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# BACK WHEN WE LIVED HERE

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Duncan Murrell

The old man throws his lit cigarette on the floor where Tony has been quietly sweeping butts.

“See that nigger there? I got no use for that nigger.”

He doesn't explain. And then he does something mildly shocking: he puts his arm around the young black man who's been playing the video poker machines right next to us for the last hour.

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“But this one right here, I like this one.”

The young man smiles weakly. He knows he's got to make nice if he wants to keep coming back and playing on the machines. I wonder what he's done to be liked by this old man, this troll committing his suicide a shot at a time.

“Don't lie, you don't like him neither,” Wolfman said, wiping beer foam from his great white beard. He sat at the other end of the bar, just a couple arm lengths away. “You don't like nobody. And how about you just shut the fuck up now? I'll buy.” He was looking at me funny, suspicious and apologetic at once.

This was my neighborhood for eight months after the flood: the Bywater, just on the edge of Marigny, downriver of the French Quarter and south of Claiborne Avenue. The neighborhood took only a foot or so of water when the levees washed out. I lived in the back of an old, big shotgun painted purple and green. A hustler named Mikey lived in the front. Sometimes we'd sit out on the porch drinking beers and he'd offer me morphine or meth or shrimp etoufee, whatever he was holding, and I'd always say, *No, man, thanks, I had rice earlier, and beer's good with me*. But this was his drunken, addled ethic in a neighborhood with no stoplights and few lights at all: Don't hold out on your buddies. Once, while drunk, Mikey cut apart a large fallen oak tree in back of the house just because he thought I'd dared him, which I hadn't. He climbed all over that thing like a tweaked chimp with a chainsaw, shouting **TIMBER** each time one of the great, hollowed-out oak branches crashed onto our landlord's old corrugated shed, which stored Carnival gear and piles of

what looked like shackles. Mikey later showed me his old oil-rig helmet festooned with stickers, an object of pride and one of the only things left that was truly his. Mikey had a temper and he drank all day in the bars around the neighborhood, Big Daddy's, The Phoenix. He disappeared for days sometimes, and finally he left for good after mistakenly pouring motor oil into the gas tank of his boyfriend's truck and kicking in our locked gate. Later, we found more than a hundred glassine bags still dusky with powder behind the couch where he had sat listening to Def Leppard in the mornings. I asked one of his friends about him, and they shrugged as if his story was one too old and too sad to have to recount again: *He's straight, you know*.

Our landlord, Malcolm, was a strapping 45-year-old man with a great garden that he worked every weekend. He was also completely blind, something I didn't figure out for three months, and only then because I asked him why the hell he took the bus to Baton Rouge every week. *I can't drive*, he said. *License revoked?* I said, which was a pretty good guess in my experience. *No, son, I'm blind. Can't see. I can tell you're short, though*.

That's how good a journalist *I* was, that's how prepared I was to record the aftermath of one of the most grotesque events in our history: I couldn't pick out a blind man. *I was* the blind man.

We lived up against the tracks that cut the neighborhood in half. All night the train carried trailers and oil back and forth. These were the very tracks that Homer Plessy, the cobbler's son turned attorney, had rid-

den before being pulled off by railroad thugs, an event that launched the disastrous U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Plessy vs. Ferguson*, and then Jim Crow. From our porch you could see the spot where he stood watching the train move on without him.

The kids of the neighborhood, who by my count hadn't been in school for at least twelve months, had learned how to time the train when it stopped across Chartres, Royal, Dauphine, Burgundy and North Rampart. I watched them on Burgundy waiting for the train to slow momentarily to a stop so they could scoot underneath and through to the other side, an old practice among Bywater natives. Burgundy had once been named Craps Street, after one of the favorite games of Bernard Marigny, the owner of the old plantation that long before had been transformed into the warped checkerboard of streets called Marigny and the Bywater. At first I collected those sorts of images and those kinds of historical details, but after a few months on the story I lost my interest. The train had been meaningful—*full of metaphorical possibility make a note of that*—but by the end it was just loud and it rattled my table and chairs and shook me awake.

Sometimes I'd dream about Stacy, wading through the water to go polish his silver only three days after having half of one lung removed. He had thought he would quit smoking, but that plan changed. He appeared in the neighborhood, here and there, at odd times and places, nearly always at night like a ghost. *You can't just take a man who's been smoking for thirty-five years, remove part of his lung, and tell him no more cigarettes*, Stacy said, pretty often. *It just don't work that way. If I'm a die, I ain't dying unhappy and without my pleasures.*

That was another ethic, to find your pleasures and keep from dying too much in the meantime. *Pleasure*, the concept, expanded to take in all sorts of oddities. One friend caromed around the city during rainstorms, measuring the depth of mud puddles for signs of unusual flooding. Another broke into a deconsecrated church and for months sketched the altar and all its fissures and rots and filigrees. Every view he drew contained the Corpus, though the Corpus

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## TEA BOWL

Eugene Gloria

A chorus lifts above the mundane spaces:

Silences and asterisks of dust—

My urge to write about the new disasters,

Homelands submerged, blasted

Coral reefs; a cask of dynamite

Has lent its method on the page.

