

IDENTITY

I am beginning to disappear—
At the small-town butcher's down on Fig Street
Where Joe Ostringa used to make his own fresh Polish sausage
Filling gut, they have closed their doors
And who is left to know me.

At Saint Barbara's Church where Father Borowy
Taught me catechism and first put the holy wafer
On my tongue; who bid my parents and grandparents
A solemn farewell in holy service; then years later
A requiem for him delivered by a black-cassocked stranger
To all the faceless in my pew.

In that small apple-growing town of Lyndonville
Near Lake Ontario, where I walked into my first classroom
To expound to those eighteen-year-olds of 1955
(Those first rabid fans of Elvis), replaced now by ghosts
Sitting at hardwood tables, ghosts computer-literate
With RAMS and ROMS and memory filled with calculation.
A sum of cold dead facts: abort, escape.

And in the clandestine lying down at night on the damp,
Crunched-down sand of Pensacola Beach, where my hot blood
Once pulsed, there is no longer heat enough to spark
Potent memory or recall a name seduced in vain—
Long before the hurricanes of '95 spilt their seed
And flooded my secret cove on Soundside
Where no one haunts but a hippie gone to rest
In the letters on the Wall. In a midnight visitation
I see fragments of me reflect transparent under a failing
October moon in the wavy silvered streaks of water in and
Out. Moss-covered my image as I am entrapped
In flowing strands of black seaweed, and wish
For a voice like Lear's to rage.

SISTER LEAVES FOR POLAND

Mama always referred to my younger sister as “Simonetta My Love Child.” Well, I got sick of hearing that, and when I was ten years old, I asked Mama, When am I going to be a love child? Mama said you’re aiming to be hateful, Becker. Becky was my christened name, but when Mama got mad she always called me Becker. Anyway, Mama said Simonetta can be a love child because she had her after my daddy was dead for two years. When the preacher’s wife said that was impossible, Mama said to her, Sweetie, it was a religious experience with the ground shaking. Well, I checked with the science teacher and he said no quake ever hit our small Southern town. Mama said it was no quake, it was Mr. Simon, a mathematics teacher from Poland, who was passing through our town for three months. Mama, there’s not even a Stop Sign in our town, so why was Mr. Simon passing through for so long? Becker, she said, he took real slow working his healing equations all over town. But I knew that was a lie, especially after he cured Mama’s arthritis real quick by rubbing her all over with WD-40, raising her to the fourth power, Mama said proudly.

I was reminding Mama how bereaved I was, especially when our church had a Christmas pageant and Simonetta My Love Child was the Virgin Mary and I was just some bleating lamb who only got to say Baa, Baa. Mama said I deserved no better ‘cause I was full of sass and a forced child. No one forced me, I said, but I would sure like to know when I am going to have one of those religious experiences like you Mama, and she slapped me full in the face. Baa.

Anyway, one hot summer day when I was watching traffic go by from our only gas station in town and eating a Little Debbie cake real dainty, a car pulled up, and a man wearing a purple suit jacket said to me he was a talent scout looking for pretty digits. Your knuckles talk, he said. Girl, I can feel them crawling up my spine like a slippery eel. Mister, I said, these knuckles are sending you a message: I have no intention of becoming a Cindy Crawlfish, so get out of town. To make this story short, I’m now a well-paid hand person in Atlanta always shaking my hands on television with diamond rings on with cherry painted nails. Now when I go back home to visit Simonetta My Love Child, I walk up real smart and say to her, Sister, you’re nothing but trailer trash who’s gotten fat and ugly. She answers me, Becker, I don’t live in no trailer. She still uses Mama’s hateful word for me, even though Mama’s now dead from lead poisoning from her arthritis treatment, the coroner said. I say back to her real sweet, Simonetta My Love Child, I hear you’re leaving for Poland

next month to find Mr. Simon and some of his equations. I tell her, don't forget to take the whole brood of yours with you too, so Mr. Simon knows you're no Virgin Mary. And tell him you ain't no mathematics student, either, SMLC—I now abbreviate her name.

CASHIERED

Someone might just have lunched with him—
After all people don't get up in the morning
and say I guess I'll die today; they do
ordinary things, or so it seems.
They're in the midst of casseroles or
cleaning firearms or swatting flies—
(that's most fitting, Gloucester, swatting flies).
God tears the swatter from their hands and
ho-hum drives the life right from them.
"But I just had lunch with him—"
So? Another fortuity life cashed at closing.

