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EDITORIAL

Living in a time when the world is changing at an ever-accelerating pace, and major political, cultural and environmental ruptures reverberate from the global scale down to the smallest daily activities, it can be a challenge to find the focus to write. Maybe your writing feels irrelevant compared to massive world events; maybe keeping up with current shifts in all facets of life leaves little mental room from creativity; maybe you do not have the energy to slow down from chipping at your endless to-do list just to follow a passion project at the end of a workday. Whatever it may be, such mental and physical blocks can make writing seem like a frivolous hobby rather than the incredibly potent, magical practice of storytelling it is.

The process of putting this current issue together, and primarily the weekly task of going through the many submissions that have come our way, had a therapeutic charge. There is some reprieve in the idea that, in spite of everything, new authors are finding their voices and proving themselves hungry to share their stories. The poetry, artworks, and prose we have collected offer a wide range of original, moving and impactful pieces from emerging writers and artists we are excited to spotlight. You will walk on the shoreline, contemplating loneliness and becoming; you will hear of yearning and love, of perseverance, destruction, fragmentation, and cold winters; you will discover the beauty in the ordinary, and read contemplations of the self-images we hold onto so dearly. Unifying writers from all walks of life, from all around the globe, this publication is a testament to the persistence of the kind of literary community *Writer's Block* tries to nurture.

This year, we began the term with an almost entirely new board. Taking some time to settle in and adjust to this shift in dynamic, we quickly found ourselves in a steady and natural workflow. We are proud to have put together this new edition of our magazine, which exists by virtue of its brilliant contributors, our dedicated board, the continued support of the magazine's founder, Lester Hekking, and, of course, you, the reader on the other side.

Delighted to present issue 53,

The Writer's Block team

Same as ever

Rizwan Akhtar

an overcast December afternoon is another similarity,
winter leaves behind a grey history, spooks the trees
bearing removal, and birds keeping to their nests
the way warmth is valued is a language lost, the lake-like
illusion of a still puddle mirrors your trapped face,
occasional encounters in dark corridors with no words
a hiatus brushing away the company of text messages
shrinking with abbreviations, and the crinkled
raisins of a mulberry on the ground like footnotes.

Recoil

Ana Helena Franco

I nose at destiny's hand
like a mare. I beg it to
'feed me the holy hay' –
which is every grass,
'lead me to the water'.
I promise to drink this time.

-

Teach me to close my eyes when
thunder strikes, fall
asleep to the taps
of water on flank, and
in the mornings, shake it off like dew –
sweet from dreaming.

Bridle me
star-poked and heavy.
Tell me of the world and its borders
so that I won't run off
the edge.

Let me realize the scent of dusk
and the glint of metal: smooth steps,
blow plumes of vapor like
an engine
made for something.

As I graze
point me to the sweetest bramble:
creeping herb.

I've yet to learn how
to lay my head down.

The Reckoning

Alessio Zanelli

Where least sought after—
a cockroach in a cream pie—
hides the signet of the truth.
The shinier, the harder to find.
Cornice of snow on an arête
the face of the moon lights up.
Roaring of rain in the night.
At a loss for jokes—a sage
among pinheads—the jester
steals drool and laughter
from the mouth of boasters.
A ronin disguised as a bonze.
The loftiest, sheerest mountain—
however high—still falls short
of a have-not's humblest dream.
Eye for eye, tooth for tooth—
if overdue, the reckoning
always comes. Like a storm.
No matter how soiled the truth.
Down at dawn or dust at dusk.

Some Things Borrowed and Blue

Phoenix Che-Lai

Big weddings, I sometimes think, are affirmations
of love, that you require a public mass confirmation of.
Is it because of insecurity, or the knowledge that this moment will only exist
once, or is it as genuine as you say?

A shallow way to pronounce your devotion. This white cathartic release, disguised in tulle
dreams pretending to be plutocratic.

Immortalized in tenuously posed monochromatic photos.

That will forever live in the precarious position of the mantel above the never-lit hearth.