Facts can melt away abstractions. New names for receptacles,

Jeweled palaces.

A ceremony of particulars: family portraits, a dance in fragments,

Postcards, a rusted tin of Sky Flakes.

Designed to intrude as little as possible to drinking tea, this bowl has the appearance of weightiness. It was fired at low temperature and therefore less durable. Rustic and imperfect, it seems to contradict preciousness. Fragile and suggestive, it assumes nothing but its own impermanence. For three generations the Great Black was passed down from fathers to sons, from one potter to another. Art inseparable from occupation is not an ambition but a way. I have lost my way in the process. Souls of no objects descended without warning. Listening to the *shi, shi, shi* of shoeless feet, middle-aged women in silk kimonos assembled in front of the glassed-in shelves of raku bowls and flower vases, a bouquet of pink and purple silk reflected on the glass.

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# MONSOON SEASON

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Eugene Gloria

The shut-in nuns had prayed for sun  
and the long blue sky, a time  
when my father was called Isidro.  
Whatever story I tell about him  
is incomplete unless I first tell you  
this one: I was seven that monsoon season  
before the highway had a proper name,  
before my father became a U. S. citizen  
and shortened his name to Sid.  
He took me to a convent on Highway 54.

“Women there,” he said, “hide their faces from the world.”  
The convent had a narrow hallway, which wound  
around an austere chapel scented with jasmine.  
A paneled door opened with a squeak; a cupboard  
kept, instead of plates and cups, a partition of wire mesh.

A voice, no a whisper, filtered through.  
I had to stand on tiptoes to see whose mouth that was—  
an outline of a face. A voice unused to conversation:  
“Please,” she said in a halting dialect I didn’t know,  
“leave your offering at the front pew  
and may God...grant you...both...safe travels.”  
The mesh screen darkened and then  
the paneled door slid shut.  
We brought three dozen eggs plus four  
and did with them what the voice instructed.

Later that day, there was a long procession  
from the old church to what seemed then  
a widening street where my father led  
a company of men with his sword drawn,  
resting on one shoulder. He was in full feather:  
tippet, a pleated shirt, bow tie, shiny lapels, a cloak.  
He wore the plumed hat of the Grand Knight.  
And men dressed like him, who in daily life  
were doctors and dentists like my godfather,  
or minor officials, marched two by two toward  
long tables where anyone who chose to celebrate  
could come and eat. There were no homeless  
in our town, no one was starving. Everyone had food  
in their kitchens with maids to tend to them.  
Therefore the feast had more to do with coming  
together and how important it was to do so.  
There was eating and drinking till night.  
And because of the eggs we brought earlier that day,  
the rain ceased for the better part of the week.

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had long since been removed from the church. *I'm good at drawing Christ; I've been drawing Him since I was in confirmation class. The man on the cross is the best part.* Other friends learned to make their own gin and passed their samples around. Their gin was good and they treated it as something almost holy. They argued about the botanicals they would add, cardamom or cinnamon or maybe some jalapeno. Another friend picked fights and wrote poetry nearly simultaneously. Another friend would not rest until the hot tub outside her wrecked house worked again. Two friends began competing in roller derby, even when there was nearly no flat surface in the city that wasn't half-wrecked or cluttered with rubble.

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**THE GRAND OLD DAYS INCLUDED THE TIMES WHEN WOLFMAN'S MOTHER WOULD SEND HIM INTO THEIR BACKYARD TO STRANGLE A CHICKEN FOR SUPPER AT THEIR HOUSE THAT ONCE STOOD JUST DOWN THE BLOCK FROM OUR BARSTOOLS.**

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These were the pleasures also, to be considered and savored along with the drugs and the drink and the sex and the food. They were possibly the greater pleasures for being theirs alone, inexplicable and unjustifiable.

