

NOCTUA REVIEW
XVI



SCSU'S GRADUATE
LITERARY MAGAZINE

NOCTUA REVIEW

Noctua Review 2023

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

First edition

This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.

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Foreword

This edition of Noctua is a bit different than those you have seen in the past. The magazine became dependent upon Submittable for collecting, organizing, and responding to submissions. Unfortunately, a business model change on their end left us adrift with no way to contact our contributors or view their submissions.

Thankfully, we were able to find a workaround, and this “abridged” edition is what follows.

Noctua will return in full force in 2024!

Acknowledgement

Noctua would like to acknowledge all those who we owe so much to:

- The faculty of Southern Connecticut State University for allowing us a place to grow.
- Our dedicated staff.
- All those members of Noctua who came before us.
- Our outstanding contributors who chose Noctua as a place to let their beautiful art rest for a while.

Masthead

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Jacob McElligott

Editor In Chief

I

Scalpel

Poems must create, in very few words, a perfect encapsulation of a feeling, setting, or theme. They are efficient, daring, and balanced.

1

Reading the Book of the Dead

She lies with eyes set,
coral scarf around her throat.
A white cloth drapes—
conceals her limbs
and torso—but not
her posture which sings
like a bird before dawn,
letting melody find passage
through still dark trees.
I read aloud.
.My voice rides soft.
Her face is smooth and pale
hair pulled back, sleek,
lips parted as if
relishing last breath's
elegant abandon

Ellen White

2

The Water Tower In All Lights and Weathers

If I were a painter I would spend all my time
at the corner of Foster and Pulaski
on the west end of Chicago's north side.
There I would paint the antique water tower
that rises in front of the crematorium
and says Bohemian National Cemetery.
This I would do in all lights and weathers,
but especially in the late mellow light
that falls from the south and west
at the end of the day, warming the greys
and brick-reds of my composition.

This light would warm the greens too
for I would also paint the uncut lawn
around the custodian's house,
the truck garden run to seed
by the disused conservatory,
the burdock squatting

by the old brick outbuilding.
Trampled earth, leaning grass,
the seed heads that grow
from weed flowers —
I would paint it all:
the whole transitional,
vernacular,
messily amalgamated,
polyglot thing.

Benjamin Goluboff

Bury Me With

A necklace made of baby teeth
 Stamps, postcards, and paper airplanes
 Peacock feathers plucked from Mata Hari's fan
 Pink legwarmers threaded with silver
 A structured Japanese silk jacket
 A vest with symbols from the Book of Kells
 Stacy's boot collection
 An obsidian blade once used for surgery
 A hope chest filled with pink nipples
 An Aeolian harp on a breezy day in 1832
 The diary of a unicorn
 Swords with beautiful names, like Joyeuse
 Ink pots filled with ink made from monk pee
 Inner ears of kit foxes
 The motley hat of Will Sommers
 A mermaid's lingering kiss
 It will never smell identical

Despite sustained focus groups,
we have no idea what real people
created or destroyed or the sounds
of their epics under the round Moon
just how they dressed their dead
and what they ate for dinner

We have symbols and cymbals
outrageous wealth and sharp blades
to cut out pesky tongues
busy, busy designing better engines,
market advantages, and impractical
rhetoric but what most people want
is a good candidate

Shaping knowledge across subjects
fighting for control over the underlying
sensations, different sequences
loaded – each a separation
hand-picked by narcissists
to simulate promise fulfillment

And why did she do it?
Why didn't YOU?

Should probably end
with actual conditions,
a date, and by God,
a more useful word
for becoming a woman

Nicole Zdeb

Loafers Glory, North Carolina

Up on the hill there are rumors
of a dying world—yellowed
leaves shudder with a shhhhh
to dull the vibrancy of summer
while the fall is yet to come.
And the rose smells so sweet
I know, but the rose just had
to go. The speckled corn has
been plucked and shucked, and
boy oh boy them jewels that
shone in the sun like uncut
diamonds will shine roots in soil
next year. Down in Vians Valley,
laughter rises from mowers
idlin' their Massey Fergusons,
and even from this far away
I hear them talk about their crops,
La la la Chick a la le o.

5

I can picture Franz Kafka writing that letter to his father

And the pain he must've been in
the type where you can imagine
diving thirty stories into slick
pavement because that's
the stuff of movies that's
giving it all a reason, giving the hurt
a reason and I can tell you
I don't like walking about with my heart in my hand

any more than my father liked that I had a heart.