It's the small weddings that speak of the most
exquisite charm though. Because sometimes
two simple signatures speak louder and with more confidence than the uttered hieroglyphs
of a strangely robed stranger you don't even know in a grand abbey.
Or the nuclear fuss of rehearsals, and strangers not yet bound by law.
I know of many who think of small weddings as requisite.
Borrowed flats can run faster up to someone's arms than your stilettos down the aisle.
Wondering if your slow speed is a translation of your suppressed doubt?

But the wedding I remember best, is the one I never attended.

Sung through the revitalised memories of my parents.

People say it was a green card, others out of love. But my mum jokingly says both.

Happy accidents and mutual understandings

that gave birth to accidentally permanent happiness and the greatest understanding.

Spontaneous latecomers and invited party crashers.

I see you slip in the petals of the chiffon dress, resonating tourmaline. The sky's baby blush.

I still remember the old phrase that you stuck to religiously.

Something Olde, Something New

Something Borrowed, Something Blue

Perishing

Kevin Armor Harris

Just a report they say, you don't have to write any more, stop, there's no more you need to say. But words keep breaking to the surface. Gloomy, beset, collared, tangled, backfired, washed up, flat, englutie. Locked, unlocked. The grumpy old painter, the one with the dog wetting the wall, so keen to gain height. Looking up — what is it that seems to be floating, to scare us with height? Airless pressure from above, no we're all ballast to the damp here. Upright and downcast. People sit and stand listening in his scenes, cringed-in from cold and dank, you recognise the droning, echoing, you want to get up and stretch a little, get blood flowing.

In the early weeks of 1692, Emanuel de Witte, painter of separate moments in vaulted churches, closing in on four score years, had a spat with his landlord in Amsterdam, a dispute over debts. Soon after, De Witte hanged himself from a canal bridge, with a fragile cord that gave way—but the deed done, body alive yet or corpse already, slumped into the brutal clinch of ice. Breakdown. By design or accident? Did he envisage, plan, measure, make sketches? The body was revealed the following month, clenched in a lock as surfaces gradually sharded in thaw. Passing eyes unpacked it, as if conservators were so soon at work.

Eyes down that morning head down east wind bitter breathtaking. The lock is a frame, seen from above, legs stock apart, as if he were standing facing firmament, sizing up. Facemask, a cast all staring. A shrivelled figure locked in its coffin's ~~measured~~ immeasurable evermelt, finally horizontal. Or like a shrunken ship in stocks. Sparks of light and sky in ice on fire, a flat pyre that flares still in my creaking sleep.

Still here there is no breath, no breathing. Everything seems to be mortal — do I mean everything — I'd say possibly, I mean yes, it is what I mean, though I know so little and mean so seldom. All appears as if mortal, which means not dead yet, not far off there, I'd say, nor near enough to be sure.

Irretrievable, irredeemable. Using words I've heard used, spewing them out, using them ill, not knowing them or how, a jumbled regurgitation, and then imagining that I've invented – something – not, only coughed up wrong, wrong words wrong time wrong order. What happened to the grand scheme of things, I'd like to know. No-one left to tell us, to tell me, go on re-using these misused, unmoving unmoved in the sludgy swill of language,

stifled at thought of this pane pressing down on this portrait, weight of transparency,

this silhouette stuck in the flocs / see, is it? / aye 'tis he alright / true darkness yet light splintered down, some invention possible, not, just a report. Why art then? So that there might be, ah there so might, a way not of telling but of listening, of looking, call it sensing, despite any scheme grand or feeble or imagined, though not, you may be sure, you may be, until such time as, until such time, such as it is, the dead done, to be sure



Two Poplars | Linden Kohut | *Charcoal and acrylic*



violets in my neighbour's garden

Phoenix Che-Lai

There are violets in my neighbour's garden. I never see the gardener. But they thrive. They survive on the kindly sustenance of rain and natural earth. A-grade amethysts in summer. But never pruned, sheltered, torn, weeded, sprayed, beaten. There are violets in my neighbour's garden. But never in mine. I plead, scream, shout, howl for them to grow. While my neighbour's flourish in spontaneous silence. I feed them, tend them, trim them, quench them, hug them. But the fertilizer burns their roots. There are violets in my neighbour's garden, and while I chose the perfect seeds from the specialist my neighbour's sprout from some shit-stain residue. Smearred by the homeless dog onto the crumbling brick walls of the front yard. Perhaps I was cursed with some malfunctioning genetic failure. At least that's what I tell them. I tried and tried and tried and now I'm tired. Eighteen years, I've tried to get them into Sunlight. While my neighbour never tries. They let them be and let them go. But I can't. It's not an obsession, compulsion, or craziness. But the differentiation of hatred and love is growing thinner. I've grown a few now, and am I happy? They've grown whilst I've shrivelled. I've tried to smile but I weep, for there are always so many violets in my neighbour's garden.

