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HARD TIMES CAFE

~ A Poem by Ben Nardolilli ~

This is no beautiful city, this is Arlington,
A city by reality, a county on a technicality,
Not in the rain, no, especially not in the rain,
This is Arlington, not Seattle, not London

Outside, lone figures are getting wet
Within all soaking regulations, it is normal,
Nothing romantic, it is dark, not gray,
This is Arlington, not Montmartre

Inside, she stays sober and I get drunk,
The mug's decent, her story's a shambles,
My life's no better, my excuses ramble,
This is Arlington, and I need to be in NYC

She eats the sampler, there's Cincinnati,
Texas, and Terlingua, right in front,
In back, unpolished wood and old metal,
This is still Arlington, not rust belt or rural

Back outside, they resume the parade,
Fake dragons, fake beads, and fake jazz,
It's March and they're having Mardi Gras,
No tits, this is Arlington, not New Orleans.

REPETITIVE
~ A Poem by Robert Beveridge ~

It's how angels fall, how photosynthesis
becomes an instrument of torture.
Lust in the cracks of concrete
barriers, the sterile agony
of those goddamned orange cones
that never, ever stay straight.
Fifteen more seconds of sound.
Anger in every participle,
whether it dangles or no.
Flee the city, into the woods
for you know the naysayers
follow you. Loop back the sound
of crushed rock and wait.
It'll come. It will come.

PSYCHOPATHIC KILLER

~ A Poem by A.J. Huffman ~

or sociopathic survivor? Which
roll would I be cast as in the horror
movie of my life?
I already know
I am not dumb enough
to fill the obligatory opening
spank-bank scene, and my name will never be
mistaken for cannon fodder.
The rest is sketchy,
the perfect mix of uncertainty, I am
a viable suspect, a deviant writer's wet dream.
I hate enough
to imagine a plausible scenario
that could lead to a body count.
I am cold enough
to compartmentalize, justify a mini
slaughter under the right circumstances.
Conversely, I am smart enough
not to run up the stairs in stilettos,
detached enough to sacrifice
an anonymous walk-on or two
to get away, defiant enough
to spit at a weapon
intended to take my life,
capable enough to turn
that knife/gun/chainsaw back,
plunge it into attacking flesh, and still

emerge unscarred and without
need of anything but a new
pair of shoes.

LORIE
~ A Poem by Michael Lee Johnson ~

Lorie, you want to see me clearly
through this joy of my naked body
avoiding the sweat of my emotions,
just breathing on my neck
rubbing this baseline of my groin—
will not find us here again.
Go away, leave me thinking
louder than your breath—
body moves quietly
in a lazy sway of indifference.

TAXI
~ A Poem by Steven Deutsch ~

My dad drove a taxi
on the night shift
through the tired streets of Manhattan,
his nights filled
with swampy coffee
and drunks
ejected from the local bars.
He'd tell the story
of the drunk that paid
his tab twelve times
in crisp twenties
thinking each time his ride has just ended
or of the ride he gave
to Marilyn Monroe
who kissed him on the cheek
because she didn't have a dime.
But, most days he slept.
We tiptoed past him—
dead to the world
on the fold-out couch
in the living room of our tiny apartment
and tried to be so quiet.

When he had one Saturday free
he took me to Ebbets Field.
He loved the Brooklyn Dodgers.
Campanella, Hodges, Pee Wee Reese

and most of all Duke Snyder.
We sat in the bleachers
In the blazing sun
and watched Sal Maggie
and Hoyt Wilhelm
take it to the seventh,
nothing nothing.
Dad went for hot dogs at the stretch
and came back with two for me
just after the Duke homered in the ninth
to win the game one to nothing.

We didn't speak on the train going home.
But on Sunday around the bagels and lox.
He told that story with a smile and a laugh.
It was my only trip to Ebbets Field
and his last.

A PALE DAWN
~ A Poem by Bobbi Sinha-Morey ~

Only sixteen and I was
locked inside the garage by
my drunken mother, alone
with the rats and winter cold.
My brother lived so far away
he couldn't help me, and I
would've loved to steal her
car keys so I could run to live
somewhere else, no hope of
my insane mother drying out.
Once I slept on a friend's
couch, begged money from
a teacher so I could spend
the night at a motel. No
homeless shelter for miles
around and I hated to live
on the streets. Home was
the house on the hill and
every night it was hell.
One day when dusk began
to darken the sky she
wandered outside with
a hammer looking for me.
She didn't know of the
twenty foot well covered
in brush; the next day
when I'd woken to a pale

dawn God had shown
me a rare kindness I never
forgot.

