

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.