sat next to her while she scarfed down a third. She looked guilty. I looked back at her. 'What?' she said. 'What,' I answered.

On the internet, someone else has written about bacon-wrapped Oreos. I decide to make this a fiction. A writing teacher tells me that it is a metafiction—meta, *mata*, who knows. *Mata* means eye in Filipino. I have an eye for a good story.

Nessa goes on and on, how she told Marya she has to do this, she has to do that. I am fed up. I say to Ms. Schadenfreude to stop acting like we are three little sisters. We have grown up, each with our own lives. Marya married, her husband sat on a couch, watched tv, and ate till he died. Marya would probably do the same. Kummerspeck. I tell Nessa. Call her Miss K.

If you look up Schadenfreude, you come across Kummerspeck, which means death by cured pork.

Nessa is silenced. Unhappy that I have deflated Marya's suffering, boiled it down to this. She is resigned to her life, death by bacon-wrapped double stuffed Oreos.

DYLAN A. SMITH

The Room of Windows

With the illness confirmed Sis left New York for the lake. She said goodbye to her doorman, the theater, her favorite fountain in the park. It was December, the darkest day of the year, yet on a northbound train to her home on the water she held in an abandoned laugh. Years had passed since she last saw the property—not since her uncle left it to her, along with all his money—and it had been just as long since she had seen her first love, a landscape sculptor named Mick. Before leaving the city she folded his letters into a book of poems. On the train she dug for the book in her bag of winter clothes, fog rising from open fields in the window. There was a ringing in her ear, a numbness. The city had gradually fallen away.

The illness was confirmed meaning by a specialist, meaning Sis would die. It was a genetic, degenerative illness of her blood vessel, meaning parts of her would die first—first her spine and hair, her vision, then her entire left side and her teeth—and then all of her would die, all at once. The changes would pass through her slowly at first, like a season. This is what the specialist had said. There was still no cure, no known relief.

But the specialist had not needed to tell her this. Sis was intimate with the process. She had studied the changes in season, the way things melted and grew. The illness had taken everyone but her mother.

She simply refused to die this way, bit by bit then all at once. She would not die like her father did, for years before seizing on a flight to Chile when Sis was only four. And not like her brother, who was wheeled around by a group of grown children before dying next to his sleeping, desperate wife. There were no flights to Chile, no grown children, no sleeping, desperate wife. Her time had been formed around the illness like muscle around a bone. She had assumed it, like an inheritance. It was at the core of her every decision.

The poems were written by her mother. She held the book and thought about the frozen lake, the dark wood of the attic room, the shape of the pine trees and the slant of the lake-facing windows. The collection was thin, the poems small and neat, and she had dog-eared her favorite pages carefully.

Something opened behind the horizon and a group of starlings dove into the evening light like a hole in the sky. *A murmuration*, her mother would have whispered. *A chattering*.

Sis smiled, she laughed. She made a series of small clicking sounds with her tongue against her teeth, then she fell asleep with her head against the window.

The next morning was colorless. Sis spent it rubbing her temples in the attic room window, her mother's poetry open on the walnut desk. Her face felt puffy with dust and sleep, with drink. The frozen lake was black and the shards of limestone on the cliff face were black. The common reeds lining the ice were rigid and flaxen, and Sis saw a spark of lime in the moss of the pine groves behind the barn.

But these colors were washed, she thought, they were ashen.

Sis tried to recall her walk from the train station the night before, but she could not. She pulled thin pine needles from her hair and arranged them in different shapes on the desk. There was a poem she wanted to read—the one about the mother nightingale—but she could not concentrate on the words formed by the letters, nor their meanings.

She could have recited this poem by heart. It is titled *Öland Island*. It is the story of a mother nightingale migrating south to nest with her young family. Over the Baltic sea she comes to an island of rest and is confronted with families of unfamiliar birds. The sky is struck with confusion, flocks tangling in blue space. There is an unspoken understanding, an ancient agreement, and at once, as one, the birds cascade toward the island. It is a suicide. It is hundreds of them in unison. The mother nightingale points her beak to the earth and closes her small wings, chirping through a church window and dying at the foot of a priest. The priest places the mother in his robe pocket and stores her body behind a bag of peas in the church freezer. Once a month for the rest of his life the priest removes her body from the freezer, sets her on a sill, and observes the fading color of her feathers in the light.

Sis did not want to recite this poem, though, she wanted to read it. She closed the book and bit down on her tongue to keep it from clicking. She dug her fists into the knots in her thighs. She held her breath for exceedingly long intervals.

Descending the spiral staircase Sis vowed not to drink with Mick. She would wait. The muscles in her back stopped twisting in the shower and hot water fell down her body slowly, like melting wax. The fog broke as she dried herself in the kitchen, then she took her coffee to a seat in the room of windows. This had always been her favorite room. She stretched her muscles in the light. She ran her hands under her arms, over her stomach, along the insides of her legs. Digging a fingernail into her navel she found a tick burrowed inside her, and with tweezers she removed it. She pinched its blackness between her fingernails, then rubbed the blood back into her skin.

A raking light elongated shadows on the field as the sun began to fall. The day had passed so quickly. Winter birds parted from the pine grove and Sis rushed back to the attic room, descending again with its pillows and blankets. The room of windows was cluttered with books, with plants and letters, with candles, with ceramic

bowls and dried flowers, and other comforting textures. She pushed away the furniture and made a bed on the floor. This is what she had done with Mick when they were young. They called the arrangement Dog Nest.

Outside she crossed the field, her red hair still wet. Behind the barn she straightened a wheel barrow and loaded it with split cedar rounds that lined an exterior barn wall. The barrow wheel made a whining sound and Sis was reminded of her brother, of how she had pushed him to the water on pink spring mornings. His useless legs wrapped in blankets, knotweeds growing rampantly in their dead uncle's garden.

No man in her life—not her brother, and certainly not Mick—had been able to see the selfishness in his suffering.

Four small drones circled the lake. Sis had seen the machines before, delivering packages in advertisements on television, but something in these was different. She tracked the red strobe of their camera lights as she pushed across the snow, feeling unsettled by the rigid design of their movements. They circled above her like strange preying birds. The groan of their overhead rotors had fallen into rhythm with the wind, which blew against Sis's neck, and there was a halting immediacy to their flight pattern. They moved in tight, mysterious formations.

At the lake's edge Sis estimated the ice was six inches thick, then pushed the barrow out to its center. There were small tearing sounds in the ice, little clicks. She unloaded the firewood carefully, forming a perfect triangle as the base of her shape. The shape was to be pyramidal, strong, symmetrical. Sis was determined about this. She drew plans with her fingers in the ice. She made precise calculations. After six trips back with the barrow her structure was complete. Sis filled the shape with bags of planting soil, leaning lightly against its base, then she massaged flower seeds into the dirt cone opening.

The weight of the shape made a depression in the lake. Sis covered the pyramid with a shining black tarp, then it was night. The ice was no longer bluish and clear, and the hum of the drone rotors had harmonized as they idled in a line above her.

'You like it,' she said.

She threw stones and gravel into the dark. One drone corrected itself in the wind, but the rest idled still. They hung just outside her reach.

'Please, please,' she yelled. 'Please, please.'

With a last load of cedar she went inside to make a fire. She undressed, drank from a bottle of wine, then nestled into Dog Nest to read her mother's poems. Her muscles ached and candles burned. The red drone lights were blinking above her Shape, and the furnace glowed warmly in the dark.

Mick arrived in the morning. Sis had not planned for this. She heard the pickup's engine stop, the door shut. Mick's whistle broke through the morning fog and she heard the dog running off, chasing something wild into the trees.

‘Mountain,’ Mick yelled between whistles. ‘Mountain. Come back.’

When she opened the door they did not embrace, they did not speak. It was all very familiar. She prepared a pot of coffee and they circled each other while it brewed. Mick smiled, Sis did not. He moved a chair to the other side of the room, then kicked it over with a muddy boot. This made her laugh. Their mugs hung from kitchen hooks and she took two down, one by one, *tink tink*.

‘Idiot,’ Sis said. ‘You didn’t take your boots off.’

‘Hello,’ he said.

Mick looked the same, only he was limping. Outside they walked around the ice once, then twice, their breath a single trail of air behind them. A siren rose from the firehouse in the nearby town and soon it was filling the valley like an object. Its vibration charged the space between Sis’s clothes and skin. She felt the sound swelling in her chest. Mick kept whistling out for the dog, but Mountain was gone.

Sis looked up at the town, then down at the snow. Mick looked ravaged, remote. He had been eyeing Sis’s shape beneath the black tarp and the collar of his coat was pulled to his ears. She pushed back a strand of his hair, letting her hand fall down his neck. There were new lines in his face, new ways the desert sun had worn him.

This was him, she thought, the man she had loved. This was the compassionate color of his eyes. These, the veins in his ungloved hands.

‘Yesterday I saw drones,’ Sis said.

‘Drones.’

‘Yes, four small drones. They were circling the lake just over there. Circling it like hawks. Then they came down and hovered around my shape all night, just hanging there with their cameras on. Do you know anything about drones? Whose they could be?’

‘Well, you can buy them cheaply now,’ Mick said. ‘I do know that. Really, anyone can buy them.’

‘They scared me. It felt invasive.’

‘It could be that some company is surveying land. Or more likely it’s just some kids exploring, fooling around. I have a fleet of drones in the desert, like little toys. I don’t think it’s anything to worry about.’

Sis watched his limp as he walked toward the lake’s edge, the way he lunged forward toward the ice and favored his left leg. He had recently won a grant for his displacement in the desert, work that explored the power of subtraction and negative space. Because of their scale his sculptures were best be viewed aerially, by helicopter or photograph, and he did all the work alone. The work had done lasting damage to his body.

The siren stopped for a moment, then rose into a full sound again. Sis made quiet clicks with her tongue. She could not stand Mick’s work. To her, the sculptures were evil desecrations. He deserved whatever ailments he suffered for them.

‘We should bring a pole out and check this ice,’ Mick said as he looked back at her. ‘It makes me nervous, Sis. The thought of you walking out there.’

He tried to put his arm around her as they walked on, but she pushed him away.

‘I’m fine,’ she said. ‘The ice is clear, Mick, look. And I’m very small.’

The walk back from the lake took longer than it should have. They walked and walked, but the home did not seem to get any closer. Mountain was suddenly with them, walking. The dog looked different than Sis remembered. It was something about his shape. The length of his snout seemed longer, more sloping, and his coat was paler than before. It was as if the home was being pushed away. Sis thought to ask Mick about the dog, about the distance, but she did not. The siren made it difficult to think. It wound tightly around her.