That I had hands.

Colleen Hugo

6

The Light

Today I saw a peculiar light,
Spectral shadows of lost moments,
Colored shafts of my disremembered past:
Radiant atoms, adrift among the ruins.
I saw colors, crayon deep;
Revelation that drove
Through a colorless night
To find me here (in this unlit room);
It came without warning
And left as quickly:
A missive, perhaps, I may have sent
When I entered the world
To reach the person I've become.
These colors are the mooring lines
That bind me to an ancient pier
I know is there but cannot see,
However long or hard I look.

Walter Weinschenk

Anniversary

Lake of the Ozarks State Park, Fall

It's hard to speak of our love
over the crunch of fallen leaves,
so we walk together in silence
through the slowly undressing forest,
stealing glances as we follow white
blazes affixed to tree trunks.

We reach a bluff, where we see
the water and all of its fingers.

Hard to tell it's a lake, you say,
when it looks like a thousand rivers.

Your eyes find mine, then your hand.

Silence again. Branches keep shedding.
The trees: naked and unashamed.

Matt Andrews

8

After Work

We sway with the subway
as it shimmies down the track,
shoulders resting briefly
against other tired shoulders
The one human contact of the day
makes me mutter an apology
with my second mouth
in my second tongue.
A heavy 5:37 silence
settles over the train car.
Headphones buzz around
heavy heads like mosquitos
as we ignore the smell of last night's
stale beer, spilled in the corner.
The other language slips
between the layers
of my clothes
prickling my skin

with an unsettling wind.
But my foreigner mind
finds a safe anonymity
in the babble of language
easily pushed into background
noise and I feel myself frown
because this bubble
unexpectedly feels like home.

Michael Harper

Drunks Making Goat Noises in a Poem

after Robert Wood Lynn

reminds me of mother's homeland
and long-beard goats near the roadside
eating wild grass and weeds all day.
Young men slaughtering goats
means family has come together
most likely for someone's passing,
and ceremonies for the dead, including
dominoes clicking between fingers
then slammed hard, loud old men
in short-sleeve shirts convening
around a men's only table, women
in the kitchen for hours preparing
curried goat, rice and peas on the stove,
red snapper fried on the back porch over coals
in a blacken cast-iron pan on a makeshift grill.
The sound of drunks bleating like goats

transports me 1,600 miles away to an island
floating between Cuba and South America
where my ancient mother still lives.

Ellen June Wright

Things I would not say to my high school
best friend at the time, unless the world
had been definitively and rapidly ending,
and perhaps not even then

Prom night was the first time I saw you in a dress
and I like loving girls like you.
I like catching up to your straight brown hair
that fans out like sunbeams
meets my fingertips, and is gone again.

We're just waiting, together
for the school year to turn into summer
because you don't like math
and I want more time with you.

Colleen Hugo

Part-Time Hero

you never took me fishing, never
baited a hook, we never hunted
for worms together, under an old
oak log, rotten from the rain.
I've always wanted to know
what you were thinking,
why you never loved the dress
she used to wear, but it was never
the dress you hated.
I wish we could have sat underneath
the shade of the willow you made me
chop down to teach me a lesson,
the ones you always thought
I needed to learn from you,
my part-time hero.
I learned a lot that I didn't
want to know, but if you took
me fishing, maybe I would have

understood what drove you
to the place you could not
come back from, like the wind
drives dry leaves from the crowded
driveway, making us rake and rake—
never getting anything done
that matters.

Kevin D. Lemaster

II

Sight From a Changed World

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. In truth, a well-composed image is indescribable. We didn't have too much room for his mini edition, but next year we'd love to include more images.

12

Brooding



KJ Hannah Greenberg

III

Sword

ANTIQUES

Braden climbed from the car and stretched, his long arms going overhead like he was clutching at the remaining tendrils of night. He rolled his head in a slow, painful circle. Next to the parked car the corn plants crowded the road shoulder. He'd swung off the highway and onto this gravel road that led into the fields. Nobody had bothered them at all.

He bent into the open door and peered in. The smell was of sour breath, beer, gasoline and maybe aftershave lotion giving way to work boots worn too many days in a row.

"Junior," Braden said. "Junior, wake up."

