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The Folklore Muse

Frank de Caro

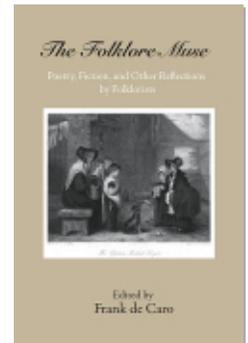
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Performance

Historically, when folklorists recorded an “informant” singing a song, recounting a story, or even speaking a proverb or telling a riddle, they rendered it as a “text”: a block of words that could be written and printed. Sometimes the singer or teller or speaker was largely forgotten; sometimes the circumstances of the singing or the telling were ignored. A few students of folk materials, such as J. Frank Dobie, Zora Neale Hurston, and the compilers of the Federal Writers’ Project anthology of Louisiana folk materials, *Gumbo Ya-Ya*, tried to engender more holistic approaches by providing fictionalized or journalistic frameworks. But such attempts were not received favorably by more scholarly folklorists, who sought a more “objective” (and perhaps, drier and more lifeless) approach. Gradually, however, folklorists—partly influenced by the functionalism of British social anthropology—came to look for broader approaches that recognized complex processes in the transmission of folklore. Influenced in part by the work of Erving Goffman, whose 1959 book *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* “likened human interactions to a theatrical performance”⁶—they have come to performance-centered approaches that see even the most simple transmission of folk materials as a performance of sorts, as a human action with a performer and an audience and a context, however dramatic or undramatic. Looking at performance and performances has increasingly come to the center of what folklorists do, and a number of the contributions in this book focus on that from the creative standpoint, in some ways harking back to what writers like Hurston sought to do: provide a context, even if a fictional one, in showing the presentation of folklore. Given that the creative value of folklore itself has been increasingly recognized, too, it seems appropriate that creative approaches to examining performance should have an appeal. Of course, folklorists who write fiction or poetry are not simply using their creative writing to make a point; as writers they are sometimes merely drawn to the folklore they know (a factor that has sometimes influenced folklorists to perform as well as to observe).

Matt Clark’s short story about a local character can be seen as an account of a single, lengthy performance, as narrators tell a story to a listener (indeed a poet and academic, who comments on processes of myth and legend formation and meaning, integrating the performance to issues folklorists interest themselves in). It is a story about the process by which stories take shape, but a particular storytelling performance is at the center here (and in some ways this tale is like a throwback to the nineteenth-century literature of the American frontier and Old Southwest, in which

elaborate stories were told by fictional oral narrators). A performance is also at the heart of the chapter given here from John Burrison's novel. In the summer camp context of his literary narrative, there is an impromptu gathering, and at the gathering, the novel's first-person narrator uses the occasion to perform a toast, one of the narrative poems that come out of urban African American tradition (though the character is not himself African American). This fictional performance tells the reader something about why we perform folklore, but it has its literary purpose in saying something about how the character is trying to fit into the setting of the novel, too.

In "The Storytelling Wake," Steve Zeitlin deftly looks at a ritual performance, providing a poetic impression of how we use wakes as parts of funeral rites to tell stories about the departed, memorializing them through narrative. Jeannie Banks Thomas's poem "Shins Around the Fireside (Jig)" uses a musical performance to juxtapose such modern cultural trappings as "bipolar duplexes" and a "phantom golf course" with the stubborn persistence of traditional culture, raising questions about how tradition and modernity co-exist, looking at how "some contemporary groups of people in the same region 'warm' themselves with traditional music." In doing so she indirectly poses questions about the persistence of tradition and about revivalism in culture, but the poem evokes the magic of traditional musical performance itself, however tradition exactly comes into play.

Performance comes into play in many of the pieces in this book, including those that appear in other sections. Danusha Goska's whole play is modeled on traditional shadow-puppet performances. The family friend who is the main subject of Kirin Narayan's memoir might be termed a performer as she creates herself upon an informal stage. Rosan Augusta Jordan's poems describe elements of the performance of public ceremonies. The memorials to accident victims that are the subject of Holly Everett's fieldwork would be seen by folklorists as a type of performance, too: the performance of memory through physical constructs.

The folklorist's conception of performance is a complex one, one that does not entirely coincide with conventional understandings of the word. For the folklorist understandings of performance may resonate beyond the performance of folklore as such, making them especially sensitive to the significance of performances generally in our lives. Leslie Prosterman's poems foreground performances, although hers are those modern and postmodern performances tied to written texts called poetry readings, not performances of traditional genres, and she provides witty insight into the larger performance context. Prosterman describes her three poems as an "ethnography of poetry readings," suggesting that a folklorist carries around an ethnographic orientation when observing cultural phenomena, whether "folk" or not. William Bernard McCarthy's "Maybelle and Sara on the Porch" is not about performance as such, but the poem derives from McCarthy's observation of country music pioneers Maybelle and Sara Carter looking at old photographs while at a festival. It provides a poetic footnote to the history of American traditional music performers and performance, and of course, they happened to be there because they had come to perform, even if the poem focuses elsewhere.

Legends, Rumors, Lore, and Revelations (Some Incomplete) Involving Leaton Troutwine, a Local Eccentric/Celebrity/Hero (and Gordon's Owner)

I was the first to recognize the walrus as being Gordon.

Me, Briscoe, and O'Neal were sitting in the back of my truck—a normal Friday night—watching The Lights jump around out in the desert and here came Gordon, sliding out of the sand and cacti.

Up until that moment, the night was pretty slow. The Lights were a little lethargic, possibly on account of how the crowd was one of the puniest in recent memory. Besides me and the boys, there was a Family of Three (Father, Mother, Young Son with a Baseball Cap and Skull Earring) and a Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine (easily recognizable by his T-shirt, which read "I'm a Poet from Over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine"). Father read the Texas Historical Marker out loud to his tribe:

The Marfa Lights

The Marfa Lights, mysterious and unexplained lights that have been reported in the area for over one hundred years, have been the subject of many theories. The first recorded sighting of the lights was by rancher Robert Ellison in 1883. Various explanations include campfires, phosphorescent minerals, swamp gas, static electricity, St. Elmo's Fire and "Ghost Lights," the lights reportedly change colors, move about and change in intensity. Scholars have reported over seventy-five folk-tales dealing with the unexplained phenomenon.

Young Son with a Baseball Cap and Skull Earring said, "So are they flying saucers or what?"

"Well," Father began, and it was apparent from the tone of his voice that he was thrilled to have his son ask him any questions at all, "rationally—"

Then Gordon, covered in dust, wheezing, a tumbleweed stuck under his left tusk, came oozing out of the darkness, and the Family of Three skedaddled.

For a moment, The Lights' mystery paled in comparison. (In Marfa, Texas, you can go out to watch The Lights bounce off each other every night. But a walrus bounding out of a tar-black desert—I would be willing to bet my glass eye that's something nobody has ever seen before. Not ever. Not even in Marfa.)

“Lookit there,” I said. “Gordon.”

He came wallowing up to where we sat in the truck and gave us a good stare. It was obvious he wanted to go home; he sighed a lot. Evidently, a long walk in a dry desert, even one aglow with The Lights, was far from a grand experience in walrus terms.

By this time, the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine had come over and was examining the eskimo spectacle with crossed arms and raised eyebrows.

“A walrus?” he said.

“College boy.” Briscoe growled and took a long sip of Bud.

‘Course I’d been to college once a long time ago and could understand his naturally dumb and curious nature. “Genuine article,” I said, hopping down to pull the tumbleweed out from behind Gordon’s tusk. Even without words, I could tell he was deeply appreciative.

“I thought they only lived in the Arctic,” the Poet said. “What’s he doing out here?”

O’Neal and Briscoe both popped beers at the same time. The hisses, like twin stars hari-kiriing out of the sky into the Rio Grande, signaled the beginning of a long night. There were two coolers full of Bud, and the Poet held in his left hand a large green bottle of cheap Chianti.

