

Barehanded
by Peter Derk

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Jiff Skippy

Your peanut butter is at my house.
It was back behind my cereal, so maybe you didn't see it
when you left.
I know it was yours, though, because it's the kind with nut pieces
tucked into the cream.
Most of the jar is dug out, an oily path scraped
by the claw marks
of apple slices
silverware
and our clumsy fingers.

Shuttles

I.

The first space walk
went bad
twice.

The Russian found himself trapped
outside the shuttle,
his suit too inflated to squeeze back in.

He thought of his famous first
marked by his body
alone in all that dark.

He deflated his suit a little,
emptying himself of what kept him alive
the way we do to survive sometimes.

They landed
a couple thousand miles off course.
Maybe not so bad, considering.

Wolves surrounded the capsule while the astronauts slept inside.
Death: eyes in the night
over and over.

II.

A close-up picture
of the Challenger explosion
shows trailing clouds

like fingers snatching
at the pieces in the sky
the smoke and fire too stupid to know.

III.

The Atlantis launches.
The shaking of the news cameras on takeoff
feels right.

The rocket shreds through the sky
and slips into space,
the earth's curve set against a tasteful black.

The news cuts back to the anchors
sitting together at the desk.

They say a few things,

a woman's mouth clamped against crying,
a man all facts and statistics at the camera, not of this planet enough
to reach across the desk to her.

Temporary Tattoos

Temporary tattoos
and candy cigarettes.

That was before,
when it was okay to be Dangerous.

A plastic Bowie knife
and guns with blaze orange muzzles.

Before Trouble drove up on the lawn,
said, You in or out?

A lighter stolen
from a garage junk drawer.

A boy showed up in the paper,
face tattooed

for permanent, for real.
He killed two people.

I looked at our class picture,
him standing next to me in the front row

his name written over
the cast on my left arm

because back then
I was dangerous.

Three Times Bob

My mom's boyfriend cried
three times.

The first
for a dog,
one he carried up and down the stairs
in the morning
at lunch
in the evening
until the vet convinced him
it was time.
He sat quiet at the dinner table
and ate less.

The second
as he buried our cat.
He took a break, standing the gardening spade
in the dry dirt,
wiping his face.

The third
when he left.

I saw him
by chance
on a birthday.
It was the first in a line
of times I'd wish I wasn't so drunk
or maybe a little more drunk
so I could tell him
how I still caught myself listening for the soft snap
of his air rifle
knocking the crows from our big Cottonwood
on summer nights.

Every Time Handsome

Every time she says Handsome.

It's not that I can't believe her.

But there are times you say things
because a person needs to hear them.

I thought at the very least

ugly would be good

for hiding

need.

Could You Recommend a Romance?

Of all the questions.

I'll do my best, I said.

Up and down the shelves
looking for a love
where everyone was pretty enough
and they didn't fuck too much
and nobody died,
at least not in a way that burst you.

Could I recommend romance?

Not really.

Short stories,

Westerns,

and the ones where the hero

sometimes rides into the sunset before the job's done

were more my thing.

Barehanded

My grandfather caught a home run
from deep right at Wrigley Field
barehanded.

It sounds like one of those stories.
It was his first date with a woman
who wouldn't be my grandmother.

She wasn't impressed
by the smack of the ball against his palm
or the way he held onto it.

And who can blame her,
but she wasn't too thrilled
to work the gear shift on the drive home,

his hand a crushed collection of bone
growing fatter while he tried to open her up
with small talk.

My grandmother never got any pop flies
or much else
handed to her.

She would grab my grandfather's hand,
destroyed by age and injury,
and she would lace the fingers in her own.

It took both of her hands to do,
until they were woven together.
And that's how they would wait

for his hand to go cold
and tell them both
about thunderheads rolling in off the mountains.

The Invention of Dog Years

A mathematician
brushes his teeth in the mirror.

His dog creaks up from behind and rests
his gray muzzle in the man's empty left hand.

The man kneels and takes
the old dog's head in his hands.

He likes the way the dog has aged,
white whiskers of a handsome older gentleman.

How is it, the man says, you've gotten so old
without me, huh?

He asks the question,
and the dog closes his eyes.

The man remembers the other dogs
gone bristly, gone bad in the hips,

gone.

He thinks of numbers,
usually so fair,

how quickly they erode dog tendons,
dog bones.

This is the first of his many
he's allowed in the bed.

There was never room before
and it was always a rule,

a rule he now breaks,
curling his arms,

lifting the dog onto the mattress
the way the vet showed him.

The oiled smell of dirty hair
holds tight to his pajamas

as he closes his eyes,

rubs the dog's ear,

and for the first time in his life
 manipulates numbers

with fear.

The Next Ice Age

The next Ice Age will blow in
on a weekday.
And the Earth will shrug
mountain peak shoulders and say,
Déjà vu.

A forward-deployed Navy private
will run out on the smoke deck
and sting his hands on the rail
looking out on a waving tousled bed of ice.

The private will run back through the galley
back to his rack
to grab his ice skates
their black leather boots last polished by his father.

He'll shimmy down to the ice
of endless depth and impossible green.

His skates strapped on,
he'll take a lap around the carrier,
 $\frac{3}{4}$ of a mile,
and then he'll go AWOL
whistling through the cold morning
wearing a severed pant leg as a scarf
and folding his cold red hands behind his back.

Wishing On

Candles, their flames
blown into smoke.

Stars waking up
in the eastern sky.

These are the things
you're supposed to wish on.

I've wished on a key
turning again in the ignition.

I've wished on the sting of my own head
covered with my hands,

wished for a certain answer
when I pulled my hands away

and asked
Is it bleeding?