The big guy was folded on the backseat so his nose was wedged into the seam between seat and backrest, his knees drawn up toward his big belly. The upholstery was cracked and gritty so his face was too. His one open eye wandered toward Braden's voice. "The hell for?"

"It's goddamn daylight. Have to get to Menomonie while there is still room and set this table out before it all commences. He repeated the line from the night before, "The good stuff

usually sells before the Fair begins.”

“Fair?”

“Junior, we talked about this. The Tri-County Swap Meet. We’re gonna take that table and sell it for a bundle.”

“Jesus Christ,” Junior put his boots down to the floorboard and tipped upright. He was cold and kept his arms crossed over his Packers t-shirt. Braden had told him to wear it, and he had deliberately worn a Rhinelander Hodag sweatshirt that had the sleeves cut off. They were supposed to be hicks, supposed to be too dumb to recognize the value of the gaming table.

“Antique,” Braden had said.

“Anti-Q,” Junior had answered.

Junior’s father painted houses and barns. He was often paid in cash rounded out with chickens, eggs, used cars, serviceable farm equipment and whatever else he could be coaxed to load into his stake bed truck. Braden thought Ellis Senior had inhaled too much paint thinner over time and was stupid to begin with.

Junior and his father had been painting Rory LeDuc’s barn in a red the color of old blood. The window frames had been done in gloss white and when Braden arrived the two men had been on scaffolding high in the gambrel front of the barn painting LE DUC FARM and under it, 1918. Braden had parked his Mustang and stood with Rory Le Duc in the farmyard as the men worked high overhead.

“1918,” Braden said. “Didn’t know you Le Ducs were here already.”

“We weren’t,” Rory answered. “Old Jack Kittredge had this place then. 1918 was when he built the barn.”

“Well, it’s a tall sumbitch.”

“Hundred feet long,” Rory said. “Got natural ventilation that keeps it sweet inside even in summer.” He waved his Camel

cigarette toward sheet metal towers that crested the hip roof. “Them ventilators will pull enough air to put your match out.”

Braden nodded.

“What you up to?” Rory asked.

Braden didn’t really know the man. “Oh, I come to see if they needed a hand,” he lied, easily. “Fuck, though, looks like they got it about dicked.” He watched the farmer to see how he’d react. He’d heard that Le Duc was one to attend Mass nearly every day before milking.

“Well,” Le Duc said, “looks like they are coming down now.”

The men on the scaffolding each took a side and let slack out of the rope. The section of scaffolding plank came down in short jerks. Le Duc wandered away.

“Thought I saw your car,” Junior said.

“Yep.”

“We just done for the day.”

“Don’t let me stop you.” Junior and his father carried paint buckets and set them in the truck. Braden watched the older man tip paint thinner into one and slosh the paint brushes through it. Junior wiped his hands clean on a rag and began to tap the lids down on other cans. Junior’s father wet another rag with thinner and began to wipe his hands on it. The fumes made Braden step away and Junior’s father grinned at him.

“Can’t you smell that?” Braden asked.

“Nah.”

“Whew. I got something for you.” Braden went to his car and returned with a clutch of beer bottles. He pried off caps and handed a bottle to Junior’s father. The man looked around for LeDuc before taking a drink. Junior tipped his head back and chugged the bottle down.

“You thirsty?” Braden asked.

“Nah. You got another of those?”

“Here, take mine.”

Braden thought that from a distance nobody would think Ellis Baker, Junior and Senior would be related. Junior was a square plug, big in the shoulders, belly and neck above a small ass and skinny legs. Senior was as tall, but lanky and looked like he'd missed a few meals. The eyes, though, were the same; the pale, haunted look you saw in daguerreotypes from the Civil War. Braden was handsome by comparison, with black curly hair he wore long and the straight nose and those guileless eyes all the Bradens had.

“Come back with us,” Junior had said. “I got something to show you.”

“Lead on,” Braden answered. He followed the truck at a safe distance for it had heavy duty tires and no mud flaps. No reason to get a rock chip on the windshield when Braden knew where they were going anyway. The Bakers lived where Stuart Novotny once had a prize herd of doe-eyed Brown Swiss. A fire had taken the barn and most of the herd on a frigid February day. Stuart and his wife Kate had seen smoke billowing from the hayloft and had gone in to get the cattle out. The cows had been inside the barn for months and would not leave its cozy fug for the cold. Stuart and Kate attacking them with slaps and, later, hay forks and shovels only bewildered the animals. They formed a warm wall of reluctance which died horribly and noisily in the fire. The Novotny's blamed the wiring and went after Northern Lights Electrical. The ensuing lawsuits brought bankruptcy to the farm when the jury found the electrician's lawyer to be more believable than the one the farmers had. Ellis Baker bought the farm from the bank and it still had the house, a machine shop, good well and a forty-foot silo that towered over the ruins of

the barn.