Since the day of my birth, October 22nd, 1944, I have been in the eyes of most Marfans what has been called of late the “designated storyteller.” Unlike those unfortunate “designated drivers,” I am encouraged to drink quite a bit.

* *

In 1945, the big football game between the Marfa Sparks and the Alpine Tarantulas occurred in late October, a month in which Texans just expect the weather to be a little more crazy than usual.

And so, right up until Father Urban gave the pre-game prayer—“Oh Lord, don’t let any of these young mens’ bones get unnaturally bent tonight!”—it was raining like hell. Then the good father ’amen-ed and the downpour ceased. The sky, though, stayed as dark and cloudy as a new bride on poker night. The clouds couldn’t agree on what direction to move, so they clambered all over each other in a big swollen orgy. And lightning? Hot damn, the pyrotechnics off to the south were twice as captivating as the soggy scramble on the field.

Very ominous. No two ways about it.

Folks hushed themselves in reverence—reverence being closely tied up with fear, you know—beneath that sky of doom. (All but two men, that is. Coaches, the both of ’em. They did enough hollering for a Superdome full of Holy Rollers. Grunting and moaning and caterwauling reprimands and insults, dad-like encouragement.) Even the barbarous players were soft-spoken, the linemen’s typical rodomontade reduced to queasy stomach rumblings, the quarterbacks play-calling done in voices more appropriate for a confessional than a gridiron. They stood out

there like the pubescent chieftains of two tribes of outback mud-men engaged in a ritual to decide the fates of their villages, whispering strategies like hexes, hut-hut-hutting witch doctor prescriptions.

In the defensive huddle, a boy named Leaton Troutwine looked up, then murmured to his compadres, “Tornado weather.”

In the offensive huddle, a boy named Rolando Hidalgo said, “If we don’t score now, we may not get the chance to score at all.”

It was late in the fourth quarter, of course. The score: zero to zip.

The boys lined up across from each other and stuck their fists into the runny earth. They did not look at the eyes of the men they opposed. (Nothing scares an eighteen-year-old boy more than admitting that he is more sore afraid than a shepherd guarding his flocks by night.)

Rolando Hidalgo said three numbers—all odd—and dropped way back to pass. His eyes searched out the ever-blessed hands of his best buddy, Jesus Hinajosa, waving to him from the end zone. Rolando’s hope for West Texas immortality—invisible, hot—flew out of his mouth as he launched the ball. Both sailed toward Jesus in a spinning brown-white arc.

Leaton Troutwine watched all this with Nile-green eyes. Without hurrying, he moved to stand in front of Jesus so that the ball landed in his arms like a picnic-tossed baby. Then he ran like the devil toward the opposite end of the field, the kidnapped pigskin snuggled close to his runaway heart.

He noticed as he ran that the other players on the field—the enemy, his teammates too—didn’t seem to notice what he had just done. They looked beyond him, mouthpieces dropping out of their proper orifices to dangle all white and drooling from face masks. They let him pass without help or interruption, seemingly unaware that there was a big football game in progress.

Of course, they saw what Leaton Troutwine did not: a funnel cloud wrapping itself up into a tight black cone. Falling upon the Spark’s goalpost like a scorched dunce cap. Twice as black and loud as a coal train at midnight, it began to pursue Leaton down the field. Methodically. With purpose.

When Leaton crossed into the end zone, he turned to face the world behind him and grinned. The fans who should have been cheering his miraculous feat, however, only gawked at him. There were no cheerleaders leaping and cart-wheeling toward him. Instead, a tornado bounced in his direction like a sewing-machine needle. Leaton, unsure whether he should raise his hands above his head and clamp them together in victory or fall to the ground and clap them together in prayer, did neither. Instead, some crazy instinct took over and he tossed the ball smack dab into the middle of the twister. Watched it rise in a perfect spiral to Heaven.

Appeased, the tornado gathered itself up and climbed back up into the celestial stew that bubbled and boiled above. Only then did the band kick off. The clarinets, reeds still wet, squawked and squawked and squawked, like geese.

* *

The Poet nodded. “A mythic hero,” he said. “Not uncommon in regional folklore, although on a global scale we’re all probably more familiar with Beowulf or Odysseus.”

“Who?” Briscoe said.

“I’m curious,” the Poet said. “How exactly does your tale come close to explaining the presence of this walrus in the middle of the Chihuahuan Desert? Not that the story wasn’t charming but—”

“Shh, boy,” O’Neal hissed. “Patience,” he recommended.

* *

Leaton Troutwine’s mother set her baby boy in a swing one early fall day in 1929, left him floating there while she hung sheets—damp still from the wash, not flapping or billowing in the breeze—to dry on a sway-backed clothesline. While most mothers hung up sheets in the morning hours, Mrs. Fonda Troutwine preferred to hang the family wash in the waning light of a West Texas sunset, let them dry in the starlight, soak up the midnight aroma of piñon drifting over from the Sierra Carmen. When the Troutwine family lay down on fresh sheets, they fell full-force into a cotton-soft imprint of the desert outback.

Leaton Troutwine was two and watching his momma’s slim silhouette move betwixt a white sheet and a purple sundown when the Marfa Lights came and kidnapped him.

That’s the only explanation that I can offer you. And it was the first thing that came to Fonda Troutwine’s panicked mind.

“Leaton!” she hollered when she noticed he was absent from his swing. She looked up and to the south, where the lights were known to appear nightly. “Leaton!” she hollered again.

The all-night baby search involved the Troutwine family, the Marfa Sparks football team, cheerleading squad, and band. The volunteer fire department. The police force. The park rangers from Big Bend. St. Sestina’s Catholic Youth Organization officers. The Far Flung River Company’s raft crew (Repairs, Guides, Management). The waitstaff and cook of Casa Chuy. A passing circus’s entire cast: tight-rope walkers, clowns, trapeze artists, fat lady, dog trainers, thin man, strong girl, unicyclist, bearded woman, elephant riders, magician, lion tamer, fire breather, hair aerialist, gorilla boy, sword swallower, snake charmer, and hermaphrodite. All those people searched the Troutwine house, the Troutwine yard, the Troutwine’s neighbors’ houses and yards, the town, the desert. Mrs. Troutwine rode in a jeep with the sheriff: he, shining his spotlight behind cacti and tumbleweeds and she, keeping an eye on the Marfa Lights as they flickered around above, hollering for a while, then talking softly, whispering to them, “Give back my baby, please. You can come and visit him anytime you like, but give him back, OK?”

By dawn, the searching army was dead-tired and discouraged. Ready to give up. They’d gathered in the Troutwine front yard, anxious to discover if anyone had

had any luck, if anyone had any plans for the next leg of the rescue operation. Mrs. Troutwine, experimenting with a new form of hysteria—radical calm—had taken to looking under couch cushions, behind the calendar, in Mr. Troutwine’s trouser pockets. “Wait,” she said. “Let me check the backyard one more time.”

Which is where she found Leaton. In his swing again. Not looking pleased nor displeased. Not gurgling or crying or cooing or pooping in his pants. Looking fine and unimpressed in regards to whatever adventure he had so recently returned from. It was only after he had been picked up and kissed by every last member of the hunting squad that Leaton expressed some anxiety. Probably connected with the gorilla boy’s cologne.

The government came out to test Leaton for radioactivity, and for several years after that, they would pull up in front of the Troutwine home on the anniversary of the disappearance in Atlantic blue vans. Try as they did to debrief young Leaton, they never came away with anything more than a painfully recounted remembrance of the Sparks marching band’s victory tune serenading the Troutwine home until long after Leaton’s naptime.