I've wished on my vomit
rising up to my mouth

wished it will come out easy
as the night sprays in reverse.

Maybe the problem
is me,

not imagining enough
to believe

the cracked half
of a greasy wishbone

has anything
to offer.

Man Heart

The way to a man's heart
they say
is through his stomach.
And that could be true.
But too much hunger
and other roads,
gravel tracks with tight turns,
open up all over.

They say the way
to a man's heart
is through his stomach.
And the way out of a man's heart
is through his touching hands.

They say the way
to a man's heart
is through his stomach,
but they don't mention
the mouth,
how it can touch
without eating,
bite
without breaking off,
the hard heat of it.

They say
the way to a man's heart
as though there were
some rutted out dirt road
the locals could drive
eyes stitched shut.
As though you could take
that same road straight out
easy as you came.

Indian Summer

This season is
grown too old.

He's stretched out of his summer
and waits for winter
with late barbecue sauce
on his cheek.

He's sitting in the bleachers
in short sleeves,
the baseballers exhausted,
chewing, cussing for rain
to warp their bats
and soak the groan
from their shoulders.

The tire swing
blown out and replaced
until we went through
all four
and had to string up the little spare.

Even Indian Summer,
he's thinking,
God, I never thought
it could last this long,
as he drops
another box of popsicles
into his shopping cart
and stands in the open freezer door
tasting frost
and icing out
the stares of other shoppers
loading up on charcoal
and ears of corn
again.

Studies Show Cavities

Studies show
and tell
that people
who kiss people
with cavities
will end up with
a black mouth, dug out, and
drilled by grime.

Maybe it's something
their mouths share.

But maybe what they share
are dinners and sweet black coffee.

Maybe they share late words
in the dark
when they should be brushing out
the last pieces of the day.

Maybe they'll share a small knife,
slicing apples together
not worried about who brought ruin
to their mouths.

Mechanical Hearts

The old World Record
for longest life
powered by mechanical heart
was three years.

The old World Record,
passed up today
by another man
with a scar down his chest.

A man
just waiting
for that machine
to give out
any day now.

Not like
the rest of us.

Manager's Special

I knew about it
for meat.

Sometimes you could get
a decent steak

if you checked the sides of the bones
for brown spots

and cooked the shit out of it.
Or just didn't scare easy.

I didn't know about it
for flowers.

Didn't know the manager
put them in a shopping cart,

death row smelling good
and bargain-priced.

There's no difference
with the flowers and the meat.

One cut from the roots
the other cut from a body.

But at least with the meat,
I don't know.

You could still save it some
with a nice mustard rub.

Despair

It sneaks up on you,
but not in the way of a cat
in tall grass.

Have you ever left your clothes
right next to the bed
so you trip on them in the night?

You get up and stumble across
your own floor, thinking,
Who's done this to me?

Men Alone

When you leave them alone
it's not what you'd think.

You might picture a cabinet
full of soups and cereal bowls.

Hell, it was my father
taught me to grill.

Then yesterday,
looking for something to wear

I pulled out a pair of shorts
from high school track and field. Hole in the ass.

Leave us long enough,
we'll still eat like cattle barons.

Cattle barons
wearing orange shorts, eating at the TV.

Art Supply

The store with all the art stuff
makes an idiot, a dreamer out of me.

The markers lined up
in disciplined rainbows

and the thick pads of cream paper
just ready for someone with the ink,

with the BALLS
to tell them how it is.

They display oil pastels by the register
the way candy bars are at the grocery.

And I start looking around at the other faces,
thinking, *If these assholes can do it...*

You probably know where this is going,
those of you who know the difference

between drafting pencils and sketching pencils,
pink erasers and the blocky tan ones.

Horsehair brushes, synthetic brushes-
You know the difference between art

and the notebook abandoned early
with only a few timid outlines of flowers

not a shadow of a rounded vase
in sight.

As Is

It's never good to be tagged

"As Is."

Everything comes

As Is, really.

But only something really damaged,
really broken,

is labeled so.

Cube, Six-by-Six

She gave me her Rubik's cube
To borrow, she said. I want it back.
Twisting the sides,
touching them,
These things go
like this:

You're trying to get one side,
one section of the cube's life, together.
Like say yellow is his job.
You're moving things around,
adjusting the red side, time,
to get him to work early.
You break up the white side,
let's say that's a hobby, rec softball,
to get that yellow side in order.
And things get good on the yellow,
on the job front.
But then you turn the damn thing over
and orange, his family,
is a total mess, pieces everywhere.
He tries, but he can't really remember
how it got this way.
The more he fixes one thing—
stray rows are the only things that come together on their own.

Insides Out

People love to talk
about human organs
outside the body.

If you took your guts,
yanked them straight,
they'd reach the moon with leftovers.

If you unfolded your brain,
ironed it flat,
you'd be looking at a solid half-acre of god-knows.

Someone will say this
in a classroom
or at the museum

as though we understand
the dimensions
of our flesh.

Not a Long Run Thing

She has
an ice maker
on her fridge.
There are cracked white trays
empty
in my freezer at home
and the hard leftover blob
of an ice bag,
melted, frozen
melted and frozen again.

The maker churns loud enough
that she stops to ask if I want
cubed or crushed,
her finger on the switch.
Her clean wood floors,
wiped-down countertops
and spotless burners.
She has ceramic jars
big, medium, small,
papa, mama, baby
for flour, sugar, and salt.
Pot holders together in one drawer
folded rags in another
table cloth ready
for guests, not messy men
who keep her up late.

Crushed, I say.
Please.