‘I want to cook you dinner once,’ Mick said. ‘A feast for Christmas Eve was what I was thinking.’

‘Sure,’ Sis said. ‘But you’re sleeping in the barn.’

Mick nodded. Then, with a smile, he said, ‘Did you make Dog Nest?’

She pushed him away, hard, into his bad leg. He fell into the snow and slid down a slope toward the lake. The dog was barking viciously.

‘Don’t, don’t, don’t, don’t,’ Sis yelled over the siren. She stood above him pointing. ‘You aren’t funny, Mick. This isn’t some funny thing.’

The ice made echoes of her voice and the black tarp waved in the wind. She walked down the slope to help him up. She could not control the clicks.

Walking on, Mick had more of a limp. He took a blue container from his pocket and removed a handful of white pills, swallowing three of them guardedly. He called these Heart Pills, but Sis had not confirmed their contents. She could not remember a time before them. They had always been around, in his pocket, his hand, in his mouth. Without them, he had explained to her once, he would have no heart.

When they reached the home the siren stopped.

‘I’m sorry, Sis,’ he said. ‘Alright, Sis? I’m really, really sorry.’

After sleeping dreamlessly Sis draped herself in a black shawl and walked into town with Mountain. The road wound uphill along the river and the morning fog had frozen, coating the valley in a glaze of translucent ice. Mountain’s head bobbed outside his body line as he made his way over the frozen gravel, stopping abruptly at the sound of cracking branches. The river rushed under ice disks and Sis walked in the center of the road to avoid the tree limbs, the weak ones, which were falling.

‘Look out, Mountain,’ she said. ‘Look out.’

A way off the road was a Victorian farmhouse that sold breakfast, although it was unclear whether it was a restaurant in any legitimate sense. There was no signage on the road, no paperwork in the windows, no real name to speak of. But it was a beautiful building. It had a wraparound porch, an open entrance hall, tall

ceilings and fine marble fixtures. The home was owned by an elderly woman named Jannah. There was never any music playing inside and nothing hung from the white walls, not a picture.

Sis was greeted by one of Jannah's gaunt grandchildren, who led her to a table in the bay window. Across the room was a countertop, and behind it a pocket door that hid Jannah and her work in the kitchen. The other tables were empty and a fire curled in the furnace.

'Yes,' the boy said. He kept his arms at his sides and his gaze fixed on Mountain, who was watching them in the window. The grandchild had black hair and alarming eyes.

Sis ordered a cup of coffee and an egg plate. The boy bowed, then crossed the room to whisper something into the pocket door. Sis removed her mother's poetry book from her coat and thanked the boy as he placed her coffee on the table.

Sis thought about Mick, how by now he would be out looking for Mountain. He had made several attempts at apologizing the night before and Sis had ignored him. The barn was insulated from the cold and furnished for guests. It gave her a kind of pleasure to push a man out.

'I just have these groceries,' he had yelled against the door. 'I just have this fridge full of beer.'

She sipped her coffee, then read a poem titled *Frozen Lake*. In this poem two herons are stuck in the same frozen lake each winter, their long legs encased in ice. They flap their powerful white wings in unison, but alone they are not strong enough to escape. One spring the herons fall in love. They give birth to a daughter heron, and as the baby grows stronger the family does too. By winter they are able to lift themselves away with the ice. They fly over a southern state, toward a warmer life, and the ice melts over a farmer's desperate corn crop like rain. The crop grows and the harvested corn is shipped to a corporate warehouse, where it is melted into a special kind of corn syrup and served as various Coca Cola products in movie theaters and restaurants all across the country.

Sis closed the book and watched as Jannah crossed the room with the egg plate. She set it on the table with a bow. The eggs rolled on the plate, bumping against a slice of untoasted bread. They had not been fried, but boiled and deshelled, and Jannah had not cut them.

'You are Ms. Amarante's daughter,' Jannah said. She wore a cornflower apron and her voice was a careful whisper.

'Yes,' Sis said. 'How are you, Jannah?'

'I've been thinking of your mother,' she said. 'Oh, I tried to help her. You know she had troubles. She'd been seeing mirages.'

Jannah picked up the book of poems and opened it to the middle. She looked deeply into the book, into the binding, somewhere passed the pages.

‘They could occur outside the desert, is what she told me. They would come to her anywhere – on the ocean, on the ice. It was just a matter of the right combination of layers in the air. Denser layers on bottom to refract the light. I think this is where she found her ideas. She said the refracted light brought her reflections—brought her images, brought her shapes—things from far beyond the horizon. And she filled these visions with significance.’

Jannah set the book down and looked out the window at Mountain.

‘I think her next poem would have regarded arctic mirages. Some kind of arctic gull seduced by an arctic image. Oh, I miss her. I do.’

‘Me too, Jannah,’ Sis said. ‘I miss her too. Thank you for the breakfast.’

Jannah bowed, shuffled toward the pocket door, and her grandchild brought Sis a fork wrapped in a paper napkin.

‘My grandmother is very sick,’ he said.

‘I know that,’ Sis said.

‘She has gotten much worse. I don’t know what do. I want to be in the city. I want to be a painter.’

‘Where is your sister,’ Sis said, ‘the little one. I remember her.’

‘She is upstairs sleeping,’ the boy said. ‘Her name is Cerise.’

‘And what does she want?’

‘There is a circus in Vermont,’ the boy said. ‘She wants to perform and make puppets with the circus.’

‘Get me some salt and pepper and I will tell you what you will do,’ Sis said.

The boy crossed the room again and returned with a handful of paper packets.

‘Okay, listen to me,’ Sis said. ‘What you will do is learn to cook an egg plate. You see this? Have your grandmother teach you to fry an egg. She will remember if you’re patient. Once you’ve learned to cook you will send Cerise to the city. I have a theater company there, a theater for young women. You will send her to the city and give her the money you make with this restaurant, understand?’

‘But I want to be a painter,’ the boy said.

‘No, you won’t be a painter,’ Sis said. ‘Listen to me. Men live on the surface of things. This is not an opinion, more a matter of fact. They are bad at making art. You would contribute nothing to the world as a painter. But your sister, with this circus.’

Sis sliced the boiled eggs, then Mick rolled down the long dirt drive. Mountain leapt into the truck bed as Mick leaned out the window. Sis waved back to him, then ate the boiled eggs slowly while he waited. The boy did not move. When she finished the meal Sis stood, bowed to the boy, and left an enormous amount of money on the table.

‘This is not for you,’ she said. ‘This is for your sister. You see that man out there? He is a bad man. An awful man. He will be making sure you do the right thing. You

will carry on your grandmother's legacy and be your sister's patron. Do you understand? My company will be expecting her. I'm very serious about this.'

Mick helped Sis into the truck and the boy stayed by the table, his eyes fixed on the window. The inside of the car was cold and Sis watched the mist of her breath fog one side of the windshield. Mick stopped to remove a tangle of frozen branches from the road. A woman spoke softly on the radio and Mountain panted in the rear-view mirror. Sis held her breath and bit down on her tongue.

'I think I solved the drone mystery,' Mick said as he got back into the truck. He was breathing heavily and had used his hands to swing his bad leg inside. 'There were these kids on the lake this morning, a group of them huddled out there. I yelled out to them, *get off the ice, get off the ice*, but they couldn't hear me.'

'What were they doing?' Sis asked.

'They were looking at your shape, Sis. Just staring at it. Like transfixed.'

GIORGIA PAVLIDOU

One

A wealthy medical doctor in Pakistan describes on Facebook how one prepares an anus. Anal copulation can be hazardous. For the rich, anal sex, like truth, is simple. They can afford it. Yet like morality, they don't need it. Rimbaud said morality was a brain defect. The wealthy have no brain defects. As for me, the moment I speak the truth, I cease to exist. Welcome into my brain.

Truth or dare?

My eyelids crack open. Yesterday's leftover-firewood. Black butter spread over my face. Is it night? Playing with fire is an art. My muscles feel like chewing gum. I have an itch in one, possibly in both, nostrils. Where did I leave my phone?

Flashback.

A 3'75 girl-child: what if I was a boy? Would I've become a junky?

It's 1985. The naked body of Mother glows as she's lying to Daddy on the phone: they're divorcing, but he doesn't know it yet. Another man is sleeping in his bed. I can smell him. It stinks.

Mother stands like an erect penis in the living room in front of the TV. I see her curves reflected on screen. This is my first sleepless night ever. Burglars have permanently set up camp in my head.

FlashForward.

He strokes my cheek. Daddy's hand smells like a mix of old piss and nicotine. The scratched-open calluses of his dark-brown hands feel like tiny needles.

Daddy drops me off at school. At the school gate, his skin looks browner than when he is at home. His eyebrows. His hair. Thicker. Blacker.

He gives me money for lunch. I feel guilty that I feel embarrassed, but I crave to blend in with the fair-skinned kids. My skin is white as porcelain. His cigarette-lips kiss me. I find them sexy. I want to have sex with them. I don't want to have sex with him. I want to have sex with him. Tiny hands push his face away. I feel guilty, but I need to survive. I can't afford the truth. I run as fast as I can. Don't look back. I feel both guilty and not guilty.

FlashInward.

My sleeping bag is my body's extension: we are one, curled up half-circle. I'm a squirrel in winter. I'm hibernating. Artists wake up early. Writers aren't artist. Poets aren't anything. Or perhaps, it's them who're the real queers.

Flashback.

Mother organized a birthday party for me. We are in the seventies and so is our wallpaper.

Mummy looks like a girl. That's the truth she can't afford. Like me, she's truth-poor. She wears skinny jeans-church bell pants. Purple.

I have no clue where Daddy is. He farts in his sleep. Mummy sits as if paralyzed in a black armchair. Mummy's eyes are black and melancholic. Just like Daddy's. Just like mine. Just like yours.

Two

We are in a fisher's village. Two hours from Athens by boat. It's 95 Fahrenheit. The horizon is sizzling turquoise and cobalt Aegean-blue. 1986.

The first thing she does is holding up an almost 25 inches long fish. Nine children have made Grandmother rather corpulent.

'Look at this photo,' Grandfather says. 'See how beautiful your grandma once was.'

The black and white picture shows a slender young woman with pointy facial features and a Mona Lisa-smile.

'But look at her now,' he says. He holds his cigarette between his thumb and index finger up in the air (so typically him). His lips bent downwards with disgust: 'look at her now.' He nods with his chin in her direction.

Grandmother's hair is black, like Daddy's.

