

Front Porch Review



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Asleep on the Couch
- Doug Polk

for my son who suffers from epilepsy

asleep on the couch,
the beast once more subdued,
for the thousandth time,
he sleeps the sleep of heroes,
unknown to common men,
a sleep, deep,
full of peaceful dreams,
dreams of another time,
when no need for heroes,
and the beast dead,
for eternity.

Back the Long Way
- Paul Hamill

It gets late darker now.
I visited the old house
And looked at the squat trees
Of the peach orchard, the last
Laggard peaches such
A dark red they looked
Like lipstick in shadow,
Inviting without gesture,
Knowing I would not turn.

On the pump house the clapboards
Have kept on peeling: tangles
Of wild grape pulled down
The back fence. I looked
At those things and the barn
And did not look back
At the house of many years
Nor at my own many years.

Then I drove home the long way,
Past lines of fresh cut hay
Laid out as if to be spun
Into yarn by giant girls
Whose braids would be hay-colored,
Glinting red as the sun fell.
I passed the bristling acres
Of feed corn left to dry
On yellow stalks and watched
The line of distant hills
Softening toward autumn.
No point to my route except
It gets late darker now.

Mr. Clean

- Alan Shiner



Bet Big, Win Big
- Jennifer Dupree

He planned to tell Mary as soon as he got home but she already had her sandals on and latched, her sunhat in her hands. He meant to tell her in the car. He'd practiced this afternoon in the rearview mirror, parked in the parking garage of Boone Insurance Agency, the words clumpy and unkind: losses, gambling debt, mortgage payment. He'd have to say it all quickly and then follow it up with the hopeful prospects of the scratch tickets. Guaranteed win — that was the takeaway message. He took a breath to start in on what he needed to say but when he looked over at her she had her head back against the seat, the fan blowing on her closed eyelids.

He'd gone to Boone, "Pioneers in Insurance," because he'd run out of borrowing options. His father-in-law, Philip Boone, had sat across from Donald, rolled the cuffs of his precise-white button down, tapped the tail of his pen on his unmarked desk blotter, and waited for "good reasons."

Donald had said things were a little tight at home: a few repairs on Mary's car and the roof seemed to be leaking somewhere over the kitchen. The car and the roof were lies but Donald had kept his eye contact steady because Philip was the kind of guy who noted those things.

When Donald left the gray space of his father-in-law's office with \$2000 in his pocket, he felt beggarly, deceitful, and excited. It was a friend of a friend who had told Donald about the books of scratch tickets — somewhere in the entire thing there had to be a winner. Maybe not the top prize but Donald figured that by buying all one hundred \$20 tickets he was likely, hell, guaranteed, to get a good-sized prize. Enough to pay back his father-in-law, make a house payment or two, get his chipped tooth looked at.

Mary and he arrived at Philip and Ora's at seven o'clock, just like every Friday night, kissed them on their papery cheeks, and peeled off to the sun porch for drinks. Tonight, though, he felt padded with hope — the scratch tickets tucked in his khakis and the inner pocket of his light-weight summer blazer.

After sipping his scotch and water for ten minutes, Donald excused himself and locked the door to the vast guest bathroom. He had to know what lie beneath the silvery film of the unscratched tickets. He stretched his arms above his head, flexed his fingers, rolled his shoulders. His eyes roamed over the baby-pink marble floor, the flamingo wallpaper, the little shells of soap. If Mary and he had money, they wouldn't throw it at whatever was expensive. They'd use some taste — marble, sure, but black. Heated floors, a stone shower with a rain head. But he had to win before he could spend, and so he sat on the shaggy, antacid-pink toilet seat cover and started in on the first ticket.

One hundred chances. Anything was possible, probable.

The first ten tickets revealed nothing. Donald thumbed through the losses, squinting at the numbers, using the pad of his finger to clear off a little more of the silver stuff here and there. Still, they amounted to nothing. He took a deep breath and twisted his neck from side to side. He thought of his father-in-law, self-satisfied behind his desk, leaning across it confidently, confidentially, smelling faintly of the sea and peppermint. With \$200,000 Donald would be as neatly untouchable as Philip Boone.

When the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth tickets revealed only a single ten dollar winner, Donald ran the gold-finished tap until the water turned pure cold then stuck his head under the stream for a drink. He felt the first flutterings of doubt — \$2000 was two months' rent, however many tanks of propane, four and a half truck payments. But what was there to do now

but keep going?

Part of him wanted to open the door and call Mary into the bathroom. He could tell her how far behind they were on their bills, how much he'd invested in winning only to keep coming up short. He'd ask her to touch the tickets with her sweet fingers and have them all turn into winners. It would feel better, to have her beside him, squeezing her hands in anticipation of uncovering the lucky symbols. But then he thought of the time she found out he called in sick from work so he could go play a few hands of poker at the casino. She'd locked herself in the bedroom, called him a loose cannon and a loser, said she should pack a bag and go home. To repair the damage had taken him an entire night of promises followed by six months of her checking in with him at work to make sure he was there. And so he splashed water on his face and sat back down to focus on his tickets.

Fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. He stood again, took another drink of water. Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he looked at himself in the mirror. He was a palette of blue and gray from chin to forehead, his hair blond and blending. He was indistinct, even to himself, and to his in-laws he would be just what they'd always expected of him if he slumped out there, waving his losing tickets in front of his face like multiple flags of surrender.

He was halfway through the second row of his twentieth ticket when Mary knocked at the door. "Donald? Are you okay?"

Probably they'd all been out there, sipping wine and scotch, his mother-in-law saying Mary looked stressed around the edges, his father-in-law asking how her car was running these days.

"I think I just have a little indigestion," Donald said. His desire to have her in the bathroom with him disappeared at the sound of her voice, tight and tired and ready for an argument.

Donald rubbed his stomach, feeling like he might really be sick. He'd expected to win by now, and he felt excruciatingly misled, like the Christmas his mother wrapped twenty-four pairs of socks in a stereo box she'd found behind the electronics store. Donald's joy — his pure, utter, open-mouthed joy at having received his own personal sound system was achingly crushed as soon as he slit the top and saw all those socks, paired and folded. He'd closed his mouth and smiled and thanked his mother.

Mary said, "Dinner's ready. What do you want me to tell them?"

"Just give me another minute."

He heard the sigh of her breath as she waited and then walked away. His heart beating like a sprinter's, he scratched off twenty more tickets, then re-checked each one, just in case. Nothing.

They were starting on the salad course when he arrived. Ora was serving a platter of green on green, not like the salads Donald grew up eating — disarranged chunks of tomatoes, carrots, black olives from the can. If his mother had lived to see him now, she would have said, "Fancy, fancy," shaking out her hands as if she could spread sophistication like water drops.

Donald yanked out his chair, sat down, and tore into his salad with forced gusto.

Philip looked up from spearing a piece of arugula, "Are you all right, son?"

Earlier this afternoon, after Donald made his case for a loan, Philip had said "Two thousand dollars is a lot of money" and "You're sure this is going to do the trick?" Donald assured him he had some money invested, some stock he was keeping an eye on. He said he just needed a short loan to get by on a few payments. He'd promised to repay it in its entirety in thirty days.

“Couldn’t be better,” Donald said. He still had sixty unscratched tickets.

“So,” Philip said, “Donald and I had a little meeting this afternoon.”

When they shook hands, he’d asked Philip not to say anything to Mary about the loan. Now, Donald swallowed a barely-chewed piece of lettuce and felt it lodge in his throat. He coughed, swallowed, coughed again. Philip watched him with steady disinterest. Mary continued cutting her salad into miniscule bites. Ora sipped her wine, then blotted her lips carefully around her tangerine-colored lipstick.

“About the stock market and such,” Philip went on. “How’s that going for you, Don?”

Donald drank half of his scotch. “Fine, thanks for the advice, sir.”

“And you said Mary’s car was having some kind of trouble?”

At her name, Mary raised her head. She looked at her father, then Donald, then back down at her decimated salad. “It’s been making a funny noise,” she said. She removed her napkin from her lap and wiped vinaigrette from a cucumber before placing it on her tongue.

Donald wanted to applaud. Unrehearsed, unscripted, and under the pinching stare of her father, Mary lied with the skill of a professional. Donald felt the thrill of victory and yet, when he looked at Mary, and she was pushing an artichoke firmly off to one side of her plate, his jubilation felt somehow like another loss.

Finally, his mother-in-law cleared the salad plates, and Donald excused himself to the bathroom again.

By the time Donald finished scratching the last ticket, he had moved into the bathtub so he could lie down. He was sweating, even though his in-laws kept their house at an even seventy degrees all year round. He shucked off his blazer, unbuttoned his shirt halfway, and let the cold of the tub seep into him.

When Mary came back, he was holding the last ticket above his head, between his thumb and forefinger, staring at the uncovered numbers, the exactly nothing symbols. He could hear the jingle of her bracelets as she raised her hand to knock. “I thought I could make everything better, Mare,” he said before her fist landed. His voice echoed off the smooth enamel.

He heard her weight shift and knew she was leaning against the other side of the door, waiting to hear how bad it was this time.

He climbed out of the tub, leaned against the solidly locked door and pressed his face into the crack by the hinges. “I bought some scratch tickets. A buddy of mine said it was no-fail.”

“But it wasn’t.”

“I borrowed the money from your father.” He pushed the tickets to her, one at a time, beneath the door. At fifty he paused, leaned his face into the crack of door, “We’re behind on the house payments.”