Braden parked by the silo and saw junior wave him to the machine shed. It was a spacious sheet metal building that still contained some of the Novotny farm equipment, now obsolete, in the form of a Massey-Harris pull combine, a Farmall H with a cracked cylinder head plus a hay mower and attendant crimper. Most of the shed was used by the Bakers to hold extra paint, ladders, scaffolding plus the odd items they collected as pay for their work. Braden followed Junior into the she and glanced left toward a shape under a paint splattered tarp.

“You still got that?”

“Sure. Gonna wait for the value to go up.”

“You’re going to be waiting a long time. Nobody wants a 1977 Coupe de Ville.”

“It’s a Cadillac.”

“So? It’s not a sport car. It’s a dinosaur. Goddamn thing must get two miles to the gallon.”

“Got leather seats and a sweet ride. Somebody will pay a lot for it someday.”

“If you say so.” Braden paused to pluck a sleeping hen from the Cadillac hood and toss it to Junior. “Maybe the chickens will buy it.”

“Hardy har.” Junior caught the hen easily and set it down to scamper off. “Pops and me painted a house for the Michaelsons. You know them?”

“The Sweetwood Creek Michealsons? There is a herd of them. Which one?”

“Delmar. He’s the one that’s got the old store. Got three hundred acres and the original homestead.”

“Okay, I know the one.”

“We painted the house, you know, and Delmar pulls Pop aside

and asks how much to put a coat on the old store. Thing hasn't been painted forever. It's just gray. The Michealsons use it for storing junk. Pops gives him a price and we go to it.

"We pressure washed it and scraped it. It still has those big windows in front and they been covered over with plywood. We pulled it off and the paint under wasn't bad. Saved us a ton of work prepping the windows. Hell, the putty in the glass was still soft."

"Uh-huh," Braden said. He saw a small suitcase next to the Cadillac and bent to pop it open. Empty.

"We got done," Junior continued, "and Pops went to settle up. I got to say the place looks good. I asked Delmar if he was going to re-open the store and he says what the hell for. They are farmers not storekeepers. Just don't want the place to go to seed."

"Then what?"

"What?" Junior asked.

"Where is this story going? You been telling me about the window putty, for chrissakes. Store that been closed for a hundred years. I figure there might be a reason."

Junior frowned. "We got some stuff from them," he said.

"Stuff."

"For payment, you know? They paid cash money for the main house. For the old store they give us some money plus let us take what we wanted from inside the store." Junior tapped a metal milk can with his hand. "Got four of these beauties. I know a woman in Fall Creek buys these. She's an artist."

"Uh-huh," Braden said.

"She paints scenes on them. You know, country scenes with cows and shit. Sells them in the Cities."

"What you get for these?" Braden slid a can over and sat

gingerly upon it.

“Forty dollars apiece. She pays more if they are dented a little. Not rusty, but beat up.”

“For forty dollars I say take a hammer to them. Make them into antiques.”

“Anti-Qs,” Junior said. “What’s everybody got against Qs?”
“What?”

Junior tipped his head in a grin. “It’s a joke, man. Anti Qs.”

“Hardy har. What else you get?”

Junior lifted the lid of a cardboard box. “All sorts of stuff. Look at these.”

Braden stood next to Junior and looked into the box.

“Old medicine bottles,” Junior said. “Lookit the pretty blue ones.”

Braden stepped back. “Right. What else? You get any guns or anything like that? Something usable?”

“No, no guns. Pops got a pair of nice crocks that he put in the basement. He says you can’t find crocks anymore.”

“Crocks?”

“You know, crocks. For making pickles and sauerkraut.”

Junior shrugged “We mostly got some furniture. But I wanted to show you this.”

He moved the cardboard box aside and then another to reveal a baize covered tabletop. “Check this out.” Junior slid a small wooden chest into the open. It had metal straps nailed to its top that were mottled with age. The wood panels to the chest were a lovely dark shade. Junior pointed to a small hasp. “Treasure chest.”

