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## Polish Wedding: Chicago 1983

The liquor was free. The groom drove a UPS truck and the bride was a secretary for someone at the Board of Trade. They were both Polish, born to immigrants who'd moved to the south suburbs. *Now they're dancing to the bunny hop, and you and I are dancing to the bunny hop, and we're laughing in that booze-induced hilarity where everything moves a little faster than it should and the chandeliers shine down like stars, and even the priest is dancing to the bunny hop, his bald head beading sweat as he smiles, somehow making the hopping holy.*

After the reception we headed farther south and found the tavern from those directions your friend had scribbled on a beer-stained napkin inscribed in fake gold, *Thelma and Wally, January 19th, 1983*. We walked inside and a pool table materialized in that land of smoke. I wondered if the tavern was burning, but then I saw Father Tom at the counter with a cigarette, surrounded by fiends making love with their Lucky Strikes, so I fetched us rum and Cokes and we drank beyond our previous stupor, reached that Paradise where every worry and sorrow was relieved, where the world was a good and happy place and the sound of the Sinbad pinball machine was the singing of angels, and the UPS man and the secretary wore halos, and the moonlight trickling through the burglar bars was light converted into language, a righteous hymn from an almighty God. We were His children, drunk and playing pool, hugging each other, inhaling cheap perfume and cologne, *until it is late and you're guiding me to the car and I'm wearing the grey trench coat I bought at the Goodwill, the one I think makes me look retro and cool. And a small voice says something about using the bathroom inside but mostly I don't care, so I pee in the parking lot, even as you yell at me for being a drunken pig.*

During the long drive home we didn't speak, and I was glad you were behind the wheel because things like lane markers and signs bearing directions meant nothing to me as we cruised by the Loop on the Dan Ryan, high on the spaghetti interchange that led from Chicago to the four corners of the world. And I stared at the Sears

Tower, that black void in the heart of everything, red lights bleeping from its summit, 1,454 feet from the dirty streets below.



I've never told you this, but two years after our divorce I ran into Wally at an AA meeting on the north side. We talked about the Cubs for a while, and how great it was to be sober. He asked about you and I told him about your living in San Diego, how it was for the best. He said, *life's hard*, and told me about Thelma's stillborn child, quite a transition from baseball and divorce, and for a moment I didn't know what to say, you know how it is when someone surprises you with grief that is beyond language, and all you can say is, *I'm sorry*.

Thank god we never had children to witness our drinking and those awful fights, like the time you called the police when I wouldn't leave our own house, and they rushed through the front door and found me sitting in my BVDs holding the phone cord, which I'd just torn in half. I can see again the red carpet of that place on Addison Street with its shit stains from Mike the dog. I can see a younger me sitting on the floor in his underwear, telling the cops it won't happen again. I can see you standing there crying, your body skinny from booze and neglect, bones visible beneath your nightgown.

So I told Wally I was sorry and bought him a cup of bad coffee, turned the conversation toward UPS and the way they were working him like a dog, adding to his delivery territory, but not to his pay. Outside the AA club, dusk was coming on. I remember it was cold spring, late April when it was still possible that the Cubs would win the pennant and the rain that fell so hard on Sheffield Avenue would bring crocuses and daffodils to Lakeview gardens. I said goodbye to Wally and walked toward the Ravenswood el, and soon I was chilled to the bone, whispers of grey breath rising toward the sky as I thought of bad marriages and dead children, of old pain and sorrows yet to come. And the rain fell like memory, steady with its sad music, puddling beneath the el platform, where stunned pigeons sheltered beneath the weathered planks.

## Devolution

During the Paleolithic, hunters and gatherers believed that in dreams the soul left the body and wandered far and wide, a precursor of death. So, those stone-agers never woke a sleeper for fear of disturbing the body before the soul had returned. It all makes sense to me: I wander whole landscapes in my sleep, confront the occasional bear, but more often the ex-wife, the dead grandfather, or my own spirit lingering over that tavern in Chicago where a whole decade of my life was spent sleeping at the bar, if indeed profound drunkenness is a kind of Paleolithic stupor, a stone-age stupidity where the mind has de-evolved and lost the use of rational thought, and even the muscles in the larynx and mouth, even the limber tongue, have been clumsily reduced, so that my human mouth resembles more some ancient fish, dumbly opening, then closing and making no sound as it navigates the watery depths.

Yes, I was drunk as a non-verbal fish, lost in that dream so numb, the world shimmered a little, as though the planet was rocking on its axis, as though the moon had shifted closer and its tidal pull acted in concert with the booze rendering me as mute as the man on the moon, drifting forever through black space, occasionally distracted by a leaping cow, my only sustenance cheese and more cheese, my arteries long-constricted by milk and fat, my heart diseased and warbling like a fat, sick bird who sings one last sorrowful tune.



All of us evolving, devolving, living, dying. Once upon a time I was a little Baptist boy living on the Southside of Virginia. Later I was a fallen Baptist dying on the Northside of Chicago. During my Paleolithic I wandered to Crown Liquors on Southport and bought duck decanters full of Jim Beam. During my own personal Paleolithic, I drank until my apartment on Addison Street became its own cave filled with a liquid dark. The walls crawled with strange animals and I cried out for my own big-hipped virgin who might ease my misery. During my own Paleolithic, I stumbled from tavern to tavern beneath the strange, dead stars, hunting for sustenance.

## Aliens Among Us

*for Mike Bala*

*Pope John Paul II used to beat himself with a belt and sleep naked on a bare floor to bring himself closer to Christ.*

When I was a bus driver in Chicago, I worked with a Polish guy named Mike Bala, who had been baptized by John Paul in the old country when the sainted one was still a parish priest. Before drinking himself to death in the late '80s, Mike offered many of us the unique opportunity to marry illegal aliens from Poland for \$3,000.