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WHAT'S IN A NAME

Piedras Negras is the name of a city hard to swallow.
Like a contrite black olive with the pit half-hung outside,
the name sticks in the gullet like gallstones
trapped in bile ducts, like calcified rosary beads
endstopped on a decade of sorrowful mystery,
like blackened swordfish whose burning peppercorns
sear the tastebuds of memory.

No dentist drill can probe the depth of rigor mortis
deep enough to discover the lover gone. By any other name,
Piedras Negras, jet bloodstone, you are the city
where we said goodbye.

GONE WITH THE WIND II, OR HANK'S GRANDMOTHER

In 1988, the Pensacola News Journal held a contest to find the best sequel to Gone with the Wind. Professor Spara received word that his sequel, a satire, was among the prize winners.

After Rhett abandons Scarlett, she moves to the seat of Harris County, Hamilton, Georgia, thirty miles north of Columbus/Fort Benning. She goes to military balls weekly at the base where she meets a wealthy Russian nobleman, Count Lotto. Five minutes after meeting Lotto, Scarlett convinces him to divorce his wife. He marries Scarlett and builds her a huge plantation outside of Phoenix City, Alabama, overlooking the Chattahoochee River, where Scarlett and Prissy sometimes sit on the spacious veranda, hooking rugs while bands of roving fishermen below move about humming hymns.

When the Count makes numerous trips back to Kiev to visit his ailing mother (Scarlett refusing to accompany him), she entertains young military officers from Fort Benning at their estate. "These officers remind me of the Tarleton twins," Scarlett confides. She holds so many evening barbecues at Lotto Grove (their estate) that plantation owners twenty miles southwind complain that Scarlett is scorching their cotton fields. "Fiddle-dee-dee," answers Scarlett as she throws another ham hock on the fire.

Scarlett, now eight months pregnant, discovers that the Count's visits in Kiev are becoming much too frequent. She steals into his study and breaks open his strongbox. To her glassy-eyed horror, she discovers that Lotto is involved with a Russian peasant boy named Wladziu on the lower Steppes. "Chicken Kiev!" she screams. "Chicken Kiev!"

"Hold your horses," Prissy answers from the kitchen. "It ain't ready yet."

Angry that she demonstrated outside of Fort Benning in support of gay rights, Scarlett destroys all the lavender stemware at Lotto Grotto. She then empties the house of all the Christian Brothers and heads for Georgiana, Alabama, where Aunt Pittypat has opened a boarding house, "The Twining Kudzu for Proper Girls." One night behind the Twining Kudzu's smokehouse, Scarlett gives birth to Francesca Jolene. "Damn that Melanie," Scarlett wails, "that twit should have helped me as I did her."

Living in Georgiana now for seventeen years, Scarlett manages to open three lumber mills and a YMCA. Francesca Jolene, having matured, shows herself to be possessed of her mother's fiery temperment. "I'm going home to Lotto Grotto and claim my birthright," she screams at Scarlett, who is too busy to hear her, having become involved with a pasty-faced no-account Ph.D named Leslie. One night while Scarlett is cooking jambalaya, a gypsy fortuneteller from Nashville tells Scarlett that she is destined to become the grandmother of a famous musician named Hank. In a flash, Scarlett exclaims, "I see the light," and jumps onto the back of her nag Beau Zepus. She rides wildly back toward Lotto Grotto as she hums melody after melody of tunes not yet composed.

As she enters the plantation's elaborate entrance hall, done in black and blue velvets, Scarlett spots a tall, attractive man trying to rip the clothing off Francesca. "Stop!" Scarlett screams. The man turns to face her; their eyes lock for a moment as they instantly recognize each other.

"But I thought she was you, I really did, Scarlett," he protests as he points to a partially clad Francesca Jolene.

Scarlett calmly reaches down and takes a pistol from her damask traveling bag. She shoots Rhett square below the belt. As he lies there moaning, a butler enters with a message and shouts, "More balls at Benning!" Rhett moans again and looks up at her imploringly. "I'll think about you tomorrow," she says as she orders Mammy to bring forth Lotto Grotto's most fetching draperies.

"Miss Scarlett," Mammy warns, "if you keep on pinching your cheeks like that at your age, you're gonna get blood blisters."

"Oh, fiddle-dee-dee."