She said nothing, and Donald was glad he could not see her face. She had a way of looking small and disappointed which made him ache all over. At least when she was angry he felt justified walking away.

Over the beautifully tiled floor the tickets slid like ladies slippers, all \$2000 worth of ill-spent fantasy.

He heard the shuffle of tickets as she picked them up; then she sat with her back pressed against the door hinge. Donald could just make out the faintest wisp of her sky-blue dress, one of his favorites. “Did I tell you that you look beautiful tonight?” He tried to press his pinky finger far enough into the crack so that he could touch her. But his finger was too fat or the crack too small and, either way, she remained out of reach.

“Come out, Donald.”

“What am I going to tell your father?”

“They’ve already served the soup. You should at least come out for the chicken.” And then she began to tear the tickets. Donald could hear the staccato rip-rip-rip followed by the flutter of tiny pieces.

“You’re going to get your mother’s rug filthy,” he said.

She kept at it — rip, rip, rip. He couldn’t stay in the bathroom forever. He considered going out the window but then what? Home to their ratty plaid couch, their stinking shag carpet? Home to watch Mary pack up her things, say she couldn’t live with such a fool. He was nothing if not a man with significant belief in second, third, and fourth chances and so Donald uncoiled himself and crawled out of the bathroom.

She’d made confetti out of the tickets, and for a brief moment Donald let himself believe there was reason to celebrate. Maybe he’d been wrong — maybe there was a winner of more than ten dollars and he’d missed it. She’d have tucked that ticket away, to be produced with a flourish after he broke down and told her everything. But then she said, “Did you tell my father what the loan was for?” Her cheeks flamed with what Donald thought must be shame.

He shook his head. “I just said I needed it to get us through until I could cash in some stocks.”

“But he must suspect what’s going on.”

“Have you talked to them?” He meant, about the poker games, the lottery, the casino slots, the horse races.

She shrugged. “You’ve been hiding out in the bathroom all night. You came in with your clothes practically falling off you because of the weight of these stupid things in your pockets.”

He was a fool, then. “I think we’re going to lose the house, Mare.”

“And borrowing two grand from my father to take a chance on winning money was your best idea.”

“It was stupid.”

“Way beyond that.”

On his hands and knees he crawled over and embraced her, grasping her just below her knees. He thought she might push him away but she placed her hands flat on his head, not stroking or caressing but just there, a solid presence that gave him hope. “We could tell them I won.”

“They’ll ask to see the ticket.”

“They don’t know for sure I haven’t been sick in the bathroom for the last hour. We could tell them tomorrow, tell them I already cashed it in.”

“They aren’t stupid.” He could hear her heart beating, and he swore it was saying: fool, fool, fool.

“I need some time to figure it out.”

Mary pressed her lips to the top of his head. “You’ll get some help? Counseling?”

He squeezed her so they were bone on bone. “Yes.”

They heard Philip’s footsteps at the same time, both of them jerking their heads to the left. His eyes clicked over them in their kneeled embrace, the tickets confettied all around them. He shook his manicured head. “Is this how you spent the loan, Donald?”

Donald felt his insides unravel. But then Mary said, “I bought Donald some scratch tickets to help cheer him up. We didn’t get a winner.”

“You bought them?”

“It’s okay, Daddy.”

Philip nodded. "You've made a mess."

Slowly, Donald released Mary and pushed himself to standing. "I'll go get the vacuum."

A Comfort Woman
- Bonnie Oh

They call me a comfort woman,
No comfort but much pain, not a woman but a girl.
In pain many wanted me. Out of it no one did.

Many hundred moons later, they honor me
With fine clothes, festive foods, glib words, and shiny plaques.
A welcome on return would have been a true honor.

Neither a girl nor a woman but an old woman now
Instead of comfort, only pain in mind and body lingers.
What will they call me when I am gone?

Dune Grass

- Flo Hayes



Daniel and the Gang
- Patrick Sinclair

Smiles,
pleasantries,
more smiles,
more pleasantries
 Glad handing my
way through
the day
 it's a ruse though,
a magic trick gone
bad

 An angry stick,
shaken at a tone deaf
God

 Decent guys
don't do that,
decent guys don't
think like that

 Daniel and
the gang did what they were
told

 They certainly smiled
and greeted before they, like me,
were fed to the
lions

Daughter, Make This Both Bridge and Thorn: How Wild

- Tricia Asklar

apples are small and pockmarked, but edible.
Bear in mind the light ons and offs —
close to the sunrise, sunsets of our lives,
dogs' lives, too. With dirt-splattered hair
etched with white paint, you're our living
freckle, a flawed beast who's historicity
grows with each day you tumble
heart heavy with us onto the downstairs futon
ingloriously sprawled, people and dogs, domestic
jesters surrounded by American elements:
Kool-Aid man, outdated electronics, photo albums.
"Lose something every day," Bishop writes.
Mostly I agree with her, but don't forget
nostrils, the warm interior meeting exterior,
outlets and their allure, the oriole —
parts of the past. I've saved them
quixotically for you, here in some pocket.
Relax and enjoy your life, history will keep.
See that red-tailed hawk perching on the rock?
Tomorrow a man will rest his boot there, tying.
Use thunder to populate your silence,
voice it as the rain comes down in sheets.
We're in this together for now. I'll hold you.
X-rays and tests won't matter much.
You'll adapt, trust me. The world
zoo will march forward.

Georgia O.

- Itala Langmar



She could say things
with paint.
She thought in color the way
others think in words.
She could see herself
enveloped in
the essence of a flower,
exploring its heart,
caressing its outlines with her
self-assured brushes.
She painted
how things felt, when their souls
were made visible.
She translated what
leaves, stones, desert roads, skulls,
moonlight on trees, skyscrapers
suggested,
disclosing the equivalent
of feelings, reducing, enlarging,
looking deep inside, making
friends,
the only friends
she loved and took with her
at dusk, to her solitary bed.

Family Business
- Sara Chaney

The corner store was the only store in Jeffery and not much of one. A lotto sign covered the only window, and you couldn't tell if it was open till you got so close to the door that it was too late to turn around. Last time I went in there was after the Connecticut flooded and shut down the box stores. I needed Crisco because I wanted to make a pie with the last of my apples. Normally, I'd drive for Crisco, or for anything that I can't grow, but the bridge was out and that place was my last resort.

"Should you be going out at all?" My daughter Sharon had asked me earlier, over the phone.

"The worst of my problems is having to shop in that nasty little place on the corner. It's good for a six-pack of Pabst and a three-dollar banana, and not much else."

"You know what," she said, pious like she has been since I can't remember, "I'm glad you're in this situation, Mom. You really should start buying local."

"Local. You mean fresh, like the apples on my trees? Or dirty, like those Martin boys you went to school with?"

"Mom, do you have any idea how hard it is for a small business person to keep their head above water? They aren't trying to get one over on you. They're scrambling to survive."

My child has the answers to the problems of the universe tucked in her canvas grocery bag. It's a wonder there's still ill fortune in the state of Colorado since her arrival. When she was in high school, she used to follow me around the back yard while I gardened, shouting out the warnings on the back of the weed killer bottle. Now I was alone in the house, the whole town surrounded by water, and who knows for how long. You'd think she'd ask me how I'd get my prescriptions filled on Monday. But she was telling me how to feel about the world, instead.

She knew I was angry with her, and I think she was a little sorry. "Mom, I just hate to hear you so sour all the time."

When I opened the door, I saw the owner's son on duty at the register. That kid's a hard case with a staying-awake problem and a curse to his mother. Is it too much trouble to move your lips when you say, "Credit or debit?" Makes you wonder who'd have to walk in that place to make little Jimmy Cagney open his eyes up all the way. That day was the worst I'd seen him; he was standing there with a baseball cap lying on top of his face and an unlit cigarette dangling out of his mouth. I wasn't having any of it. I walked right over to him and said, "Where's the Crisco."

Not even his eyeballs moved, just his hand floated, like it was pushing through Jell-O, toward a shelf full of Folgers, Ragu, Bisquick.

"Thanks awfully." I said, to point out that I had nothing to thank him for. The message was lost on him. He continued gathering moss; I bent with difficulty to reach for the fist-sized container of Crisco on the bottom shelf. Once I wiped enough dust off it to see the price sticker, I thought about calling the police right there and then.

"Eight dollars and ninety-nine cents?" I asked the whole room.

I wondered if Sharon would tell me to pay this boy eight ninety-nine or eight hundred ninety-nine just because he and his mother asked for it and happen to live around the corner. That she probably would made me so angry my breath started coming shorter in my chest. We could really use decent boys to grow up here and stay here. Maybe they would open some stores that we'd be proud to patronize. Now there's a local movement I could get behind.

I decided to walk all the way up to the counter then, put the Crisco down rough next to a basket of raspberry crumble bars labeled “Grandma Yankee’s Bakery,” more like Little Debbie cakes rewrapped in fancy paper.

“How do you expect to keep your customers?” I asked him. The boy didn’t take this chance to tell me what everybody here knows: That they make money by selling beer to those men up the road in the one-room apartments who drink a six-pack for breakfast and haven’t worked since the eighties. I would have told him that might be true but it doesn’t make it right. He did pry his lips open to drop the only sentence I ever heard clearly from him.

“It’s family business,” he told me, like he was proud of something all of the sudden.

When I saw little Jimmy’s face in the newspaper about a month later, I wasted no time in calling Sharon. I guess he and his friends robbed that store and put mom out of business.