When I was growing up with the Southern Baptists, Catholics seemed alien back during nights I'd unfasten my belt and beat my meat before falling asleep naked and not feeling closer to the risen Christ. I knew, even then, that Jesus did not want me to play with my penis, O magic wand of adolescence, which seemed to stiffen and wave on its own, almost as if it were an alien part of my body taking guidance from outer space.

In his final days, Mike Bala would pass out after two beers, his liver so swollen that the alcohol went right into his bloodstream. We'd carry him out to his Pontiac, throw him in the back seat, let him sleep through the cold hours until dawn. He'd always show up for work the next morning, talking shit about the old priest and telling Polish pussy jokes that, even then, weren't funny.

It is funny how Mike and the Pope are in heaven now, that alien place where everyone is closer to Christ, where a just God strokes his white beard, where the risen play their gilded ukuleles, where I'm sure those angelic, big-boned Eastern European women wander stark naked across the cumuli.

## Eddie Jones

My wife said Eddie had *bedroom eyes*, and even though I didn't know what the hell she meant at the time, I sensed it wasn't good, didn't represent some commitment to fidelity on her part, didn't bring a measure of confidence to our troubled marriage.

In those days I worked with Eddie at the bus company in Chicago, and drank with him every afternoon at the Club del Morocco, and watched Eddie and those *bedroom eyes* seduce the prostitutes that frequented the tavern, trolling for easy prey among the vulgar crowd that played pinball as they invited the *cunts* into the bathroom for a half-a-sawbuck blowjob.

But Eddie never had to pay, even took the whores home sometimes to his two-flat on Halsted, leaving the rest of us behind in a smoky haze, whose curtain I am parting now, and I see Eddie again, his only flaw a mouthful of rotten teeth, and now I'm remembering how he drank Nyquil with booze to kill the pain of those blackened stumps. But it's a testament to his good looks that even with his foul breath, my wife snuck off with him several nights, and I hope he at least walked with her through some south side park, sweet-talked her a little beneath a full hunter's moon, the kind that transformed the whole Midwest into a red-tinted wonderland. I hope he at least held her hand for a little while and told her she was pretty before he pulled the curtains on his bedroom window and killed the orange streaming moonlight.



The last time I saw him, ten years after he seduced my wife, Eddie was living over a bar on California Avenue, so his commute from home to work was about one minute. He looked bad in the way booze melts away the once firm cheekbones, allows gravity to pull the face down so far that a mouth disappears into a chin, a chin fades into a fat neck, a fat neck becomes one with the stout trunk, that bloated vessel filled with failing organs.

Worse, the bedroom eyes were faded brown buttons in a yellow-pink sea, and when he looked at me, I saw drowned kingdoms, Sirens

whispering “Last call” into the wine-dark sea, the bottomless deep that waited for Eddie, region of strange fishes without eyes, of sunken ships like the closed taverns we frequented before they were lost in the fog of dark and tans, of good Irish whiskey, of old music in an older jukebox that sings of the looming rocks, the jagged ones that will pierce our bodies and leave us cold and naked on foreign shores.

All these years later, I don’t hate Eddie, nor do I argue against the right of any man to choose alcohol over living, to choose drunkenness over these sober days of bill collectors and animal services banging around in the alley looking for that scared, bewildered dog.

If the body is the temple of the soul, Eddie’s has been cut open by priests, his intestines bared to reveal bad days ahead, cold nights on the rocks, and the terror that comes when the liquor finally fails, when the nerves themselves become wires transmitting quick and fiery messages of a new dawn, one of broken glass and extinction, one of dead batteries and late buses, of cold coffee in the one diner he had still believed in.

## Dave

the pot-bellied Puerto Rican drinks Old Style and brags how in the middle of slicing watermelon on the 4th of July, he threw the sticky butcher knife at his wife, plugged her right in the thigh as his ten-year-old son looked on. Dave says he laughed as he called the paramedics. “You shoulda seen the look on her face,” he confides to me here in the cool and drunken dark of the Club del Morocco. “What about the cops?” I ask over the sweating pitcher that separates us. “That was the best part, I told her I would kill her if she didn’t say she did it to herself,” replies Dave, who once attacked homeless “Cincinnati,” the broken-down boxer who sold left-over chicken parts from the Fulton Street Market. Dave beat the hell out of him one August afternoon, slashed a six-inch cut across the old man’s skinny side, then ripped off his chicken.

He calls me “college boy,” doesn’t understand why I avoid the whores who prowl this place. So he pays Cindy ten dollars to blow me, dares me to turn it down. (The next thing I know I’m in the bathroom, too drunk to do anything except be embarrassed.) When I stagger back to my bar stool, I’m not “college boy” anymore, and Dave grins welcome, as I lurch into his darkness, celebrate with shots of bourbon the blurry, high-pitched minutes before “last call.”

## Tom

The last time I saw Tom Johnson, I was sitting at the bar in the Club del Morocco, sipping on an Old Style. It was payday and I'd just cashed my check at the currency exchange around the corner on Halsted. I had three-hundred bucks in my pocket and it was late afternoon with a whole night of drinking and forgetfulness lying ahead of me. Tom walked through the door of the Club. It was January and the cold air followed him in. He sat next to me, ordered a Budweiser and a shot of bourbon. Lindsay pulled a can out of the cooler and deftly poured a shot all in the same motion. "I'm a little short, Jess," said Tom. "Can you spot me half a sawbuck until I cash my check?" "Sure," I said, pulling a wad of money out of my front pocket and peeling off a ten-dollar bill. Tom finished his drinks and said, "Think I'll head out to Cicero and catch up with some buddies." I watched him walk out the door, late sun framing his portly body as he walked out into the faltering daylight. I never saw Tom again. That night in Cicero someone nearly beat him to death in the parking lot of a tavern. He lay in a coma at Rush Presbyterian for a week before his family told the doctor to pull the plug.