Seven Minutes

Oscar Dumas

I.

Seven minutes in heaven with Cesca.
“But you’re both girls!” they guffawed.
“It doesn’t matter, it’s spin-the-bottle,”
She said, “you don’t get to choose.”

That must have been how I was made,
God’s coke glass, like Saturn’s rings,
Boy, girl, boy, girl, in-between.
It was so warm in the dark with her.

We laughed and smelled each other,
Funk of perfume bottles and sneakers.
“We don’t have to do anything,” she said,
But I wanted to and she could tell,

And she kissed me on my mouth.
Legs wading through stinging nettles,
Cesca and I were twelve, winter scouts,
Watching each other, sharing band-aids.

Nesting in her mother’s coats, blood
Came rushing: she smiled, cried out.
“Jesus...” I swore, “... wept?” she teased.
“I’m pretty sure he never wept like this.”

We wrapped ourselves in chocolate
suede,
Laughing, escaping to her bedroom.
We must have looked like streakers.
The next day, Cesca’s mother shrieked

About the creaming soda stain
The party had left on the carpet.
When those days came, loud among
The ones who hushed, we laughed

II.

“Seven periods for a whole week,
Just so we can learn sex kills you,
At the end of every school day.”
Beaming, Cesca punched my shoulder.

“Don’t even joke about this shit.
It only took God seven days...
These people really screw you up.”
Three months ago, we’d kissed,

But now we barely brushed arms.
My shoulder burned with vindication,
And desire, bruise forming a target.
I held the spot throughout the lesson.

Do you want to give away your
treasure?
The lady with the grey scour perm
Held up a clean white Nike and then
its wasted, filthy sister. Do you think

That boys will choose the dirty one?
I wanted to shout – do I give a shit
What boys will choose? But I sat
Cross-legged, stifled, loveless.

This is a special time in your lives.
Carved with a dull stone knife.
One day you too will be an adult.
All the evil organs scooped out.

In the brassy odour of the bus,
My eyes stormed with bitter rain.
Cesca wrapped herself around me,
Finally kissing, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry.”

III.

“What the hell happened, dear?”
My father asked, staring at the corpse
Of my alarm clock, arteries exposed.
Waking up, I dashed it on the bright,

Hard surface of the here-and-now.
Casio was such a diffident name
For a magician in control of time
And math, and human heartbeats.

“We’re not getting another one.”
Bury it with my baby teeth, then.
Little boys and girls together,
Somewhere quiet in the world.

Cesca’s body began to shock.
I dreamed of a giant Operation,
Gathering her breasts, her heart,
Perpetually electrocuted.

Our bodies were no longer toys.
She let boys weave around her,
Cultivating spider-threads, an
Advent calendar of boy-pieces.

“Are we going to the prom?”
Searching for a soft place in her,
I sounded none. “Have you been asked?”
“I’m asking you,” I whittled out.

Her face was sheer and glum,
Withholding light, diffusing me.
“I don’t love you... like a boy.
I’m sorry. We can go as friends.”

IV.

The way she cupped my hands in prayer
Remained a ghost with me,
Colonising every touch, each kiss
With a mute platonic seal.

But I had bled many moments
And she had eaten the excesses;
Together we concealed our scents,
Our camp in the bleak forest.

I passed her wearied notes in class,
Dreaming her cursive would restore me,
But she did not acknowledge them.
Her friendship was diminutive.

In English, I stammered through
The essay question: how did Shakespeare
Countenance the pain of love?
Each period a death-knell.