“Just because something comes from a place, doesn’t mean it’s good for a place.” I told Sharon, thinking she’d have to see things from where I’m standing, for a change.

“How sad,” she said, “the strains that tear families apart,” like she was giving her verdict on a new movie, some tearjerker that I really ought to see.

Food, Words, and Silence

- Brian Kayser

“I want you to be my best man,” my father said to me. His hair had grown longer and whiter since I’d last seen him. It fell in loose strands around his face, which had grown full. He wore a navy blue polo that had been through the wash too many times, untucked over cargo shorts that fell over his knees. Despite his fullness and adolescent clothing, his eyes were the same as I remembered them. Cold, calculating, but maybe a little cloudier.

“How ‘bout that pizza place, over there?” he asked, pointing. “Is that place any good?”

“Not really,” I said.

“We’re gonna need something kind of quick, that’s all.”

I kept my eyes on the passing white lines in front of me. The sky was a light gray, as if deciding whether to rain. When I didn’t ask why he was in a hurry, he continued as if I had.

“It’s just that I have to be in Charlotte tonight. Tomorrow I’ve gotta start setting up my booth for the convention.”

“For the energy bars?” He’d always sold energy bars. They were cheap slabs of what looked like condensed dog food. I used to get a couple boxes in the mail when I was in college. They were so nasty that its claim of “30 grams of protein” was never enough to convince any of my hallmates to eat one past the first bite. I became the kid whose dad sold dog shit.

“No, no. That company folded three years ago. It’s a new drink, guarantees you eight hours of focused concentration. ConcenGrape. You might’ve seen our ads in Runner’s World.”

“I don’t read Runner’s World.”

“No? Aren’t you still running?”

“Nope.”

He didn’t say anything. I guess he knew better. But I know it was bugging him because he had his hand in a semi-fist, and he was biting at his knuckles. He’d had to have a hip replacement back when I was in high school, which essentially ended his running career. His never really ended though; as soon as he could he began living through mine. He even volunteered to help my cross country team, until the coach told him it probably wasn’t a good idea, his cussing and screaming at the meets being an embarrassment.

There was another pizza place down the street. Angelo’s. The red and green sign, every other letter illuminated, featured a stereotypical rotund Italian chef tossing a pizza high in the air. The pizza was awful, the sun-bleached yellow tables usually dirty, and whoever was working was usually leaning against the door outside, smoking a cigarette.

“A real hole in the wall,” my father said, excitement in his voice. “This looks great.”

“It’s something,” I said, hoping Katie was cooking a big dinner.

“So,” my father said, swallowing a huge bite of his pizza. “What’s the word?”

“About what?” I asked. I did my best to sound like I had no idea what he was talking about, but even he probably knew it was a game.

“About my wedding. Being my best man.”

“I didn’t even know you were getting married.” Truth was, I did know, since he’d left a rambling voicemail on my phone about a month ago, telling me he’d finally found true love and he was determined to make this marriage work and that I would really love Susie, my new stepmom, when I met her.

“You’ve gotta check your messages,” he said. “People could be leaving you important

stuff. Maybe a job offer or something.”

I looked at him.

“What? Is it that bad that I give a few people your name and number? They could really help you.”

“I’m not looking for a job,” I said.

“You’re still teaching?”

“Yes.”

“You’re not getting tired of it?”

“No.” I didn’t bother telling him about Eric, a kid who started sixth grade reading at a third grade level and how now he was reading at a fifth grade level, devouring whatever book I gave him. Or about Christine, the one other teachers had said was unteachable and would be lucky to learn a few life skills because of her autism, who was not only starting conversations with students and no longer sitting by herself at lunch, but was also one of the highest performers in her math class.

My father poured more red pepper on his pizza. “Gives it some good kick,” he said as the red and yellow flakes speckled the pizza.

He folded his pizza in half and took a bite. “Ohh,” he said, wincing. He took a huge gulp of soda. His ears and nose burned a bright red. Sweat bubbles formed on his forehead.

“Well, we’re always hiring. You might not start out making a whole lot, but with your education, you’d move up fast. ConcenGrape is going to be big.”

“I think I’ll pass,” I said.

“Think about it,” he said. “It’s going to be hard to support a family on a teacher’s salary.”

“It was hard for you to sup-” I started. I stopped myself. Most of what began as conversation shaded with passive-aggressive comments about my life choices ended with one of us saying something we might regret later.

“Hard for me to what?” my father asked.

“Pizza’s great,” I said with a tone of false cheer.

“So how did you and this girl meet?” I asked. I pictured Susie as a tall, heavysset woman with dyed red hair and a thick layer of blush and foundation to conceal her wrinkles. Although that’s what I pictured all of his women looking like after Mom described the woman she caught my father with. I wished I could talk to her about this.

Susie, or maybe it was Suzy or even Suzie, was probably sitting at a table with her single friends at some dimly-lit bar that could double as a crime scene for any primetime TV show. I saw him saunter over to her table, holding his cash, folded in half, a twenty on the outside, singles on the inside, asking if he could buy her a drink. She probably said yes too fast and before either one of them knew it, he was kneeling over her naked body slugging a ConcenGrape and wiping his mouth with his bare forearm.

“At a convention,” my father said. “She was running her first marathon, we kept in touch through e-mail, and before I knew it I was proposing.”

I waited for his next comment, how she was better than Mom, how he could ask if she had a sister for me, before winking like it was the funniest joke in the world. But there was nothing.

“So listen,” he said, his pizza gone. “All you have to do is stand up there and pass me the ring when it’s time, and then say a little something before the toast. That’s it.”

“When is the wedding?” I asked, pushing the fallen pieces of parmesan around on my plate with my burnt crust.

“Not ‘til March. So you’ve got some time to think about it, if you need it.” His voice was tight, like the slightest gust of wind would knock his concentration off, and he would transform into his old self, pounding the table, leaning in close, and speaking through gritted teeth.

But it never happened.

I looked in his eyes. They had the look of a man who had nothing and knew it.

“Fine. I’ll do it.” I stood, folded my paper plate in half, the palm of my hand coated in the grease that had soaked through.

“That’s great,” he said. “Thank you.” He stood and embraced me. I stood there, letting myself be hugged before remembering that I was supposed to hug back. When I embraced him, he didn’t feel like the same father I’d hugged goodbye before I left for college, back when he was still with Mom. He felt bloated, soft, like he’d been inflated with a tire pump. I tried to hug him like I meant it but it seemed disingenuous, and I wondered if I would think about that when I got older.

My father was passing through town in February, a month before the wedding. We hadn’t spoken since we had slices at Angelo’s.

“Are you excited for the wedding?” he asked me. We were getting burgers this time. He said he had to get going soon, but he wasn’t in a huge hurry because he was just going to Richmond, a much shorter trip.

“Sure,” I said, my voice lacking emotion.

“I’m trying to make this one work.”

“That’s good.” It was difficult to make eye contact. Always had been whenever we’d get together.

“These burgers any good?” my father asked. “This seems like another awesome down home place.” Any place that failed health inspections consistently was a hidden treasure to him.

“Not terrible. Any of the old neighbors coming to the wedding? Gary, Jimmy, any of those guys? I haven’t seen them since high school. Since Mom had to sell the house and move into the apartments.” I knew that was a low blow, but I’d never feel bad about it.

My father stared at his hands, as if the answer was hidden between his worn, wrinkled fingers. “No, I haven’t,” he said. “I didn’t see them much after that time either.”

I wasn’t surprised. The way he left Mom was less than chivalrous, to say the least. He’d been sleeping in my bed during my first semester at college, something I didn’t find out until I came home for Thanksgiving break, and I was stuck on the couch. He left sometime in early December when one of Mom’s friends said she saw him and another woman at the fancy Italian restaurant. Mom drove down there and watched them through the window, avoiding a public confrontation. When he got home, she told me she asked him if the lasagna at Mancini’s was any good. He packed an overnight bag without saying anything and left.

“It’s going to be a small wedding anyway. Few friends, some family, that’s pretty much it,” he said. “If you’re, you know, dating someone and you want to bring them, that’d be great.”

“It’s just an off and on thing,” I said, not mentioning that Katie and I had been engaged for a year and close to setting a date.

“Oh,” my father said. “There’ll be space at the main table if you decide to bring her. If it becomes a more of an on thing and less of an off thing, if you know what I mean.” He laughed at his crass joke. I avoided the waitress’s eyes as she placed our burgers in front of us.

A week before the wedding, Katie asked me if I wanted her to come. I was sitting at the

table, a blank sheet of paper in front of me.

. “I don’t want to crash it,” she said. “But I can be good company in the car.

“Thanks,” I said. “I’m just driving up for the day. I’ll probably leave early and be home by midnight.”

“Okay,” she said.

Katie stayed at the table and thumbed through the newspaper I knew she’d already read, but I didn’t say anything else. I wanted next week to come so it could go.

My father e-mailed me late last night, reminding me about the toast. Maybe he didn’t want me to embarrass myself, but it was probably more for him. I stared at the blank notebook page, trying to come up with the words, an outline, anything.

But nothing came. I folded the blank sheet of paper into a small rectangle, smoothed out the creases, and stuffed it in my suit pocket for next week.