During the week he lay in his death trance, some of the guys visited him, but I didn't. Instead I went to the Club and raised an Old Style and thought about Tom's bad luck. Dave Zaworski, a sixty-year-old, soon-to-be retiring charter driver, said, "He knew better than to go to that fuckin' Candlelight Lounge. They'll roll you there for a dollar." And soon we reduced Tom's death to a bad choice: getting drunk in a neighborhood known for its paranoia and prejudice, for its cheap hoods and gangsters. The night of Tom's death, I got drunk just like any other night and knew that if fate had been reversed, he would have done the same thing.

Somewhere deep inside of me, those days are still playing out. I see the dead hanging over the knife-nicked bar of the Club del Morocco. "Fast Willie" Green is offering me a sip of bourbon from his favorite mug—it has a miniature tit on the side of it near the

top. There's a hole in the nipple, so you can suck booze from it. The booths are full of bus drivers eating the greasy perch dinner that is the best choice on the tavern's menu. From the kitchen I can hear the laughter of a prostitute and two of her clients. Downstairs an illegal card game is going on, and the jukebox is blasting Motown as I look into the mirror behind the bar, see a stranger staring back at me. He's holding a shot glass in his right hand and the hollowness behind his eyes goes on forever.



I'm reading this twenty-five years after Tom's death, twenty-two years after I stopped drinking; fifteen years after I quit the bus driving job and moved to Florida; and five years after I stopped believing in God. I still remember Tom, and as I look back toward that darkness of the early '80s I can almost see his face, almost remember what he looked like.

A few days before he died, we got drunk at O'Sullivan's, an Irish bar at the intersection where Grand, Milwaukee and Halsted meet, where on most afternoons between two and four, you could get dark and tans and shots of Drambuie for half-price. That last time we drank together at O'Sullivan's, Marion, the only female bus driver, was with us, and now I can remember her short black hair, the pretty face, the strong body that flashed *don't fuck with me*, in pink neon. There was an Irish band playing at the Irish bar and we were drinking dark and tans, and even though Drambuie is Scottish, hell, it was close enough that we felt like Irish booze brothers and sisters. There were other bus drivers there that afternoon, which by the time the band played, had become a ragged night of too much laughter and too many of the giggly insults we lived by. At one point, I fell off my stool and landed flat on my back. It didn't hurt at all and everyone complimented me on not grabbing the table and pulling the shots and brews down with me.

O'Sullivan's is coming back clearly now, or as clearly as anything from those days might be remembered. It was a big place with high ceilings. The west wall had big windows so you could look out on

Milwaukee Avenue and pity the normal people who were waiting for buses, or maybe queuing up at the Greek butcher shop across the street with a sheep's bloody head on display out front.

There were pictures of Mayor Daley behind the bar. One of them showed his honor shaking hands with one of the founding O'Sullivans. Another picture showed Wolf Point, that little peninsula on the Chicago River where the sainted Fathers' Marquette and Joliet landed in the late 17th century. In fact, there were many other pictures and I could make up a few, but I want you to believe how drunk I was that last time I hung out with Tom Johnson. I want you to realize that if you had asked me at that very moment when I chugged down those dark and tans, followed them with the fire of Drambuie; if you'd ask me then, I would have said that I loved Tom and Marion. Hell, I loved everyone when I was drunk.

## Marion

Marion was the only female driver at the bus company. Until cancer took her in 1982, she smoked three packs of Marlboros a day and prided herself on pushing the big Detroit diesel against its governor for the long flat miles that separated Midwest destinations. Many winter weekends the two of us made the trip from Illinois Benedictine College to Lake Geneva, Wisconsin, taking Spanish students to a pine-wooded weekend retreat. It usually snowed from Coral to Marengo.

*And by Harvard the road has disappeared* into the white fields. I have followed the dull red glow of Marion's tail lights for hours, as the grey sky lowers down to the brown stubble of wheat and cornstalks that flicker by like skinny hands pointing toward Big Foot, Illinois, seven miles from the Dairy State border, where downtown is a gas station, Laura's Antique Store, one pallid church and a chain-fenced cemetery next to the woods that darkly thicken the horizon. As we approach Wisconsin, the landscape turns to steep hills, and Marion's MCI fishtails down the first incline that leads toward the lake, which does look like Switzerland, the vast grey waters surrounded by forest, mist obscuring everything.

Now the students are singing "*Guatanamera*" and there's a hint of moon breaking through the storm. Ice crystals shine like fallen sugar, glaze the open fields as we turn on the narrow road that twists down a lake bluff to the retreat. Windshield wipers thrash clods of new snow into the stillness pierced by steel-belted radials searching for blacktop and meaning amid a chorus of "*Yo soy un hombre sincero.*" Marion parks in front of the main lodge, gets out and clanks open the aluminum bay doors, her middle-aged body in a polyester black jacket with fake fur around the collar, the wet cold darkening grey work pants, black boots road salt stained. She unloads suitcases by the yellowed storm light, a sudden angel smoking a cigarette, awash in a brightness not of this world but the next.