What could he have uttered, if Juliet
And Rosalind had loved? If Emilia
And Desdemona had embraced?
If the votive glow of candles

Burned their skin while the bath
Grew limp as they kissed and moved
Inside each other's veins, revealing
Loves which sentences enchain.

I wrote again but now untraced
By the tyranny of a full stop.
Dipping the pen in my bruises,
I found the vital ink.

MIDNIGHT ON THE SHORE

John Grey

1

The mind spins its thoughtless wheels,
as the harassed heart goes into spasms,
like the fishing boat lost in a foggy arctic landscape,
churning, churning, but going nowhere,
There's a mystery kept secret from the self:
how does the apparatus work? It just does.
It stands at the edge of a seaside metropolis,
looks out at the throbbing cannonade.

The wailing orphan breezes find
the night sky unresponsive.
Waves roll in, reach out, but nothing grabs hold.
The sand is footloose and the dark
shifts the atmosphere to one of dread.
And the heart is a program without listeners,
a lonely organ on the beach,
pumping blood for no apparent reason,
somber, repetitious, like footsteps on streets.
Just the rapacious, foam-tipped waves for company,
that roll up the beach and back again,
the chilly bite of salt-jackals of calamity,
the bleak displeasure of wind.

Midnight. Sea at its darkest, deepest, coldest.
Body shivers without end. Clocks strike out of hearing.
Here, time goes nowhere.

Beyond, closed doors have never been so tightly shut.
Lovers turn to each other, not to me.
My company is the dynamo of the ocean.
Its thrumming shudders my bones.
I must not crack and break.

My explanation is that I'm drawn by the smell of the sea,
its permanence, my transience, a welcome fallback
from the boredom of a cheap motel.

Besides, I love to wander.

And here I stand suspended
before the enigmatic ocean mirror.

Like a man on a moving surface with blind eyes
but vision in his hands and feet.

No human warmth.

Just a line of demarcation between sea and land;
slender, constantly on the move.

Bad feelings detach from me.

And I will not welcome them back.

The weather drifts west, nerves bud,
lungs flushed with nascent air.

And amazed how, when reflected, the tranquil stars
seem close and comforting. Their endless gleam extends
even to the waters like serene gewgaws.

I am not among the missing;

Their eyes peer out of posters in the plaza.

I'm known to the grains of sand,
the dollops of water.

It may seem blank, but it is not anonymity.

No alcohol, no bright lights, no phony cheer.

No fire, no merrymaking, no other hands.

None of these gather at midnight.

Amid all the trundling,
it's an homage to the spindrift soul.

Nor beaten down. Nor destitute. Nor lonely.

I have been many times
in many places such as this.

I am well-equipped for solitude.

The Weeping Angel

Maia Popa

I've always thought my skin looks best in the moonlight. Not that sunlight doesn't do it justice - I do love the feeling of the warm afternoon rays dripping between the leaves from above me onto my stone arms. But the moonlight... the moonlight makes my grey skin look translucent, a dewy sheen of blueish silver blanketing and enwrapping my entire statuesque body. I would even say that, at midnight, it makes me look the most alive, but that would be a pleonasm. I never know when it is about to happen, but I feel it from the way my fingers, frozen in time, start twitching, and my wings fall heavy onto my back, and I can raise my head from the headstone. Sometimes I even wipe my tears, but it's mostly futile, as they seem to reappear each morning. I would love to stretch my legs, too, but the ivy curls around my ankles, and each time I try to move, the stems cling closer to them, climbing higher onto my body. The leaves almost reach my hips now, so I've learnt to accept the little liberty I have.

I stretch my arms onto the cold surface of the gravestone and loosen the tension in my neck by looking around. The graveyard is empty, and the moon bleeds her silver light through the foggy air. The wails and sobs of the day are replaced by a deafening quiet, and somehow I find myself wishing for the rustle of the wind through the loose braids of the willow tree. A heavy mist hangs upon the cemetery, humid and dark, the cold of the night seeping down to the bones six feet under. The branches of the yew trees sigh under the blue dew as a gust of wind gives them a stifling tremor—finally, some movement. I trace my fingers along the lines of the headstone and rest my head in the palm of my hand.