Thank Goodness for Little Girls

- Joseph Glaser





Heathen Sundays
- SuzAnne Cole

It's a beautiful Sunday morning, flowers blooming, birds singing, sun shining. According to the liturgical calendar, it's halfway through Lent. In the sanctuary, the choir sings, the minister cajoles, and prayers soar like incense. My husband sits among the congregation, peaceful after a busy morning of Sunday school, worship committee meeting, and ushering. But after two-score years of being there by his side and, before that, sitting between my parents with my brother and sister, all of us Sunday-groomed and polished, I'm no longer there. The little girl who hoarded her pennies in a cardboard church to save the "heathen babies" no longer attends church, this church or any church; instead, like Emily Dickinson, I've learned I keep the Sabbath best by staying at home.

My disaffection with organized religion began many years ago, the dark angel of the unconscious forcing its way into awareness through my body. Uncontrollable coughing fits began overtaking me during worship. I dismissed them as seasonal allergies and began taking an antihistamine before church. However, it didn't help. Oddly enough, as soon as I slid guiltily from the pew, handkerchief to my mouth, and slipped down the side aisle towards the freedom of the outdoors, the coughing would almost immediately subside. But I chose not to examine why.

Then I began feeling nauseous during worship, sweating, clammy, especially when latecomers forced us to give up the end of the aisle seats I preferred without knowing why. After a Sunday when I literally bolted during the middle of the sermon, stumbling over the legs and knees that stood between me and freedom, I talked to my physician. He diagnosed anxiety attacks and prescribed a mild tranquilizer which calmed the panic but inclined me to drowsiness.

So I kept going to church although now I refused to give up my aisle seat for anyone, instead letting them trip over me to the middle of the pew. Sometimes I had to practice deep breathing to stay in my seat; other times, I could not make it through the entire service. But I never questioned why the only other place I suffered anxiety attacks was on international plane flights, a situation from which I could not possibly escape. I continued to choose not to examine what might be causing the panic. A lifelong practice of attending church every Sunday could not be questioned. Besides, I was an elder in the denomination, "elected" at age twenty-seven, an elder, said the church, until I died. My good angel insisted I continue the habit.

Eventually I learned self-hypnosis, a more acceptable antidote for the anxiety attacks than tranquilizers, and became calmer in church. Calmer, that is, when I wasn't angered by the patriarchal language, bored by the sermons, or repelled by the antiquated hymns whose melodies I loved, but whose lyrics could not bear close examination. Rather than learning anything from the sermon, I found myself wondering why the female minister had to begin every illustrative anecdote with "a business man." Just once couldn't it have been a business woman?

Then an ugly episode split the congregation. People whom I had respected behaved reprehensibly, judging before the evidence was in, spreading ugly rumors. It was six months before the issue was settled, and then the solution and the manner in which it was reached, angered me. I no longer wanted to attend church, not that church, not any church. I skipped a Sunday, then another, then three or four in a row. My good angel whispered guilt; I ignored her because I felt better.

I began to love my Sunday mornings at home alone, the solitude, the peace, the green branches dancing outside my study window, the sun coming through the shutters at a sweet angle. I read, I meditated, I prayed, I worshipped. All in my own way, to my own desire. And

that has become my pattern for the last few years.

Sometimes I attend church with my husband when there's a special program he'd like to experience with me. I observe and listen to see if I'm missing something. I'm not. I see how being part of the congregation feeds, nurtures, and inspires him; I like some of the people, too, but they are no longer my community. I get my nurture, inspiration, and illumination from my creative community of other writers and artists. That's my fellowship now.

Sometimes I wonder if my bad angel has defeated my good angel, but I don't think so. I may have had it wrong before. If the good angel promotes, as I think she must, authenticity, honesty, and integrity, then surely she approves of my behavior now. It seems to me that attending church only because it was expected of me, as for far too many years I did, was the reign of the bad angel, the angel of hypocrisy, passivity, and illusion.

Horses, or To Love a Woman
- Katherine MacCue

I was never drawn
to horses the way
the other girls

were. My desires
never took the form
of a deep plunge into

soft brown from
the head – or even
the elongated middle –

no different to me
than the stomach
of a pig or a dog.

I used to pull at the
pants of a boy I liked
in grade school.

He yelled *stop*
with such desperation,
it made me feel

predatory in instinct,
not prey – the fallback
position for girls –

more schoolboy
than shrinking violet,
more stallion from

a book I had read
than the ones I sat
on at the local farm,

their oblong heads
hanging over the rim
of fences to eat apples

and then perhaps a carrot.
When I was eighteen
I fell in love with a girl.

She just sprouted,
one day, like a flower
in front of me, emerging

from mousy bud
into ripened rose flesh
petals. I wanted to give

her my hands, soft
touches the way a flower
might bloom: a slow

spreading out, then
bursting forth. I wanted
to give her this because

she was so beautiful,
and, yet, that was why
I was told I couldn't.

I never spoke words
to her again, stepping
over the forlorn glances

across a sidewalk
like trampled florets.
If you want to talk

about horses, then
I'd say I have straddled
two separate kinds, two

distinct forms of desire,
neither of which were
considered acceptable.

What I mean to say is,
the horses were never
symbols of sexual desire

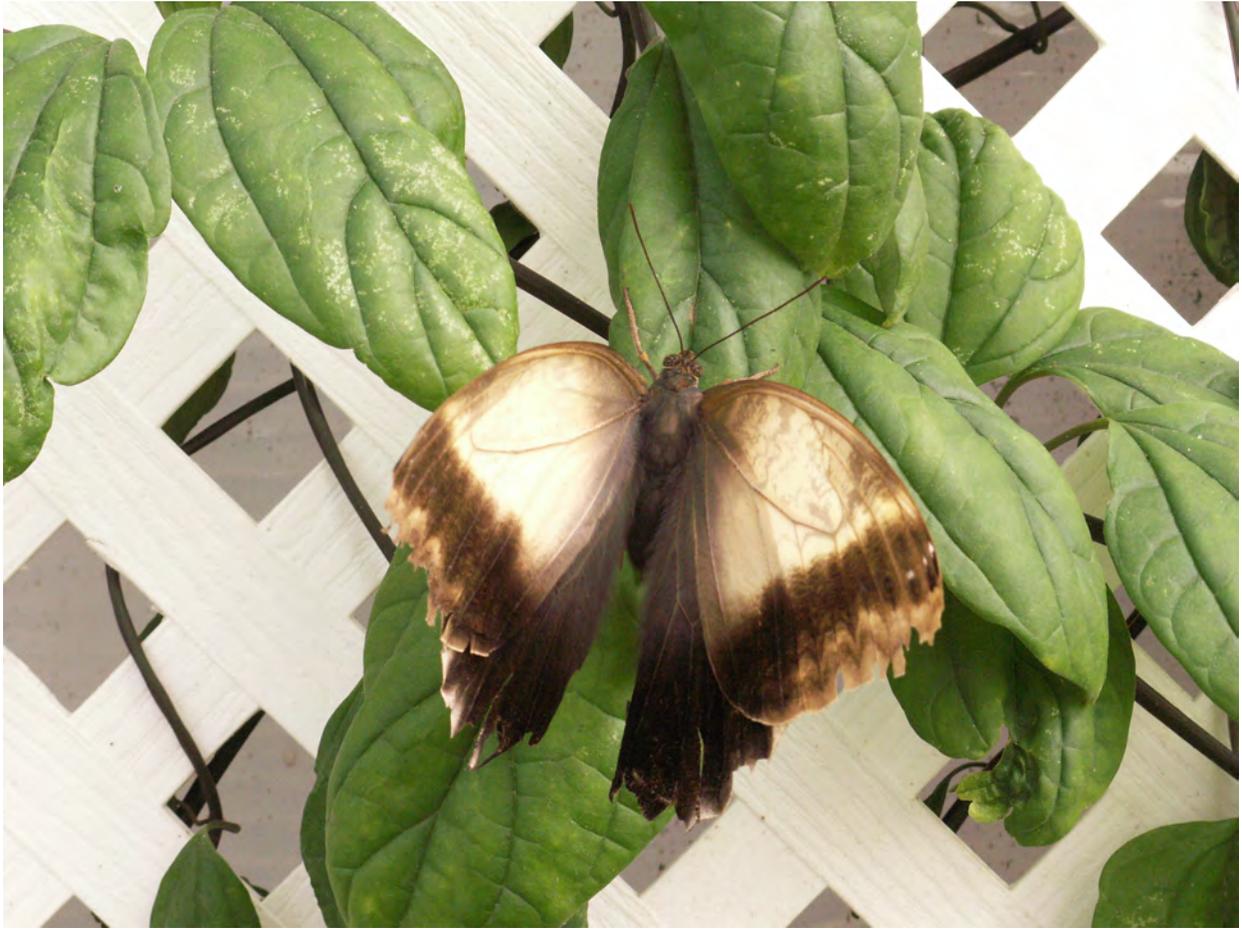
to me, not until I grew
up and saw the chains
around their necks.

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Wings and Things

- Len Kazmer







Layers of Tape
- Joanne Faries

like tree rings
reveal holiday years
attic haul down the ladder
knife slash to open
treasured memories

happy new year return to the faded box
screech of tape wheel adds new layer
but I can still make out my late mother's writing
wishing me a Merry Christmas
long ago

Life
- Mitch Grabois

1.

My life is bronze sculpture
blocky, dense

transcending substance
to imply motion

2.

The metal mesh chair disappears under me

Amália Rodriques
Queen of Fado
climbs three stairs to the stage

Portuguese sorrow songs
make my room vanish
in a burst of expanding pixels

I'm in a cemetery in Lisbon
I'm in a crowded restaurant
eating salt cod

3.