'I hate fish,' I say in 1986.

Eight years later she dies in a car accident. I'm constantly eating that long fish. I'm forever eating that eternal fish.

'You are just like a little fish,' Grandmother said.

FlashInward.

I need to get up. Where's my phone? A memory refusing to forget me says I shoved the thing under my bed. Why?

My fingertips rub over sandy stone tiles. 2016. January 14. 09.42 AM.

Not bad, considering I fell asleep when birds already sang.

Flashback.

Mother calls me in her room. Her voice trembles. I dreamed Mother wasn't human. I peeped through the keyhole of her room. I saw her lying on her bed. Part of her body was metallic, and I was looking inside her. It looked like the mechanism of a 1985 clock. She then turns her head in the direction of the keyhole. Her eyes meet my eyes, and my real-time eyelids break open. At the breakfast table I know that Mother has become a slightly different woman. That's the truth she can't afford. Like me she's truth-poor.

Truth or dare?

One

Little Gods

Metacarpus.

Shoulder girdle.

Cubital vein.

Moonlets trod on by nomadic Seraphim. Blind rays furling up and down aphotic bowels. Medusas throbbing in the heart of Zeus. If you could, would you—tenderly, quietly, without rattling a pebble—steal on through? Would you? Yes. Yes. Yes. Of course. Of course, you would.

Breams.

Snuffboxes.

Kneepits.

A sluggish vortex of sparkling grains, spirals, wedges, flukes, and burls delivered the youth up out of slumber. Thus, like a giddy sprite, he jigged over dirtflat, tripods, sedge roofs, bird fences. Swooshed in through gaps like a fruit bat. Eavesdropped among clutters of kettles and shuck beds and whittlin's and lupin shellings and rale-egg peelings. Jacobian voices lamenting rain, swelter, sloth, swinishness, misplaced endearments, tommyrot, bleeding hearts, biggety, brainsickness, chickenheartedness, misplaced or stolen coils of rope, grub axes, shovelheads, pigstickers, stewpots, ladles, rip saws, wrecking bars, adzes, spindles, mallets, awls, stitchers. Robing, disrobing. Nipples, navels, lips. Penises. Vulvae. Swabbing crevices. Combing out beards. Plucking mole hairs. Osculating. Uniting. Resisting. Forcing. Drinking blind randy. Prosecuting. Razzing. Excoriating. Enticing. Forswearing. Beguiling. Yarling. Spurning. Slandering. Taunting. Menacing. Entreating. Begging for mercy. With gestures involuntary. Unsteady. Graceful. Artless. Maladroit. Brutal. Instinctive as bluethroats. Mindless as rain. Insensible as rump pots.

You. Sheridan Jacobs. Long-frogged godparent of nature. Tell the purpose of the belly. Gank your hide. Put your finger on the heritage of spunk. Blood flow. Sweat. Mucus. Electric pulse. Breath. Turn a stone. Track hankering to its source. Your own figure to the unbounded. Catch it in your scrotal rampouch. Gank you. Can you fashion an infant from sweetwood ash? Whittle a toenail? Cast one brass clanker? Cock again the hammer of life? And yet, you adventure the mind. Formulate denotations. Regiment impulses. Ejaculate edicts.

Make ten.

That's ten to smash.

e

Three-note bursts of cockerels had raised a coquelicot mist above the weald as Wing set off from Old Bund's, gimping across a dirt flat ringed by cabins like heads of pointy Nophalim safeguarding the tomb of Arthur Jacobs. Apace with two structures of recovered cinder brick, abutting flame trees shading the crag that leaned from the Place of the Holy Bones, Wing stood rubbing his ear, looking over footprints, dig marks, and a stud-link chain in battered fleabane, dark and dully alive, forge-welded to its iron stump. *All you Jacobs, he thought. If you'd the thinnest valuation how close you come to should be.*

Between giant palms, elephant ears quaked. A figure stooped from the weald. Sabelle Jacobs, her mouth, under bulging sockets, working in a long hard face, hands knotted over tail bone. She was dragging a bush. It passed hissing and loaded with red motes in the shadow of a chantry barbed with trinity spikes. She towed it along the tomb and the schoolhouse, where Wing had read, under Ayanot Jacobs (corrupt, dying Ayanot) anatomy, rhetoric, spectrology, horticulture, ornithology, atmology, axiology. Pulling his ginger-gray beard, cradling some rotted *Genius of Birds* or *Geological Evidences* or *Parallel Lives*, Ayanot would circulate, occasionally taking up his dry bone to knock a refractory skull. 'He who revels in solitude and towering aspirations (*knock*) taking his mind's very processes as anointed, repudiates the One, which rests beyond the particular. There! (*knock*) you prodigals, what do you make of *that*?' Caiman leaves twitched along the A-frame. In dust, crackbeaks were skittering. Chirruping. The mist went from gold to gray.

Wing took the footpath to the rock jetty.

He pushed through cordweed between buoys like cankered missiles. Across the strand, ewes bunched and milled. Over a carcass black on its tripod, gulls were crying, climbing in place as he stepped between spars near where Man Wan and yegs had smoked and hawked and tossed mutton bones until Man Wan trod on a seagoblin. 'Served up his perfect plate, the stoolworm,' snarled the Nedge, scratching his teeth, shifting on the sawbuck. 'Strung up the best ram on Arthur Jacobs Cay.' Wing kicked the matted quillwort along a row of bonegray and sundered boats where the Man kept stash. He picked up a bottle, wiped it, and he drew the tire-rubber bung.

Swaddled in the growl and swat of surf, Wing sat upon an entombed conveyance, fisting up the bottle—just wetting the tongue, masking the stench of spoiled mutton, bottle smooth in his hand, fender cool, watched by giddy, ravenous, indolent ewes. Along the seamless meld of sea and sky, the farground was cloaked. Beneath a ruby print of sun, rundles of indigo carved grounded ships. Among flocking, needling sanderlings, a pair groaned and rubbed hulls like enamored bovines. Upon a cold strand, a cockswain recovers a certain bleak dignity. A certain

reclamation of towering aspirations. Modicum of the little god every swain was or might've been.

The coracle Man Wan brought full of rope and threads and rump pots and pig stickers revolved and lifted its tether, and the Stump loomed out beyond. In concrete schist, purple and red and blue beads glittered between clumps of sheep vetch where a bag must have burst when the Man's yegs packed all trade goods and their yelling sire in the shallop. Back in the day, Bund held, a cockswain could tromp out to the Stump. The cliffs curving like a mig's neck—where Arthur Jacobs'd throat-cut a gigantic goat and shouldered it on down, if it were not so much wolf bait. The blind randy was spreading, soothing the sphenoid ache that grew during the Nedge's brickbats (if he but knew how close). It did not gall so much since he had only to think. A gift of not. Well a considerable bestowal. The blind randy a succor impartial, kin to beach gravel, driftwood, riptide—to that primal welcoming-wanting of the female cleft . . .

'Neeiaaaa,' groaned the Nedge. Shutter banging. He shifted on the sawbuck. Billhook's big hands rubbed, and the stove fired puffs, and the Nedge coughed. 'Get thet whelp up on the roof to fix thet. What's 'is logjam?' Said like *the whelp* was not right there whittling. Under a trapezoid of dirty car-glass, Bund stacked her hands. Billhook rubbed. And what there could be worth a rumpskuttle? The Nedge holding out a finger, ruminative over ruminant?

In soggy huffings by turns punk and wort, Wing limped between maimed palms, shambling under concrete archways. He passed the aeroplane. Charred, viscera dangling. There, a little back in the weald, a bashed edifice. A slumping, reticulated grillwork whereupon Ayanot's students had painted, *only by your unknowing are these shades of devilry cast*. Seams crossed and slipped relucnet, and ghost crabs swarmed broken pillars left by froward folk who'd harnessed cosmogonical forces and brought the deluge inundating structs that bunged up black and slick at low tide. In the center of a pale tire, where Man Wan had dropped it, festered the ram's head, horns doubly undercutting an auric sneer. Wing was muzzled when the Man yelled first and still muzzled when loaded up yelling into the shallop by his yegs. Coracle left behind like a bootless dog. In pecked sand, Wing slew-footed round holes of Novin the Digger. All them tins which hissed and drained gray gunge.

Or he thought about it all wrong.

Wolf bait.

Robodeen and *all them* laying into his ribs. Busting up his ear.

The muzzle.

Engine of clan order. Rejoinder to sauce. Just fence talk no longer. Tilting in dirt, grotesque, primeval, corroded, with a nose guard, a bell on the leaf-stand, a serrated oval for a mouth. The chain clanked. The bell tinkled as the Nedge hefted it. It squeaked by Wing's ear. Crashed against his cheeks. Geezers argued on how to secure it.

Billhook stayed. Blundering in fieldleeks. A spotted barrow rooted through bushclover. Flatsedge. Soil pan. Salvos of crackbeaks. Pheasants clucked. Kingbirds piped. Riskadees warbled. Out of eburnean mist, half-naked whelps spilled round their squire, Bighead Hervolk (son of Robodeen). Hervolk's eyeballs in their wobbly boulder glinted like cut-throat scratch awls. Shrilling his whistle whilst stones cracked Wing's buttocks, loins, thighs, breaking off the metal cap, popping up around. Dwarfish yegs rushed and capered. Got back and stowed stones. Darted like pups worrying a sloth. Shortened Wing's charges by stamping on the chain. All the while, Hervolk marched. No. gospel truth. Every Jacobs except maybe Bund saw. No one said *bof* until a *BRAIIIEEEE!* from sick Ayanot's schoolhouse scattered them like rooks. Billhook reared up with his palms full of wolf farts. Gr bolted for the weald.

The muzzle drug his head low, chain clinking with each righting, sidebars garroting his cheekbones, topcap heating. His wrists burned. He smelled blood and iron. A strap divided his vision. Spare black hens tracked shadows, clapping along a skewed barrow sty. The blue-gray crag of Arthur Jacob's tomb slanted, as a whale leaps suspended. One crooked pup toted some shred and rolled over it and yarled at Wing. Pissed along an anvil and wooden pails before Agistor threw a stick. Sweat trickled down Wing's nape. A mig stood in a threshold with her hand on her hip, Wing now the watch *ed. Mama, he crawled. Mama, what. Clawing the sun looks like.* Small dark eagles flapped over the gridelin sea, carved listless gyres, then flapped on over the shaded weald toward isthmus humps boiling up a file of dragons' heads.

