
HUCK'S PICKS

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Issue 6

SAILING TO BYZANTIUM . . . OR OTHER UNKNOWN PLACESS



"An artist exist[s] to create." So says the speaker in one of Edward Thomas's poems, and after reading this collection, aptly entitled "The Writings of the Lunatic Minded," the reader is forced to conclude that when the poet listens "to voice[s] from people no one can see," the only reason for existence is indeed the creation of works such as this. Thomas provides an eclectic tour through the schizophrenic mind, wherein struggles between angels and demons are as common as lawyers at arraignments. If you remember "The Exorcist," many of the poems will resonate "with flames of fire" pouring off the poet's tongue. This work is not for the faint hearted. But if you're up to a challenge and have an interest in mental health, then take a long, hard look at what Mr. Thomas offers up. (poemvv)

CARRYING A CAT BY THE TAIL

Aaron Hullett is an author who isn't afraid to tell it like it is. A master of the urban idiom, he gives us *Race to Crack Mountain*, with Soulja and his "Gee Homies girl, Thick Like Money" and places them at the center of a rapidly moving tale of gangsta greed and violence. His characters fulfill the predictions of Langston Hughes, for example, men and women whose dreams do not "dry up/like a raisin in the sun" or "fester like a sore," but "explode." It will therefore come as no surprise that the people who populate Hullett's novel also remind the reader of another African American poet, Gwendolyn Brooks, whose sad speaker in "The Pool Players, Seven at the Golden Shovel" confesses that "We/Die soon."

Being in the game means assuming certain risks, and Soulja and Thick Like Money accept them without sniveling about the consequences when they need to step on someone to climb the drug dealer's ladder to success. It doesn't get any more real than this.

Hullett's companion novel, *Release the Hounds*, maintains the identical realism as we get to know the members of competing street gangs who take no prisoners and neither ask for nor give mercy to their enemies in the dope trade. It's Atomic Dog versus Bull Dog, each man backed by armed gangsta teams that kill with no more feeling than turning off a bathroom light. Adding to the confusion and carnage is Detective Crush, a crooked cop who tries to work both sides of the street but ends up right in the middle. And everyone knows what happens when you get stuck in the middle of the street with cars coming at you from both directions. As the good guys and bad guys get progressively harder to distinguish, the fast-paced and bloody action sweeps everyone along, told by a narrator with both experience and insight. (fictvv)



STATE RAISED AND STATE BURIED

The title of David Garcia's memoir, *State Raised*, says it all. Beginning his prison career at sixteen, he is in and out of custody, moving through a succession of prisons for crimes including armed robbery and assorted mayhem, until he finally catches the big one that puts him away for life. He is indeed state raised, much as the late Jack Abbott described to Norman Mailer in his memoir.

Garcia's details about his early life serve as a blueprint for failure: a broken home, frequent moves, intractable poverty, no education or job skills. Add to that a rap sheet and no future except dead-end jobs, and no one is surprised when prison becomes the home he never had. And as we hear about the years inside, those of us who know expect the transition from bad to worse. Attempted escapes, assaults, more drugs, prison gangs, psychotic guards, and a philosophy built on the premise of unremitting punishment combine to make Garcia worse than the sixteen-year-old who walked through the gates for the first time.

This unforgiving narrative, including large sections culled from Garcia's trial transcript, helps answer the question he poses to himself: how did he wind up in prison again and again? His inability to identify continued felonies and four parole violations as the proximate cause testify to the systemic failures that accompany being "state raised." Absent is any expression of remorse, even for the death of a store clerk during one of Garcia's robberies. We get only a profound sense of victimization, as if the system were obliged to play by the rules Garcia himself disregards and forfeits the moral high ground when it doesn't. Being state raised clearly encourages neither introspection nor behavioral changes.