* *

“Not surprising,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “Oftentimes a mythic hero is subjected to some odd initiation by inexplicable forces—gods or whatever you choose to call them. Joseph Campbell, one of our most knowledgeable scholars in the field of mythological studies once said—”

“Wait,” O’Neal said, “Are the studies mythological or mythologically oriented?”

The Poet cocked an eyebrow, stroked his thin goatee, frowned.

“Trials and revelations are what it’s all about,” I said.

“Yes!” the Poet exclaimed. “The exact quote to which I was about to refer.”

“Well, hell, son. Just cause ol’ Joe Campbell said that don’t make him some kind of genius. That’s the kind of stuff you cull from the pages of life, not some dusty-paged journal of smarty-pants theory.” Briscoe’s son—currently a student of animal husbandry over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine—had of late been on his daddy’s bad side. Come home from classes one weekend to tell his Pa—a lifelong rancher, mind you—that he’d been handling the process of castration all wrong. “Before that wisdom got set down and marked up in a book, it was a free animal, belonging to no one but some great universal consciousness, amigo.” Briscoe paused, reined in his disgust and said, “I guess.”

* *

Murder wandered the canyons and gullies at his leisure, showing up wherever he felt like it, whenever he felt like it. Some nights you might be driving down to Panther Pass to borrow a book from one of the rangers, and you’d see Murder standing by the side of the road. Or he might turn up right around dusk, making his way up the face of Alsate, all silhouette. Bobcat Carter swore until the day he died that Murder would sometimes wake him up on sweaty August nights, poking

his horns and head and all—breath hot and wet and smelling like a century plant—into his old shack out back of the Cooper’s store. “He was trying to tell me something,” Bobcat used to say. “But, of course, I don’t speak bull.”

* *

”Murder?” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “While murder is regularly a factor in many heroic epics—going all the way back to the Oedipal myth and all males’ innate hatred of our fathers—I’m not entirely certain that I understand the nature of the murder about which you are now speaking.”

“Boy,” said Briscoe. “To be a Poet from over at Sul Ross State University, you sure don’t know how to put words together. Are all poets as clumsy dialogue-wise as you?”

The Poet puffed up like a spiny-tailed crack lizard.

“Here,” O’Neal said, handing the Poet a beer. The bottle of wine was empty. “Some sparkling Bud might help you with your persecution complex. Melancholy angst like you got doesn’t do nobody any good.”

Wisely, the Poet accepted O’Neal’s offering.

I decided a little backtracking was in order.

* *

In 1891, January 28, a bunch of the small cattle owners—that is to say men who owned not many cattle, not men who owned small cattle or men who were themselves small—got together a roundup at Leoncita to brand all the calves that had slipped through at the fall doings. About three thousand head of cattle were gathered up and the calves were to be branded according to the mark on its mother’s backside. Problem was, one little bull didn’t have no mother and no brand. So’s it was impossible to tell which ranch the bull belonged to. ’Course, two ranchers got into a fight about it—Fine Gilliand and Henry Powe (it’s spelled P-O-W-E, but you say it just like in Edgar Allen)—and couldn’t come to no fair resolution. Henry Powe, a one-armed Confederate veteran with the wooliest black beard you might ever hope to see, pulled a pistol out of his saddlepack and took to firing at the bull. Rather have him dead than a source of friction betwixt two neighboring remudas, you understand. Gilliand, though, did not see things this way. He preferred to draw his gun and shoot Mr. Powe dead. It was the kind of nasty thing that happened every now and then in the Wild West. Thus, was Powe muerte. Suddenly realizing the gravity of what he’d done, Fine Gilliand took off like lightning, guessing rightly that there’d be a lynch mob looking for him soon enough. Before that unpleasant gathering was called to order, however, the ranch hands, led by Gene Kelly (no relation to the dancer) caught the little orphan bull, branded JAN 28 91 on one side, M-U-R-D-E-R on the other, and turned him out of the herd. It run off into the Chisos then, already aware that it was a pariah through no fault of its own, but a cursed beast nonetheless.

* *

"So you've seen this bull Murder for yourselves?" the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. "Despite the fact that he would be over one hundred years old now?"

"Well, actually, he's been seen less and less ever since he met up with Leaton Troutwine."

"I saw him last spring out near Muerto Springs," O'Neal said.

"Course you did," I witnessed "That's on account of Leaton Troutwine, but even before Leaton, on account of the señorita's ghost, the spirit of Ofalia Sotol."

* *

The movies you see are wrong. The Treasure of the Sierra Madre, an out-and-out—but glorious, nonetheless—lie. Some banditos ride down out of the mountains very quietly. So it is that their raid on Don Sotol's hacienda came as a surprise to everyone sleeping therein. There was no jingling of spurs as they opened the courtyard gate. No clumping of boots as they moved down the hallways' tiled floors. No snarling, no teeth gnashing grins as they pulled razor stilettos across the throats of Don Sotol, Doña Sotol, the servants of the Sotol household. There was not a sound. There were shadows and there was silence and there was evil in the air like ragweed.

Only one person was left alive: Don Sotol's daughter, Ofalia. She was taken out of her bed alive, carried to the barn, and tied to one of her father's best horses. Still silent, the bandits rode away with her in tow, the hacienda in flames. Shadows on an orange-red background raced ahead of them.

For more than a day they rode. Never stopping to rest or eat or relieve themselves, until—finally—they came to a spring-fed pool deep in Boot Canyon. Cutting her loose, the men grinned at her. They opened their mouths as if to laugh at the horror on Ofalia's face, and the young señorita could see that none of the men had a tongue. One of them pointed at the ground in front of Ofalia, made it clear with his hands, eyes, and leer that she was to lie down quietly. She shook her head and began to cry. "Allow me this," Ofalia begged the bandits. "Let me bathe there in the pool. I am dirty with the waste of my own body." The men agreed, nodding their heads, miming a girl bathing, washing her hair. Then they set about making a fire.

It was not long, though, before the bandits were overcome with lust and went to the pool to pull the girl from the water.

Despite the grisly nature of their lives, they were shocked to find that she had drowned herself. They started to wade into the water to pull out the body—clutching a piece of granite to its chest—but stopped when a low cry began to seep from beneath the rocks around the pool, from the surface of the water itself. Louder and louder it grew, until the bandits fled, haunted for the rest of their lives by the otherworldly weeping.

* *

”So now the ghost of this Murder hangs out around a moaning pool?” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said.

“The word for bewitched in Spanish is *hechizo*. Those mountains over there are the Chisos. Strange things have always happened there. Nothing is surprising in the Chisos. Only mysterious.”

There was a long pause. The Lights—perhaps they heard the mention of mystery—seemed to grow almost frantic in their movements.

“So, OK,” the Poet said, “we’ve got this bull and a haunted spring. Now how does Leaton Troutwine wander into the picture?”

* *

Leaton Troutwine loved to ride. He’d ride anything. Anything. Horse, burro, mule, donkey, goat, sheep, ram, large dog, pig. On a family trip to El Paso, Leaton ran amok at the zoo and rode a giraffe, a hippopotamus, a yak, and a toothless lion before he could be apprehended and ejected from the menagerie. So of course, it would be young Troutwine who would end up riding Murder.

(Speculation has it, though, that Murder WANTED Leaton to catch him and saddle him and ride him.)

A dusk in late August. Purple sky, orange horizon. Leaton has spent the whole of his fifteenth summer tracking Murder all over the devil’s realm. Time’s running out. School’s preparing to open its trap doors and suck in all the catfishing good times, turn blood bait into geography, water whiskers into algebra.

Leaton, he creeps along the edge of Tornillo Creek, following the freshest set of hoof prints he’s found to date. He—a boy full of hope and purpose—sees a bull ahead of him, tail swatting at horseflies, neck lowered, pulling up bluebonnets gingerly with teeth together, big rubbery lips apart. He—a boy with a history of the unexplained resting laurel-like on his sunbleached hair—moves like a stealthy slug, closer. Closer. Close enough to see the brand, now grown over with hair, but that hair a silvery gray against the brown-black hide—MURDER.