'You,' he heard again. 'You *Jaaaacobs!*'

Wing felt the knots. The Nedge had his belt knife. In a white gum, behind a cut square of bark, he'd cached the gun blade. His miscalculation! His blunder! Too trembling in his dread that this cryptic life was dunce's gold. And no motherlode. Slate, skarn, mudstone, tuff, pumice, coal, chalk, clay, an occasional glimmer of quartz, but no seizure and no bubbling; no breathless shooing away. Invisibility needed cold blood. Blood of the weald cat. Weasel. Stag. He'd broke but could not outrun Robodeen. Was, in *that* sense, yes, Sheridan, culpable. O Ayanot's banshee of justice. Gnarling and drooling righteous venom. Is a slight to be tolerated as a means to an end? Gank them. Sheridan. The Nedge. Robodeen. While ramsheads were gilded, some Jacobs would cry out. Another dripping head. Sleep light, Jacobses.

He drug his chain in wireweed. He wrenched at the iron stake. Combed the earth round. A cockerel bone. A smooth pebble—probably'd struck him. He fished the pebble in through the serrated mouth. A flat glass bottle with a rusty lid. A heavy bolt. A padlock. Another bone. A bent spoon. A hinge with flaring wings. A gray ceramic shaft with floral scrolling. He tried digging with bone, spoon, and bolt but settled on the ceramic shaft. *Beyond the mushroom rocks, hid away in a white gum. Blood grooved. Serrated along the back side.* Stark, boiling cliffs rolled for the sun.

Under a camphor tree with limbs broke and dying all round, aquiform stobs floated in a blur. In gold-gray light, a pair of speckled cockerels stalked, wings pumping. They fluttered, leapt, conjugated a feathered storm. Streaked across dirtflat. Left a bloody trail. Wing scraped red earth, and he tugged the iron stake. *Mama, look. Is he ever digging!* Sweat flowed under the muzzle. The pebble made scant water. His chopping became a murder. The mutilation of a foe. The stalk went down and down to the heart of a callous slattern of earth. The ceramic tusk clinked. A great bulb of quicklime. Poured couldbe by Arthur Jacobs himself, rot his bones.

Wing flung the bolt, the padlock, the flat bottle. He took dirt in his fists and cast it at the ring of A-frame cabins and yelled *Jaaaacobs*. He stabbed the earth with the ceramic shaft as if he could wound her. As if she could spout rivulets of blood. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Gank. Up a colubriform darkness Caliche Jacobs came swaying, burro headbobbing and chalk-nosed and hide stippled with ashen furuncles. Caliche in a wide seagrass dish-hat and back braid, body smart, cwm tightening, couldbe, as she went by, face compassing, eyes narrowing under severe brows, head shipping back, lip curling. The faintest prospect of putting a finger on that dead. *You Jacobs, for what I have seen through cracks in your walls, cooking, loom-work, and yes, dim convulsions of domestic unions, rites paltry enough, abject enough; for electing myself watcher of trifles, a seat for which I am surely fit, you have taken from me the myth of a future beloved Wing Jacobs, cast me upon a sea of un-relation.*

e

Past beach holes, pale smoke swept dying palms—churning and ebbing under a beamless sun. Among riddled fixtures, Novin bent over smoking bricks, straggles awhirl. Behind him hulked Miss Bee: two-basin sink up along her fender. Beyond Miss Bee, an emerald-streaked derelict tilted in gulfweed. Novin was weighing a pediform gimcrack, elbow punching through a greasy sleeve. He picked up a wire brush and scratched. Beside his fire lay a raw slap of bonefish. The head, the fins.

Novin's eyes came up lizard-green and clouded and bereaved in a grizzled mass like a macaque's fringe. As Wing lofted the bottle, the inward fixation broke. The grooves of bereavement faded, the face smoothing out. A gamesome network spread hairline fractures. Two woody stumps gleamed in mossy surfeit. He set down the reel. Lay aside the wire brush. Extended rust-stained palms. He took up the old factory-molded bottle and shook it. He popped the bung. He ran it under his nose, swallowed, shook his head.

'Why, thet'll do.'

'Rooted her at the Man's.'

Wing sat down on salt-crusted tires.

‘Hunting a gun blade.’

‘Gun blade?’

‘About this long.’

‘A few around.’

‘Had one over at the Mushroom Rocks.’

‘That so?’

‘You aunt been out there?’

‘Naw.’

‘Idea who might a?’

‘Naw.’

‘What’s that?’

‘Boat reel. Cobbling me a fish tower.’

‘What for?’

‘Fish. Dry ‘em up and trade up. Footgear when the Man comes around.’

‘That could be *never again*.’

Off toward piled stones that Jacobs styled a jetty, one small Jacobs steadied the rim of Man Wan’s coracle while another clambered. Into the pitching saucer tumbled the second. The paddle dipped, and the coracle made a clumsy, rocking orbit.

‘Safe money on that seagoblin dropped special?’

‘Seagoblin never did fly.’

‘Man killed him a good ram.’

Novin laughed, showing brown stumps.

Wing said, ‘Yarding?’

‘Minge gratuity’s so *easy*, son. Half the Jacobs is trader get. You oughta know out of anybody.’

‘I can’t catch *every* little thing.’

Novin’s fire slanted, tongues steam-tipped among grills from scavenged appliances. Minuscule flames sprouted and danced and died on puzzled brands, the bed coruscant. Novin fisted the bottle to Wing.

‘Eye pertinear healed. Keep that where it belongs so you won’t *lose* the article.’

Wing sat with the bottle between his knees and hocked a glob.

‘So far’s I ever heard, never been no mig nor swain eye-kilt.’

Novin shrugged. He got up. He totted, a bevy of bones in a furling duster, to the blocked-up basin and time-gnawed flanks of Old Bee. Who’d like as not simply ran out of fuel, swerving in the light of burning hulks and under planes droning and remorseless as lead vultures. Novin dipped a coffee can in the basin and shuffled back to the fire and scraped ash off the pot and lifted the lid with a greasy sleeve while dribbling through steam.

‘What in there?’

‘Mussels from yestiday,’ he said. ‘Fly or three. What I find around.’

Wing had a drink. 'Can't be worse than old Bund's liver and assholes.'

With a rusted smelting ladle, Novin coaled a pot lid which glowed then and darkened. 'Couldbe you don't appreciate your callers.'

'*Mine?* Why don't *you* have a go? She game.'

Novin scraped coals under the fish. He sat down and lifted one foot onto his footrest, a box with corroded snaps, gazing overhead. His toes stuck out of ankle-wired footgear. 'Full house, Bund's.'

Novin got up. From cement tailings he picked a hatchet-headed limb, and he bent hammering a section of rowboat. The head would fall off, and Novin, jam it on. He tossed it. Stood dropping slats while flame spilled sideways. He moved the pot. Boatwood loosed purple smoke, and Novin's crowfeet lit up. 'Old Man Wan wanted enough for blind randy. Had a mind to bend on over for that studhorse myself.' He gave his hips a wiggle.

Wing snorted: bottle hung in his forefinger. 'Man's yeg has it they all set to come one day with a big gas motor and a haul of thread and randy.'

'Wolf bait.'

'Way he tells, Koko-Qulao and Bershey got workrooms underground minting autocars.'

Novin squatted probing his stick. 'Yeg boosting you. *One* cockswain I know of ever come back from there. Bird track on his ass end. Never did mention no autocars.'

After the fish yellowed, Novin collected both slabs in his fingers and laid them on the leaves. He removed the pot and set off the lid. Wing sat on his heels and screwed down the bottle. Into a mossy riot, Novin shoved a full, dribbling leaf. Wing picked out a spoonstick and transferred stew from the steaming pot onto a leaf, laid a bit of fish on, and stuffed it in entire. Now and again, a hand lifted the bottle.

Novin put his feet up. Across a forest of hatted masts, herons slid with their necks tucked. A ring of eagles circled the farground.

'You there when they happened on me?'

Novin tongued his stumps. 'Yump. Scouting tin. Two Arty's buckwives come hauling you. Old bush dog saving you for moon meat. Bund there with the udders.'

The blind-randy worked its glow. The furrowed, mutable, fondling sea washed up odd, necrotic scents, rockrose, bladder wrack, and moldering dead. Over a chaos of derelicts and fluctuant shadows, an eagle slid, black and premonitory in whirl of flycatchers, floating under cankered apertures and smelts of molten gold. From the divine commixture of farground and sea was Wing spunked. Wing not-Jacobs spunked from farground and sea. Sea and moon and farground. O devils sing. No Billhook, no Nedge, nor even Bund. Wing of Sky. Wing of Moon. Wing of Sea. Wing of Farground. Never had been, never, never *would be* bound by the edicts of your Sheridan Jacobs, your clan geezers, them tight of ass.

'You, Wing Jacobs, to whom we have lent our name and our care, have repaid us in spite.'
Wolf bait.

Thongs broke.

The muzzle clunked to the earth. The maternal darkness breathing *PISSFUCK* while Wing lurched past the Place of Holy Bones. Floundered on in tamarind. Head down in a ditch carving in dodders, Wing thought: *Bund*. He came then in heavy dew to the strand and fell on his chin over one of Novin's heaps. He wriggled beneath a tilting wingwall and dropped his head on his arm. By moonlight he sucked at a rockpool. He gathered for his head quillwort from Man Wan's empty camp.

A trace widened over magenta waves, casting a fan on the sea's straightedge like a hot tip in the smithy of Agistor Jacobs while Wing tugged off footgear, untoggled his sark. He plodded in bay mud till waves broke against his belly, and he twisted his sark and put it on wet and washed hard blood from his hair and toyed loose teeth.

Among gutta percha and knots of shiprope, Wing pulled up a battered paddle, which he employed stafflike, working round the west arm. One eye was swelling, choking down the emerald weald. The track crossed fields of concrete crags and rusted bomb tails and helmets and chains and iron tracks and armor and axles and undercarriages. He crouched to drink from a rockpool. In the heat, his wrists turned scarlet. On the slope of one of Novin's piles, he picked out a tin can, rusty and riddled and just larger than the circle of his hands, and he washed it in the sea and lined it with grass. With fraying shiprope, he braided a sling and sock to contain it. He plucked cockscomb and mallow, crushing leafballs to chew or drop into his tin. Bitter nettle burned his fingers and made an ugly welter in his belly. He trapped ghost crabs, split them with stones, clawed out stark flesh. A barrow track cut through masses of bastard ipecac and weather grass. A tarnished locomotive with one yellow eye and chalky tears grinned in tussocks of sumac and forkfern. Man-of-the-earth and indigo and loosestrife and painter's palette and traveler's palm festooned terra-cotta teapots and tops of sunken carrousels and skeletons of fallen wheels and standing hearts and marble windmills and carriages and knots of cable. In a clatter and echo of sheep's hooves beyond the mushroom rocks, he felt round the trunk of the big white gum and pushed his fingers into the hole. The square of bark lay among roots. Gun blade gone. *Novin*.