“Really?”

“Looks like one.” Junior thumbed the hasp open and tipped the lid back. Inside was a wooden tray divided into compart-

ments. A pleasant spicy scent rose from the box. “Michaelson said it was used in the old days for tea or spices.”

Braden peeked into the box. Empty. “Pretty cool,” he said.

“Ain’t it? I think he was sorry to let it go.”

Braden nodded and tapped the baize covered table. “I don’t remember this thing.”

“Oh, I got that from Michaelson too. At the last minute. I saw it leaning against a wall and asked for it.”

“Card table?” Braden asked. It was a round topped table with plain legs. The baize top was dirty and marked by a few nicks and burns. He tapped it.

“Looks like it. I thought it would look good in the basement by the pool table.”

Braden ducked to look at the table underside. The top was not a plywood sheet, as he expected, but several boards glued on edge with batten strips nailed across the boards. The wood was somewhat rough and unvarnished. He ran a thumb along the table edge and across the baize.

“It’s got some lettering on it,” he said. When Junior tipped the table the men could discern some lines and boxes in the dirt and fade.

“Blackjack table,” Braden said.

“You think?”

“Maybe.” He traced some box lines with a finger. “This looks like where a dealer keeps the cards. Maybe not blackjack but faro, maybe.”

“Poker? I thought we could use it to play poker down in the basement.”

“What? So I can win all your money again?”

“Ha. That was luck. You can only be lucky so long.”

“Sure, sure.” Braden said. He narrowed his eyes. “This here

is an antique.”

“Anti-Q.”

“I mean it. Look, this thing could be a hundred years old.”

“So what? It’s an old card table. It might be twenty years old and just dirty.”

“That’s the beauty of it. Nobody can be sure. In the right situation this table could be a lot of money.”

“You think?”

“Uh-huh.” Braden patted the table. “Let me go doing some looking. “

Which led Braden to make some calls. He didn’t call antique dealers, of course. He called Rusty in Red Wing, the fence he used when

some items that came his way.

“Try a garage sale,” Rusty said. “You might find some sucker.”

“I don’t have the time. Who wants to sit around and wait like that?” Braden was beginning to sour on the whole idea.

“I got it. Get to one of those big weekend flea markets.”

“Ah,” Braden said. “I think I saw a sign for one of those. Over in Dunn County.”

“There you go,” Rusty said. “Before E-bay a flea market was the best place to sell stuff. You’d be amazed what gets moved out of a car trunk in the parking lot. I mean, everything goes.”

“Now you use E-bay?”

“Nah. E-bay is flooded with dumbasses. A friend of mine, his kid had his BMX bike stolen. A custom bike, you know, because the kid was into racing. My friend looked on E-bay two days later and there it was. He called the seller and offered to buy the bike. Dumbass gave my friend his address. My friend took along a few buddies and they fuckin’ got the bike back.”

Braden laughed. "Idiot."

"The worst. He got a beat down for his trouble."

"How do these flea markets work?"

"Usually they are set up on a parking lot like at a county fairgrounds or coliseum. Usually got a bunch of tents too. A seller pays for a parking spot or for a tent space. You park your rig and set up a table. Sell what you got. Easy as pie."

"Cops?"

"Not many. Look, the best deals are early, like as soon as it gets light. Dudes will be going around with flashlights to get first look at your stuff. That's the best time to move merchandise." He paused. "What you selling, anyway?"

"Nothing you'd be interested in. Some antique stuff. An honest to god gambling table."

"Like from a casino? That's no big thing."

Braden's mind was racing. He put his tongue to a lie and rolled it around a little. "It's a table from Deadwood, South Dakota," he said. "Like a hundred years old."

"Deadwood?"

"Fuckin' Deadwood." He pitched his voice down. "I was told that it was the table Wild Bill Hickok was sitting at when he got shot."

"Wild Bill Hickok? You're shitting me. You're definitely shitting me."

Braden chuckled. "Could be. It's an old table all beat to shit. Built out of boards and square head nails. It might have been in Deadwood. Thing is, you just don't know."

"Ha. And you don't know."

"That's it. I plan to sell the thing to somebody who also don't know."

"You kill me, Braden, honest to God. Let me know how it

works out.”

“See you.”