* *

”Wait,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “Before you go on, let me just say that I think you’ve left out the part where some mystic sage gives our hero an invisibility-rendering cowboy hat and a magic lasso.”

Briscoe and O’Neal looked at the Poet like he was nuts. “What in the hell would he need those things for?” O’Neal said. Briscoe said, “Where’d you get crazy ideas like that?”

“It’s classic mythology,” the Poet said. “You know, Perseus catching Pegasus, the Winged Horse? How else would Leaton capture this apparitional bovine?”

Briscoe sighed with disbelief. “Son, I believe you’ve had enough to drink. There ain’t no such thing as a horse with wings.”

“Then how did Leaton catch Murder?”

“He walked up to him with some sugar cubes, slipped a rope—an ordinary

rope—around his neck, put a saddle on him, and climbed up top of him. As far as magic lassos go, I believe that's one of Wonder Woman's gimmicks," Briscoe said.

* *

At first Murder didn't want to move at all. There were more bluebonnets to be had. But after a few swift kicks in the ribs, the old bull began to lumber along the creek. Leaton's heart was the size of a boulder, the consistency of warm taffy, alive with a fandango rhythm. He fully intended to ride Murder down Main Street Marfa, up onto the courthouse lawn, into the middle of the square dance crowd's clog-footed hoedown.

But Murder's plans were not synchronicous with Troutwine's. The bull turned south and began to trot, then gallop—if bulls going full speed could be said to gallop—then, almost but not quite, fly, toward the dark forests of the Chisos. Leaton, astride the bulleting beef, held on for dear life. It hurt, that ride. Leaton's bones rattled, his brain bounced, his balls were mushed ten thousand times over. But a fall, purposeful or not, onto the ground's assortment of cacti, rocks, and tarantulas was unthinkable. So Troutwine held on.

And rode Murder. For what seemed like hours.

Then the bull began to slow up, and Leaton could hear more than just his body alerting him to its aches and pains, Murder's heavy breathing, hoofbeats like bombshells every step of the way. He heard the wind in the trees. The Rock Slide, more than a mile away in Santa Elena canyon. Somewhere, a peregrine falcon. Coyotes. And he heard a moaning that echoed all around him.

It was more than dark by now. It was oblivion in Boot Canyon.

Tough to make out the pines and live oaks that Murder picked his way through. Tough to tell anymore if they were outside or in a cave. Tough to tell if the moaning came from a downed cow, a giant snoring cowboy, or a bruja giving birth. Tough to know, with just the sound of Murder's hoofs coming down into water, whether the bull was crossing a creek or plunging both he and the boy into some nightmare lake. Tough to be sure if the moaning was really getting louder or if Leaton's ears were getting bigger. Tough to remember the exact order of a Hail Mary: full of the Lord with you, grace, blessed women art, fruit, womb, sinners now pray, etc.

When Murder was deep enough into the water that Leaton began to feel the water creeping up over the tops of his boots and running down around his feet, all fear left him. The water was warm, and the moaning subsided into a kind of whisper. Murder went further into the water. The warm bath reached up around Leaton's waist, over his belly button, edged above his chest and encircled his neck. He was floating now, swimming in the pool. Off the back of Murder, who moved away into the shallows and stood looking at Leaton like a cow looks at anything: bored. The moaning-turned-whisper had now become a hum that vibrated through the water like a low-voltage electric current. It got inside Leaton's mouth and nose and ears and began to relate to him how lonely this pool was and how kind it was of Leaton to visit and how she hadn't been able to stop crying for what seemed like (and what

really was) a hundred years. She missed her father, she said, and her friends too. And now Leaton was here and would he please stay with her forever?

Leaton, a virgin, never kissed on the lips before or touched or wanted by anyone but his mother and father, fell in love immediately and was tempted to do as the water asked, to stay and dangle his feet in the pool until the end of time. But he suddenly grew as homesick for his family as the spirit in the water was for hers. He ducked his head underwater, blew out air so that he sank like a soaked loaf of bread, descended to the bottom of the pool. Opened his eyes to see Ofalia Sotol glowing, stretching out her arms to him without menace, crying tears of fire, telling him without bubbles or soggy tremolo that she loved him deeply. He opened his mouth and spoke, promised to come back to the pool at least once a month—more if possible—to be with her. Then he pushed himself up off the pool's leafy bottom, broke through the surface of the water, and took a tremendous breath.

It was very late and Leaton fell asleep astride Murder on the long ride back. He woke up a hundred yards from the circle of porchlight outside his house. Murder waited patiently for his passenger to take off the saddle, and when he was done, turned and ambled out into the desert without so much as a snort of goodbye.

* * * *

"Adventures sometimes end that way," I said. "As if they were a normal part of life."

"I'm surprised she let him go," the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. "Most women in folktales of that nature would have clung to the boy until he was drowned. Of course, you mentioned his virginity. That could be what worked in his favor. Although, to be sure, sometimes a virgin sacrifice is precisely what a spirit might need to escape its hated bonds."

By this time, I think Briscoe was ready to throttle the Poet. Strange, when you consider how gentle and good-natured Briscoe is normally, even when slightly drunk. Something about the Poet was a little galling, though. Some people are like that.

O'Neal, a veterinarian, possessing incredible patience after a lifetime of dealing with twisted horse guts and hyper-sensitive cat owners, said to the Poet, "Do you approach everything as if it were a text to be taken apart or an opportunity to impose some iron-fisted formula on life?"

"An artist's job is to impose order upon chaos. To make something better out of what life offers."

"Hoo-boy," Briscoe whooped, "we got us one of them fellers who presumes to define art in twenty words or less."

Red-faced, the Poet spit out, "The forms of storytelling are well-known and tired. The only way I can enjoy them is by trying to second-guess them."

"I bet you," Briscoe was in the boy's face now, "I bet you looked in your mama's closet every December 24th to see what it was Santa Claus was going to bring you, you sonnet-spouting little—"

“Here now,” I said, unhappy that the tale had been interrupted for so long. Especially for an exchange as silly as that.

* *

Leaton Troutwine did go back every month for more than a year. Even when there was a little snow in the Chisos, he would slip into the pool and spend a pruny-skinned afternoon telling Ofalia the day-to-day events that constituted his life. Homework. Chores. Keeping up with three pen pals. (Honest to God pen pals. Fellers behind bars for peyote harvesting in the Big Bend. First-year rangers, all three of them, all contained in the same cell. Planning an elaborate metaphysical escape.)

Then, of course, the tornado incident occurred, and Leaton became a favorite of the sweet young things of Marfa. Found himself in demand at dinner parties and beauty pageants and bonfire keggers, elected student body president and captain of every sports team Marfa High had to offer. (Understand this: Leaton was not an especially superior athlete, but players and coaches alike held certain beliefs relating to the appeasement of whatever supernatural deities watched over the Troutwine boy.) So there came a long pause in the love affair between Leaton and Ofalia.

It was only after a painful breakup with the captain of the cheerleading squad that Leaton remembered how things had been with him and the spirit at Muerto Springs. Guilt and hope raged in his teenage heart as he rode his horse to the mouth of Boot Canyon one evening late. (Even Murder had stopped coming to rouse him out of sleep, sick as he was of the boy’s “I’m-so-asleep-I-can’t-hear-you” masquerade.)

Leaton was halfway naked at the edge of Muerto Springs when he began to realize that something was wrong. Where the edge of the water should have been, there was nought but dry land, a layer of pine needles, and a broken robin’s egg. Leaton fetched his flashlight and hated every dry circle its beam showed him. There was nothing left of Muerto Springs but a puddle, a dark brown iris in a cornea of mud.