Later, we fill out our log books to the roar of defrosters pushing warm air against the opaque windshield. The forms of the night—

hemlock, pine, lake—disappear beyond the wet grey wall cast by our breath. We sit in the first row of seats, graphing the hours driven to this barren half-light of air pressure gauge and the orange burn of Marion's addiction. The smoke glides to the green and white speckled bus ceiling, circling like an uneasy spirit released in fire then trapped by dirty fiberglass. Marion pours lukewarm coffee into the Styrofoam cups that define a bus driver's life, and we sip the black brew, thinking of the slick miles between us and home, cornfields and dairy farms immersed in January, towns asleep in cold counties of the dead.

## Starved Rock State Park: October 1983

My first wife, Lillian, hated her life so much she started smoking at 30. For her birthday that year, we took a weekend trip to Starved Rock State Park near Ottawa, Illinois. She smoked Kools the entire ninety minutes we drove down I-55, and as was our custom back then, we chased down a pint of Seagrams VO to the tune of humming Sears retreads on the cratered concrete.

You really should visit Starved Rock yourself, warm yourself before the enormous fireplace in the main lodge that was built by the Civilian Conservation Corps in the '30s. And the park itself is beautiful where it pushes up against the Illinois River, so it's all bluffs and rocky hills looking down toward the slow-moving water.

My wife and I hiked those steep trails and marveled at the thick woods that made us feel as though we'd found a great wilderness, and we had, though the darkness was within ourselves and not framed by fragrant pine or solid oak. We tried to drink the darkness away and on Saturday night we even scurried into Ottawa and stopped for dinner at a bar overlooking the river. The special was all the fried smelt u could eat for three bucks, so we gobbled down a school of the greasy little fishes, following each mess of smelt with a cold Pabst draft until we'd forgotten our wilderness beneath the high ceilings of the tavern, but around midnight it was time to head back to our cabin where we didn't have sex but instead made love to a few shots of whiskey as my wife curled smoke rings across the Formica kitchen table. We didn't talk; you know how alcohol sometimes takes your speaking away, dumbs down your tongue until even the silence is slurred. So, we sat there and drank. A little moonlight crept between the ugly lime curtains and the kitchen clock clicked out the slow minutes before dawn.

If you go to Starved Rock State Park, I recommend early fall when the leaves are turning, when the air is crisp and when the light softens toward dusk in colors that are almost shades of the very leaves

the late light falls upon as the sun sinks somewhere west of Iowa, and the Midwest darkness swallows the whole world into its sea. If you go to Starved Rock, avoid the all u can eat smelt, the bitter Pabst Blue Ribbon beers, the dusky cabins—it's much better to stay in the main lodge with its immeasurable fireplace. And by all means, have breakfast in the cafeteria, the buttermilk pancakes are excellent, and you can look out through a huge picture window toward the sparkling Illinois, and even in autumn there will be a late sailboat or two slicing the cool water. Maybe you'll find a little peace beneath the autumn moons that flare out each night of your visit, rising above the outlines of the dying trees, the ones whose branches will soon flash skeletal shadows over the winter ground.

After that drunken birthday weekend we returned to the city where autumn moons are called hunter's moons because they rise fat and red out of the October lake. Soon my wife smoked two packs a day and became skeletal herself. That winter of '83 was the coldest on record, so we drank indoors and watched the snow pile up to the windows. By January, the trip to Starved Rock had become a fairy tale, a remembrance of a magic time in the forest when things were good. By February, even the full moon was tinged with ice. By March, I slept on the couch and rose early to drink an Old Style. It was so good for my hangover, and I'd go back to sleep refreshed and dream of Starved Rock, the Illinois River, Ottawa. But I'd always wake to emptiness flowing like its own river, and by April my wife was gone and my loneliness reached flood stage, the dark water higher than my eyes until all I could see was the world of shadows beneath the current, that place so deep and dimmed the sunlight could never reach it.

If you go to Starved Rock, make sure you visit the gift shop, buy yourself one of those toy bow and arrow sets that claim to mimic the Ottawa original, and purchase some of that really good local ice cream the manager sells from behind the counter. Have a vanilla cone just as I did once. Man, that dessert was so sweet and so cold that all these years later, the memory still freezes my tongue.

## The Alcoholic Point of View

When the bourbon sours in your mouth, use second person to distance yourself from that first person who's hung over this autumn morning when the city streets bleed with the fire of red-fallen leaves beneath overcast October. Yes, choose a convenient host for your depression, pass him the near-empty bottle you've been caressing all night as you've slowly slipped out of your body, that sluggish temple of the "I," the flesh you've fed alcohol for years until now when the "I" has had it, wishes to pass this bitter cup to a third person perhaps, someone wise and all-seeing who can lift the sorrow from your brain and make it his own. But these shifts in perspective never work, and the cold wind pushes the leaves into gutters, and the chimes on the porch of the Victorian house down the street sound more like absence than music. And you realize that whichever narrator you choose, the ruins of your own life live in his voice and all the dreams you've shouldered since childhood dim in his eyes, too. But he is omniscient and you're not. Godlike, he cradles your spirit in his hands, blows hard into the kindling until the "I" catches fire, leaving you behind in its wake of white smoke.

## My Lost Season: Chicago, October, 1984

It scares me a little that I can remember so vividly the scene at Ray's: a cold pitcher of Old Style in front of me, color TVs shouting from either end of the bar, an el train shaking the tavern walls every few minutes; but most clearly I remember how dark it was inside. After all, this was before Wrigleyville went yuppie so there was no track lighting or ferns, no rich kids with loosened ties. There was only the barking of angry drunks, the smell of spilt beer and the melancholy scene of the Cubs walking off the field in the ninth inning as the happy crowd swarmed over the winning Padres.