Braden and Junior loaded the medicine bottles plus a box of old magazines, a kerosene lamp missing its mantle, a brass lamp whose luster was gone, and a back seat full of other loose items from the shed. The gaming table was wrapped in a quilt and lashed into the Mustang’s trunk. From a distance it looked like some shot animal on its back with its legs jutting into the air.

The plan had been to get to Menomonie and stay at one of the cheap motels near the highway. But as they had gone by the Black Bear Tavern Junior had pointed toward a truck parked there. It was a yellow GMC pickup which had rust holes in the wheel wells.

“Look, that’s Larry Untereiner’s truck. Pull in. That son-of-a-bitch owes me forty dollars.”

He did but swore he didn’t have it. The bartender refused to take on the debt for the full forty but would let Larry put a round of beers on his tab. Junior got a draft of Budweiser and Braden a bottle of Miller Genuine Draft. Some people were shooting pool and the men watched them

One was a man with blond hair to his shoulders and who wore a Guns N’Roses t-shirt. He played against a dark haired woman who was very good-looking. When she lined up for a shot she bent at the waist and her blouse fell open to where the men could see her bra. It was red satin and while it did its job without strain, it provided a peek at a tan line.

“Goddamn,” Junior breathed. He slid from his stool to place a quarter on the pool table rail.

“Wanna shoot a game?” he asked Guns N’Roses.

He shrugged. Ground a cube of chalk onto his cue.

“How about for twenty bucks?”

Guns N'Roses glanced toward the woman. She shrugged.

"Alright," Guns N'Roses. "Me and Andrea will take you and your partner on."

Nobody was in a hurry and Guns N'Roses finished the game when Andrea missed sinking her last ball. He put his remaining two in and then followed with the eight ball. None of it was fancy shooting, just straight shots made with minimum fuss. But Braden saw that the man put a quick twist in his wrist when he shot so the cue had a spin.

"I'll break," Junior said. He racked and set the balls before taking the cue ball and setting it a few feet from the end rail. Braden stood by the bar and watched Guns N'Roses and Andrea.

Junior shot with tremendous force. He put his big shoulders and arm into the shot so when the cue hit the triangle of balls it sounded just like that—a shot. More than a .22, Braden thought. More like a .38. The triangle of balls scattered. At the shot both Andrea and Guns N'Roses stood straighter. Braden, might look a little like a pool shark; Junior was one. He and his brothers spent hours at the pool table in their basement.

Junior watched the balls carom and bounce around the table. There were a few thumps as balls found pockets. He held the cue in the middle and tapped it against his hip. "How about that," he said. "Looks like two stripes and a solid. Reckon we'll take stripes."

He called his shots and cleared them with short, simple pokes. Only one shot used two bounces. Even the eight ball was a straight shot. He stood then and scratched his chin. "Sure got lucky on the break, them being open and all. You wanna shot another game?"

Guns N'Roses laid two tens on the table. "My break," he said. So Braden and Junior spent a few hours at the Black Bear.

Andrea and Kyle, in the Guns N'Roses shirt, were from Viroqua and were up for Kyle's sister's wedding. "Everybody is all wound up," he said. "We had to get outta the house."

"Can't blame you," Braden said. To Andrea, "You standing up in the wedding?"

"Kyle is," she said. "I can't wait to see him in a tuxedo."

They drank the winnings so when Braden and Junior left the tavern it was nearly two. "Too late to get a hotel," Braden said. "Just have to get back up in a couple hours."

Junior yawned. "That Andrea was a pretty thing," he said. "I wonder if she was wearing red panties."

"You can dream about it. There in the back seat."

"I wish she was in the back seat with me. Since I probably won't sleep worth a shit."

Yet he was snoring before Braden dozed off. Not buzz saw snoring, but the gaggle of the well under. Braden leaned his driver's seat back as far as it could go. Closed his eyes and tried not to think about anything at all.

When Junior was awake and climbing from the back seat Braden stepped into the corn. He saw that weeds had emerged since the last time a harrow went through the rows. He deliberately pissed on an emerging thistle plant. Go get 'em cowboy.

When he returned to the car he saw Junior had pissed a wet spot at the side of the road. "You ready?" he asked.

"Sho," Junior said. "Maybe we can find coffee."

"I been thinking," Braden said. "I got the plan figured out."

"Yeah?"

"We're brothers," Braden said. "Our grandma lived up in South Dakota. She like, got dementia and went into a home. We helped empty her old house to sell and got some stuff. These medicine bottles. Lamps. This table."