Along a wall crumbled to blunt columns, Wing extracted bramble berries. At the tip of a weathered pole, a tattered rag was lapping. He found the earth there soft. A stony and broken progression stepped up to blood plantains and a stick fence partly slanting, partly falling into ropy overgrowth. The shelf had been dug. Flattened six or seven paces. Rows and ditches under his feet. Who fooled in grow plots in the weald? Novin. Back when. Before he dug his own little whelp loose from the collapse and strove to blow the life back in. But had to dig one more hole. After which,

Battle-Vale long-necked it to every stove-side. Novin was crunk. Jonk. Gomo. Behindhand. Cracked rump pot. Figured wife meant frog service. Figured husband meant victuals-for-nothing and punch the starfish. And go dig more killholes.

A brace of paw paws sprang through wicker, with rings of fruit high and plump and blue, and the blood plantains were likewise unripe and distant. He found in one fluky basin a hammer head with a broken claw, which he used chopping out anonymous bulbs, and woody roots he could never grind with his teeth so. He masticated strips from the outer folds of riddled brassica. He returned how he had come. While black shapes of gulls whirled and floated across a swathe of ruby and soot, he laid in the coracle the paddle, hammer head, and can of bulbs.

He followed the track along broken trees and armatures and motors and impedimenta of unknown battles in shrouds of twinflower and runaway vine. At the brink of the dirtflat, Gr slunk at him, ears laid back, but scatted before stones. The chapel sat tranquil and sensate. Five black and slender flame trees wove in mist, roots twining about the ribs of Arthur Jacobs. In Old Bund's, a light went out, and the Nedge and Billhook got after it. Wing untoggled his torn and caked sark, and he draped it over a stick fence. He stepped out of footgear and pushed off plastos and hung them sarkside and slipped along the ring of cabins in shadows beneath rattling figs. At Robodeen's, he sat on his heels, waiting for his heartbeat to slow. For blood to cool. To stay trembling. Check resolve. Cockerels muttered. Buggy-glass windows glinted. A gust washed through sougning figs, sunflowers nodding. Robodeen's door knocked a pot-metal moke anchor. Wing crept to the pole fence and felt up the corner and scraped his thigh going over. The earth was soft beneath his knees, the air soggy and scented like sunflowers. Stalks scratched his ribs. The door swung wide. Wing wormed through. He paused while the visceral gloom evolved.

Advancing on his elbows less any whisper of trade cloth close to pails and broomsticks and heaped kindling, he went feeling ground, passing grills, cans, scavenged mirrors, leaning crosses, sticks, rods, heaps of candlesticks. Old Sabelle smacked. Robodeen Jacob's new buckwife produced a melodic utterance. Wing could see the silhouette and open lips. Robodeen's knuckles. Over shavings like chips of silver, the moon cast a path between intruder and them. A copper pot rested in a shaft of light. A sunflower drooped through the open window. Beneath the shelf, a hen stretched her neck.

BLOCK-bock-bock-bock!

Robodeen coughed.

Between his wives, Robodeen came up hinge-like. Out the corner of Wing's eye, the long, sharp nose twitched in gloom. The frame of Robodeen unfolded endlessly, the silver line of his shoulders among dangling garments, the tiny head and great beak climbing. He strode like a stork over his new buckwife, and he crossed the

floor, long feet slapping. Wing flattened out. Smell of cascarilla, earth. The hen clucked. A splattering. Robodeen's feet made a sucking return. The moonlight caught Robodeen's pale haunch. Robodeen's buttock flexing high and powerful while the hen clucked and Robodeen slurped. The dipper clinked. Robodeen's foot slid near, dorsal-furred, smelling of toes. The jointsplitter'd knock Wing's head in two. Robodeen leave the bloody husks. Gr grub.

Heels slid away. Robodeen settled between wives. A dulcet lamentation. Plosive confabulation over hissing corn shucks, an interminably duplicated strophe, antistrophe of palate and tongue. A prying apart of immense, wet fruits. A laving of yolk. A sludgy cudgeling. Antecedent and consequent phrases in breath and sibilant utterances. *Into their surfaces hundreds of spices of beans or atoms or stallions inside acorns because of others. Please. Other profiles. Please. Other hogsheads. Please. Other sword staffs. Please. Other siege engines. Please. Please. Robodeen. Please.* Robodeen prescribing bizarre alchemies. *A little more control. That's it. Heat you to metal. Forge your bellows and with more control. Give me your basin of coal. Now, give me air, and lots of it. That's it. Turn it into furnace pots.* Applause. Laudatory cries. A sigh. Nothing. Nothing. Nothing, at last. The door thudding.

Frogs croaking.

A pauraque. *Weeeeem. Weeeeem.*

Old Sabelle snorted.

The hen glowered one-eyed, beak gaping, wattles atremble. A gust bashed through the weald, clattering bamboos, drumming roof tiles, and the door thudded. Robodeen's breath came in blasts, and Old Sabelle champed like a burro chewing salt. GANK! GANK! GANK! Shadows darted like fingers of weavers beside the sunflower. The hen bedded her beak in feathers. Wing eased the jointsplitter from its round. Along the bench, toward a shuck platform on posts, he inched, maintaining cold blood, quiet as a black weald cat with yellow eyes. GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! In the pallet below, the bigheaded and jocund stone thrower. The living, breathing, beastly, odious, pale yegflesh tucked into a ragged cocoon.

Hervolk tossed on his pallet. He slapped his shoulder, and the whistle slid. The cheek rested near a hideosock. The ear a loutish cockle. Wing took the wrist, carried it. Wing quashed the nose and mouth, and eyes snapped open. Throw stones at me, you dag-assed plonker? *Spiff! Spiff!* One more to make the point. *Spiff!* This sound erotic. Terminal. A muffled gag. A groan from Robodeen while Wing bore down, pinning that loach.

On the dirt: a can ribbed and dented.

On the dirt, a coil of ship's cord stained green with strands mashed and splaying. Pell-mell or not, careering beyond all recall or not. And footstool flat across and shadowed like a murky animal beside an antler and peg dolls with pointed

hats and rounded breams, whittled by Sabelle. GANK THE CROAKER. Leaves of bamboo rushed like water, covering Gr's *wow wow wow wowwow wow* giving rise to a groaning, creaking commotion, moggly, passionate. GANK! GANK! GANK! GANK! The positions of a falling cleaver could be divided. Or one of Novin's thrown cans infinitely repeatable as the arrow Ayanot had scratched again and again and again across a sheet of blue slate. Her throat as smooth as sea. One yearned to wriggle between curving walls. Stow away like a whipworm. Hibernate. Devour what Caliche devoured. Pupate. Daily overhear her utterances. Wallow till she withered. Post till she expired. Unfold from her lips with her last breath.

Hervolk moved his hand, baring his neck.

Place one hand down? Yes. No. Yes.

Straight through veins, meat, fat, bones. From ear to shoulder, the valley gleamed. The back of the square blade pricking Wing's shoulder. Three, fast. Four'd knock through. The gritty, knotted twine passed secretly from hand to hand while Wing yarned about the moon kindling the dark sea fathomless. And Battle-Vale with her elongated neck, capuchin thrust of mouth, breams like water sacks, nipples black and swinging. Her ashen crop of crotch wire. Between two breams the possibility of a third. Between those, a needle bream. A germ bream. More between. Goose that drum. Confirm truculence. Bad blood, *yes*. Skulking menace, *yes*. More to *anything* than meets the eye. Not just a certain amount for a copper pot and so on. Was that asking for *so much*? That he could not go into the center and purloin the unutterable? Was it? *Was it*? Without that, there can never be *that*. And obviously, nothing ever like red shapely walls and living inside and hearing her lilt till death.

The whelp's cheek gray. His eyelashes dark in their hollows. Pulled through bigheadedness and Robodeen's footgear to carry on rank Jacobs blood, like Gr, who got her snout free and paw free and paddled to shore and survived on offal and afterbirth and pullets and aborted lambs and native savagery and cantankerousness and wariness and slyness until she could avenge herself with litters of savage pups with twisted spines and crooked teeth. The jointsplitter tip digging his back now *move!* Wash blade in waves. Now *move!* Wash blade in waves. Now *move!* Wash blade in waves. Now *move!* Wash blade in waves. Now *move!* Wash blade in waves. Now *move!* The deep, soft sea sparkling and giving birth. The sun would come and here he'd be. Mouth of Hervolk agape, and in the crook, a button eye. Wing's arm a bad frog wilting, a hyssop stalk drooping. One knee edging backward. The jointsplitter dragging by a slanting broom handle. The hen blinking.

Brawwwwrk . . .

Beyond the thudding door, Wing stumbled on in a breeze awhirl with bats, sparking with lightning bugs, conveying distant trills of reed warblers. He fell to his knees, still clutching the jointsplitter. The top of his head struck earth. He

could smell Robodeen's urine. Rest then go back in. Get ye guts, yeg. Get ye guts. No. Yes. No. Can't. Can't. Can't. Can't. Along the stick fence, he found the threads. The footgear. Before the dark and astonished A-frames, he tossed the jointsplitter. The moon plunged along a serrated ridge, revealing small, gray deer, ghosting, nibbling, passing behind the tomb of Arthur Jacobs and coming out along the chapel, heads lowering or lifting, the leader in velvet. By turns, they pushed into the weald. Against the coral-gray sky, palms signaled like frantic hairy spiders. White-spined grass roofs glimmered among corn cribs, stick fences, rags on lines, colocasia and sunflower patches, tripods for hanging sheep, and barrels with Man Wan's rims of Capric iron, their fruit and mutton steeping under patinas of froth and pin maggots.

A cockerel beat wings.

Ar-ah-haaahrrrr.

Ar-ah-haaahrrrr.

Wing breathed scents of primrose, fireweed, barrowshit, and lye. These roofs, these cabins—whose interiors he knew, whose bodies, smooth, young, plump, old, embattled, sick, spent, his eye like a finger had traced—had broken off from *should-be*. A boulder fell out of Sabelle's daughter and dropped along a path. The misshapen head lay unmoved, the *should-not-be* head. Under five bowing flame trees, a crag inclined over bones of Arthur Jacobs. A fetid tailwind drove a *should-not-be* village—cloven from its original, in particulars a dead ringer—out upon a limitless darkness. A crooked small god, Wing not-Jacobs squatted among leaves sprinkling down under the moon among hoofmarks of barrows. Before he took the path to the jetty, he had a look at these roofs. These weaving camphors. These figs.