I wish I knew his name. The writing is on the other side of the stone, away from the reach of my gaze. I weep for him, but I've never known his name. I only know him, or what was him, through *her*. She comes before dusk, and she sometimes murmurs his name between sobs, but never quite clearly enough for me to discern it. It's always *her*, and only *her*; she brings him flowers, sometimes a little trinket. From time to time, she even leaves them within my reach, and I can take the roses and put them in my hair and take the little souvenirs and play with them and pretend I knew him too.

But when dawn breaks, the flowers in my hair wilt, and their petals fall off my shoulders onto the ground. Then, I put the playthings where they were left, resting my head on my arm and waiting still until moonlight shines upon me once more.

I love to watch her when she comes. She's got long raven curls, like I wish I had, rosy cheeks tainted by tears, and slim, graceful fingers, always neatly folded in her lap. I watch as she stands before the headstone, reading his name over and over in her mind, never quite believing: the image of his lively, joyous face, imprinted on the blank darkness of her closed eyelids, seems so close, yet his voice and presence are forever out of reach. And so she falls to her knees and digs her fingers into the soil, bowing her head to the ground, chest heaving and gasping for breath as her lungs feel like they are collapsing from the inside. And as she weeps, I weep with her, for the only love and yearning I've ever known is the one I see in her. I sit still and listen closely for the name I ache to hear, wishing I could play with it upon my lips at night, letting it dissolve on my tongue like sugar. But it never comes; she never lets me have it, claiming it as hers and only hers to bear.

And most of the time, I think I've made my peace with what she has, for I know she comes in every other day, and I can watch her and imagine I am her - and all of her memories and experiences become mine, too. But tonight, the moonlight urges me on. I feel the weight of my wings, which were made to fly, sitting folded on my back from day to night. I contemplate the gnawing ivy - but if I'm quick, I think I might make it. I shift my legs, and readily so, the leaves reach a bit higher. My lips curl into a smile, because I can feel it, the tingling sensation of his name, so close within my reach. I spread my wings, and give myself a strong push off the ground, rising into the air, the ivy wildly clinging and crawling higher around my body. The twigs suddenly snap, and the stems leave long lines of crimson imprinted on my skin. But I'm free, and I cushion my feet onto the dewy grass, and stagger to the front of the grave plot, holding my breath.

It's there, his name, carved in stone in capital letters, and I whisper it a thousand times until it doesn't feel like it's *hers* anymore. It's mine. My knees buckle, and I plant my hands onto the soil before the headstone, and reach the tip of my finger out towards the name. A strange sound escapes my throat, a chuckle which doesn't feel like mine.

I plunge my hands deeper, closer to him, and I think of her dark curls, since the ivy crawling towards me reminds me of them. The heart-shaped leaves sprout from behind the headstone, and they reach my wrists and pin them down while I push my tainted knees into the soil to break free. Yet the ivy grows, it grows, and it reaches my body, my neck, my bleeding legs, and it draws me closer to my spot behind the stone. But I bury myself into the ground and whisper his name, for he's mine now and I'm fully his. The sky cracks open and light spills in through thin threads, and suddenly the ivy stops crawling, and I think I'm free, but my fingers don't move, and my legs sit still, and I can't feel my wings.

"What a shame," she'll say the next day. "The weeping angel has fallen."

And she'll ask for me to be taken away, and I won't ever be close to him again. But I'll forever keep his name as mine, locked behind my tightly closed lips.

Untitled body

Hamza Ahmad Khan

The human body is a niche
to be studied out
of necessity— made of mercury
& mercy— I used to call
it ordinary before
I knew the finger
to mix the wound with blood
& suck. I did not know
what tongue-in-cheek was.
I kept nothing, out of exception—
like any good B-lister.
I knew my place only
when I touched my body
to let it study me
like I was its niche
& it not mine.
I am a niche.

In celibacy before I had learnt it
I was unripe & now I am dirty
in my body— I am
not a son, but a mother
I am a teacher in his subject
& a disciple of my skin
I am simply nothing
out of the ordinary
but human in my
tail & fur
like a product of species
and a descendant of my
farmer grandfather
in his dhoti— I am not a son
not a daughter
I am the ordinary object
of a niche to be studied.