After that horrible loss, I drank my way home down Addison Street, pausing for several Old Styles at the Cubbie Bear Lounge. Then I turned north on Clark, shifting to shots of bourbon at the Piano Man, where Detroit Junior belted out *Sweet Home Chicago* to a crowd that could have cared less about good music, a crowd so drunk and pissed off that even the golden boy second baseman, Ryne Sandburg, was dissed by the masses.

That early fall afternoon on the north side of Chicago, the sky was a limitless blue and the air was warm with Indian summer, that teasing time before the cold arrives. The first hint of yellow lit the few Dutch elms not killed by blight, or chopped down by city workers and ground into mulch to prevent the spread of disease.

In November they would mark the elm in my front yard with an orange X, and then the following week remove it from the scene, leaving an ugly blankness before my living room window, so that whenever I looked out into the world, my view wasn't softened by leaves or branches, not mediated by the natural. Instead I looked right into traffic whizzing east and west as each day for months I relived the Cubs losing to the Padres, remembering the hope that followed Leon Durham's three-run shot into the left field bleachers, the optimism from knowing Rick Sutcliffe would surely hold that lead, but he didn't and that world collapsed, and the image I would most hold

on to was catcher Jody Davis bent over crying in the dugout at Jack Murphy stadium as Steve Garvey jumped high in the air.

For the first time, booze couldn't remove the pain. Long-time announcer Jack Brickhouse once said that the Cubs weren't having a bad season, they were having a bad century, and there I was, caught up in their losing. Which was merely a reflection of my own mounting losses: wife gone, charter bus driving job almost gone, early mornings dimmed by hangover.

I drank for another season. Went to Wrigley Field and had a sixteen ounce beer per inning, so that when Harry Carey sang "Take me out the ballgame" in the seventh, I was almost out myself, the brick walls and green-ivied outfield spinning before my eyes until the whole world became an hallucination and even the concrete beneath my feet could not steady me. Luckily, I was on foot in those days, my car abandoned on La Salle Street after a tie rod broke: I was driving north on La Salle, going home from work, the whole business district behind me, the Board of Trade building with its Cubist statue of Ceres, the Roman Goddess of wheat, staring at my rear bumper as the rod snapped and the Pinto made an abrupt ninety-degree turn into oncoming traffic. No one collided with me, and I flew into a u-turn and bounced off the curb facing south. And I'm not making up the fact that I took off my orange and blue polyester bus driver's tie and re-connected the broken pieces of tie rod and attempted to drive the car again, only to hit the curb and knock off the hubcap. So, I removed the license plates and took the el home, which is why I walked home from Wrigley that last season, making the rounds at the Cubby Bear, the final stop being Frank's Place on Wayne Street, a mere block from my house. And the farther you got from Wrigley, the cheaper the beer, and Frank's was sleazy, and as I picture the long bar with the pool table in the back, it bothers me how completely I see it again, and I can even remember the overweight waitress and her tattooed biker lover who became my best friends in that lost time long after the ninth inning was over and the defeat flag hung from the mast over the bleachers in center field, just as defeat hung over my brain, my spirit humming with loss.

As I sat on the barstool and admired the alcoholic plenty manifest before me, a libation for every drunk season, and best of all, below the bar, kegs of beer ready to be splashed into 75-cent drafts, as I sat there I remembered Ceres, the goddess without a face, her head an abstraction of empty angles. When they built the Board of Trade in 1929 and crowned it with the goddess, she was meant to look down forever, but in the '50s, construction resumed downtown; first came the Prudential Building and then many others would surpass the goddess as they reached toward the heavens. Now Ceres is obscured by skeletal steel and concrete unless your car breaks down on La Salle and you're looking south pondering the misery of your own life and you see a woman without a face, who in ancient times was adored by farmers who sacrificed to her each spring in hopes of a great harvest. My harvest was bitter in those days, another season watching losers in the most beautiful ballpark in the world, where by fall of 1985, I had reached the end.

There was no visit to the playoffs that year to temporarily revive me, and my collapse that October took me to the emergency room at Illinois Masonic, where a smiling nurse pumped my stomach, freeing it of Xanax and bourbon, and even in my lost state, I could see she was no Ceres. Her face was fully human, and she smiled to comfort me as the plastic tube slipped down my windpipe, as I looked into her green eyes from the depths I had descended to, as I listened to her voice whisper that things would be fine.

In April of '86, I saw my first sober game at Wrigley. I remember walking up the runway toward my seat behind the first base dugout and how dark the passage was leading toward the grandstand, and how at the moment I emerged from the tunnel, everything exploded in spring light. I sat in my cold seat, the temperature in the 50s, wind blowing in from right field and the frigid lake beyond. I cupped a hot coffee in my hands, looked at the outfield where the red brick was bare and the ivy still brown from winter. I could not know then that the Cubs would lose to the Cardinals that day, and slide into another ugly season. And I could not know then that the following week the IRS would garnish my wages and my landlady would ask me to move so she could remodel my apartment and rent it to wealthy yuppies.

I could not know then that the first woman I would date in sobriety would have a canopied waterbed with a mirror overhead and would not know what the Civil War was. I could not know then that I would rent a cheap basement apartment in Rogers Park, twenty yards from the lake. I could not know then that the winter of '87 would bring record-high lake levels and that ice would coat the shoreline and tremendous white waves would batter the street I lived on. I could not know then that throughout the heart of that cold winter, I would run north on Sheridan Road and learn how to not fall on the ice-glazed streets and sidewalks. I could not know then how beautiful the lake would become with its almost icebergs drifting in the white freeze that extended a mile offshore. I could not know then that a homeless man who insisted he was Jesus would walk that mile out on the ice and be forcibly rescued by a Coast Guard helicopter.