His village. *He* had created it.

WADE CRAVATH BELL

Kennedy and My Friend Gord

Where was I the day Kennedy died? I recall the instant. The radio was on in the shop. My fingers were holding the wrench I was using to remove the plug to drain the engine oil pan of an oilfield wireline truck. Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

If you should want to know, I can offer these tidbits of information to verify my identity (or mask it): 1) you played in the Edmonton School Boys' Band. 2) John played trumpet. 3) Reg met Haile Selassie. 4) I tossed a better spiral than you. 5.) Magyar Posta is another clue.

You might think I will not go on with this without insulting you. Or at least misleading you.

Now you tell me which of these statements is true. A) I was born of an American mother. B) I attended Garneau school C) I owned a gold Mini Cooper.

Sometimes the moon

He sees a deer

Does the road end here?

Something, someone hear

But I didn't listen

Doesn't matter does it?

Know the answer

Why after all these fallow years

Sometimes he does something but doesn't know why.

Who faced the Desk Sergeant? Who picked the perp out of the lineup? Who faced the fury of his father? I did.

Who was waiting to console him? No one.

Who saw the kid needing a friend? One too many.

You chose well, later; retirement in Tuscany with a wife you never had to see.

I threw the better spiral pass, lodged expertly between your hands and your body, but you, taking the cat by the tail, swung it round and round and over the neighbour's bungalow. It was a psychopathic gesture. I couldn't stand to be around you for a while after that. Not even in class side by side. There was something wrong with you. Everyone saw it. The problem was, you were the smartest guy in school, Old Scona High, South Edmonton. You were destined for university. You could tell off the teachers, the brutal principal with immunity. As if you were a basketball star and our school was not in Alberta but Alabama. How many other kids learned Greek in high school?

So, what was that cat episode about? Maybe you disliked all animals. I don't remember.

We were Bronco Nagurski and someone else from our favorite National Football League team. But it was the Canadian Football League we loved. Twelve years old freezing in the end zone bleachers watching Rollie Miles, Jackie Parker, Normie Kwong, Johnny Bright, Eagle Keys who played the last down in the national championship Grey Cup game with a broken leg and Edmonton won for the first time. Fuck it was cold in the south stands of Clarke Stadium with an Arctic wind blowing down the field and into our rimed faces; then the exhausted walk back to the car in the monstrous parking lot and the minutes it took to get heat from the heater. In those days they didn't make gear that would protect us (or maybe our families didn't have the money to spend on the best).

My Dad was always the driver, never yours. You knew my father. I never knew yours except to see him. Never your mother, either. Never around the few times you invited me to your place. A cold place. Maybe that explains the cat. (Nothing explains the cat.)

(You told me I was a writer. You told me I was Kafka. You were going to be my Max Brod. Now I wonder if you've read anything I've written. (A novel was just up for a prestigious prize; it didn't win but it made the shortlist and garnered invitations from two publishers.) I suspect if I want you to read me, I'll have to win the Nobel Prize for you to (possibly) hear about it. I can tell you that on page 290 of the ms, Nikola leaves Selfine at Sitges: "Here's to long nights on warm beaches." Leo and Olivar are rescued at sea and given a ride with Gunter in his bronze Mercedes. They reach the city, Barcelona, go their separate ways. Olivar, on the road since Vietnam, looking for another room to call home. Leo finds a home at the Bar Candanchu on the Plaza of the (Broken) clock.

I know you have found your paradise in Tuscany. Tuscany is in demand as a paradise for Canadians. I have friends in Calgary and Toronto waiting out Covid to return to their places in that countryside that looks so much like Calgary west on seventeenth down that hill and spread out into Rocky Mountain foothills perfection. I imagine you perfectly at home, speaking the language, entertaining with your clarinet or playing your sax in local pick-up jazz band. With your talents and your mind, you carve your personality like those US presidents on the side of a hill.

I remember while I was writing that story that took place in one of those modest Catalan castles with high walls and stalls for horses and outbuildings and shade for the E type Jag, I sensed you just across the mountains in Andorra or Perpignan. I sensed you thinking about my invitation to visit me in Vulpellach, only a hundred clicks away; but thinking no, let's go on to the Riviera then wend our way to Italy, to Tuscany. I sensed you thinking Spain would be uncomfortable; for I remember how important comfort was for you. Should I tell the tale of our hitchhiking to the Pacific; a three-day journey; the fat bed pillow you brought along that soaked up

the rain and you had to throw it away; no, nothing about that trip, at fifteen still too young to drive. Or the ride we got with that insatiable early-onset sexual kid whose father could not control him, who found a friend in you in the messed up blankets and bedrolls in the back of the van. It was so obvious. I felt sorry for the father. At the next gas stop I got out and said goodbye. At that point I didn't care what you did but you came with me. As for the father and son? Just waited for the next hitch-hiker, I guess. The episode probably should have lowered my esteem for you but you were, above all else, my best friend. We got to Vancouver; braved it for a couple of rainy days and hitched back. Do you remember the railyard and the box car we jumped into to take us through the B.C. Rockies, Revelstoke to Golden, rather than hitchhike all the way up and around the glacial headwaters of the Columbia River, hundreds of miles of impromptu and improvised gravel roads paralleling a swift, one degree about zero, river only crossed on temporary World War Two Bailey bridges. Called the Big Bend. Going to the ocean we took the Big Bend route and waited a long time for rides. And it was fucking cold. So, coming back we rode the rails, buddy. Fifteen years old, snug in a box car, you lamenting only the loss of your pillow. The struggling train went further up, up and up into the Rockies all the way from Revelstoke though Golden, across Rogers Pass to Lake Louis then Banff. Filthy, hungry and thirsty with tramp's bedrolls, we were, though we didn't know it then, in 1956, on the road. And in magnificent Banff, where a beat road should take everyone. My copy of *On the Road*, the second edition, 1958; so, two-three years after our trek.

In my book, *In Barcelona*, returning to the city after the Oran fiasco neither Leo nor Olivar are happy to be there. No longer do they have girlfriends/wives to go to. They say goodbye in the Plaza Bar and hope never to see each other again. You thought about catching the train south from Perpignan, and maybe you did and maybe you got out a Figueras to see the Dalí museum. Way back in our tossing footballs era, you were knowledgeable about Dalí. Through you, so was I. Then, on my own, I became besotted with Spain. At first not Barcelona but a village. City boy in a village where he knew not a word of the language. Behind our back gate were farm plots of tomato and vegetables, little conical hills, the sea. Rustic. For me, it was the best introduction to the country (had I settled in to a city I might never have experienced the true country except through the window of a car.

You would have delighted in Dalí's world. If you'd come further south, you'd have delighted in Gaudí's.

A privilege it was to know the villagers and the townspeople across the hill in La Bisbal. People like – names kind of buzz by me this afternoon leaving not enough sparks of sound to spur identification – like the carpenter who made my door. Like the sweet college girl who sent me postcards. Like the two buddies who were great partiers. (Oh, so ripped on cava around a fire in a civil war bombed out

farmhouse.) Pep and Enrique were their names. Thank you. Pep Bou's gold Mini Cooper for scooting around Baix Emporda. Enrique's moto. The garden gnome factory behind his house. Waves from people on the other side of the street (people I didn't know). The gypsies, Muchi and the orphan labourers, brothers from Cadiz, Paco and Juan. Juan the father of the American woman's child in my novella, *The House of the Americans*. Sad story there. Miguel next door with his crazy mother-in-law wailing beneath a full moon like someone Shakespeare might have heard.

On the Day of the Dead, after three days of snow in our northern clime, a ladybug appears, lands on my window then takes off, looking for warmth in the cold. So much comes and goes from the human mind in the course of a day. Each of us putting together the pieces of our god's infinite jigsaw puzzle for another go at what appears in front of us, an office or a store or a laboratory or an insect flying out of time.

I had a recurring dream. The subway would not let me out at my stop but carried on to the next one from where I had to walk back to get where I was going. But the scenery was nice.

I had friends in the city and they closed around me. They were friends of La Baronesa, my girlfriend; my wife, better said, though we weren't yet married. I had access to interesting people, from a celebrity magazine journalist to doctors, professors, poets, musicians, clerks and carpenters. Some were famous to us and infamous to the regime. I knew people who were tortured. (What a thing to boast about, eh?) At the time, spring 1977, the lid was about to be blown off fascism in Spain.

Where is the love you show us in holding back the rain? Oranges plentiful again, but sour. No animals left to feed the troops whose boots terrorize or save. Turnips to last the month. Youth's appetites hard to curb. Tomorrow netted gems from the secret horde. A celebration. Why not celebrate? If no rain, how many will be left? Who the winner dying last? Whose point of view then? Will the locusts learn to write?

Why am I rooted to where I'm not suited? Beguiled by the isle when continents I need?

The air gets thinner though I climb no higher than a bed, seek no knowledge heavier than a thigh upon my head.

Why after all these fallow, shadowed years. Eleven years old. Scots desk sergeant's hand steadying my shoulder.

Won't. But yes, I did. Choose the one from behind one-way glass.

But it doesn't matter, does it?

Still, yes, alone on my island it does.

Thought paced beside me in the pastoral unknown like a ragged eager dog, turned her head, hooked by a scent, wandered away, tried to swim a river that had no shore. Moments ground to dust. I mourned the loss of a thought, maybe of a dog. Maybe of a man.

The barman introduced me to the sadness of passing time.

Poetry



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Alexandria Peary

GLOVED AND WINGED HAND AT EDGE OF PARAGRAPH

Chapstick applied. Drawer closed. Coffee cup raised. Drawer open. Song changed. Song returned to. Drawer closed. Chapstick applied. Pen cap put on. Another pen picked up. Coffee cup raised. Desk chair pushed back and coffee cup brought into the kitchen. Door opened. Full coffee cup slid on desk an inch beyond surface area covered in Post-Its. Space heater dial lowered. Door closed. Drawer open. Coffee cup raised, then lowered, then raised quickly again. Pen bouquet in shot glass reshuffled. Chapstick applied. Drawer closed. Door opened. Pages rifled. Pen cap removed. Chapstick applied. Song returned to. Song returned to. Space heater dial raised. Door opened and closed. Song changed. Drawer closed. Coffee cup raised and lowered. Slid off. Smearing important words on a pink Post-It. Pen cap removed. Space heater turned off. Door opened. Water glass slid next to coffee cup. Water glass raised, lowered. Chapstick applied.