SOAP OPERA
~ A Prose Poem by William Doreski ~

Something in your head, something raw as yolk. It has never developed, will never develop, never become an embryo. That evening as the steam heat sweated, your cries of despair roused the cat, who scratched at the bedroom door. She should have phoned the police to arrest the invisible bulk oppressing us. She should have phoned your mother, whose overflow couldn't reach us without assistance from the cosmos. That assistance wouldn't arrive until Christmas, when you got sick and I left you dozing with flu while I dined at your sister's off-white apartment on Newbury Street. When I left, reeking of polite conversation, the early urban sundown reeked of dead meat. A skyscraper pronged the mist, every window lit for the holiday. I wished I could climb like an ant, climb right up that skyscraper and leer at the world from a height. At home, you felt a little better, your pasty smile a little broader if slightly less sincere. I relayed your sister's regrets. Your brother-in-law's slightly illicit love. A couple of months later he would try to pry you away from me. When I tossed him down the stairs he grunted like a sausage in a pan. He picked up his unhurt dignity and fled.

THE ISLES OF ISLAMORADA ~ A Poem by Rekha Valliappan ~

for tonight
paddling w i l

d

l y. denuded, I hear the coastline *krrackk*, slumping into the rev-
ving seas;

twisted metal meets broken glass in sheets. tangled homes uprooted, smelling
sickly sweet;

I am u n s u r e,

watching gumbo limbo trees shred into the bimini sunbrellas and stone crabs;
the rotting seaweed and sewage have busted the water line, they say.

is there a chance?

the earth is belching out the kitchen sink with black soot and gristle in a firestorm.

limbless they float, oceans of sand, siloed out in a spitfire of a monster moment.

decaying earth promises a coral emboldened good harvest in the season of fall. only
now it is sea breeze truncated,

and lying supine on the oh-so-balmy-isles of islamorada, i breathe the rhythm of
the land.

for tonight

when irma came. you could see the moon pelting through the rain. i woke to circa-
dian waltzes tap-tapping my cardia.

it gave me a sore back and i swallowed an advil; all day strong, all night long; kick-
ing into high gear, but it didn't help;

our swamps went rogue sucking up to salome of the dexterous destiny; low hanging
ocarina of the skies, how she skimmed the waters like a monk in brown habit;
dripping candle wax.

they say ghosts still dwell there in nomadic exuberance, spilling out unleashed.
i look for those chasers of the night, smelling of formaldehyde. the plastic men or
are they men of straw?
one never can tell, and soon it will be d-e-c-e-m-b-e-r, season of decay; carrying
puffs of anodyne; lifeless and flattened and still.

for tonight, grandma's true grits.
this time the hurri-cyclo-cane was for real, red angus rolling; splicing our moon too
tangled up with frenzied blood clots for real ghosts.
grandma irma d
 i
 e
 d on the magical shores of that random fall; wild with the shrieking
winds. twisting and twisting
 and twisting her demise. will the isles ever be the same any
more?

for tonight.

curdled;
curried...

From GOLDEN GIANT
~ An Original Chinese Poem by Hongri Yuan ~
(Translated by Yuanbing Zhang)

Who is sitting in the heavens and staring at me?
Who is sitting in the golden palace of tomorrow?
Who is smiling?
The golden staff in his hand
Flashing the dazzling light
Ah, the flashes of lightning
Interwoven over my head
I walked into a crystal corridor of the time
I want to open
The doors of gold
Lines of words in the sun
Singing to me in the sky
I want to find
The volumes of gold poems
On the shores of the new century
To build the city of gold

Laozi with rosy cheeks and white hair
Smiling at me in the clouds
A phoenix danced trippingly
And carried in a book of gold

Lines of mysterious words
Made my eyes drunken
Countless giant figures
Came towards me from the clouds

The times of seventy million years
Emerged leisurely before my eyes
The cities of gold
Surrounded with the crystal garden

The sky of sapphire
Sent out the colorful miraculous brightness
On the green hills of jasper
Dragons and phoenixes were flying

Exquisite pagoda
Majestic palace of gold
The airy pavilions and pagodas
Standing in the purple-red clouds

TWO POEMS by Christopher Barnes

*

A GOWN FOR SIMON SIMPLE

We dull-benched you in class,
Invariably thought you lame brained.
We up this Tsarine fizz, and these mutters
To social-grace your degree.
Mind-boggling is what you game,
Overthrowing us from our toes.
It's necessary I bow your laces.