And so here I am, nearly twenty years beyond my last drunk, thinking about the Cubs and their latest August swoon, remembering those days when I had truly fallen, and had no hope for resurrection. I think I will end this with a tribute to the homeless man who thought he was Jesus, and in tribute to the deity, did walk on the waters of Lake Michigan. How wonderful the view must have been: to the south the shoreline of the north side stretching past Lincoln Park to the Gold Coast, where he must have seen the Hancock Building rising toward the cold sky. But more beautiful must have been the miles of unfrozen turquoise water unbroken for the sixty miles to Michigan. And I think the real Jesus would have loved the homeless man in that moment of complete stillness where he looked east and saw the dark roiling waters at the edge of the horizon. Do you know what I'm talking about here? Have you ever looked east as far as you can over some vast expanse of water and seen how the lake or ocean darkens at the farthest edge of your seeing? Have you ever wondered about the magic of that place where the sky finally meets the sea?

I imagine him looking east toward Michigan, the northeast wind burning his face, pushing the deep water into waves that lifted the ice beneath his feet before lowering him again. I imagine him peaceful in his blue cocoon, but then he'd hear the whacking blades,

see the faces looking down toward him as they prepared to save him by yanking his body skyward. Yes, the *Chicago Tribune* noted that a Coast Guardsman “assisted” the man into a lowered basket. And probably wrapped him in warm blankets, gave him hot coffee, and revived his body. But I wonder if my rescued Jesus was torn from the brink of resurrection, if somehow in the last moment he saw a heavenly city rising from the uneven waters, if indeed, he became holy as he looked toward the celestial. I wonder if angels flew towards him, ready to wrap him in feathered bodies woven from starlight, ready to take him in to the sweet fire of eternal life. But the angels, being immortal, were unconcerned with time, didn’t move fast enough to embrace the tattered savior. The helicopter was faster.

## Listening for God: January, 1987

When I first stopped drinking, I went to a silent retreat in Palatine, Illinois, and for a whole weekend I left speaking behind and read AA’s Big Book and wrote down the details of all my offenses against my ex-wife, family, and friends. A portrait of Jesus looked down as I sat at a simple desk and scribbled page after page of misery until a strange lightness came to me, as though the winter sky had whistled through my ears and for just a moment, I felt the guilt of my drinking years slip away.

The only time we could speak was at the meeting on Saturday night where we told our alcoholic stories and thanked God for AA. There was a man who held a life-sized doll of a young boy in his lap as he talked. There was a holy man from Detroit who’d lived with a woman and drank every night of his priesthood, who said he never found God in the church, never knew spirituality until he went to his first meeting. And there I was, newly sober, thinking the doll reminded me of Howdy Doody, wondering about the wayward priest who was so different from the Baptist preachers of my childhood.

After the meeting I walked in the darkness of whispering snow beneath occasional glimpses of a three-quarters moon peeking through the clouds. I passed a statue of the Virgin holding her famous child, both frozen and silent. Bare trees curled black branches skyward in supplication, and it seemed to me the whole world was cold and sullen, and I thought back to the AA meeting, how after two days of silence, our voices sounded strange, how when I spoke, it was hard at first to summon language from my belly, to move my tongue in the dance that produces syllables and words. I said I was grateful, and I was, but beneath my gratitude was a fear no fallen priest or father of Howdy Doody was going to scare away.

The next day I marched to the retreat’s small chapel, praying that God might reveal himself to me, and thus fortify my sobriety, but I found instead only the silence of that small space, listened to the voices of my childhood, heard again the old hymns, felt the old futility that

came when I asked for vision and revelation, when I begged for the flash of light or the Savior's whisper. There was only silence and more silence, and cold light gathering in stained glass windows, illuminating the lives of saints and the specks of dust that floated in the chapel air.

All these years later, I do remember and honor the blessed silence of that place. I no longer go to AA because there is no god to admit my powerlessness to; there is only the fragile, beautiful world I wander through, and my sobriety is not the single preoccupation of the universe. All these years later, I humbly accept responsibility for myself, for my conduct in this world of dead virgins, children whose wooden mouths speak the words of others, priests who sin, a savior who wasn't, and an almighty god who isn't.

## I Remember a Pet Peeve: Florida, 2006

Last night I told my class that everyone should experience divorce at least once. Then I told them about my own divorce, 1988, Chicago, late March. I walked from the Lake Street el station over to the Richard J. Daley Center with its rusted core ten steel and ugly Picasso guarding the plaza where a few city folks braved the early spring cold. I took an elevator to the twelfth floor, could see Lake Michigan falling away from the east windows as I walked into a courtroom for my uncontested divorce, taking in the bored judge, "in God we trust" risen above his bald head. He asked me a few questions and then it was all over; I was free from ten years of hell, free from the feminist who grew to hate me and soothed her anger in the arms of other men.

One of them, a transvestite named Les, got himself arrested once for taking his panties off in a park in Hinsdale. My wife told me that Les' interest in female clothes began when he was a boy in rural Georgia and he saw his mother's frilly underwear through a crack in the lime-scented outhouse, which gave him a thrill and influenced his clothing decisions for years.

I walked out of the Daley Center into an afternoon that had warmed into the 50s, so vendors were out on Randolph Street selling hot dogs, fruit, and pretty flowers. I bought myself a celebratory banana and enjoyed my first minutes of freedom, thinking it had been worth the \$600 I'd forked out for a lawyer, worth the late night pleadings with my wife to sign the documents, which she did eventually, mailing them back from San Diego where she lived in a tiny house near the Pacific, and each time I talked with her, I thought of the ocean, that vast treasure of blue, and wished for her some kind of Pacific peace, like the kind Balboa must have felt when he first gazed upon that western ocean, the one that stretched all the way to spice islands and cannibals and beautiful places like Hawaii where Cook was righteously butchered.