*J. D. Nelson**n*

LIMON GOOD FACE THE ASTOR *TECK*

myriad foot opera
 stereo eggs

I was a boxing box
dreaming of goblins

the waxing fox
the coin of a vision

celebrate the confusion

DOING THE WORK UNDERWATER AND HEARING THE BIRDS

I was the smart hulk using a barium hole in the moon to explore the channel of
skunk consciousness

a clean sweet yes from the color of blue while eating a heart
a color of the red and hearing it was a tune of the morning and I ate it

bird good find
when I ate the dollar bill

were you from a little while ago saying something about the robot in the room?

DREAM RICE IN A FIXED BUCKET

that jumping man is a fish to win a burly icicle
and now we wield the weapon of wilma

in the astrid envelope
the dinosaur tree

the mirror of the sun or un-sun
the language is a seated foot

the three and third
the hair as we need it

the hand worrying about the hand
the dreaming spider

IN THE PALACE OF THE DIMES

in the froth there was a mention of the management
is there cider and dice?

the world boat is the carbon
the science of the ducks

I was the leader of the parakeets
on the glum ship of the careful water winking

the ironed name of the lake
a little pearl of the orion

the iron milk of your shoulder to cope
the mineral pine to stand with that snake

the machine of the talking half
to eat a lunch of the harold hamburger at the cloud picnic

Don Pomerantz

EL CAPITÁN

You stand upon the galleon bridge looking west over the sea
as the vessel's final provisions are brought on board.

Don't blink. I say don't blink
but no you blink and there is a kind of you,
smaller, but clearly you, seated
at a crowded Woolworth's counter, finishing lunch.

The man next to you looks over, his shirt smells of sawdust,
pine and sweat, and he says so you like fries with your ketchup,
so do I and you understand but don't know why.

No one wears a helmet or carries a weapon.
There is the smell of fresh meat as it sizzles, cheeses
and breads laid out where the hungry are fed.

You rise and wade in more deeply.
Brilliant colors one after another,
shelf after shelf of things that make crinkling sounds.
Among other children finely attuned to this strange bazaar.
Dense aromas of sweetness.

More deeply you go into wave upon wave
of other scents, aromas of neither earth nor sea.
Then sawdust on the floor,
small creatures in small cages
and a multitude of tiny fishes, all made of gold.

Raise the sails, you say,
raise them now, men.
Fish, bounded by land, call
through glass like sirens.
Their bodies undulate through
their own circled wakes.

Raise the sails men, we sail not
toward destruction, but a heaven surely
not made by the hands of man.

TALBERG, SKJEBERG

for K. D. G. H.

Summer, and a lowland fjord splits a wheat field from Southern rye.
 In the rift, a pair of swans cruise the eternal sunset.
 To the left, a deer bounds through waist high grain towards a church
 across a field, green waters and a prescient field, where rafters never split
 from the steeple. The steeple that wants to inject the sky.
 A fjord is a many seeded cantaloupe, each seed a brilliant mind,
 sea water befuddled by stillness, as confounded as Isaac. Saved.

Farther north, all the secrets that ever were collect
 on the mountains and thistle tree cliffs as if they were snow.
 And the snow melt water falls down into today is July.
 Waterfalls, all the opened secrets told
 in jagged songs sung by the jagged black stone
 water is always the open secret that hides
 in plain sight so that a waterfall is a patina of unannounced events
 a neurology as perceived by another well worn rainbow over barley and wheat
 all the ampersands of compassion well met on the perspicacious death beds of oats
 eyes wider then buffalo herds their unadulterated seas
 where the mountains consider their carpet as it rolls to be a river.
 A first, a second, seventy nine misted bowing downs
 the nightgowns of before nightgowns enrobing such a time
 the seams of nightgowns before sewing
 in daylight after daylight bright reminiscence falling
 after daylight escaping from an open drawer
 avalanche after avalanche filling in the blanks of uncommon elisions
 where no commas or clubs lay buried
 not the ghosts of Norsemen or lilies.

A Farther North, where a fjord is salt water resting,
 riddled with open secrets told.
 Here farther South, North of Copenhagen and the stones of Berlin
 hard by an empty dock
 the swans mated for life float upon its stillness,
 many seeded fjord, each seed a brilliant mind.

H. Mark Webster

PIBLOCKTO SEQUENCE

little walk, outpouring, of scientific papers, another little walk, contusions, bruises, could he have had, a minor stroke, no, no, he's sat down, to have a wee-wee, across the way, black terrier, solid lad, across the water, two, spidery hands, sugary blood, charnel house, not pretty, fragmentary textual narrative, steady, steady, sinus rinses, up against the wall, little walk, realization,

immunization, jerky block, blocks, discourses of equality, discourses of inequality, running through, golden crown, wash hands, cycle, cycle, wash, ash, schmooze, no burial, no burning, then occupying, a middle slot, fancy, dicey, whenever you can, put forth, thy trodden worms, nectar, sure enough, vacant throne, sequestrations, twisted and yearning, elements of absence,

pelt, cash, phalange, sure enough, a scream, a chirrup, the number ten, throws himself, doubling over, into, the pit, veridical, suicidal, surely, a storm, a chortle, cherry, chancy, dicey, are you looking at, where you should be, looking, stepping outside, in the extreme, foolhardy, frozen, throne room, merciful, yet twisted, a shout, a clout to the chops, another clout, they keep coming,

now raining blows, happier than ever, worms, a little lie down, yet another little lie down, dizzily down, soft, instance of wreckage, put back together, in the meantime, lovely rest, arse about face, gate, wall, entranceway, snuck through, from behind, with brick, aye, yet again, clobbered, the female heart, a nurse perhaps, brutally thorough, eyebrows off, gauze off, limping through, on all

fours, one catechism, after another, where you forget, they never forget, immaculate, division of labour, and where it all, began, curse follows, curse, around the block, cheap and natty, flash, inert, the division, the addition, the supplementation, then tax, then seduce, then seduce, then divide, forget dogs, daddies, all about numbers, of people, of peoples, stupid, conscientiously so,

largely, by means of pipette, these days, largely, they scan, they sample, they screen, bejaysus, they *kiss* the charts, in the ice, may, they be heard, sniffing, logarithmically, day by day, sneezing, exponentially, at some distances, granted, there are regulations, and the regulations, are coded, and the regulations, cover all manner, of sniffs, of sneezes, at half a glance, without even

saying, no, the spokesperson, is never right, is never wrong, the charts, the bailiffs, with their scissors, with their inspissations, are never finished, will it go, away, only when it comes, at night, where the lights, disclose, not, a sequence of, screams, emanating, but divagating, never, from the heart, frozen in colour, and laid out, slide by slide, for the lamenters-to-be, in triplicate

SKYMENDERS

In memory of Lawrence Fixel

1.

I can't recall when I first heard mention of them. Perhaps from a friend at a wedding reception in a backyard, a story about a bird that struck a window and died. Then the bride touched a fingertip to the cardinal's throat and it quickened. No doubt a perfectly innocent tale. Or was it? It felt like an enticement, or an admonishment. I soon began to hear more about these 'menders.' How they'd place a pebble on a larger pebble. How they'd turn a twig at an angle to another twig. How they pick up a plastic bottle cap in a parking lot, carry it for miles, only to place it on the crack in a curb. In order to bring about harmony, they say. To mend a tear in the sky's fabric.

2.

In line at the grocery store, he was behind me, a scruffy guy with a hole in the shoulder of his faded green shirt. Purchasing several jugs of distilled water. Each time I gazed at him, and I did this several times, compelled to examine his unsettling presence, he turned away. Each time he angled his body, his face, so I could not fully regard him, could not look directly into his evasive eyes. All I could do was stare at the small hole in the shoulder of his shirt. Yes, he was one of them. A skymender.

3.

We breathe roughly 25,000 times in a day, my wife said to me today. Why would she tell me that? Has she been counting my breaths? Is she hinting I breathe too loudly, that I should step outside whenever I need to gather a deep breath? Does she stay up all night counting my every inhalation? Could she be a mender, this counting one of her required tasks?

4.

I saw a clump of cat fur this morning on the hall carpet and I did an odd thing. I picked it up, opened the front door, and stood on the stoop. A gentle breeze eased the fur out of my hand. Soft, silky belly fluff. Perhaps a bird will use it

to line a nest. Or a vole will tote it down a vole hole. I'm a bit worried, though. Why didn't I deposit the fur in the trash bag under the kitchen sink? It felt so good to surrender the fur to the breeze. Does this mean that I have somehow joined the menders? I must be more careful.

5.

A honeybee heart has five openings, you know. That's what the cashier said to me this afternoon, there in the grocery store. In the shoulder of her turquoise blouse, a small hole. Someone needs to slip into her room one night as she dissolves into sleep and mend it.

Interviews & Reviews



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CHARLIE BAYLIS

*Charlie Interviewing Charlie**

Hi Charlie Baylis!

Hi, who the fuck are you?

I'm Charlie Baylis the interviewer.

Who?

More to the point who are you?

Me? Charlie Baylis the poet, you've must surely have read my work in The Vicar's Toenail, Tampon Magazine and Arsehole Weekly, now really, who are you?

I'm the up and coming interviewer, Charlie Baylis. I have been hired to interview Charlie Baylis the poet for the Lotus Eater regarding Charlie Baylis' the poet's poetry.

Oh, for fucks sake, why?

Be quiet Charlie Baylis, it's time for some serious discussion [loud thud].

Charlie Baylis the poet tries to escape but is dragged back by Charlie Baylis the interviewer...

[noise of handcuffs clicking, eyedrops being applied, manic screaming]

Ok Charlie Baylis let's begin! Question one: Why do you write?

[Charlie Baylis the poet begins to answer robotically, in a kind of daze... mispronouncing words]

errrrrr... ok Charlie Baylis the interviewer, it's either an attempt at evading the boredom of modern life, a psychological exploration of some teenage trauma that won't go away and never will go away, or a manner of staying sane in a complicated world.

* All the names mentioned in this interview are purely imaginary, except for Shania Twain.



On rare occasions i find myself actually enjoying being alive and writing is a neat way to capture pleasure in the moment and to be thankful for the hand I've been dealt. Not everyone gets to be Charlie Baylis the poet interviewed by Charlie Baylis the interviewer!

Amen.

Also why not write? I've nothing to lose!