I myself am not so creative about pleasure. I do what I'm told, and so I drink. I drank. I drank in the neighborhood bar, called Smitty's. The writer in the corner bar, that was me. I bought a thin-brimmed fedora, smoked brown cigarettes, listened to Hank Williams. I borrowed my pleasures from a hundred different sources; I took pleasure in my mimicry. I watched myself in the mirror above the liquor bottles, where someone had taped a sign: "\$25 Credit Available With \$50 Deposit." I wrote down those words; I wrote down the conversations I overheard; I wrote down the brand of the blow-up sex doll that had been strapped to the restrooms sign; I counted the number of family pictures on the mantle of the bricked-in fireplace and I wrote that number down; I wrote down the words of the yellow newspaper headlines announcing the arrival of Joe Louis in the city and the fleeting successes of the Saints. I wrote it all down. The two hundred square-feet would be my little patch of Winesburg, Yoknapatawpha, Malgudi, Albany, Newark,

Vietnam, Holcomb, just small enough for me to handle. I had it figured out, and that was my own inexplicable pleasure.

I'd go to Smitty's most days, and there I heard what the neighborhood had been like long before, *before the fags found it and started fixing it up. And I got no problem with a fag, they're handy with a hammer, no shit. But shit.* The grand old days included the times when Wolfman's mother would send him into their backyard to strangle a chicken for supper at their house that once stood just down the block from our barstools. There's a school where his house used to be. It was closed after the flood to all but squatters and truants.

I can't explain very well what drew me to that neighborhood any more than I can explain what has kept me going back to New Orleans for nearly twenty years. I went down there again in that first January after the storm to live through the spring and summer as a responsible journalist. I intended to come back with the true story of what the rest of us outsiders had so far failed to see. I prayed this was true, that this was my intention. But I am a great sinner.

I could have lived anywhere in that city, but I chose to disappear into my own private and much-cherished nightmare, a neighborhood shot through with the histories of the departed, stories that were like tunnels under my feet, labyrinths I could never navigate and might kill me if I crossed into the wrong one, or worse, would open up and take me in forever, never to return home. In my liquor sleep I dreamed about the Germans who had built the neighborhood and had left their deconsecrated Catholic church, The Church of the Holy Trinity, to be encircled by vines until only the Virgin in the cemetery stood untainted and arch.

When the termites took flight in May, pulsing and reflecting clouds drawn to the light on my porch and the reading lamp by my bed, I caught a few and created a small terrarium

in which they might mate and tunnel and create thousands more. It was like playing with Daddy's gun. Believe me when I say I have imagined *Coptotermes formosanus*, the Formosan termite, the destroyer, tunneling constantly around and through me until my body and my ego become merely material to be devoured and regurgitated in more useful forms. This is the confession of an addict and a nervous man. I remake the world in my own image and am, as Wallace Stevens once put it, *the world in which I walked*. I confess that the story I brought back from the disaster was not the work of a responsible journalist, but a dissection I performed upon myself.

I wonder if it's possible to ever see the world, or our little block of broken sidewalks and luxurious banana trees, as anything but the things that we have made ourselves out of memory, and therefore things that comfort us because they are our own inventions. In that bar I saw the worst things, the sight of old men drinking to their deaths, the smell of failure, the sound of bitterness and fear, the stink of disaster. But I looked at it through the eyes of the man in the fedora smoking the dark cigarettes, I looked on it as the man who had just arrived, the man who had set out to lose himself, and so it was perfect. Squint at the place right and I saw an oasis, something that was not at the nadir of its deterioration, but rather a bulwark against it. The browning palms in the broken planters out on the sidewalk where the men gathered to watch the sunset each night were not just dying things, they were someone's garden, someone's twisted, parched garden that contained shade and calm and quiet talk. Or they had been set out there for the fucking trashmen whenever they decided to show up.

"Let me walk you out," Wolfman said to me one night just as I was about to step out the door. "That boy across the street's been standing out on the corner for an hour." I was flattered he'd thought of me, even if it was because I was an easy candidate for being rolled. He stepped out on the stoop of the bar, kept his foot in the door so he wouldn't have to be buzzed back in, and glared at the black man standing on the corner across the street.

The next day, while sitting at the bar and telling Sarah, the bartender, it was her bicycle had been stolen out the back of the bar, Wolfman

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told me a very odd story about this paradise of his.

“Did I ever tell you about the bravest guy I ever knew?”

“No, I don’t think you did.”

“Well, we used to all run together, boys from the neighborhood. Rough crowd. Mardi Gras we used to go down to the Seventh Ward and meet up with the niggers and fight. It was a good time, kick some ass, get your ass kicked, you know. Part of the party.”

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**“THE NATIONAL GUARD’S  
DOWN IN HERE RIGHT NOW!  
AND THEY’RE JACKING UP  
WHITE BOYS! THIEVES!”**

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Wolfman’s eyes were squeezed between his brow and his white beard and the red swell of the flesh under his eyes. He looked drunk even when he’s not.