My wife's name was Lilliana, though for most of our marriage, she was just Lillian, and she was born in Chicago at Columbus

Hospital, grew up near North Avenue and Milwaukee, the heart of the old Polish neighborhoods, and we were married at her church, Immaculate Conception, by a hippie priest named Tom who didn't care that I was a fallen Baptist who worshipped only booze. In fact, the morning of our marriage, a cold Saturday in early January, I'd swigged down a few belts of Jim Beam before I'd imprisoned myself in my tuxedo.

I would never wear women's clothes and I've never been to Hawaii. I've never had the urge to eat human flesh or venture to the South Pacific on worm-infested wooden ships. But what a thrill it must have been for Cook and Bly and the rest when they gazed upon that beautiful shore with the mountains falling away green and pretty women frolicking on the beach while others swam out to the *Endeavor* and danced upon its briny decks where no woman had been for months, and these beauties brought them many exotic flowers.

After we had separated in 1985, Lillian moved to San Diego. And for a while like one of Cook's seamen, I, too, lusted after every woman I met. But unlike those sailors of old, I had little luck as I plied the taverns near Wrigley Field on the north side of Chicago. And because my students are so young, I'll caution them about the perils of alcohol, how it makes you feel more attractive than you really are, and worse, how at 4 a.m. even the obese bartender looks like some glittering mermaid who's just swum up to your own private island. But she weighed three hundred pounds and hated me because I was the last patron at the Cubby Bear Lounge, the difficult one who whined for one more drink with a tongue so heavy, she thought I'd asked for a "shrink" and wished I'd go see one and save her from consoling me over my lost wife.

I survived my rocky nights at the Cubby Bear, eventually stopped drinking in early March of 1986. But I still remember the flowers, the transvestites, the barmaids, because, as I tell my students, it's all about the naming, and if I had to put a name on those days in Chicago, I would call that season sorrow, and maybe I'll take back my recommendation to my students that everyone should experience divorce. No it's really not necessary to hurt and hate another human being

whom you once loved so deeply that you kissed her in the pouring rain outside her mother's condo on Jefferson Avenue beneath a darkened sky where the planes were skidding down toward O'Hare, filled with people and their own dreams of the world, their own memories of oceans and mountains and flowers.

What a nice moment to end this, but I don't think I've talked enough about Les, how I actually liked him, despite the fact that he slept with my wife and adored women's clothes. One night at the Piano Man on Clark Street, as my wife chatted with Detroit Junior, that evening's live entertainment, Les and I talked about pet peeves, and I told him everyone should have one, that they're small and fluffy like lambs, and we spent four hours spinning yarns off peeves until last call when the music stopped and the tavern lights were turned on.

The Piano Man yielded to brightness, and Lillian and I walked home and Les headed over to the cheap hotel he lived in on Broadway, right next door to the Golden Apple Restaurant, a kind of cheap imitation of the famous Chicago chain, the Golden Nugget, only the Apple, by way of its uptown location, attracted the homeless, addicts, prostitutes and all the other city folks who had fallen like Adam and Eve fell from a Paradise, yes, fallen city angels whose wings were broken and whose mouths were blotted with cheap lipstick or cold sores, whose hearts hurt in the way despair becomes a physical pain, one that requires the intervention of needle or bottle or quick sex with a stranger.

I must confess there were nights after much drinking that I, too, ventured to the Golden Apple, sat in a red booth in the back near the smelly bathrooms, ordered the Denver Omelet, glistening on the plate, a greasy apparition, a vision of the food we'll eat in heaven. Perhaps Jesus will multiply the omelets.

Can I tell you this? On those drunken nights at the Apple, when my stomach hurt from booze, and my head as if it was stuffed with cumuli or cotton, on those nights I would look around at my fallen brothers and sisters and manage to see something beautiful in our shared suffering, as pale hands shook around coffee cups, as the waitresses fanned out in every direction, delivering food and refills.

As early morning traffic stopped at the intersection where Broadway splits into Sheridan, and the headlights of stopped cars splintered the Apple's dirty windows turning every one of us into luminous creatures, into angels, the desperate kind with long haggard faces and bloodshot eyes, the real angels who have lived in this world of pain so that they might truly rise when the earth breaks open and all the nations are shattered, when the moon itself glows lonely, when the dead stars ply the empty oceans, when all the bars are shuttered, when all the whiskey on the planet flows out of broken bottles to fertilize the cold, hard ground.

## Hair Salon Panic Attack!

It was sunny and cold (for Florida). I had to wait fifteen minutes because the joint was busy. The music was terrible, some kind of smooth rap women singing clichés in high voices. Kathryn beckoned me and I sat down in the chair. I glanced at myself in the mirror, noticed how I looked old, how the lid over my right eye hung down a little, making my face appear weird, unbalanced.

Worse, as I looked at myself, I started trembling, had an anxiety attack for the first time in years. It came out of nowhere. I tried to think about pleasant things, you know that old imagery-summoning deal where you think of the Shenandoah Valley in fiery fall when the tulip poplars and oaks and beeches are throwing off their leaves and the ground turns yellow-red and crunches beneath your feet. But there I was, still looking back from the mirror, a thousand tremors rippling through my body. And Kathryn must have known because she turned the chair sideways away from the mirror.