*

CHOCOLATES FOR SIMON JOBBINS

Tingly at your fast-track
Into bossing,
We scarcely hazarded you'd no competence.
A foofaraw attaches itself to each deficiency.
Makes raw undertakings nerve-twitched.
Bonus dough goes for couch therapy,
Levelling profit out.

HAPPY GHOSTS

~ A Short Story by David Rae ~

If you were a ghost, where would you go? I'd be interested to know. I used to think—well—when I was a kid you know; girl's locker rooms and stuff like that. But it sounds so sordid when you think about it, sad really.

When I look in the car mirror I don't look a day over- I'm not sure how old I really am. How do you count ghost years? Are they like dog years or what? I was driving with my guy, Andy, and he said, "if you were a ghost, how would you know?"

We were listening to old music on the radio. Maybe that's what made him think it. Here we are listening to all that stuff from the sixties, the seventies and the eighties; a ghost would listen to the good stuff wouldn't he?

"If you're a ghost, then so am I," I said. I've know Andy since we were kids. We went to school, hung out and went to college together. We dropped out together. Maybe we're both ghosts. Yeah could be, could be we're both ghosts driving in a ghost car and listening to ghost radio— Ghost Echo and the Ghost Bunnymen.

"If we were ghosts, we'd have to be dead," I said.

But Andy said, "Nah, we could be in a coma or something."

"Even if we were both dead or in a coma, we'd remember it happening and all that," I said.

"No," said Andy. "Ghost ain't like people, they're just bits of people, memories or emotions and stuff. Where'd he come up with this shit?"

How the hell did we end up here? None of us knew; we just were. How long have we been going round that same highway; up and down every night. At least the music never got old, but suddenly those girls' locker rooms didn't sound so bad.

"We ain't dead," I said. "We're just in a coma."

"Then maybe we could wake up," said Andy. "If we knew where we are, I mean where our bodies are, then we could go and wake them up."

“They’ll be in a hospital,” I said. “We should go and check out the hospitals, all of them. Hell, we got plenty of time, time to check them all.”

Andy shook his head, he wasn’t so sure.

I asked, “How come?”

And Andy said, “Maybe we only got like one night and go over it again and again. This might be the only time we got to sort this out. Where would we be?”

“Think man,” I told him. “We’re in a car, that’s got to mean something.”

Alright, that was good, that was thinking. Maybe a car crash or something. So, this is what we’ve got so far; we’re in a coma or dead, we come off the road, if we’re still alive, we’re in a hospital. We need to find the hospital and wake ourselves back up. We’ve been going up and down this highway since the eighties and if we want to stop, then we got to find that hospital. Make sense? Well, tough shit, the supernatural doesn’t need to make sense, it just kind of is.

Andy pulls over at a gas station. We didn’t need gas; this is a ghost car after all. But he figured we could get some info. Andy went over to the kiosk and picked up a newspaper. He looked at me and pointed to the date on the masthead. Shit, the eighties were almost forty years ago. I wonder who the president is? Andy said it was probably the bastard lovechild of Bill Clinton and George Bush. We asked the cashier for directions and he pointed this way and that. In the end, we decided just to follow an ambulance.

We pulled up on the lot next to the hospital, got out the car and headed into the hospital. We skipped in through the swing doors. I asked Andy if he was certain this was where we were, and he said, of course, he could feel it like some kind of ghost homing instinct. But I couldn’t feel nothing. Maybe, he’s more dead than I am; could be that he’s more of a ghost than me.

We followed Andy’s ghost homing signal through the hospital corridors until we came to a room. There was a nurse coming out of the room. She said we had to leave and that she was getting security. When the guy in the black uniform came, he ushered both of us to the lift.

“That was a waste of time,” I said.

Andy said “No,” and showed me some pills he’d scored from the trolley while the nurse had been talking to me.

“What kind of pills,” I asked. “Hopefully heavy pain killers.”

“Why do you want pain killers,” Andy asked. “Ghosts don’t feel pain.”

But I said, “What about all them clanking and moaning and howling ban-

shees and the like, surely they must be feeling pain.”

Andy said, “No, they felt mental turmoil and that’s not the same thing.” Smart-ass.

“Can ghosts take pills?” I asked Andy.

“Too darn right they better can,” he said.

But when we swallowed them they didn’t do nothing. Andy read the box—some kind of Di- Methya- Hexa-Propa-shit, whatever that is.

We got back into the car.

I asked Andy, “What we should do now?”

“It don’t matter,” he said.

“How come?”

He said, “If we’re ghosts, maybe we just do the same thing every night.”

“Like what?” I asked, as he floored the gas and headed off back onto the highway.