The Bathroom: I, Scrub. I, Cleanse. I, Polish.

H.D.Waves

I stare at myself in the cloudy bathroom mirror as the shower's water swirls down the drain. My mind sculpting every pore toward an impossible gloss. As I step inside the cascading strands of liquid, I brace myself for change. For the water would cleanse me, polish me and my tormented identity. It would leave my skin and soul glistening, their stories intricate, intellectual and impressive. My life would be like purple prose, convoluted and deeply moving to those with wit.

I rearrange my memories and try to rewrite my life, making it—overwritten, gilded. But my skin is simply cells, my ink just blood. I walk back and forth underneath the shower's droplets; the realization that there is no realistic escape from the dirt and disarray of my life burrows under my skin. For everything I say and do is still merely youthful petulance. So, it is with a sense of anticipation and finality that I inhale the sizzling air — and scrub.

The water descends and bursts on to my shoulders and hair, sliding from my neck to my back — gravity gripping, pulling each drop down my body. My soaked fringe flaps over my eyelids, moulding itself to the bump of my nose and crevasses of my eyes. My left hand claws the loofah, while my right palm squeezes a litany of gelatinous soaps, to probe, gnaw and erase molecules off my skin. My body, perfumed. Tense. Dormant.

I throw my head horizontally to let my bubbly hair clench to the back of my skull, exposing my large forehead, darkened pores and misshapen blue eyes. My irises awaken and find a myriad of polished reflections that loom within the mirrored marble. They are beautiful, clever. Everything I wished to be more of — I cannot resist comparing myself to my idealised version glaring back at me. Each facet's immaculate perspective of my skin and soul is clouded by beads of glistening water that cling to each marble square. I can see my flawless reflections slowly warping, gradually drifting out of my reach. The more I scrub every limb, the more water splatters on the surrounding surfaces, the harder it is to grasp what I am. What I am becoming. Am I successful? Am I failing? I know the answer, but the reality seems too concrete to bear.

For I stand soaked, my skin raw, I cannot wash my imperfections away – I am simply lost in a flood of mechanical rain. It is after my loofah draws blood from my knee that I succumb. Reluctantly, I press the flowing faucet shut.

Bruised purple by reality, I pull the shower curtain open. I can feel my scorched facial expressions. My scratched burning face yearns to shed its unwanted skin. It is as if my limbs work without my consent, all desperately gasping for conformity. Yet, it is my eyes, my boundless blue eyes, that remain unwaveringly loyal to who I truly am – Who I think I am, that is. The pair dart though my surroundings, alert. My body drips frantically, staining the rug, while the subtle hum of the fan attempts to distract my mind from obsessing over something I can never change, never in its entirety.

Yet, a thought pierces my subconscious. My pupils analyse each drop of soapy water dripping down my skin – I see that they all fall at different paces. One drops straight from my hair to the floor, others race each other from my chest to my knee caps. They cannot avoid their fate – bursting into puddles on the tiled floor. This odd observation awakens a thought in me – if I am to change, would it matter? If others see me polished purple, would I be? I can scrub my body raw, to its bones and even then, I think I would not. Does that mean I am bound to a singular narrative, a body contained by the same skin? Or in the end, am I not a growing soul, an evolving story that cannot be captured, no matter how hard I try?

These reflections preserve. Until I see an answer – like condensation on a mirror I wipe, a hazy version of myself stares back at me in an instant. I witness my strengths and weaknesses synonymously: My wit accompanied by my perpetual sadness, my vulnerability and my lack of self-restraint, together; my body and soul – the dirt of its honesty and its polished lies have shaped me. Undeniably. Even though they are dualities – twisted, contradictory. They are mine. The water cannot simply cleanse me. For if it did, I would not be the person scrubbing in this shower to begin with. I couldn't be.

An exhale perspires through my lips as I feel my mind calm. The beige walls and glossy Italian marble tiles become clearer. I sense the realization linger through me, gradually gaining consciousness of my drenched body, as well as the disorientating steam. While my lungs try to catch a breath, I let my head softly fall on the cold tiles. With every inhale, I make my finger move, then my toe – I can sense my mind retaking control of its ligaments. I continue until I can crawl to the bathroom's radiator and press my back on its warm surface – slowly drying the remaining moisture off my skin.