Sideways was good. Sideways calmed me a little. Sideways allowed me to banter a little bit with Kathryn: *Yes, I said, we do have plans for the holidays. We're off to New Orleans. My father-in-law has a timeshare.* She tells me she's never been but wants to go. I tell her she should, even though, given the way New Orleans has changed since Katrina, I'm not sure it's a good idea. Yes, the French Quarter is the same and the restaurants and clubs are coming back. And I'm sure she wants to go to Bourbon Street and party like it's 1994, but the problem is, it's not 1994, it's 2009, the very end of a dreary decade of murder and mayhem.

Can I tell you the truth? I find New Orleans depressing. Partly it's because I don't drink anymore. And hey, I'm not angry with all the non-alcoholics who can drink. But there's something about the false revelry of the French Quarter, something about the public drunkenness and ribald frivolity that bugs the shit out of me. Ribald frivolity! That's sure a mouthful of gumbo.

And worse, if you drive around New Orleans at night, you see the vast swaths of darkness where city used to be, those abandoned

places by the levee where feral dogs bark toward the brighter constellations. And here's something I've never told anyone because it's so unsettling, but since I'm writing honestly now about anxiety attacks and hairdressers and hurricanes and drunk people, here goes: I used to play tennis with a Serbian woman who was a Miami firefighter. She went to New Orleans after Katrina and did search and rescue in the Ninth Ward. She found lots of dead people. She told me that finding dead people is disturbing, but the worst thing she encountered was a poodle. *A poodle?* I asked. *Yes, a poodle,* she said. *A poodle that had lived for a week by eating the legs and feet of the old man's corpse it lived with.*

I don't blame the poodle, even though I don't generally like poodles. At what point do our loved ones become meat? When does the soul leave the body? Exactly at which moment does hunger overcome revulsion?

## Please Don't Bury Me in that Cold, Cold Ground

My much younger wife asked me the other day if I wanted to be buried or cremated. I told her that I'd prefer neither until I actually and irrevocably died, upon which sad occasion, I'd like to be cremated. She had assumed I'd want to join my ancestors in that hallowed ground on the Southside of Virginia beneath the Civil War battlefields and accumulated misery of the Commonwealth. I surprised her by saying I'd rather have my ashes scattered across Lake Michigan where it pushes up against that beautiful park south of Northwestern University. So many memories of my years in Chicago: running north against the January wind as it whistled through my ears in that graveyard of frozen earth and dead trees, the lake solid white out for a mile or so, except where it was ribboned by indigo inlets full of happy mallards; the sky on winter nights at that same park, where constellations brightened over the black void of the water, which breathed its listless deep into moon-shimmering waves that crackled on the shore, *stars in a wilderness of stars.*

When I was 33, and I finally stopped drinking, I ran by the lake every day and sometimes at night as well. I felt my body come back to life and sing in a way it had never done before. And all of that singing along Lake Michigan, some sixty miles across at that point, 900 feet deep in places that hid the sunken vessels of other days. All of that singing in a slice of green space along the water with its ice skating rink, boat houses, tennis courts, picnic tables, all deserted in winter except for the rink, which was always home to a child or two in bright coats, laughing into the frozen air and breaking the cold dream I had fallen into.

Alive, I ran fifty miles a week, winter, spring, summer, fall—yes, fall, the golden time of dying leaves and temperatures when the first frost crinkled the lawns of October, when the oak and elm and maple turned toward red and yellow, when the cool nights cleaned out my lungs, when the cold stars sang back to me, when the constellations

whirled over the lake, when the moon sometimes sent down a yellow trail, and when, sometimes I was tempted to turn like a Jesus and run across the water until I, too, rose into the sky.

Yes, cast my ashes upon the waters where Lee Street empties into the wall separating dream from concrete, where one world ends and another begins. Let me feel the cold lake one more time, until I, too, like the drowned sailors in the ships I mentioned earlier, until I, too, am faded and ghost.



I've changed my mind again. An environmentally aware friend told me that they make biodegradable coffins these days, so that your body, that blessed container that once held spirit, might rot back into the soil, completely. I know a spot in Wisconsin where I camped once near the Wolf River, a quiet, pretty place where the only sound was the little river rushing over rocks and the wind stirring the spruce trees and the whisper of god exhaling as she realized the whole world should have been created in this image of water and green and black sky with stars tumbling down. Bury me there, please, and come back the next spring and pick the lazy susans that would surely grow from my grave, the black and yellow flowers of my disposition, the radiant stems and petals of my skin and bone and whatever else had passed from one darkness into another and then found this beautiful light.

That's the real truth, isn't it? We are immortal like grass and soil and memory, like the rocks smoothed out by the Wolf River over geologic time, that real measure of our puny human lives. But there's nothing tiny about forever, and though our bodies and spirits fade away, there is plenty to absorb us: I hope in the death that comes to somehow glisten in the rain, to somehow rise up as dust into the storm wind that blows across entire counties of Wisconsin before losing itself in the lake's deep blue dream, that bowl, that liquid altar, holy remnant of glacier, blessed mirror of the sky.

## About Jesse Millner

Jesse Millner drove a charter bus in and around Chicago for fifteen years before moving to Miami in 1994. He received his MFA from Florida International University in 1997. Jesse has published five poetry chapbooks, *The Drowned Boys* (March Street Press, 2005), *On the Saturday After the Rapture* (Main Street Rag, 2006), *I Give You This Ghost*, *Holy Numbers* (Pudding House Publications, 2007, 2008), and *My Grandfather Singing* (YellowJacket Press Chapbook Contest Winner, 2010). His first full-length poetry book *The Neighborhoods of My Past Sorrow* was released by Kitsune Books in March 2009 and won a bronze medal in the 2010 Florida Book Awards. Jesse teaches writing courses at Florida Gulf Coast University in Fort Myers, Florida.

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