“We’re selling it for her,” Junior said.

“Exactly. Helping Grandma out.”

“We don’t look like brothers.”

“What?”

“We don’t look anything alike.”

“So what?” Braden shrugged. “We say we’re brothers. Nobody will think twice. I’m Pete and you’re Junior.”

“You don’t look like a Pete.”

Braden frowned.

“You look more like a Paul,” Junior said.

“Fuck off. Paul is a dick name.”

“Paul.”

“Paul Danvers. Paul Johnson. Both assholes. I hate the name Paul.”

“If you say so. What about Pete Jorgensen? He’s an asshole.”

“Look. We done? We set up the table and load it with bottles and stuff. Let me do the talking.”

“Okay, Pete.”

They drove from the field and onto the highway. It was empty so Braden sped through the early morning. When billboards appeared, three in quick succession, advertising in order: root beer and shakes, a lumber yard, and a pro-life picture of a smiling white baby. Beyond the baby was a weathered sign naming the town. It was, apparently, installed by the Rotary Club.

“What a Rotary?” Junior asked.

“Fuck if I know.”

“There,” Junior said as they exited the highway, “those lights. That must be the fairgrounds.”

“You think?”

“Must be. It’s the only thing open yet.”

They fell in line behind a van and a pickup whose bed was laden with strange, upright chunks of firewood that had pieces of thin lumber nailed to them. In his headlights the pieces of wood, with the bark on and holes drilled in them, resembled rough gargoyles.

“Those are birdhouses,” Junior said.

“Really?”

“Yep. I saw one at a house we painted. This lady had two of those set on posts in her garden. I wondered where she got them.”

“Ugly things.”

The vehicles slowed and they encountered a man standing at the road shoulder wearing a safety green vest. He shined a flashlight at the car then flicked it to Braden’s face.

“Hey,” Braden said, “knock it off.”

The man shined his light onto his clipboard and poised a pen there. “You a seller or buyer?”

“Both. Got a few things we might sell. Wanting to buy beer signs for a tavern we own.” Braden liked a lie that came from nowhere.

“Beer signs?”

“You know, lamps and such. Miller. Coors. I got a Hamm’s that looks real nice. It’ll look good in one of our windows.”

“Hamms,” Junior said. “‘The beer refreshing.’”

“What?” The man looked up from his clipboard.

“Hamms,” Junior said. “Every beer has a slogan. Hamm’s slogan is ‘The beer refreshing’ “.

“Ten dollars,” the man said.

Junior gave the man money and received a paper tag.

“Parking spot 319,” the man said. “Trading starts at eight. Keep the receipt for your taxes.”

“Right.” Braden rolled his eyes. Took the slip of paper and tossed it into the footwell. They followed signs to the parking area containing the three hundreds.

“Check this out,” Junior said, and shot his thumb toward a box truck which had a load of colorful paintings in ornate frames. Some featured musicians captured on stage. “Elvis.”

“The King,” Braden said. “There’s our spot.” He nosed into the spot and killed the engine. To the left a pickup sat empty with a U-Haul trailer behind. The spot immediately right was unoccupied. They unwrapped the quilt from the table and in the glow of the trunk light set it upright. Junior brought the box of medicine bottles and began to set them on the table. Braden added the lamps and a rusty block plane.

“Keep the stuff spread,” Braden said. “They got to see the table.”

A flashlight beam flicked over them and then away. Braden noted a man in a fedora walking toward them. His flashlight beam caught Braden in the face.

“Hey,” Braden said.

“Sorry,” the fedora man said. “Those are some pretty bottles.”

Braden saw that the man wore a jacket with extra pockets and thin epaulets. He recognized it as a photographer’s jacket. There was no camera around the man’s neck, though he had a laminated card on a lanyard. He came near enough that Braden saw that the card contained a business card and permit of some kind.

“Keep the light outta my eyes,” Braden said.

“Sorry,” the man said.

“Lookit this bottle,” Junior said. “It’s got lettering on it. Expectorant.”

“Cough medicine,” the man said. “Expectorant is the old fashioned way of saying that.”

“No kidding,” Braden said. “I wonder where Grandma got that one.” He dipped his head toward the fedora man. “Grandma had a bunch of these bottles in a china cabinet. Her and Grandpa collected them. I remember her saying they got most of them from a dump outside of Spearfish and some other stuff from Deadwood.” He looked at Junior. “Remember how strict she was about this stuff?”