In the end, Garcia rejects a plea bargain that would have put him back on the street when he was 50, preferring to represent himself at a trial in which the state had both video and eye witness testimony identifying him. He refuses to conduct any cross-examination of the witnesses and calls none for the defense. It is no surprise when the jury barely sits down for lunch before coming back with a guilty verdict, prompting his court-appointed attorney to compliment his performance and opine that both had identical IQ's.

I've met enough subpar lawyers before and during my prison years to cease being impressed by a JD degree, so perhaps the attorney wasn't that far off the mark. Cognitive abilities aside, both Garcia and the other players in this unfortunate drama all end up playing the roles they either chose or had forced upon them. Identifying which is which is the difficult part. (memvv)

KISS THE BEAUTY AND LET IT FLY

"Long Lives CeeCee's Sweet Essence of Inspiration" by Ronald Lee Smith is a celebration of a special woman and her influence on the poet's life. It is a journey both spiritual and aggressively physical, acknowledging the dualism that defines the most lasting relationships. CeeCee is cast in the same role as Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy* or Annabel Lee in Poe's classic lament. She is both guide and inspiration, sometimes frustratingly so, but throughout she remains the ineffable CeeCee, whose reforming influence and imposing presence lead the poet to abandon his predatory history and shout with confidence, "NO MORE!" (poemvv)

AS A MAN IS, SO HE SEES

If William Blake had been incarcerated at the Atascadero State Mental Hospital in California, he might have penned something like "The Plato of Genesis," London Ferguson's collection of poems. The vivid imagery and symbolism (e.g. "Fire breathes seven pill[ars] of sin") and religious overtones reprise the English poet's aesthetic that defines the imagination as "human existence itself." Add to that Ferguson's idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation and the reader comes away feeling as if he had just visited 18th-century London, not a bad place to shop for poetic inspiration. Get ready to accept a challenge that is worth the effort. (Poemvv)

Act is if what you do makes a difference. It does.
William James

BEAM ME UP, SCOTTY. THERE'S NO INTELLIGENT LIFE DOWN HERE

Richard Sean Gross has taken Gene Roddenberry's idea and projected it 1200 years into a future unimagined by Captain James T. Kirk and the intrepid crew of the *Enterprise*. For those old enough, including this reviewer, to recall the original *Star Trek* series, the same fuzzy physics apply in *Out of Time*, specifically the mysterious warp drive that permits superluminal velocities. And, as often was the case in the original series, the plot's action relies on potentially dangerous engineering problems.

Gross's travelers find themselves lost, both physically and philosophically, when the new drive pushes them into space-time coordinates unknown to any of them. They have no clue how they got there, where they are, or how to get back home. Complicating matters is the simultaneous appearance of other time travelers, each from a different historical period and each with his or her own device. The subsequent interactions between the stowaways and the crew move the story along while Captain Erik Lee and the officers of DS791 try valiantly to reverse the procedure and return the ship to port. Do they make it? Has anything changed back home? What about relativity's twins paradox? Read and find out. (screenvv)