My soul, finally able to accept its reckoning enough to view my imperfections not as scars, rather as companions in my curation of self. It is my cerulean gaze that catches a glimpse of my reflection on the opposing glass door. My face bare, my pupils gawk back at me – finally seeing myself unpolished. I am – neither gilded nor endless. The radiator burns, the fan hums, my breath is loud – everything and nothing has changed.

Yet –

I will keep trying.

I will stop scrubbing.

I will begin a better cleanse.

Until, I see,

I am not polished –

I am – lived in.

This Earth Will Be Our Mother

Jeske Hulst

This earth will be our Mother
but only as our grave.
When the Third and Fraud
turn Simple law
into a power play-

As the Devil points at children,
and cries out:
"Kill them all!",
the demon on his shoulder grins,
and shouts out:
"Joy to god!"

-that is when the hallowed eyes
of Holy angels cry,
for the earth who is not Mother,
stains crimson by design.

A lament of empty tolls, rings hollow in earth's tomb
as cement of grit and mothers' tears, lines the soil's womb.



Master Artworks in COVID Times | Donald Patten | *Charcoal on paper*

That toothless voice, again

R. P. Singletary

DICTION: PHONE, SWITCH ON, TRANSCRIBE MY DAD'S MEMORY of his orange world-fantasy, what he called survical [btw, her name was Kim]

FAR AND WIDE AWAY FROM EVERYTHING, he hid :

HOW you think

WHERE you live

WHO you pretend

WHY you are

“That toothless voice, again” what I carry in my pocket: piece of his insanity

{[ORANGE, ORRANE, ARRANGE ORANGE like a mantra, summoning, his love of conjure-color-ginge, entropé entail envisioning]} Every night 'fore I gets too drunk again, it talks to me about things, deep things I don't rightly understand as a man. Three li'l words mostly. “No *problem, man*,” it says. Over-'n'-over, just those three, damn, li'l words. Every. Friggin. Night. Week after week, month after month. Like those three li'l, damn, words ever done. Nothin. For nobody. Like last night. Yet again.

Them's Mama and I never talk about it, not again last night, can't find no proper words. Never talked about it, not once, was the main reason I saddled up to her in the first place. She don't talk, and I mean the lightin in the bar, the way she stood there, *man!* Well, I suppose the three beers did a-somethin, but the lightin did a-somethin. I always bring up the lights when I tell this story. Somethin, um, went up real bright and well, I let my guard down. Sweet juice o' the fruit, what is it they say? ...forbidden fruit, that's right...Adam and Eve, not yet Steve, *haha*, been better off if us menfolk done just clicked from the start, ha, back in that garden, back 'fore the snake got to a-talkin...hell, if Dad done heard this jabber, he'd skin me raw and make me eat it...glad he gone....

You see, them's Mama and I, well, we had two kids. Four years apart, mind ya. Beauty of a tall-y, that daughter, the older one. *Hmmm-hmmm*, all the boys in her class say. She always done us proud. The other, well, he done took after me. Could not be taught a derned thing. Hard-headed as smart-headed. *Mean*, some would say, but *loooovin!*, I know'd he was lovin since that day he was born, 'cause he done took after his Paw-Paw, yessiree he do, *haha*, at least in most ways of thinkin, but dear *Jeee-sus*, that boy, he, well, he done took after his Mama in some other ways. OK. I'm just gonna come out and say it. **HAIR COLOR!!** That's what I liked most about her, any ways truth be damned. Yeah, she had smarts enough alright-y. Yeah, she done had a supportin family, yeah. But, when I'm hangin and a-draainkin in a bar and thinkin about how old I'm gettin and all, I mean it gets mighty lonesome in that bed, though the house ain't too big, but a woman's touch does do a-somethin, not just to a man's bed, but to his kitchen, his house, his flowers and all.