I share the sadness of tables after a banquet
It is good that I am not a surgeon
The tablecloths are roundly stained with wine

4.

What if my grandfather had not stopped in the Bronx
and become a presser in the garment industry?
What if he had continued west
and become a bronc buster in Colorado?

5.

In the desert
rabbit brush
shines in the sun

6.

An Indian carries a mass of snakes in each hand
reptilian lightning

Please turn the toxins of our lives
into pure rain

I will spend nine days asking

7.

Bronze sculpture carries
a profound patina

I can't see my reflection in it

One Among Many

- Joanne Faries



Lost Illinois Pastoral
- Richard King-Perkins II

Now it is dark.
Glorious worlds of fireflies
lie scattered
on harsh, hungry pavement.
Phosphorescent bulbs burnt out
they crawl blindly
across oily blackness
at the edge of cricket night.

Croaking birds disappear,
dancing down into
the soul of Earth,
descending through the silent pond —
an unwavering monocle,
sentinel of falling dust
and bloody reeds

where a swan floats alone,
tender and sore,
dying in the blue shadows
at the side of an access road
no one uses anymore
except us
and a troupe
of harlequin nightingales
nesting in the throat of the world.

My Little Portagees
- Ray Scanlon

I was intrigued to find, during some basic genealogical research, that my grandchildren are one-sixteenth Portuguese, and are therefore adequately "ethnic." In this multicultural society, where differences are emphasized, and it's so last-century to be an assimilated American, I am relieved that my grandchildren can now flaunt their diversity.

When I was their age, in the rosy Leave-it-to-Beaver days of my youth in our insular WASPy town in the Boston boondocks, the Portuguese were exotic, compared to the multitudinous Irish and French and even the occasional Italian. My grandmother commented darkly about "newcomers," but other than a low-grade and not necessarily malicious Yankee xenophobia, there was no nationality-bashing. My friends and I didn't know about ethnic slurs. Our weapon of choice was sophisticated wordplay involving the judicious mangling of both surnames and given names.

It was a mixed blessing to have the Skitt family live down the street. The boys were widely feared; on the other hand, what a gift it was to be able to make a simple, rhyming, one-letter substitution in their surname and gain a valuable tool for subverting the pecking order. Indeed, even nominal adults are not above using this technique; witness MoveOn.org's puerile ridicule of disgraced Gen. Petraeus in the days of the Iraq surge. I certainly appreciated and used our blunt instrument as often as I could — when the adults were out of earshot — but I had no clue about using nationality as a basis for slight regard. I learned, though, and have the Portuguese to thank for it.

Fearless Pete Blaisdell — he handled live garden spiders with utter coolness — was roaming our neighborhood one day and pissed off an adult. The adult called Pete, who was none of these, a "Portagee monkey bastard." This marvelous phrase delighted Pete. He wore it as an honor and riffed on it endlessly, varying its pronunciation, accenting, and tone. We found it hilarious and called each other "Portagee monkey bastards" at the slightest provocation. Amongst ourselves, of course. All we had to know was that it was forbidden language, therefore useful, if dangerous, and the why was irrelevant.

Yet I longed to know the why. It stunned my brain; it made no sense; it seemed an impossible violation of the laws of nature to use nationality this way. It was the kind of paradox that on Star Trek caused enemy computers to explode. Bastard was obvious, monkey was kind of iffy, but "Portagee?"

We tended to disparage on a case-by-case basis. If someone were stupid, we called him retarded; if someone's face reminded us of a certain bivalve mollusk, we nicknamed him Oyster. Now here was this more abstract and generalized method that I just couldn't fathom. I knew from school there were intrepid Portuguese seafaring explorers and that you got corks from oak trees in Portugal, which all seemed inoffensive enough. I analyzed and speculated, but the knowledge of why "Portagee" was bad eluded me, given my grasp of the facts (sketchy enough) and of human nature and social nuance (abysmal).

It may be from obliviousness but even after I became alive to the possibilities of ethnic slurring, I recall no really scurrilous stereotypes for the Portuguese. Portuguese stereotypes were for the most part assertively positive, and, as often happens, the Portuguese themselves adopted and embraced the term "Portagee." About the worst slur I ever heard was "dumb Portagee." One Portuguese friend told me years later, "You always hear 'dumb Portagee,' but you'll never hear 'lazy Portagee.'"

As a kid I'd stumbled right into the durable Shakespearian cliché: "There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so." How easily something spoken with scorn and contempt insinuates itself into the language with its emotional load intact.

Stir the Imagination

- Stacey Leverette





Nourishment
- Ann Whitehouse

Pt. Reyes, California

Sweetwater oysters grilled in their juices,
hot sauce and sourdough bread,
and raw oysters trembling in the shell,
piquant with lemon, consumed in a swallow.

Mushrooms simmered in a brown sauce,
wild rice and salad greens, olives, oranges,
and wine — those virtuous transplants —
and tender cheeses, shaped lovingly by hand.

Rendezvous
- Penn Stewart

I remember the first time I saw you, standing tall in your maroon and gray uniform, brass buttons polished, and your smile as wide as the doors you opened for the guests. I'd been working at the Monteleon only three weeks when I asked about you and was told you'd already earned a twenty year pin. I heard other things, too. Like you lost your wife in Katrina. She was one of the poor souls who drowned in their attics when the water got too high. So many of these folks in New Orleans believe in checking into the high-rise hotels rather than getting out of town, and so you had to work. Someone said you volunteered.

The first time our paths crossed, Wanda and me dared the front door just to walk by and smile at you. Mr. Highsmith would've thrown a fit if he saw two maids in the lobby but we didn't care none. You treated us like we were guests, tipped your hat and opened the door. I swear, Wanda and me giggled like school girls all the way down Royal Street.

We talked not long after that day, and that's when I knew your broad shoulders were something I could rest my head upon and feel what I hadn't felt in so long. That righteous feeling of a fit so comfortable you know it was made for you. Your golden smile and copper skin made me breathe fast, like running across the trolley tracks when a car is coming. We figured out ways to match our breaks so we could get together. A rendezvous you called it. We'd meet in empty rooms; ones that had already been cleaned. You never rushed me and made it feel like it was our room, as if we were on vacation in some fancy city faraway from kids and family and friends. It was our place and our time.

You were always waiting in bed for me for me with a smile as wide as the Mississippi and your uniform neatly draped over a chair. I'd drop my uniform in the bathroom and shut the door — never could stand to look at rumpled clothes on the floor — and then I'd slide beneath the cool sheets, my skin all tingling, and I'd find your body, your heat. I'd breathe you in like you were a spice that awoke something deep inside me; it left me crying after the years I'd lived without it.

Once I was back in my uniform and you in yours, I'd wonder about those rooms and the guests who climbed into those beds after us. Did they see our imprint? Smell our scent? Feel our passion? I imagined it was like being in a spot where lightening just struck, crazed atoms buzzing about and dancing off their skin. Seems like the way I'd want to start off a honeymoon. But then things changed.

I thought it strange when you came out of that guest room, buttoning the last button on your coat, but your easy smile and the way you winked as you passed me in the hall melted away my suspicions. Instead of worry, my mind jumped to visions of us in bed. It wasn't until the elevator door closed and that door opened again and I saw Wanda straightening her skirt that I realized I wasn't your only. Wanda smiled and blushed, and I knew she didn't know about you and me. Later, she couldn't wait to tell me things about you that I already knew. You never made promises or told me we were together. No, that's on me. But it still hurt.

You acted like it was no big deal, and I wanted to slam your smile into that marble floor, but that was just my pride speaking. I prayed on it and decided the flesh *can* feed the soul. It might not have been love, but it had heat and made me feel alive. Like you, I'd lost someone close. My husband of twenty-two years was taking the Algiers ferry home when he slipped into those churning river waters and was swept away. The police said he climbed the rail, but I don't believe it. He loved me. I know now that I'll never feel that way about anyone again, and it was

silly of me to think that you could replace him, but you know what they say about hope. Anyway, once I accepted what it was you and me had, my heart settled down and that pain was pushed aside by your kisses on my neck.

And I remember that last night. I worked a double. Wanda called in sick, and Highsmith towered over me as he asked — it wasn't really a request. Still so new I couldn't afford to say no. And so I missed our date, but you understood. Shoot, you know how hard it is to say no to that man, but you didn't want him to ruin things, and so you called after I got home.

"Claudia," you had said. "Hop the car, and you'll be here in fifteen."

The streetcar tracked the neutral ground through uptown with its windows open. The night air was heavy with humidity, and I was annoyed with your persistence, but you made me laugh, and I gave in. Tired feet be damned, I wanted to feel your touch.

Heat lightening flashed in the orange and gray sky, the way it does on summer nights. I heard tires squeal and smelled a burnt match. I pulled the chord to signal a stop and stood up. The car slowed at Napoleon Avenue and the conductor's eyes widened and he just kept going. I looked back and saw a dark pile of clothes next to the track. You said you'd meet me there so I wouldn't have to walk alone through the night of the neighborhood — this city has danger on all sides — but who was there for you?

Tennis: an Extracurricular Activity
- A.K. Small

Gigi flies down 76. She wants to get away from her newly purchased stone house, from its several floors and gigantic air-conditioned rooms. She wants no part of the Restoration Hardware king-size bed her husband has just had delivered, and she wants no part of the majestic hallway covered in miniature-black-bird wallpaper. Gigi can't stand the sight of that huge bed, of those damn birds, of one more house, and, worse, of what it represents: another corporate relocation. What Gigi longs for is Paris, her birthplace. By driving around unfamiliar roads, she believes she might find something close to it, if only she wills herself to look hard enough.