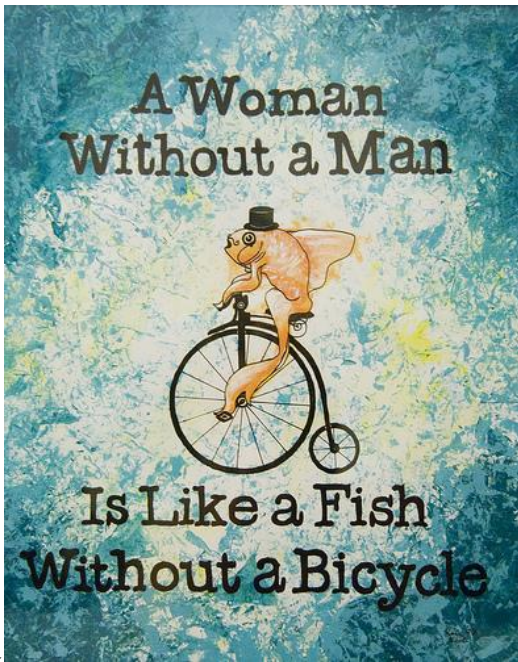


SO WE WON'T GET FOOLED AGAIN

Frank: A Book for Women About Men is precisely that: frank. If you're looking for some touchy-feely excursion through gender relationships, don't bother reading this. Mik, the pseudonymous author, sets out first to disabuse women of the stereotypes they encounter daily, many of which combine to damage their self-esteem. He describes the ways in which women are taught about fashion and makeup, the ways in which they are socialized to think of themselves in comparison to some false ideal of beauty and sexuality.

Mik adds authority to this erudite and witty discussion with a grasp of fundamental female biology, not simply knowing where things are but, more important, how they are affected by emotional trauma. Having recently read Naomi Wolf's new book, I was struck by the parallels between Mik's discussion and hers, especially regarding the roles played by endorphins and oxytocin.

Both authors go to great lengths to distinguish good lovers from bad, and in Mik's book, that includes providing cogent advice to dump the losers as quickly as possible. He also emphasizes the importance of friendship in relationships, perhaps channeling Emerson or Montaigne in the process. He contrasts this with a man's search for his OPA, his own personal angel, the woman who will complete him as



The organization of the book, maintained throughout, is a comprehensive laundry list of what a woman should do to attract a suitable man, with Mik establishing himself as the archetype with wide experience. The language is vivid and frequently harsh but never seems gratuitous. Mik's working hypothesis is that all straight women, driven by their genetic need to procreate, are on the hunt for the "right" guy with whom to form a permanent bond. Whether that hypothesis has universal application is something the reader must decide on her or his terms, but in either case, you won't come away without a strong opinion about Mik's theory or his ability to defend it. (nonfictvv)

PERMISSION TO DREAM

Anyone who has ever done time knows how difficult it is to escape the insanity that passes for standard operating procedure behind the walls. Identities are submerged beneath standard uniforms and numbers until for many, it becomes impossible to recall the actual persons who entered prison at the beginning of one's sentence. Nicolas Saperstein's collection of poems, *Sanity Somewhere*, captures that dilemma by emphasizing the constant presence of anger and rage and the impotent desire to ignore both.

In "Living A Lie," we hear the speaker mourn, "I'm not who I chose to be." This is followed closely by "The man in the mirror/is elusive not clear." The poem closes with the familiar old con's observation, "The real me has withered and grown old." It doesn't get any more precise than that.



The poems' speaker clearly has experienced the worst that America has to offer, suffering "war wounds" from the "unforgiving blade" and being medicated by psychotropic drugs. The avenues for escaping the madness are limited to sleep or getting high, and even those are not always successful. Darkness and perpetual night are constant themes in this guided trip through a "nighttime of nothing," alternating with the anguished wail of a man forever deprived of the warming light of the sun, both literal and metaphorical. Although the speaker tells us that he loves the night, it's only because he has "forgotten the light." Thus, the poet's search for peace and a sense of his truer self must remain forever "anchored in abstraction."

After reading this collection, one is tempted to ponder the title and wish Saperstein the best of luck in finding some sanity somewhere. Those of us with prison experience know the quest is not a promising one. (poemvv)

REPTILIAN POWER

Mike Evans returns with "The Adventures of Pushon Turtle and the Fireflies," featuring the understated hero of his first comic strip. We previously met Pushon and his friend Jus'abird in the first installment. Now Evans adds more characters to flesh out a story of friendship and cooperation. Fireflies, as the title indicates, play a pivotal role in this story, with a pelican explaining their intrinsic worth to both Pushon and a local frog. We thus get a lesson in the necessity for keeping nature pristine, but this is coupled with a subsequent project in which all the local characters combine their skills to build a new clubhouse, replete with the fireflies providing illumination and decoration. Evans once again does a masterful job of infusing a comic strip with valuable lessons every child should take for his own. (Comicvv)