THE REAL WHO

They live their lives in black and white, confined
in computer screens, without corpuscle or fleshy
touch. Each an electron corpse, they clone off
in dots that go to some distant somewhere. Wires,
poles, circuits, in their glassy caskets they dracula
in bloodless nightly incarnations as they drum
at their keyboards, sucking in metallic clinks
as they chunk off the unreal. No Keith Moon drum
of color, nor even the reflection of Platonic cave fire.
They are the fetus aborts craving breath on some distant foreign shore,
smothering in silica.

FIXING CICELY TEA

Forgive me my caducity.
I smelled it too this morning
in the ice cubes stored too long,
and in their clink at all loose ends
as their scent followed from room to room.

Was there ever a time of no odor?
or do I, like the sweet cicely losing white,
mask the scent of fermentation?
Things begin to perish after steeping—
no deep freeze then to stave off
final chill.

DOCTOR ARGENTINA'S FUGUE

"My whole life had become a succession of dull recitatives with no arias," Doctor Argentina announced at the Congress of Retired Scientists, "but I have changed all that since last we met."

What ridiculous new invention will this consummate fool inflict upon us this time they pondered.

"Watch closely and I will show you my Golden Thimble," he said, advancing one foot. "I now have a fixed body part that magnetizes all those who see it." A number of skeptics rushed forward to scoff, but they could not dislodge the Yellow Appurtenance from the upper part of his right index finger.

"It is some new chemical adhesive," they said. "Nothing more. A mere glued thimble." As the scoffers attempted to pull it off, Doctor Argentina remembered the auburn-haired beauty twelve months ago at the Playa del Musico who followed him home. "I am helpless in the spell of that magnet," she said. "I am a wealthy woman who will pay you well." The next day she accompanied him to the matinee at the Legato Grande track, where, at twelve, Doctor Argentina used his magnet again—this time on that famous dark-haired jockey, rumored to color his hair. "I will give you inside tips on every race," the saddle rider said. "You will become rich beyond..."

Suddenly Doctor Argentina's fugue crashed. "I am embarrassed," he tittered.

"It's off. We have gotten if off," the frenzied scientists yelled.

"Perhaps you will believe me now," he sang.

Finalist in FSU's *World's Best Short Short Story Contest*

FRANZ DIED

We are a family of all primas and no donnas. For example, nine months ago when our pet Franz died, Mother and Father argued about who was going to bury him. They each refused and took up stationary posts—Mother in her rocker at the window and Father in his recliner there by the doorway. They sit so still that I hate to disturb them when I go out to the formal garden. Once when I was digging up the grey mulberry, I peeked in at their window to see if they were moving in secret, but no. They're still here. My sister Muir thinks they're dead.

Muir is sometimes moody. She got up early one Friday morning and found wrinkles in her hands. Don't stand so close to the sun, I said. It sees. That set her off, and she started on a desperate search for her cloisonne container of French dusting powder. When she finally found it in the west wing, I asked, "Are you going to make explosives?" But she just ignored me. Now she's holed up in her room and won't come out. In fact, I never hear anything in there anymore, not even the sound of her window chiffon caressing the granite ledge.

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LECHERY

A dash of lechery makes everything just that much more interesting. The longskinned, uncircumcised penis that hides its head in shame wins no contest of color. But just let a little pink show and see how Mimsie who before averted her eyes now glances in questing approval. She ponders the tone, the texture, the quality of tissue. Can it stand the pressure she asks. Is the color real? Can it turn to crimson? Will Hawthorne disapprove? Oh hell, yes. That's why he's such a flaming intellectual hard-on.

A SLEEVE OF YELLOW CHIFFON

As I looked down at my twin sister Felicia confined in a sleeve of yellow chiffon, I remembered again her words nine months ago: "I'm so far past desperate that I've come home again too *satisfied*." Did I fail to recognize this as mere bravado? After all, three doctors in Switzerland had declared her well enough to quit the asylum and resume her life. She appeared very happy at the garden party, making light of the plump daffodil sent anonymously to her welcome-home. Greeting everyone warmly at the trellis gate, she dismissed her latest confinement so quickly not even Clara, her childhood nemesis, had time to disturb her equilibrium. Nothing upset her that afternoon, not even the downpour that drove everyone inside to the interior drawing room.