"God," she blurts out, clapping her hands on the steering wheel. "What the hell are we doing in Pennsylvania?" Then she remembers the presence of her son in the front seat and silently reprimands herself for cursing.

Bruno seems nonplused by her outburst. He leans noodle-like onto the passenger window, as far from her as possible, as if she carries tuberculosis. Gigi wants to get away from him, too, but she knows that's not an option. Without summer school and friends, Bruno is with her 24/7. His favorite pastime is to sulk and ignore her. "You're about as much fun as the inside of a paper bag," he offered this morning. Gigi tried to take the higher ground and ignored him back but Bruno kept on sulking. When she couldn't take it anymore, when she yelled at him in French that she was going out for a drive, Bruno worsened her day. He barked back that he might as well come with, that staring out the car window would be vaguely more pleasant than staring at bare walls.

When the tennis center, like a mirage, appears on her left, Gigi slows the car and drinks in the center's glow, the way it shimmers in the noon haze. She knows little about tennis but at that moment it doesn't matter.

"Look," she says, jutting her chin in its direction. "A small version of Roland Garros."

"Whatever," Bruno mumbles.

But at the sight of it, Gigi is somehow hopeful and re-energized. The roads look less abandoned, and the center's packed parking lot reminds her of Paris, of the way her city — in comparison to the American ones she has lived in — always bustles with life. She makes out taut nets and a myriad of courts shining beneath the late August sun. The words *Tennis Elite Academy* are sprawled above glass doors.

"Wanna go?" she asks, but, of course, regrets posing the question.

Bruno doesn't give a hoot about Roland Garros or the center. He still slumps against the window, wearing his usual cap and scowl. Only the cold whoosh of air vents respond. *Tant pis*, Gigi thinks. Out of boredom *and* to spite him, she'll go check things out. Besides, they have nothing else to do. As Gigi veers off the highway, Bruno seems to catch wind of her plan because he sits up and moans.

"Jesus! Mom! Stop. I hate racquet sports. They're for douche bags."

"Douche bags?"

"Yeah. Douche bags. And, no, it doesn't mean *douche* as in showering."

"Oh," Gigi says then pleads, "Show a little enthusiasm."

Bruno snorts. "FYI," he warns. "No matter what, I'm not wearing old man shorts."

"Okay."

"Swear on your life," he says.

"Fine."

“Say: I swear. No old man shorts.”

“I swear, “ Gigi repeats. “No old man shorts.” She sighs as fresh parental guilt washes over her. “I’m sorry we had to move again,” she says, meaning it. “I’m sorry Dad’s always gone.”

“Bet you are,” Bruno replies.

At the reception desk, a guy with a goatee swivels around in a chair. Gigi smiles at him then tucks her tank top inside her jeans to look more presentable. Good, she thinks. Swiveling can’t come across as too douche-like, right?

“What can I help you with?” he asks.

Gigi looks at Bruno. He’s pulled his cap over his ears as far down as possible and watches as a light-skinned black kid, not in old man shorts, slams a ball against the side of the building. Good again, she thinks. “We’re here for tennis.”

“No kidding,” the guy replies. He scratches his goatee, gives her a lopsided grin, then says, “Someone will be right with you.”

“Can’t wait,” Bruno mutters.

By the time one of the pros greets them, the lobby has filled. Squealing kids run to their parents. With her back to the reception area, Gigi observes everyone and relishes the noise. One mother speaks Croatian. Another carries her baby on her back. She wears full African garb, making Gigi long for her first apartment near La Goutte D’or. The woman’s dress colors — tangerine, browns, and sky blues — light up the reception area. Three girls who might end up in Bruno’s seventh-grade class, one blond, one with braces, and a tall dark-haired one laugh so loudly that their Adidas bags shake on their shoulders.

As Gigi fills out paperwork for Junior Development, she grips her pen and envies their stories. Especially the African mother carrying an infant. It’s been years since Gigi has cradled one. The baby is ebony with a splash of curls on her head. Once in a while, the mother brings her hands behind her back and taps the sleeping baby’s behind. Bruno never hugs Gigi anymore. Not even before bed. The most she gets is a faint thanks when he snatches his lunch from the kitchen counter. Gigi also envies the blond. She is the most exuberant of the trio. She waves her hands around her. Her long ponytail bounces as she speaks, making Gigi remember how hers used to bounce when she was an au pair. Back then, Gigi’s husband, then boyfriend, loved twirling his fingers through it. “Don’t go back to France,” he joked, tugging at her ponytail. Now, he’s the one who travels the globe while Gigi stays home with her French accent and ponytail long gone.

“Ma’am?” Someone says.

Startled, Gigi turns and finds herself face-to-face with another pro. She searches for Bruno to introduce him but her son has left the lobby.

“I’m Coach Y.,” the guy says. “You’re?”

He’s come from outside. Drops of sweat drip down the side of his forehead. Taller than Gigi, he peers down at the brochure clasped in her hand in a humorous yet potentially condescending way. He’s black, too, but not as dark as the African infant. His skin is a smooth *café-au-lait*. Like Bruno he also wears a cap. His t-shirt has one swoosh of bright blue. He holds his racket butt in one hand. Caught by his self-assurance — a trait neither Bruno nor Gigi has yet mastered — she fleetingly debates how young he is, but then feels her cheeks flush for wondering.

“There’s space on the mezzanine,” he says. “If you want to sit during clinic.”

As she is about to climb the stairs, Coach Y taps her on the arm with his racket frame. It’s a friendly gesture. Perhaps a confirmation of his self-assurance. Gigi jumps.

“Take it easy,” he chuckles.

“Sorry,” she swallows.

“Look,” Coach Y says, shaking his head and revealing as he moves a tattoo etched beneath his ear. Three barely noticeable initials. “You don’t have to tell me who you are. Just which kid’s yours?”

“I’m Gigi. Bruno Bane’s mother.”

“Alright — ” he pauses. “Gigi.”

He scans her jeans, the baggy ones she’s adopted since the move. Her tank top has slipped out again, and she tucks it back in. But before she can begin to feel either uneasy or, for the first time in months, substantial, Coach Y turns his back to her, then high fives a few of the remaining kids. Upstairs, love chairs decorate the mezzanine. Parents read the paper, type on laptops, and watch children practice on courts below.

That first day after registering and the following weeks, Gigi leans against the railing while Bruno practices. She loves the thwack of balls slamming on hard courts. Though Bruno doesn’t outwardly express his contentment — that would take away cool points — she knows within a few days that he enjoys the center. Coach Y calls him Red for his hair. He and another boy, Sammy, bond as they practice their serves. At night, while Gigi cooks her *blanquette de veau* in their antiseptic kitchen, Bruno no longer barks at her or gives her the silent treatment. Instead in athletic socks, he slides around the hallway, cawing amongst the miniature black birds. He demonstrates his forehand and backhand. He sometimes slides by Gigi and pats her.

“I like the academy,” he offers one night as he sits chewing on a veal strip. “I like Coach Y. You did good, Mom. For once. ”

Youpi! Gigi wants to shout. She likes everything about the center, too. She likes its musty smell. She likes the overhead lights. She even likes the shiny red vending machines where she can slide in quarters to get her Diet Cokes. Mostly, though, she likes the way she feels, awake and giddy, as she observes pros, parents, and students. She likes everyone’s effervescence. She likes following the throng of people in and out of the parking lot.

On Tuesday mornings as she grocery shops then cleans the already immaculate bathroom tiles, she imagines the stories of those in the center. Who do they go home to at night? What do they love besides tennis? Gigi fantasizes. Her dreams about them shine bright, like Paris by night.

On the rare evenings when her husband does return home to crash, shower, then leave again, she tells him while steam fills the bathroom that Bruno seems better, more settled. Which is true. But what she doesn’t tell him, not because she doesn’t want to but because he’s never around when she thinks of it, is that she too feels more settled. Gigi doesn’t slip on her baggy jeans anymore. She wears her favorite boots and green eye shadow. She looks forward to waving at Simon, the goatee man and at Bajou, the African woman in garbs. Sometimes, she coos at Aba, the baby.

One afternoon, a few months after they’ve joined the center, Coach Y rallies outside with Bruno and other boys during a weekly clinic.

“Red?” he calls from the opposite end of the court. “Do you see me shuffling to the net for my volleys? What are you, a slug?” His voice is authoritative. He tips the butt of his racket back and forth as he speaks. “Hustle,” he yells.

Bruno nods. Coach Y sends him a ball. Bruno flies to the net. He holds his racket high and straight. Sammy does the same.

“You gotta have heart on and off the court,” Coach Y says.

Bruno misses a return, shrugs.

“It’s okay to fail. As a matter of fact, the more you fail, the more you succeed.”

For a few minutes, they rally. The boys run to the net and volley. Bruno’s cap is wet. His cheeks are the same color as his hair. He grins at Sammy. Gigi, the only parent watching, sits on the picnic table beneath the pavilion.

“Sam, I think we’re winning,” Bruno says.

“Winning?” Coach Y laughs. “You double faulted! Sammy, send me something.”

Sammy tries but can’t manage a good serve.

“Out,” Coach Y cries. “Red. Let’s play.”

Sammy leaves the court. Bruno runs to the middle.