Near tears, he walked out to the puddle. His bare feet couldn’t recognize the dry rocks and sticks with which he had once been so familiar with underwater. The puddle, not much larger than a washtub, was dead-body cold to Leaton’s touch. Still, he did his best to get into it, to try and warm it up with his body heat, to call Ofalia up from the black earth.

His body grew numb as it sank into the near-freezing water. So much so that Leaton was almost unaware when a cottonmouth found his 98-degree flesh too much to resist, bit him good and hard at the back of his heel. Unsatisfied with the sad nature of the blood it found, the snake climbed up over Leaton’s belly and exited the pool.

What could Leaton say but “Damnation!”

Dizzy, scared, numb, ashamed, Leaton got out of the pool fully realizing that his

chances of getting home before the snake's venom had spread to terrify every last molecule of his lymphatic system were slim. He made it to his horse, pulled himself up onto its back, and wrapped the reins around his waist to help keep him on in case he should pass out. He knew, from a boy's life around ponds and stock tanks, what things might happen to him if he didn't get help. First swelling, then fever, nausea, vomiting, delirium. If he was too late getting help, he'd begin to bleed into his skin, out his mouth, ears, and nose, his eyes. He thought about that for a minute and couldn't help but remember the first time the water from Muerto Springs flooded his mouth, ears, and nose, stung his eyes, intoxicating him with magic and love. He started to cry as he whipped his horse on its hindquarters to get it moving. The tears burned his cheeks and he passed out.

When he woke up, he was not more than a hundred yards from Muerto Springs. It was late in the afternoon. His horse was tied to a live oak, calmly eating some hay that lay at its feet. He looked down at his heel and was shocked to find a dead chicken, slit from its beak to its asshole tied around his calf and foot. Another chicken, also dead, also slit from top to bottom, lay on the ground beside him. Its insides were a deep blue. There was a pitcher of water on his right, and a clay bowl full of some kind of powder and sliced pomegranates. A note next to the bowl—tiny, neat handwriting—read, "Eat. Sleep. Tomorrow, ride home."

Which is precisely what he did.

* *

"Was he OK?" the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine asked.

"I'm surprised you care," Briscoe growled.

"Who'd taken care of him? Ofalia? Who?"

I shrugged and moved on.

* *

Summer of 1957. Leaton Troutwine, living in Lajitas, runs tourists around in river rafts. Down through Santa Elena. Mainly just the tame stuff.

One tequila-hazy morning, Far Flung River Adventures gets a call. Leaton, sleeping closest to the phone, picks it up to find none other than Marguerite Lechuza on the other end of the line.

(Marguerite Lechuza. A woman with extraordinary powers. Rumored to be a witch. Said to have been seen sneaking down from the peak of La Mitre on full-mooned nights, where she may or may not have been consorting with El Diablo in his prison cave. Legendary for her love potions, revenge dust, and pecan pralines. Feared by sinners and saints, revered by all who fall in between those boundaries. Loved by children in the daylight hours; after dark they check under their beds to be certain she isn't lurking there to kidnap golden dreams. Consulted by jilted brides and suspension bridge engineers—"It's no good to build there: the coyote king's spirit will chase cars into the gorge every February 13th. . ."—Marguerite Lechuza, the town's eldest inhabitants will testify, could change herself into a gila

monster or an organ pipe cactus. She could hear through walls and into wombs, could see where the water lurked underground, ripe for the coming of a drill and a pip. The priest welcomed her to every social, although she never actually went to Mass, and her presence at the birth of a child was regarded as a sign that the child would be strong of heart, will, and liver. Marguerite Lechuza, unofficial but universally recognized Queen of Marfa.)

“Troutwine,” she said before he had a chance to grumble hello. “I saw you in a dream. Last night. A boy stood in front of a dust devil holding a football. Number 37.”

“That was me,” Leaton said.

“Yes. And you were talking with someone, Troutwine. Do you know who?”

Leaton looked around him at crumbling adobe walls and the fan that curled uncertainly in the window’s struggling breezes. He thought about the way his tornado had danced for him, how it had spun like a ballerina. “No. Who?”

“La Llorona. The Wailing Woman of the Rio Grande,” Marguerite Lechuza whispered, as if she was afraid her line was tapped and someone might overhear the secret she was about to impart.

* *

“Wait a second,” the Poet said. “Hold on just a minute. Two wet, weeping women?”

“The human condition can be summed up in one word,” I offered. “Coincidence.”

* *

(Leaton Troutwine had heard the Wailing Woman before. Some evenings just before he put the rafts ashore and cooked the tourists’ dinner so they could crawl into sleeping bags and prepare in moon-baked dreams for the next day’s adventure, Leaton would hear her sobbing. It always happened at the same place, a wide, high sandy beach on the Texas side of the Rio, perfect for camping. Across from that, twelve or thirteen feet above the glassy water, a fern grotto.

Leaton waited to see that grotto all day while he steered the rafts through the Rock Slide—through the Mexican Gate, past Dog Nose and Jupiter, over Rogue Wave, and to the side of Grabby Hole. When he caught sight of its feathery plants leaning out of the cave toward the chocolate brown water, he tuned out the oohs and aahs of Far Flung’s customers—mers, he called them, or peeps—and listened carefully for the weeping. It was no louder than the sound his oar made dipping into and rising out of the water. Brought back painful memories of Ofalia and Muerto Springs. His heart ached. His scarred heel stung.

Usually, one of the tourists would notice his painful-looking concentration and ask him if everything was alright. The weeping faded then, and was gone.

“It’s nothing,” Leaton would tell the peep. “Give me a hand getting this sun-dog ashore.”

Around the campfire at night, Leaton would tell the story of the Wailing Woman. “And so, out of desperation,” he would conclude, “the woman took her children to the high cliffs above the Rio. Being only babies, they could not have known what it meant when she tossed them down into the abyss. They made no sound, and the river took them just as quietly into its own dark heart. She meant to throw herself in after, but found that she could not do it. Some invisible hand kept her away from the edge. Ever since, the woman, or her ghost, has wandered the cliffs of the river, lamenting her runaway husband, her lost babies and her unbearable sin. Shh. Listen. Some nights you can hear her wailing. Shhh.”

The peeps, the mers were quiet then. Concentrating to hear anything over the campfire and their heartbeats. “I think I heard her,” someone would finally say.

But Leaton Troutwine knew that what the man or woman heard was nothing but the river humping against the rocks it loved. He knew the sound of the Wailing Woman’s tears, as if her misery was his own. But he had no way to describe it.)

“She was telling you where to find the gold, Troutwine,” Marguerite hissed into the phone. “She knows where it is hidden. And she told you in my dream. So when we find it, you and I, we will split it neatly in two.”

* *

Gordon sneezed, and Briscoe put one of the coolers down on the ground in front of him. The walrus stuck his snout into the cooler and sighed so that the empty beer cans danced and jiggled in the icy water.

“Let me guess,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine said. “The gold was hidden in the fern grotto. And Marguerite stilled the waters so that Leaton could climb up and claim the treasure. He became fantastically wealthy, owning as he does every Cosmic Drive-In Diner in the state of Texas—you see, I HAVE heard of your Leaton Troutwine before. I’ve eaten more than a few of his Marfa Melts. So let me finish this up for you: He lives happily ever after in a house modeled after the one in *Giant* not fifteen miles away from here. The end.”

Briscoe belched, snorted, popped another beer. “Wrong,” he said. “Wrong,” O’Neal echoed.

“Mostly wrong,” I granted.

* *

After Marguerite ran off with all the gold, Leaton Troutwine was pretty down and out, as you can imagine. HE was the one who knew where the gold was. The knowledge had been inside HIS head for who knows how long. HE’d been unable to reap the rewards his subconscious had mined for HIM.