Crank it up to eleven. We sped down the road laughing, listening to AC-DC. Until, Andy-shit-for-brains skidded off the road. The car landed in the same place as before and the steering column pierced right through Andy’s rib cage. I went flying through the windscreen and my neck broke. Hell, we really are ghosts. Still, at least we died happy.

FREE AS A BIRD

~ A Short Story by Steve Carr ~

After taking the last lobster trap from the boat and placing it on the pier with the other traps, Craig sat on an overturned wood crate, removed his gloves, and tried to rub the chill from his hands. He stretched his aching fingers and blew his warm breath on them. The cold had turned his cheeks bright pink and numbed his ears. Inside his worn boots he wriggled his toes, thinking they were the only part of his body that wasn't completely frozen.

Under the pier, choppy waves battered the pylons. A constant, frigid breeze blew in from the ocean. The lobsters crowded in the traps climbed over each other, their claws stretched out, opening and closing as if in search of something to hold onto or a means of escape.

"The catch was good today," Liam said as he hopped off the boat, his boots thudding on the pier and making the wood vibrate. He slapped his gloved hands together. "Winter has started early this year." He spat a wad of chewing tobacco into the water.

"I'm gettin' too old for this," Craig said. "Lobster fishin' is for young men whose joints don't get stiff from reelin' in the traps and can stand up to the weather."

Liam leaned against a flag pole attached to the side of the pier. Maine's state flag was tightly wrapped around the pole. "What else can you do?"

"Nothin'," Craig said, standing. "I'll get the catch into the tanks before Molly's closes."

*

Craig sat at the counter, passing a small red plastic straw back and forth through his fingers. On the other side of the counter, Jill grabbed the plate of food from

under the heat lamp in the window and turned around and placed it in front of him. The aromas of tomato sauce and garlic wafted up from a mound of spaghetti. Jill re-filled his cup of coffee as he twirled several strands of spaghetti around the tines of his fork.

“How long have you worked here?” he said to her.

She let out a chortle, as if even thinking about it was comical. “Ten years, now.” She pushed a loose bleached blonde curl that was hanging down her forehead back up into her bouffant hairdo. She placed the pot of coffee back on the metal heating plate of the coffee maker, and then with her hands smoothed out the wrinkles of her Pepto-Bismol-pink uniform.

He shoved the forkful of spaghetti into his mouth. When the tiny bell above the restaurant door tinkled, he turned to see who had come in.

David walked up to the counter and sat on the stool next to Craig.

“I thought you were coming to our house for dinner,” David said.

Craig swallowed the spaghetti. “I’m sorry, son. I forgot about being invited.”

“Paula and I invite you every night, Dad, and you forget every night,” David said. “Mom wanted us to look after you.”

Craig wound another rope of spaghetti around the fork. “I don’t like to impose.”

David let out a loud sigh and then asked Jill for a cup of coffee. As she poured coffee into a cup in front of him, he said to Craig, “I ran into Liam who said you were here. He also said you were thinkin’ about quittin’ lobster fishin’.”

“I think of lots of foolish things,” Craig said.

*

Walking home, Craig kept his head down, his chin buried in his wool scarf, as the wind battered him. The bright green cap that his wife had knitted for him while she was undergoing chemotherapy was pulled down over his ears. He had his gloved hands tucked into the pockets of his coat. The reverberation of the clanging buoy bells was carried in the wind.

At the end of Main Street he stopped in front of the large parking lot of the Mayworth Poultry Company. Three trucks loaded with stacks of crates filled with live chickens were parked at the loading docks. The men on the trucks opened the crates, pulled the chickens out, bound their legs, and hung them by the bindings

onto the hooks of an overhead conveyer belt that carried the chickens, squawking and struggling, into the depths of the factory.

Chicken feathers and down carried by the wind blew across the lot like large, feathery flakes of snow. It collected as drifts around Craig's boots and attached to his clothing. Looking down at the feathers stuck to his coat and pants he began to laugh. He began to flap his arms and walked home, occasionally clucking.

*

Sitting in the living room in his favorite chair by a fire roaring in the fireplace, Craig picked the feathers from his clothing and put them in a bowl.

The clock on the mantle ticked loudly. The walls were lined with photographs of boats he had worked on as a lobster fisherman and pictures of the sea. Hanging on one wall was in a large gold frame was his wedding photograph. His wife's brass urn stood on a small antique table below the photograph.

He stood up, carried the bowl of feathers to the urn, unscrewed the top, dumped the feathers in, and then screwed the lid back on.

That night he slept better than he had since his wife's death. The next morning he didn't go to work as a lobster fisherman, and vowed he never would again.

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