Ok Charlie Baylis, thanks, so, if you had to choose between not writing poetry again or not reading poetry again, what would you choose?

This is an unholy question, Charlie Baylis, because reading and writing go hand and in hand. One feeds the other. Shania Twain told me, via youtube, that for every good poem you write you need to read a thousand great poems. Taking Shania Twain's tangent to its logical erection, I mean extension, I'd simply have to stop writing, because without studying and learning from other poets I'd get worse and worse, and that'd be embarrassing for my mother, and for Shania Twain, my most dedicated reader.

What's the worst thing that could happen to you Charlie Baylis?

Aside from this interview, the worst thing would be to die. Once you're dead you can't read or write. You're dead. Killing yourself may seem like a good idea sometimes but really you'd be wasting a lot of good material, especially your bones, which are loaded with calcium.

Charlie Baylis, we're all dying to know, what are your favourite poetry collections of all time?

Nice to know you're a list man too Charlie Baylis! Probably you get it from your father? Here's a quick top 167:

1. Charles Baudelaire – Les Fleurs du mal
2. Sylvia Plath – Ariel
3. Federico Garcia Lorca – Poeta en Nueva York
4. Selima Hill – Violet
5. Arthur Rimbaud – Illuminations
167. Charlie Baylis – hilda doolittle's carl jung t shirt

Also here's quick list of contemporary poets I either love, hate and/or am on friendly terms with:

Ella Frears, Isabelle Baafi, Aaron Kent, Rebecca Perry, Rebecca Tamas, Memoona

Zayid, Rachael Allen, Luke Kennard, Serge Neptune, Matthew Haigh, Liam Bates, McCaella Prentice, Eva Griffin, Andrew Taylor, Sarah Fletcher, Rosanna Hildyard, S.J. Fowler, Astra Papachristodoulou, Toby Martinez de las Rivas, Mark Waldron, Melissa Lee-Houghton, Bobby Parker, Lewis Buxton, Jack Solloway and every single poet published by broken sleep books.

What are you working on Charlie Baylis?

This interview. Apart from that just trying to stay alive. One peculiarity about me, despite the obvious cloud high levels of self-indulgence, is I really don't like talking about what I'm writing, or my writing, or anything closely related to my writing. I appreciate that puts you in somewhat of a fix. Float on.

I notice you've been nominated for a few prizes: Sabotage Awards for reviews, Pushcarts and Forward prizes for poems, Charlie Baylis, why didn't you win any of them?

I didn't win because of the cronyism involved in awards, the misalignment of the stars and my deeply unfashionable hair.

Kidding! Probably there were people better than me on the lists. Fine. Hopefully one day it'll be my turn, Charlie Baylis, and when it is my turn I'll be sure to tell everyone it's my turn. On an instagram live stream. On your twitter mobile app. There's only enough limelight in 'poetry' for Charlie Baylis.

Like Shania Twain told me, the sky is the limit, but there is always a higher level. You might think you've done well because you're in the latest edition of Prick Monthly, but you should always aim higher. Never rest on your laurels, or in my case, lack of laurels, because otherwise what's the point? Why are you even trying?

Right Charlie, so is that YOLO or Keep it 100?

Amen.

Your poetry is playful. What is the importance of play, discovery, unexpected mixtures in your writing? Is this something that translates in your everyday life?

Can we please stop with the questions, Charlie Baylis the interviewer. I'm just trying to enjoy my coffee and bake in Tim Hortons and you're ruining my time with all this nonsense.

[loud thud]

[noise of handcuffs clicking, eyedrops being applied, manic screaming]

Welcome back to your interview Charlie Baylis. It says here you studied at UEA? Is that true? What was it like being at a ‘star school’?
My coffee is cold and it’s all your fault Charlie Baylis. What have I done to deserve this?

Charlie Baylis the poet throws a pot of coffee over Charlie Baylis the interviewer...

[loud thud]

[noise of handcuffs clicking, eyedrops being applied, manic screaming]

...errrr what happened at UEA? there were good times and bad times. The truth is I didn’t really settle in the fine town of Norwich, I got depressed and went home after a term. UEA have been good to me since dropping out, I am always proud when they include my publications in their ‘recent work’ emails. Especially when I haven’t even published anything. Somedays I think I’d like to go back and do a PhD...possible about neon epicurean psychedelic poetry vs ‘Man, I feel like a woman.’
[Charlie Baylis the interviewer interrupts]

One curious thing about you Charlie Baylis is that somewhere on the ‘internet’ it is alleged you studied at the University of Falmouth, which I guess is because of your close friendships with Aaron Kent and Rupert Loydell, but you’ve actually never set foot in the town, let alone taken a degree there! No hard feelings, Falmouth! Charlie is reaching out an olive branch...

Amen.

Moving on, romance, and particularly the early stages of falling in love and a not very well defined female presence seem to be a constant in your poetry, sometimes in plain sight, sometimes hidden. Would you say this is true? Why?

That’s enough. Would you like another donut?

Collaborating with another poet – you published a pamphlet with Andrew Taylor. How was it working with another poet? Did it change your creative process?

Thanks Charlie but I’ve had enough of this shit. I just came to Tim Hortons for a good time...

[Charlie Baylis the interviewer interrupts]

Can you remember writing your first poem?... How and where do you begin a poem?... When do you know a poem is finished?... Your poetry is not autobiographical. Is that true though? How do you feel about poets that write mostly about their life experiences?... Do you try to push your personal experience out of your poetry intentionally?...

[Sound of Charlie Baylis the poet gently snoring]

[Charlie Baylis the interviewer continues...]

Apart from writing and publishing your poems – you are editor of Anthropocene, Chief Editorial Advisor to Broken Sleep Books, Poetry Editor of Review 31... Tell us about these other projects... do these roles and your personal reading allow you to have a good understanding of the current state of poetry in English language, what do you make of it?

[Charlie Baylis the poet wakes up and hits Charlie Baylis the interviewer with his shoe. Hard.]

Ouch! Ok one final question is it true you dated the editor of this magazine?

That's private.

Is that a yes?

That's private.

Are you sure?

I'm sure. I think she prefers Crispin Best.



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Contributors

CHARLIE BAYLIS has a new pamphlet called *Santa Lucia* (Invisible Hand Press) coming out in early june 2021. For more about his work take a look at theimportanceofbeingaloof.tumblr.com

BRIAN MICHAEL BARBEITO is a poet, writer, and photographer. Work appears at such venues as *Fiction International* from San Diego State University and *CV2 The Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing*. A novella is forthcoming in *The Notre Dame Review*.

WADE CRAVATH BELL lives in Calgary, Canada. He is the author of four books of short fiction published by Guernica Editions and Coach House Press in Toronto, Canada.

ETHAN CUNNINGHAM is a creative wanderer. He holds an MFA from Boston University. His short works and photography have appeared in *Fiction365*, *Forth Magazine*, *Three Line Poetry*, *Agave Magazine*, and others. He currently resides in quasi quarantine in Sacramento, California with his wife and three needy cats.

JOHN BRADLEY is the author of ten books of poetry, the most recent *Everything in Motion, Everything at Rest* (Dos Madres Press), poems inspired by photographs. His poetry has appeared in *Alligatorzine*, *Calibanonline*, *Hotel Amerika*, *Otoliths*, *Sulfur Surrealist Jungle*, and *SurVision*. He frequently reviews books of poetry for *Rain Taxi*.

FINLEY J. MACDONALD grew up in Sun River, Montana. For the last decade, he has lived in China, currently in Zhuhai with his partner Yang Meiting and his daughter, Molly, and he teaches English writing and contemporary issues at Sun Yat-sen University. He is founding editor of *Imagazine*, a Wechat mag for university students. His fiction and nonfiction have been published or accepted by *Anomaly*, *Menacing Hedge*, *Queen Mob's Tea House*, *Crack the Spine*, *Nude Bruce Review*, *Hungry Chimera*, *Slippage Lit*, *Near to the Knuckle*, *Embodied Effigies*, and *Shanghai Literary Review*.

J. D. NELSON experiments with words in his subterranean laboratory. His poetry has appeared in many small press publications, worldwide, since 2002. He is the author of several collections of poetry, including *Cinderella City* (The Red Ceilings Press, 2012). His work has recently appeared in *E•ratio*, *Maintenant*, *Otoliths*,

BlazeVOX, and *X-Peri*. Visit madverse.com for more information and links to his published work. Nelson lives in Colorado, USA.

GIORGIA PAVLIDOU is a writer living in Los Angeles. She holds an MA in Urdu Literature (Lucknow University, India), and earned her MFA from the Manchester School of Writing, UK (though her meetings with LA poet Will Alexander since 2015 have been much more impactful). Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in such journals/anthologies as *Clockwise Cat*, *City*, *From the Ashes Womxn's Anthology*, *Revue de la poésie in toto*, *New Urge Editions*, *Witchcraft Mag*, *Puerto del Sol* and *Entropy*. She's an editor of *SULΦUR* and *The Room*. Both are multilingual international surrealist magazines.

ALEXANDRIA PEARY serves as Poet Laureate of New Hampshire and is a 2020 recipient of an Academy of American Poets Laureate Fellowship. She is the author of seven books, including *Control Bird Alt Delete* and *The Water Draft*, the latter book heavily influenced by her travels in Italy.

DON POMERANTZ lives in New York City and Peekskill, NY where he is a retired software developer and educator. His poems have appeared in *Washington Square*, *Failbetter*, *Tar River*, *Eclectica*, *Conium Review*, *Kestrel*, *SAND* and many other journals. His poetry collection, *The Moose of Felicity* is forthcoming.

DYLAN A. SMITH is an emerging writer living in Brooklyn, New York. His fiction has been published in *Vol. 1 Brooklyn*. He is currently working editing a series of epistolary poems titled *Letters to Red* and curates fiction workshops in New York City with an academic organization called Think Olio.

BEN UMayAM moved to NYC to write the Great American Filipino Gay Short Story. He worked for political consultants, became a chef at a fancy hotel, worked privately as a chef for priests, and is now retired, working that short story again. Recently he was published in the online publications *Maudlin House*, *Digging Through The Fat*, *The Southeast Asian Drabble Anthology* (Insignia), *34th Parallel Magazine*, *Anak Sastra*, and *Gay Flash Fiction*.

H. MARK WEBSTER's previous publishing credits include work in *Anastamoo*, *Poems Niederngasse*, *elimae*, *printout*, *Blackmail Press*, *Otoliths*, *Milly Magazine*, and the chapbook *A Life Without Touching*. He currently lectures in cultural studies and literature at IPU in Palmerston North, New Zealand.