So he spent a great many days wandering through the ghost town of Terlingua, and it was there that he realized what his life’s calling was.

Tater Tots.

Leaton Troutwine took out a small business loan and opened The Cosmic Drive-In Diner just outside of Marfa. It was the only dining spot in West Texas in

1957 where the consumer wasn't limited to a menu of nothing but chicken, beef, or sour cream enchiladas. Made a fortune in no time.

People flocked to the Cosmic.

You could see it from miles away, an oasis of neon and roller-skating waitresses. Patsy Cline's "Walking After Midnight" hit it big that first year the Cosmic was open, and for a while, driving toward the Cosmic, a hungry rancher with a convertible Caddy and a craving for Frito Pie could hear Patsy's voice wafting out to him on Highway 90. The Cosmic sign towered over the pickups and Ford Fairlanes. C in green. O in orange. S in blue. M in white, I in red. C in green again. Above the letters, neon reproductions of Leaton's beloved Lights blinked and zipped from side to side. "I stop to see a weeping willow," Patsy crooned.

Of course, Leaton expanded almost immediately. Began to sell off franchises all across Texas and New Mexico. Before you could say, "Que cruda estoy!" that young son of a gun was a millionaire. But not one content just to sit back and watch the president's faces roll in to him. As more Cosmic-like diners opened and competed for Leaton's business, he took to wandering Terlingua again, hoping to find the same spot of inspiration which gave him the idea for Tater Tots, anxious to evolve.

And one night, standing in the ruins where the Starlight Theatre had once shown films to the horde of miners that made Terlingua—for a brief time—a quicksilver boomtown, Leaton heard a voice say to him, "Alaska." He turned to see who might have snuck up to stand behind him.

"Alaska," the ghost said again.

(Leaton recognized the man to be a ghost, on account of how he was see-through.)

"Who are you?" Leaton asked.

"Used to run the projector here," the ghost replied. "Until no new films showed up for more than a month running. About the thirtieth time the miners saw the beginning of *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, one of them pulled out a gun, turned around, and shot me where I stood in the projection booth. Just as well, really. I couldn't have watched that damned film again myself."

"I'm the one who gave you the tater tots idea. Whispered it in your silken sow's ear whilst you roamed these same ruins, vituperating Marguerite Lechuza's venerable name."

Leaton, not scared—how could he be, considering all the weird things he'd endured in his life?—only curious, asked, "How'd you come to think up Tater Tots?"

"You say Tater Tots as if they ought to be capitalized," the ghost said. "But then, for you, I suppose, they would be. Listen, you sit in the desert long enough, watching the town you lived in turn to nothing, watching your best friend, a movie projector, rust, you come up with some notably bizarre ideas, poetry, recipes."

"Poetry?"

"It's a dead language," the ghost explained.

* * * *

“Now hang on there just one minute,” the Poet from over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine objected.

“I’m just telling it like it happened,” I said.

* * * *

“Alaska,” the ghost insisted. “Something tells me you’d find whatever it is you’re looking for in that great new state. Bigger than Texas, I understand. The deserts there are all ice. No sand. No cacti. No agkistrodon piscivoruses up there.”

Leaton shook his head to show that he was not completely up with what the ghost was attempting to relate.

“Water moccasins. Cottonmouths. Too cold for ’em. May be too cold for you. But it sure would be nice to feel the difference, wouldn’t it?”

Leaton told everyone who asked that he was going up to Alaska to investigate the possibility of developing a new product for The Cosmic. “Blubber tots” he said. “Eskimos eat blubber like it’s valentine candy. Maybe—deep-fried—it could catch on down here.”

* * * * *

“Here, you boys,” I said. “It’s getting late and old Leaton may have discovered Gordon’s disappearance. Let’s get him up in the back of the truck and take him home. Me and the Poet will ride in the back, and I’ll finish up the tale on the way in.

“Leaton stayed with a tribe of Eskimos for almost two weeks. Every night they told him the next day they would take him to see the ice cave where they stored the blubber. (Leaton wanted to get an idea on the size freezer he’d be needing.) But every morning, if it was snowing but just a little, the Eskimos told Leaton it would have to be some other time. Those people live to make snow angels.”

Gordon hung his head around the side of the cab, caught the desert wind in his whiskers. Grunted appreciatively, his walrus sense of direction telling him he was headed toward home.

“Leaton gets tired of waiting, of course. That’s one of the things being a millionaire had done to Leaton. Made him lust for all that effective usage of time had to offer—namely more time. So one afternoon, just a few flakes falling on the tundra, he puts on his parka and heads out for the ice cave, taking with him a map he pestered one of the Eskimo women into drawing out.”

The Poet listened attentively.

“Not too much to tell really about this part. The ice cave was beautiful beyond words, Leaton’s said again and again. Like being inside a diamond, apparently. Full of whale blubber and a few sleeping walruses. Well, Leaton looked around until his hands started to sting from the cold, and he decided to go on back to his igloo. But a polar bear was blocking the door. Actually, it was lumbering toward Leaton on two legs, growling. So Leaton figured this was what the projectionist ghost was referring to. He’d come looking for something. Blubber, he’d thought. And found it.

Death. A great, big white death with hellacious teeth and cock-fight-sharp claws.

“So long, cruel world,” Leaton says he thought. He just relaxed his shoulders, thought about a mountainside of ocotillo in bloom, and got ready to be eaten. Except the bear didn’t get to him. Two walruses decided to take him on. One tripped the bear from behind with a well-placed flipper. The other one sank a tusk right into the bear’s hairy trunk. I’ve heard of dolphins pulling stuff like that against sharks, but this walrus story, well, it was a first for the world, I believe.”

The Poet, not able to resist the temptation, asked, “Did the polar bear manage to kill the two walruses before he died? Is Gordon those two walruses’ orphaned child? Is that why Leaton brought him back to Marfa, Texas? Out of gratitude?”

“Would it make you happy if I said yes?” I asked the Poet.

He had to struggle for a few seconds before he came up with an answer.

“I don’t know,” he said over the roar of the pickup’s tires, Gordon’s jubilant mewling, the beer cans making beer can music in the truck’s bed. “I don’t think so.”

“Then I won’t tell you.”

We pulled up to Leaton Troutwine’s house in a fog of dust glowing red from our brake lights. The Poet and I had to hold Gordon back while Briscoe let down the tailgate. As soon as we let go of our hold around his neck, he bailed out of the truck and lumbered up to the front door, turned around, and waited for us to catch up and ring the doorbell.

It was well after midnight. And the door was unlocked. And Leaton Troutwine didn’t answer to our voices calling, “Hey there.” And we knew, just from the way our voices echoed, that something was not right.

We found him in the kitchen, his face down on his arm like he was resting his eyes. But he wouldn’t wake up when we shook him, or when Gordon tried to get up in his lap.

There was a note propped up against a vase full of fresh-picked bluebonnets. (Don’t tell anybody that part. It’s illegal to pick bluebonnets instate. And I wouldn’t want to be known as the one that blew the whistle on Leaton’s only transgression of the legal system.) Note read:

I’ve gone out to live with The Lights. They were nice enough to finally invite me back, and I’d be stupid not to accept. Seeing as how they have asked me to stay for what we’ve come to call “good.” I would greatly appreciate it if somebody would take care of Gordon. Also try and corner some poet (I’m told they have one or two over at Sul Ross State University in Alpine) and tell him that he can have every last thing I own. I ask only that he quit whining about his infinitesimal soul and pay some lip service to the mysteries that blessed me all my life. (Who’d a thought Marguerite Lechuzza would save my life with two chickens, then rob me of a fortune in gold? People are strange.) There’s a typewriter in the basement.

Without regrets.

Leaton Troutwine

PS: If anybody can track down Lorna Tickfringe, please do so and tell her I’m finally over her.