As the ungainly ladies seated themselves on the stiff-backed Victorian sofas, Felicia recoiled at the damask pattern: "The congealing of these stilled canaries does not absolve the hungering eye." Perhaps, those words of hers were meant to be a warning, but she had always said such charming things, even as a golden-haired child on vacation chasing a lone monarch along the distant shore of Father's manor at Rockrose, staying just this close to the edge of the water's bound. "My first-born," said Father with the pride of an owner's eye. "The sun chose her alone to shine on." How those words stung at parting.

At dawn I returned to the family plot to leave a companion bloom.

RETRIEVING THE GOSPEL

I go grudgingly for the morning news,
hobbling on the carmine scream of my right arthritic
knee, on those same svelte legs, about which Lois
in Columbus, Georgia, said, “My three roommates would kill
for limbs so trim and pretty, but don’t be insulted.”

An old photograph mocks the vigor of those legs
that played tennis so nimbly under a scorching Georgia
sun with Buzz on the Tech campus; those legs that cycled
ten miles each way to Lake Erie’s Woodlawn Beach as that
witless child couldn’t hasten age fast enough; those legs
that briskly trudged the Buffalo snows, up Ridge Road
to Lackawanna High, bent on escaping the principal’s wrath
at their tardiness; the soldier’s legs that survived
the forced marches in the fetid Benning swamps; and the
less-than-forced antic bedding-downs.

Now, still frigid from my sleep, I walk the unending
length of the driveway, cane in hand so not to forfeit
grace. I crave beyond measure one last ballsy stance
to shake my cane menacingly at the duplicitous divinity
that lends, only for a time, harmony, and then slowly,
painfully steals the sacred grace away.

EUTHANASIA: FOR 30 YEARS DEAD

The cinema of my memory replays the movie *The Uninvited* in which the heroine Gail Russell is terrorized by an evil spirit from beyond the grave, a horny stepmother or such who nightly haunts Gail's dreams, whispering to the hapless girl to throw herself from a cliff outside their home onto the blades of rock far below, as if there was body enough (Gail's) and fright enough (mine).

But it was the wafting of delicate mimosa scent intruding on Gail's bedroom that announced a second spirit present. Someone in the movie said (I don't remember who) that mimosa perfume was the favorite of Gail's long dead mother, and that she should trust the scent of the featherduster bloom to lead her out of evil—and it did, despite the wired black cat lurking.

So when the mimosa in my backyard's moist Southern clime began to run sap, sweet, thick, gelatinous and the floodlight nightly exposed ravenous colonies of roaches feeding, their stick-thin legs mired in the honey of the mimosa's life expelling, I tried to ward them off, but they clung persistent as the memory of my long dead mother. There was no choice: I axed the tree.

AN HONEST MAN

My grandfather used to say: There are no curves
in coffin corners—but I learned long ago
not to trust him. He wasn't talking about curves
and corners but different things that were alike.
He'd wait for me to ask him what he meant
then finally after making him wait, I'd ask.
When he finished he'd bounce me on his knee.

I watched him die yesterday, but he wasn't sneaky
anymore—like dying in simile or metaphor
he just died for real, just out-and-out died for real.
And I learned something by myself for once and I want
so much to tell him: we're like a chain, you and me,
with part of that chain now under the ground.

HISTORY LESSON

I have fallen into the relic heap of your history
where reside soft memories of Polish folk tales;
hard memories of blitzkriegers skimming the flats
across the border, and your family tales of starving
Romanian émigrés turned Nazi-poseurs who slipped food
to your grandmother in secret, having fled their own
land as cannibals.

Your mother's recipe for *placki*, remembered this
Fourth of July, as you strained the juice of the potato
in my kitchen sink through a coarse dishcloth as did my
grandmother one aged lifetime ago in Buffalo.

The surreptitious sharing of one cigarette as we bent
double in tandem under the table to defy the threat
of no-smoking in that food place in Perdido after the
revel of the daiquiris at the Cabana in the cove,
and my spoken secret to you and yours in blue-eyed
averred silence.

And now your last call to me when history failed you.
Didn't you remember I never arise before noon
on Saturdays? Your hyperventilating secret tenuous
voice pulsating in fractured English, fracturing my
heart as if you were speaking from the depths of a
dungeon your last cry, your reach for my identity
denied to you, Polish mafia brother: "Vallee."
I forgive you history, but not the fracture
of permanence on the tape your last calling out
from the depths of farewell.

placki (Polish): pancakes

Vallee (Polish): Wally

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