“Clean shots,” Coach Y orders.

In his gray sweats and black t-shirt, Bruno amazes Gigi. He doesn’t sulk. He plays good tennis. Or good enough to make Coach Y take off his long sleeve shirt and expose his arms in the autumn chill. Bruno’s serves are crisp. He anticipates Coach Y’s moves and sprints to every part of the court. When he misses a return, he yells, “Crap.” Coach Y ignores him and keeps on serving balls in his direction. After a solid twenty minutes, Coach Y stops and says, “Come here, Red.”

By then shadows have formed on the courts. Bruno clutches his racquet and hurries over to the other side of the net. Coach Y places his palms on Bruno’s shoulders and says things but from the pavilion Gigi doesn’t understand them. All she can see is her son listening and vigorously nodding his head. Something Bruno never does.

Minutes later, Coach Y follows Bruno under the pavilion.

“Red’s gifted,” he says to Gigi.

Up close, his long-sleeved shirt has a funny shaped silver triangle. He clutches the end of his racket again and looks at Gigi with that same slightly condescending air that he gave her on the first day. Trees are losing their leaves. Gigi pulls up the collar of her leather jacket as they walk toward the parking lot.

“He should start private lessons,” Coach Y says, raising his eyebrows.

“Yeah, Mom,” Bruno eggs on.

Another lesson. Another afternoon not thinking about what table to put where, or which curtains to hang. Another evening getting into bed as late as possible.

“Sure.” Gigi smiles.

To her surprise, Coach Y high fives Bruno then hugs her.

The gesture’s quick. By the time he’s done and added, “Thanks for doing this. Red’s pretty great,” Gigi’s body warms up in the chilly air. Everything around them sparkles, including the concrete on the stairs leading to the parking lot. In the wind, Coach Y’s silver triangle ripples on his shirt. All her grocery store fantasies flood back. Who does Coach Y go home to at night? What does he love besides tennis? Gigi yearns to know more, to discover him and his story the way she’s discovered his workplace.

“Can I ask you a question?” she blushes. She wants to know what the initials below his ear represent.

“It’s about money, right?” He scratches his head then says, “Fifty bucks an hour? Does that sound reasonable?”

Gigi holds onto her collar, not saying anything.

“Mom?” Bruno cries. “Yes? No? Do I need to say it in French? Is fifty dollars okay?”

“Cut it out, Bruno,” she says.

But Bruno shakes his head. “You’re so irritating.”

“French?” Coach Y repeats. “Are you really from there?” The cavalier look on his face has been replaced by interest.

But Gigi doesn’t have time to answer because Bruno does it for her.

“My mom was an au pair.” Bruno digs his hands in his sweats and rolls his eyes to the back of his head as if he’s told Coach Y the dumbest thing on the planet.

“Cool,” Coach Y says then sings, “*Voulez vous couchez avec moi ce soir?* That’s all I ever learned. Except I have no clue what the heck it means.”

“I’ll tell you what it means,” Bruno says. A sly smile spreads on his face. “Will you — “ He pauses, pounds his right fist into his left palm twice, then adds, “is what it means.” He laughs so hard that he has to bend over at the waist.

Gigi keeps clutching her jacket, stunned at that Coach Y so casually mumbled the raunchy words and at that her son, her almost thirteen-year-old baby, knows not the translation of the lyrics but its meaning.

“Wow,” Coach Y says, turning to Bruno. “You’re crazy, Red.”

Maybe Coach Y notices Gigi’s fluster or maybe it’s just her own imagining but as she waves goodbye then cries, “Bruno Paul Banes,” and as Bruno sprints up the stairs still laughing, she’s almost certain that Coach Y grins as if her son’s joke has brought all their stories closer together. More intense warmth spreads through Gigi’s jacket. She longs for another hug.

The following week, Bruno is sick. He lies in bed with a fever, his hair, the only color in the room, slick with sweat. Gigi strokes his bangs.

“Are you okay to stay home twenty minutes so I can get Motrin,” she asks.

“Sure,” Bruno says.

Outside the day is cloudy. It’s cold. Birds are migrating south. After paying at the pharmacy, Gigi chucks the Motrin in the passenger seat. Yet, when it’s time to go home, to make a left onto Conshohocken, and to call Coach Y to cancel Bruno’s lesson, Gigi doesn’t. She makes a right, drives toward the center. Once there, she rushes inside to reception. When she doesn’t see anyone, she peruses the indoor courts. A few students are practicing. Maybe there is an away tournament. Maybe Coach Y’s outside. No. The outdoor courts are also empty. No one stands beneath the pavilion. Only nets flutter in the wind. It isn’t until she has gone back inside and stops at the vending machines to grab a Diet Coke before driving home that Gigi feels someone standing inches behind her. When she turns, Coach Y fidgets, his hands in his pockets. He wears a long-sleeved, gray shirt. No patterns. His eyes bore into hers. Gigi’s short two quarters. The coins she does have feel cold against her palm.

“Hey,” he says.

“Bruno’s sick,” she explains. She feels so silly standing there alone that she quickly fabricates, “He wanted me to tell you face-to-face. He said that you were counting on him.”

“Wow. He must be pretty feverish, huh? Here,” Coach Y says. He hands her a dollar and smirks ever so slightly. “Do you ever drink anything else besides Diet Coke?”

Gigi looks at the gray of his shirt. She remembers the hug he gave her, the silver triangle he wore. She thinks of the way he is now teaching Bruno how to place spin on the ball. She thinks of the mezzanine full of parents. The wave of color. Vibrant noise.

“Sometimes.” She slips his dollar inside the opening.

“Sorry he’s sick. Wanna bring him Wednesday?”

As he asks, Coach Y leans into the vending machine, thus into Gigi. He pushes against buttons and yanks out the Diet Coke bottle. For an instant, they’re so close that Gigi swallows

his breath. Then he pulls away. He twists the cap open, takes one big gulp before handing it back to her.

“So? Wednesday?” he confirms, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Sure.”

Gigi doesn't know why but the stupid lyrics he sang that day resonate inside her. It's her turn to take a sip of the Coke. As she places her lips on the plastic tip, Coach Y thanks her but for what she's unsure. Perhaps because they're standing alone by the vending machines, or because they've shared raunchy lyrics, or because she has swallowed his breath and sipped Coke from the same bottle, Gigi notices his initials again and finally dares to ask about them. But in the process, she forgets who she is and whose story she belongs in. She lifts her hand off the bottle and, as if in slow motion, caresses her thumb against his skin. A shiver shoots up her spine. P. A. S. the letters spell in script.

“Whoa,” Coach Y whispers. “No touching.”

“Sorry,” Gigi says.

The shiver dances inside her. She has the urge to lean into him and to place her lips on the letters. She imagines lacing her fingers through his at Bruno's spring tournament. How she might wear sunglasses and he a visor. But reality hits. She clears her throat, gets a hold of herself, and says, “I was just curious. What do they stand for?”

“Patrice Angel Simmons.”

“Oh,” she says, then asks his name. What the Y stands for but he doesn't answer.

The silence that hangs between them next blinds her like that Clorox drop she got in her eye while cleaning, then it zings and reminds her of her house, of Bruno sick and home alone. The red of the vending machine tarnishes. The Coke loses its flavor. The fresh feeling of substantiality Gigi was beginning to recognize expires and is replaced by a sinkhole the size of her king-size bed. What the hell was she thinking? How could a tennis center help her and Bruno feel more at home and more connected?

“I'll call about Wednesday,” she manages.

“Cool.” In his gray shirt, Coach Y moves light on his feet.

“Thanks for the dollar,” she says.

No longer thirsty, she throws away the rest of the soda bottle and flees down the hallway. At the reception desk, Simon has returned but something's different. He's shaved off his goatee.

“Where's Bruno?” he asks.

“Sick,” Gigi says.

She opens the glass doors and takes the stairs two at a time. Bajou waves. She moseys on down with Aba on her back, telling another mother that her daughter made it into Future Stars. Gigi wonders if they'll keep coming here. Bruno is supposed to play his first tournament in the spring. Two days ago, he purchased a pair of Wilson tennis shorts and paraded them around the living room. “Old man shorts, Mom,” he laughed. At the image of her son modeling his gear, Gigi knows, the way she knew about becoming an au pair before becoming an au pair that she won't re-enter the center. She can't. She doesn't have the heart to face Coach Y again. Like the pile of old rackets by the dump, she's broken.

But what about Bruno?

Will he forgive her if she yanks him out? The answer, like the chrome rims on the cars in the parking lot, is glaring. Bruno doesn't forgive her when she forgets to put salami in his lunch. Maybe she'll continue taking him to clinics but will wait inside the SUV. As Gigi speeds toward

her big stone house, as she passes the grocery store, the void she covered up so well all these weeks and months splinters. Paris is still an ocean away. Her husband's still gone. Their empty bed still waits. Gigi shudders. Maybe like Bruno she's getting sick. Maybe when he and she are better, they'll find another place. An ice hockey rink. Or, a golf course. Maybe.

When Gigi reaches her driveway, she shuts off the car, closes her eyes. She can foresee the future — her husband's cheerful message, Bruno's *I hate you* coming from his closed bedroom door once she tells him where she's been, then silence.

No noise. No color.

Just miniature black birds and stone. Yes, stone piling up around her.

Go on, she tells herself. *Go on inside and make the best of it.*

The Last of Us
- Samantha Seto

So many decades have passed.
We grew apart between love into hate and sad letters.