“Who was Lorna Tickfringe?” the Poet asked. “The captain of the cheerleading squad? How did he know it was Marguerite Lechuza that saved his life with those chickens? How much stuff did you leave out?” the Poet asked me.

“Son,” I said, “you’re a rich man now. You could pay every person in Marfa to come in here’n tell you everything they know about Leaton Troutwine, and you’d still be rich but no closer to owning the whole story.”

“But at the end of *Citizen Kane* they let you know just exactly who Rosebud was. What’s the meaning of all this?”

I walked over to the phone to dial the funeral home. “In a world where a projectionist gets shot over a Mickey Rooney movie and a snakebite can make a man bleed out his eyes, you’re better off deciding what stuff means for yourself. That way, your disappointments won’t be many and a bad mystery novel’s only half as long.”

The Poet moaned, “I’m lost.”

“We all are,” I said. “Ain’t that fine?”

(Some years after that night, I sat on the Poet’s front porch [used to be Leaton Troutwine’s front porch] drinking wine. “Quote me a poem,” I said.

“I don’t know any by heart.”

“Not even your own?”

“Nope.”

I took out two cigars and passed one over to the Poet. “Then tell me about the night we found ol’ Leaton Troutwine ‘not at home.’” I said.

“Well, the Marfa Lights were big and bright,” he began, laughing. “Deep in my heart, I knew something was afoot. . .”

(I lit my cigar and passed him the lighter.)

Steve Zeitlin

The Storytelling Wake

Gina bet against her in gin rummy
Sarah summered with her as a child

When she died, the stories
lay scattered
around her absence
like lost children

So we gathered first the stories
of Abby as saint
then, local sweetheart
finally, the trickster tales

and we reconstructed Abby
at the storytelling wake

—inspired by folklorists Kelly S. Taylor and Kenny Goldstein

Leslie Prosterman

Rant

I
can
not
stand for
one more minute
the woman sitting
next to me eating an apple
during Kim Addonizio's
"We part our lips, our mouths get nearer and nearer."
She picks up the apple
and digs her mouth
into the mealy flesh,
tiny eyes riveted on the poet,
tiny teeth riveted in the apple.
She puts it down, picks it up again
without looking at it,
rests it carefully on *Jimmy and Rita*.
And then picks it up again.
Immediately.

She is fat and soft and pale and
does *not* put down the apple
for two fucking seconds.
Kim is reading the poem about death
and the woman next to me eats on.
How did the apple get so big?
It must have apple extender in it.
It never seems to diminish.
She is the inverted Penelope of apple-eating,
the apple renewing itself each minute
instead of unraveling the night before.
Or perhaps she's eating it slowly
just to piss me off. She's stringing out
the apple eating deliberately,
turning it into a goddamn cliff-hanger.

She's waiting
to finish the apple,
to make sure there will
be no poem read unaccompanied
by slow, ruminative
chewing, extremely slow,
not unlike the cud
revolving throughout the four
chambers of a cow's
stomach. I don't know
why that came into my head just now.

Kim Addonizio acknowledges
that the Rilke quote she is about to use is very well-known.
Nora on my other side
turns to me and says, yeah,
it's on quite a few
refrigerator magnets
these days.

And the apple-eater says, I just
bought that magnet. Isn't that weird?

Yes, that's weird.

She does not seem to realize
how annoyed I am with her
and her now mercifully-deceased apple
and that I think she should get a new
hairstyle and stop
dyeing her hair
so blonde
when her skin is
so pink.

She smiles at me
tentatively.
My indefensibly
soft heart feels
ashamed and tender toward her
in the spirit of the New Age.
I realize she is a person, too.
She is anxious,
hoping to please

like a new kindergartner
on her first day of school.
She would like to connect,
she is sensitive,
she is, after all,
attending a poetry reading.

She is like me, we are one.

And then,
she
takes
out
another
fucking
apple
and
I *see* now
she really is the antiChrist.
She should get a new
hairdresser,
exorcise those
cotton-candy textured
blonde curls
falling limply into sixes
over her fuschia cheeks,
stop chewing those apples,
or confine herself
forever
to attending readings
of grocery lists.

Ceci N'est Pas un Metaphor

"I've lost my power here"
as he holds his big
microphone
in both hands.

"Symbolism, he says, metaphor,
no. Let's just talk about tone.
Symbolism and metaphor merely
confuse the issue."

Re-enthroning himself,
he sits
cross-legged up on the stage,
non-metaphorical crotch
slightly above
eye level,
big,
though impotent,
microphone now held
by a
four-footed
metal stand
instead of his
five-fingered
hand.

Now, a mere symbolic
gesture of its
former functional self,
the mike becomes
an agent of display,
reinscribed as an
artifact of sound and dominance,
a figurative, useless
amplification of authority.

Painting Louise Glück

Five aspiring poets
slid
surreptitiously on their
bellies
to the podium. They
whipped
out five little bright bottles,
dipped
their tiny brushes in the shiny pots and
smeared
her toenails with jade and turquoise
shellac

As she read “Prism” to the assembled crowd
we
accidentally
embalmed
her entire foot in
formaldehyde-based
glaze.

We
realized
we had
slightly
misunderstood
the formula
and, backing each other up,
prayed and labored
apologetically
to release
her from that
subsequent
layer
of unnecessary
varnish.

“My intimacies have always been forged
with people who were capable
of seeing the dark side of things.”

With these words, she
cracked
the second
lacquered
coat of precious
gems
and finally released
herself.

from *Kamp: A Memory Novel*

Chapter 1

Foretaste: A Night at Camp #3

The all-day rain, light at first, worsened as evening approached, a ghostly mist rising from the warm hollows of the rolling terrain. Such weather exposed a dirty secret of the bunkhouses, which from the outside appeared to be in good shape, by highlighting the condition of the roofs; mine, for example, had a half-dozen leaks, one of them directly over the foot of my bed. On such a day, outdoor activities were pretty much ruled out, leading to a group sense of confinement not unlike what it must be like in prison. My bunkhouse boys spent much of the day sorting laundry.

After the supper dishes were cleared away that night, a torn, yellowed screen was set up at one end of the dining hall and a creaking projector, which deserved retirement in a museum, was clicked on at the other. The natives (including us counselors, who should have been maintaining order) were especially restless; when it became clear that the movie selection was the decrepit classic, *Ruggles of Red Gap*, the assembled multitude issued a collective groan and all traces of decorum vanished. At first we amused ourselves by shouting out clever responses to the film's dialogue, the older campers offering particularly ribald contributions made the more hilarious by one's affectation of an English accent.

Then things got physical: before I could stop them, my own table of campers was tossing lit firecrackers saved from their July Fourth celebrations for just such an occasion. Knowing better than to buck the resulting mass hysteria, I slipped away in the hope that by absenting myself my dereliction of duty would be less obvious. I wasn't that worried, since the heads of the Boys and Girls Sides—the real authority figures—were nowhere in evidence.

As I passed the front wing of the dining hall where the camp store was housed, Jerry, the canteen clerk, grabbed my arm and whispered an invitation to return later. You never knew with Jerry, but his dramatic tone suggested that he was planning something special in the way of a late-night diversion. Since it was my “night off,” which is to say that I had no patrol duty, I was free to do whatever I wished so long as that didn't involve leaving camp.

Joey, the youngest camper in my bunkhouse, had made one of his escape attempts the day before, and although a search party had combed the grounds and the local sheriff's office was alerted, his empty cot at "lights out" this night seemed to reproach me for not having done more to mitigate his misery. I was especially concerned about the homesick pain-in-the-*tush* being caught out in what was now a downpour. Waiting until my other campers showed every sign of falling asleep, I eased open the creaking screen door and sloshed through the mud back to the canteen, the rain making a roaring din as it bombarded my rubber-impregnated, green Army poncho.