We done got married in her church, big weddin for that little church. Folks turnt out, not all the real Big Wigs of the county, but one maybe two did, yeah more, I suppose that was enough. We ain't no lawyers or doctors or nothin like that, but we know'd a couple of 'em. Had a-somethin up-'n'-over 'em, so they guilted to come. In short, the marriage, it all done broke up, and I moved on to other things, had my needs elsewhere. I check her website thing-y every fourth day, see if she ain't got up-'n'-gone hitched again. Oh I don't give me a rat's-damn about her. It's the boy. The capital-T boy, *Trouble*, that son. Been talk mo' and mo', he worse then his Pop, no, it's just that times done a-changed. You can't talk ya way outta shit like we always did. Everybody gotta hold to the law, I reckon it's right. Preachers ain't no use for gettin ya outta trouble any ways these days neither. That's why I done quit goin to church. Ain't no good prayin neither 'cause God can't help no *orange*-headed son none at-all. There I done gone and said it. He done got his Mama's hairs. Unlike that sister, and the boy don't know he needa wear a hat, his face so pale and pasty. Lisa, that's my new wife, she says he can't help it. I say, ya darn tootin he can help it. He can wear a hat. They ain't expensive like those videos he plays every day instead of studyin. Ain't no young fella gonna stay indoors with a hat on all the time, Lisa says to me. I shake my head and say, "*Skin Caaaaancer!!!*" But ya can't talk nothin to these people. No sense to 'em! I gave up tryin to figure out people's line-a-thinkin back 'fore 9/11. That's why I drink. My son's got red hair, *orange* it be!! Y'all stop me from overdoin and goin some place I ain't comin back from--

That's when the toothless voice last night started up its yabberin at me again, sayin "youuuu know better, heeee ya son!" I took another swig but no mo' left. "Yours! All yours, Daddy!"

"No ... *problem*, ... *man*," I answered it back with its own three words. Takin its own medicine to it, spoonful for spoon.

I whispered it...real soft again...soft-'n'-fine like a clean cushion. Could feel its breath on me. Come in so damn close, greedy-'n'-all, wantin to hear it full.

"No ... *problem*, ... *man*." That's what I done said again. Like that, just like that.

Toothless voice quit talkin. Got real quiet like in Sunday School. Tryin not to shake a hair. Same voice--. Made me sit up real shy like a little,

"Better then a red *neck*," a-somethin said. "*Neck* ... better then a red *neck*."

I told it - it done had it all arse-a-back-a-wards. "You only wish," I shouted.

It finally heard, or listened to a man. And I went to good sleep, for once in a long time. Damn good sleep, kinda sleep, what all babies done had every night of them's lives.

The kinda sleepin nothin but a stern talkin to wears a man out with and readies him for, makes him ready to die for in his bed full of orange hairs rejoicin.

Good night, I say to citrus lovey-dovey.

Where I want to live for the rest of my life

Richard Luftig

is in Kansas. Or Iowa.
I'll let you pick.
In a town so shy
that if it announces
its name at all
on the map it's in lower-case
letters almost too small

to read. A place where
you can stand at the single,
blinking caution light
with no danger of getting hit.
Look both ways, one block,
and see all of downtown.

And the barns. Lots of barns
all made of wood, some with rotted planks
that look like missing teeth,
others with their doors gone,
mouths open like surprised *ohs*,
but all with joists and beams
as true and straight as the day

they were nailed. Close by,
are farmhouses, snuggled
behind groups of windbreak trees,
oak and maple that each autumn
offer a falling crop of their own.

I want to live where the only two streets
that run off Main are straight and true
and dead-end into fields of corn,
their rows so close together and tall
that they make you feel you're deep
in a valley where nothing bad can occur.

Where plowed, sown hills of wheat
with seed names like Paradise and Red Hawk
are stitched together so that in summer
they create a landscaped, satin pillow
that makes you wish to take a nap.

I want to spend late mornings
and early afternoons in the single
café in town, where if you are lucky
you can grab a seat at the Liars Table,
drink coffee, thick and black

as tractor oil, and order chili so spicy
that you have to sign a waiver from the cook
but where the only hot topics of the day
are crop prices and the chances
of the local high school football team
on Friday night. And later, when

I wander back outside,
where cell reception is spotty
at best and the only person
who might ask for my opinion
is some lost driver seeking directions,
eager to get out of here for the somewhere
else he thinks he needs to be.

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