Phone calls impossible for my paper flowers,
your face vanishes into crowds, escapes inside our song.

I breathe into your lungs like the soprano in the opera,
my ghost will inhabit your soul.

The ground weighs beneath my feet in white hospital linen,
my headache burns past nightfall.

If our collective CPR stopped, lost charge,
our last breath would synchronize into one.

Despite every passing second alive
for all who breathed us in, a pair of doves.

Each set of lungs, colorful balloons, warm kisses,
they throw us into air and I watch you rise like rain.

The Sculpture

- Denny E. Marshall



This Poem is Not a Pipe
- Karen Neuberg

Title after René Magritte's painting "Ceci n'est pas une pipe"

This poem is not a pipe. It's not a tribute
to itself. Not a song and not a summer
morn. Not a prom or promise.

This poem sits
beside an open humidior.
Packed down and lit. And suddenly

this poem is father in the easy
chair, reading the evening paper,
and, inevitable as sundown, smoking a pipe.

Waiting for the Train
- Howard Waldman

Every minute I look around for witnesses. What would they think of an aging, well-dressed, clearly respectable man — that's how everybody has always seen me — acting like a thirteen-year-old up to no good, squatting next to rails in the middle of nowhere in mid-winter with night coming on, waiting with pennies for a train he'll never board? It's no crime but clearly abnormal. Isn't abnormality a crime in a way, though? That was always my father's view.

This time, driving back from the tire retread plant, I finally gave in to the abnormal idea about rails and pennies, and maybe more, that's been gnawing at me for the past month. I turned off the main road, something I'd never done before. It's a route so familiar from twenty-five years of back and forth from plant to home that it hardly registers anymore. I've covered plenty of ground in my life even if it's the same ground over and over. Five eighty-mile round-trips a week multiplied by twenty-five years gives you 740,500 miles, twenty-nine times the circumference of the earth, a better trip than the real one, I imagine. Toward the end you'd probably get tired of equatorial temples and tigers but not as fast as billboards and used-car lots.

So I turned off. The small road shook off landfills and junk heaps and started running in empty country alongside the railroad embankment. I pulled over and automatically pocketed the car keys. Half-way to the rails, I stopped. I went back to the Mercedes, left the keys on the driver's seat and then walked back to the embankment with a fistful of dull pennies.

I can't get rails and pennies out of my head ever since the doctor gently explained what's the matter with me. The gentleness was the really bad part. That was a month ago. Now I start thinking of rails whenever I see the faces around me, dull as unimproved pennies, the worst of the faces the one staring back at me in the bathroom mirror every morning. Maybe the illness has spread to my brain, too.

Rails and pennies go back to when I was thirteen, already a secret sinner, standing at the bottom of the embankment, looking around for witnesses and then up at Allan. The wind blows his red hair into flames as he repositions the penny on the rail again. The penny is his idea. He has all the ideas, and I go along with them, even the dangerous ones, because he's my only friend. I don't want to lose him. I've never told my parents about him because his father drinks, is an atheist and has socialistic ideas or even worse. Everybody knows that in our small town.

Allan's up there without me not just because I don't dare soil my shiny Sunday shoes. Mainly because I'm scared of what that coin on the rail can lead to. I've heard that mutilating American currency is a Federal offence. Worse, suppose my father found out?

I think I can hear the train coming. I always liked trains. Before I studied geography, I used to dream about boarding one for China disguised as a Chinaman. But this train is different.

"Won't it derail?" I say, tense for flight and not mentioning the crime of mutilating Lincoln.

"So what?" he says and speaks about fat wallets scattered in the wreckage and what we'd be able to buy with the money. But he joins me as I start running away.

That evening the radio announces a train wreck: 200 victims. I'm devastated till I hear: India. Maybe kids there had been fooling around with rupees on the rails. My father tells mother and me to kneel with him and pray for the souls of those dead people. We do that all the time. There are lots of accidents and wars on the radio, and my knee-caps hurt from them. But I always think of other things when I kneel alongside him, like being in China, for instance. This time I think about elephants and tigers in India.

The next day Allan and I recover the penny, miraculously transformed, like what my father says in church about believers, something about the trumpet blowing and we shall all be changed. But it wasn't a trumpet, it was the train. Allan had placed the drab penny on the rail. Now, after the train, it's unique, with a burnished, true copper color, but green against the light, like, once, a sunset over our grey prairie town. An ordinary penny blocks light. And this extraordinary penny doesn't go round and round in a boring circle anymore. Lincoln's marvellously stretched out, a new person. I collect things like that. I have tropical seashells with the sound of those seas in them. I have cocoons with the hope of butterflies. I have old maps of spice islands in Asia. I have silk masks, lots of other things.

A fat kid at school offers us five drab round pennies for the marvel. I want to keep it. But Allan, already a shrewd schemer, is in command. It's just the start, he explains. Those five pennies, transformed by the train, will be good for twenty-five more pennies. Twenty-five multiplied by five amounts to 125. Three more such operations amount to 78,125 cents. He's quick at multiplication and sees the round money rolling in, 25% of it for me.

So I have to agree. But the next day I offer the fat pig-faced kid a dime for the transformed penny. He says no, suspicious. I didn't know the techniques of negotiation. Right from the start I was a bad businessman. It wasn't in my nature. That was strange because later I became a successful businessman. But it went against my nature, every day every minute of it. The kid says no to a quarter, no to a half-dollar, then yes to a dollar; he'll bring it to class tomorrow. But tomorrow he says he's lost it. How can you lose something like that? Will the train be able to repeat the miracle?

So Allan and I return to the rails. But a railroad employee catches us recovering the five transformed pennies. He has silver hair, no lips and silver-framed glasses that magnify his pale blue eyes. Holding us by the scruff of the neck he says we deserve to be jailed for mutilating American currency and the name of God. He calls us Communists and kicks us hard in the behind, 78,125 times it seems. Of course he confiscates the transformed pennies. Then he takes our names. When I blubber mine he looks at me hard and says, "Hey, you're the minister's son." I should have denied it. But it's sinful to lie. I should have anyhow.

He reports us to our families. The next day Allan says his father just laughed. Allan's lucky. Not that my father ever beats me. He doesn't believe in physical violence, he always says. He confiscates. I learned the word from him very early. The last time it was all my Devil's Eye aggies and delicate bird skulls, because of cards on Sunday. This time he confiscates the tropical shells and the old maps and the cocoons and the masks. He also prays to God on my behalf. My soul's at stake, I understand. My mother weeps. I wish he'd beaten me.

That night I dream that Abraham Lincoln, terribly mutilated and wearing silver-framed glasses, sentences me to worse than jail. They are tying me to the rails in hell when I wake up sweating and weeping. I resolve to reform, be a good American, stop the secret sin, stop seeing Allan, respect my nation's currency and the name of God and never do anything that might turn me into a Communist.

My father died ten years later. I was in business school by then, his idea, not mine. One day I poked around in his study, something I'd never dared to do when he was alive, and found in a deep drawer the aggies, the bird skulls, the cocoons (still just cocoons) the maps, the tropical seashells, the masks and all the other confiscated things. They were dusty. I dumped them into the ashcan.

That business with the pennies was forty-two years ago. Since then I've been a reasonably good American. I've been married for thirty years, although it seems much longer,

run my own tire-retread business in this same town, am a regular church-goer and try desperately to believe in transfiguration after death, contribute to charities, bowl on Friday evenings when my wife has her ladies' meeting, have sent three children through college and see them on Christmas most of the time.

I am generally regarded as dull but solid. Nobody knows how ill I am, not even my wife, although it's beginning to show. Probably it's like the main road with me: I'm so familiar to her I don't register any more. Nobody knows about that ill me, not at all solid. Nobody knows how I've been tempted to seek out rails in the open country as I've finally done and how I think of dull pennies transformed by the train's wheels into copies of rare sunsets over our town.

So here I am, midwinter, night falling, middle of nowhere, staring at rails, waiting with pennies for a train I'll never board. The way I did long ago, I look around for witnesses even though it's not for the same thing now. All I see in the twilight are muddy fields, bare trees, a grey sky and a distant farmhouse with lights already on at the end of the day. I notice I've scuffed my new shoes struggling up the embankment. It doesn't matter this time.

I wish there were a way to retread souls like tires.

I think I can hear the train coming.

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Submission Guidelines

We publish thoughtful, provocative fiction, poetry, essays and visual arts.

Submissions are accepted year-round.

- If accepted, submissions may appear in any quarterly issue.
 - Biographical information will be requested for accepted submissions.
 - If your submission was previously published, please cite the reference.
 - Simultaneous submissions should be accompanied by a statement stating so.
 - If your work is accepted elsewhere prior to our evaluation, please notify us.
 - No erotica or works which rely on explicit language or gratuitous violence.
 - All work must be original and in English.
-
- Fiction and essays can be up to 5000 words.
 - No novel excerpts
 - No memoirs
 - No genre fiction; e.g., horror, science fiction, mysteries
 - Fiction should deal with critical, universal aspects of human behavior.
 - Essays can be on any topic but must express a reasoned opinion.
 - Poems should have strong images and concise, evocative language.
 - Visual arts which elicit the comment, "How interesting!" are desired.
 - Submit visual arts as **.jpg** files; do not send **.tif** or **.bmp** files.
 - Accepted visual arts may be reduced to fit the available space.
 - Prose and poetry may be accompanied by one or more relevant photos.
-
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