“Don’t touch. Anti-Qs.”

Braden saw another man approach from the front of the car. He paused to peek into the back seat and then stood by the rear door. He was a big guy with a paunch that strained the fabric of his shirt. He wore a dark blue nylon jacket. As he leaned in Braden saw that he wore glasses and a Fu Manchu mustache that joined a patch of beard. Looks like a Paul, Braden thought.

“What about this table?” Fu Manchu asked.

“Grandma didn’t let us play on that, either. She said it was valuable, but, you know, her mind was slipping toward the end. She said it was famous because of Jesse James. Said he played poker on it.”

“Jesse James?” the fedora man asked.

“Wasn’t that what she said, Junior?”

“Not Jesse James. But I don’t remember.”

“Anyway,” Braden said, “It’s old. Maybe we’ll sell it after these bottles.” He hefted the brass lamp. “Look at this. We even got the shade for this.” He saw that a pair of women were watching from a distance and that somebody was opening the back of the U-Haul trailer.

“I’ll give you five hundred for the table,” Fedora man said.

“Five hunnerd?” Junior said.

“What?” Braden narrowed his eyes. “You must think we’re some kinda dummies cause it’s our first time here. No sir. You said five hundred right off so I know it’s worth more. You can’t fool me.” He crossed his arms across his chest.

“Perhaps I can offer more,” Fedora man said.

“A thousand,” Braden said.

“A thousand is a lot.”

“Take it or leave it. You know it’s worth more. It might be worth ten thousand, I don’t know. But I ain’t gonna be took. It’s twelve hundred, solid.”

The fedora man ran his fingers along the table top. Paused to tap a square headed nail. “You take a check?” he asked.

“Fuck no.”

“Then wait here. I got five hundred cash in my pocket. I’ll go get some more.” He nodded to Braden and scurried away.

Braden looked at Fu Manchu. “What do you think of these bottles? We’re trying to raise some money for Grandma in the home. Pretty blue bottles and some sky blue. A red one.”

One of the women had come near and lifted one of the bottles. “Maybe twenty bucks for this one,” she said. Braden kept his eyes on Fu Manchu, who lifted his gaze from the table to meet Braden’s eyes.

“How about two thousand?” he said, quietly.

“For the bottles?” Junior asked.

Fu Manchu ignored him. “For the bottles, lamps and table. Everything.”

“I just sold the table to that other guy.”

“He didn’t pay, did he? I’ll give you two thousand cash. Right now.”

“Twenty-five hundred.”

“Twenty-two.”

“Right now?”

Fu Manchu man reached to his hip pocket and showed Braden a thick roll of bills. Braden glanced from the bills to Fu Manchu’s face. The man was probably good at poker.

“Fuck me, mister. You got a deal.”

As Fu Manchu counted bills onto the Mustang fender Junior boxed the bottles. A young man, heavy like Fu Manchu appeared to take the box and lamps from Junior. When the bills were counted, Fu Manchu stepped to the table and ran a careful hand over its top. Then he slowly folded it and tucked it under his arm. He followed the younger man and simply walked away.

“Let’s haul ass,” Braden said.

They backed the car out of the parking spot and switched on their lights. It was light enough that they didn’t need the headlights, but it helped to get people to step out of the way. The man in the safety vest waved them down. He pantomimed cranking so Braden rolled down his window.

“If you got your receipt,” the man said, “you can show it for re-entry.”

“Right,” Braden said. “Thanks.” He rolled his window up. As he clutched into gear Junior looked at the line of cars arriving.

“You don’t wanna look around?” he asked,

“Nah. Nothing here I want. It’s all junk.”

Junior patted the pile of bills on the seat. They opened to his touch like a fallen flower. “Not to some,” he said.

“At least not yet.” He grinned. “Before you woke up I was looking at that table and found a sticker on the bottom.”

“Yeah?”

“Good thing I scraped it off. It said Montgomery Wards.”

“Ha!”

“Got that right. Did you say you saw some coffee in this

town?”

“Saw a Denny’s sign.”

“Good enough for me.” He turned toward town and goosed the gas, just a little. Dropped his sunscreen. Ahead the sunburst touched on patient fields, sleepy cows and another day brought to light.

Afterword

Thank you again to all who make this possible.

The world has changed much in these last years, as have all of us. Be kind to your fellow humans and never stop bringing beauty into the world.