“So there was this one guy who would fight anyone. Baddest motherfucker around. He’d go and look for cops to fight, didn’t give a shit about jail. He’d go down on into St. Bernard Parish, just yell for someone to fight him. So we all hung around him, he was in charge, you know? Got to have someone in charge. But he wasn’t the bravest guy.”

“He was the bully who is nevertheless the coward, right?”

“No. What? No cowards. What you mean?”

If I learned anything during that time in the destroyed city, it was to know when I should shut the hell up. I shook my head nevermind.

“So, all right, the bravest guy I ever knew. This is the BRAVEST FELLA I EVER KNEW. Have I told you this? No I ain’t told you this. OK, then, he was this little, thin kid who ran with us but never said a word. We could knock him around and he wouldn’t say a motherfucking thing about it. Just looked at you, smiled, wiped the blood off. He was always *there* though, like a piece of the kitchen.”

“What?” I said, thinking there was obviously some local grammar or idiom I had forgotten to learn. Another labyrinth barred to me. The longer I stayed, the more I felt that way. I ordered us some beers, and Sarah pulled new mugs out of the cooler, a privilege reserved for

Wolfman and a few others. My mind wandered. Sarah had told me the night before that she had once lost an infant; one day she woke up and he was dead. She was the third woman who had told me about her dead baby in as many months. My friend’s house had burned down a couple weeks before. Another friend got his throat cut and lived. I was beginning to think I was carrying something bad on me. I decided to quit touching people. My phone rang, and it was my friend Tanya, a black woman from the Lower 9<sup>th</sup> and she was yelling and singing and shouting, “The National Guard’s down in here right now! And they’re jacking up white boys! Thieves!” I thanked God for Tanya.

Wolfman waited, ordered another beer on me, and when I was off the phone he continued.

“Like a piece of the kitchen. This boy, he was like a piece of the furniture. Like a, what, like a chair? A chair. Just there, not saying anything, not looking anyone in the eye. You could make him do things, run errands and so on. He was the one guy who knew how to give tattoos, and that was something. India ink and a needle. He only did one tattoo.”

Here Wolfman pulled up his shirtsleeve and showed me the rude cross, faded to green. It was nearly straight.

“He gave us all crosses. Then he decided to tattoo a cross on his cock and he did it, man, I was there, we had to hold him and keep him from passing out, he was screaming. But he did it. Right there on his *dick*.”

“Why a cross? Was he religious, very observant?”

Certainly one of the worst questions I’ve ever asked.

“No, not him. You’re fucked up, brother. Nah, it was the easiest thing to draw. But that ain’t why he was the bravest guy I ever knew.”

“How could that not be the reason?” I said. The idea made me nauseous.

“Now listen. So, one day that bad motherfucker with the attitude, our leader, the fighter, no coward hear me, I mean some cops were *afraid* of him, that fella’s working on his car, a Fairlane, I think, and we’re all sitting on the stoop watching him, drinking beer while he’s tuning the engine, got the timing gun out, checking gaps. He needs someone to sit in it and work the pedal, right, so he yells at the piece of furniture, the boy with the cross on his dick, to come and get into the car. The dude gets

into the car, and revs the engine a few times, and then the other guy wants a beer, he tells the little guy to stay the fuck in the car, faggot, he’ll be right back. I remember that’s exactly what he said, always remember it. *Stay the fuck in the car, faggot, I’ll be right back.* A few seconds later that car is in gear, motherfucker, squealing tires and burning off down the street.”

“Damn.”

“And he never came back.”

“Never?”

“Never.”

“He didn’t come home to see his mama? His family?” The story can’t end there, Wolfman, it needs meaning, resolution.

“If he’d come back, and he’d have known this for damned sure, he’d have been killed. No way he would come back.”

“No one saw him again?”

“No. They’d have cut his head off.”

“How old was he?”

“Sixteen, I think. Maybe fifteen.”

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**“SO THERE WAS THIS ONE GUY  
WHO WOULD FIGHT ANYONE.  
BADDEST MOTHERFUCKER  
AROUND. HE’D GO AND LOOK  
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And those, I was to understand, were the good old days. That was when a man had a place here and knew how everything worked. He knew what to expect, he could master the neighborhood if that’s what he wanted, or he could haul ass. And there, in that bar, where in the old days the men used to hand beers out to the kids on feast days through a secret window, right there was the diminishing point of that mastery. There, at the bar with the ancient and broken foot rail, a certain man once could claim a certain domain.

*Not like now, with the niggers and the faggots and the hippies and the journalists and all. It’s all gone to Hell now, but it was so nice before. Before, back when we lived here.*

Long before I got there, he would have said if I’d not been listening. ❧