Speaking of the Army, Jerry had been a PX clerk near Seoul during the Korean War, so he knew all the ins and outs of acquiring discounted and contraband goods. Camp #3's canteen stocked an amazing variety of items for camper and counselor alike, including under-the-counter alcoholic beverages, cigarettes, and marijuana reputedly grown by local Amish farmers. The camp's owner evidently turned a blind eye to such illegalities, very likely receiving a hefty kickback for letting Jerry get away with them.

Corruption aside, Jerry was a gregarious guy who always was ready with a good story, whether or not you had time to listen to it. As I entered the canteen he was in the midst of telling one of his favorites, about how he and a couple of fellow privates in Korea had plotted to kill their hated sergeant one Saturday night. They planted a landmine in the road the "sadistic sonofabitch" habitually took to visit his favorite brothel and waited on the hill above with their M1 rifles to finish him off if need be. But the sergeant's jeep never appeared that night, and the speculation that he'd gotten wind of the plot squashed any further assassination attempts. Jerry ended the tale by expressing his relief that the plan had failed, the point being, that he was not a murderer at heart. That was a good thing to know.

Jerry's audience consisted of about a dozen counselors, who were lounging on the benches at the few tables or leaning on the counter. The canteen offered a sociable refuge from the gloom outside, aided in no small measure by a sweet cloud of reefer smoke. I'd chosen, even in those heady 1960s, to abstain from drugs, but a contact buzz was unavoidable in the small room and it wasn't long before I was feeling mellow. Apparently Jerry wasn't ready to spring the surprise hinted at in his whispered invitation and was waiting for a few more staffers to show up. Meanwhile, I couldn't help noticing an uninhibited couple in one corner engaged in as much sex as they could manage with most of their clothes on.

The arrival of the camp's pastry chef and handyman completed the by-invitation party and also gave away the theme of the night's festivities, since both were noted tipplers whose bond of friendship was cemented by alcohol. Jerry ducked into the large refrigerator where the soft drinks were kept and emerged with a heavy cardboard case containing a treasure-trove of canned beer from a well-known Philadelphia brewery. (The brand would later go belly-up after its advertising slogan, "The Beer with Body," became a self-fulfilling prophecy; word got out that a vagrant's corpse was found floating in one of the vats, a smile on his face.)

The novelty this night was not so much the beer as its containers. Metal cans for beer had existed for some time but could only be opened with the sharp end of a tool affectionately known as a “church key.” It was in the early 1960s that manufacturers introduced the zip-top can, and our little group of happy campers was to be among the first to experience this innovation, which Jerry demystified by giving us a demonstration. To underscore his largesse as host, he was only charging us seventy-five cents per beer, a considerable reduction of his usual inflated markup.

I’ve never been a big drinker, but I can toss down a couple of cool ones with the best of them, especially in summer. So I joined the others in wrapping one hand around a can and tugging with my other on the tab. Clearly the technology wasn’t perfected yet, for all of us but Jerry, who’d been practicing, were visibly struggling to open our cans. The young women who were present complained of broken fingernails, and all of us received lacerations from the razor-like metal. An impressive quantity of blood began to flow, but that didn’t stop us from drinking as we created at least partial openings in the can tops. Blood mingled with beer, and our lips took on the hue of a sated Dracula. The sight of each others’ bloody fingers and mouths, the sting of our wounds, and our growing intoxication added up to raucous laughter. We were having fun now.

To encourage each round, Jerry would recite short, bawdy toasts from his military days. This inspired me to contribute a narrative “toast” I’d picked up from my black West Philadelphia schoolyard chums in the eighth grade (and which I still like to perform in the right circumstances). It offered a very different take on the tragic events of 1912 than the favorite camp song, “Wasn’t It Sad When That Great Ship Went Down.” A couple of counselors boosted me onto the counter as a bid for the group’s attention, and I launched into it:

Say, the eighth of May was a hell of a day
When the great Titanic went sailing away.
The ship hadn’t been at sea more than a wink
When it struck an iceberg and began to sink.
Now, Shine—he was the black porter—
Was down below eating his peas,
When Atlantic waters came up to his knees.
Shine ran upstairs quick to tell the captain:
“Captain, Captain, I was downstairs eating my peas
When cold Atlantic waters come up to my knees.”
Captain says, “Shine, Shine, get your black ass back down;
I’ve got ninety-nine pumps to pump that water down.”
So Shine went back down and stared through space,
That’s when the water came up to his waist.
Shine ran upstairs again and found the captain:
“Captain, Captain, I was staring through space
When cold Atlantic waters come up to my waist.”
Captain says, “Shine, Shine, set your black ass down;

I've got ninety-nine pumps to pump that water down."
So Shine went back down and was eating his bread;
That's when the water came up to his head.
This time, Shine didn't bother to find the captain.
He jumped overboard and began to swim;
There were dozens of millionaires on deck watching him.
Now, Shine could swim, and Shine could float;
Shine could outswim any goddam motorboat.
'Bout that time the captain came on deck and said,
"Yo, Shine, if you save poor me,
I'll give you more money than any black man ever see."
Shine says, "Your money may buy plenty on land,
But it ain't worth shit on the sea.
So jump overboard, motherfucker,
And give the sharks a chase, like me."
'Bout that time the captain's daughter came on deck,
Titties in her hands and drawers all 'round her neck.
She says, "Shine, Shine, if you save poor me,
I'll give you all this white ass that you see."
Shine says, "You hate my color, you despise my race,
So jump overboard, bitch,
And give the sharks a chase, like me!"

At this point, the canteen group was in an uproar, cheering me—and underdog Shine—on. I concluded,

'Bout that time Shine met up with Brother Whale.
Brother Whale says, "Shine, Shine, you swim mighty fine,
But if you miss one stroke your black ass is mine."
So Shine speeded up to outswim Brother Whale.
It made his arms ache till they were real sore,
But he finally made it to the shore.
Now, when the news got to old Philly town
That the Titanic had sunk,
D'ya know where Shine was?
He was down on Broad Street, dead drunk!
Now, if anyone asks who proposed this toast,
Tell 'em it was Ishmael,
Who's been from coast to coast.

Resounding applause, screams of delight, and shouts of approbation enveloped me as I jumped from the counter; Jerry even handed me an opened beer on the house.

Suddenly, a deafening thunderclap reminded us of the violent summer storm outside. At the same instant, the canteen's front door banged open and the tail end of a nearby lightning flash threw an unnaturally large figure into menacing silhouette. His face was obscured, but we all instinctually recognized the most

unwelcome of party crashers, Big Jack. Shocked into instant sobriety, our hilarity quickly deflated to nervous titters and then dead silence.

As luck would have it, I was leaning against the wall next to the side door. The beckoning doorknob persuaded me—a firm believer that discretion is the better part of valor—to call it a night. So I slipped out into the dripping darkness, hoping that the others would escape confrontation as easily as I . . . but knowing otherwise.

Jeannie Banks Thomas

Shins Around the Fireside (Jig)

In the church near the woods,
bagpipes, and
men holding hands
and singing loudly
enough
to wake all the lambs in the cemetery.

In the town by the highway
company housing,
bipolar duplexes
at war with each other's angles;
on stoops, tenants dream
the promises of phantom golf courses.

In the bar by the French-speaking sea
young men in sandals
play the instruments of their ancestors,
but plug them in first;
and the old men dance whether
they've been drinking or not.

In the house in the snow
shoeless old women
wear tightly knitted slippers;
they beat the tunes out hard
with their feet and
think about working up a rock 'n roll sweat.

While upstairs, the fire
and the midnight dinner
wait.

William Bernard McCarthy

Maybelle and Sara on the Porch

In straight chairs
in fading light
two aged ladies
play the light
of hand and eye
over old and faded photos.

Meanwhile,
behind,
inside,
like daylight,
dinner—
supper, rather—
fades.