

crazyhorse



Number 77 Spring 2010



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MARVIN BELL

The Book of the Dead Man (Kiss Kiss)

Live as if you were already dead.
—Zen admonition

1. About the Dead Man (Kiss Kiss)

The dead man is of the future, but he will not breathe a word of it.
The dead man will say he is the patchwork offspring of Mother Nature and Father Time.
He frames it thus when folksy, as others say *tsk tsk* to youth or *kiss kiss* for goodbye.
He is common, even so he has tried to pry official fingers from the nuclear button.
He is common, even so he has tried to smoke out the cranks.
The dead man has seen his nation shoot itself in the foot with a blood lust for guns.
He has seen it smoke itself to death.
He has lived among the wistful who can only rub a brass lamp.
He has boarded with the fry cook and the pool tender, the task master and the idler.
He doesn't wear a suit, he is small town, common, he is one-at-a-time.

2. *More About the Dead Man (Kiss Kiss)*

Where now a cyclotron spirals particles at Brookhaven Laboratory, there was Camp Upton.

The dead man saw the soldiers mustering out.

He was a child among the khaki strap undershirts, buffeted by the commotion at the edge of imminent release.

This was the old way of war, one tour of duty and a discharge.

The dead man's father drove to the Camp to hire a veteran.

And there were prisoners, then, working at roadsides or in fields, happy to have been pulled from the fighting.

And the veterans of older wars who said nothing afterward.

The dead man is a veteran of an army rent by the *hubris* of empire.

Now dead men and women live among the bereaved of war, live and pass away, live and pass away.

The dead man dies with the fallen soldier and the aged veteran equally.

TESS WHEELWRIGHT

Max Donaldson and His Son

Max Donaldson was a waxy, whiskey-logged financier who knew his son not to be stupid, and knew himself to be less stupid than his son. He blamed the mother. Like him, she was a corporate triumph in the Windy City, but unlike him, she was a churchgoer and a baker of puddings, a saver of dinner leftovers in labeled yogurt tubs; she kept in close cooing touch with the half dozen siblings she'd grown up tending in the woods of Minnesota, and the only albums she owned were musicals. She volunteered; she drank only moderately and then became pink and gullible; she'd betrayed never a wince of resentment of their children's squalling dependence. Unlike him she'd *rewarded* their small son for stunts like giving up a goal to a pitied opponent or half his Halloween candy to a kid claiming to have lost his to a hole in the bag—for later rounding up his motley middle school friends for an unsponsored no-to-drugs campaign at the mouth of the lunchroom: one hand-drawn poster per susceptible peer, each library-researched and on recycled paper. These acts, this boy, embarrassed Max. So did his ex-wife's license, to this day, to pull the boy onto her yielding lap, after a gluey Midwestern dinner, folding in his gangly limbs, clucking, both beaming. Their daughter Max understood better. She'd always squirmed off

that lap. Now off in London, trying to model— attractive, unforeseeably attractive, though probably not attractive enough—*she* was proving the unsure bet, but still hers was a power—the power to leave lovers, to make the *other* party strive to impress—of the kind Max recognized.

It was Max who informed his son that his son possessed an especially large penis. They were at Max's club, in the steam-room; his son had just given him a decent game of racquetball—more than decent: wiped his ass, in fact, finally, after enough permission. Max had his towel doubled up behind his neck and was leaning back comfortably, enjoying the sensation of the first run-away droplets of sweat down the sides of his heavily resting stomach, wondering, Why hadn't they done this more often?

Well for one, his son preferred outdoor sports; he had a soccer game with some Bolivian guys in Washington Park; did it ever bug Max that it was black guys handing out the towels and only white guys using the club?

Oh Jesus, right. Max had forgotten. Sorry he'd asked. Max leaned back again. A sweat droplet rerouted by a tuft of silvering curls stayed a high course to pool in his navel. Another headed south from his lower back So was Tommy still seeing a lot of that girl from Indianapolis? She

was cute enough, could have been cuter, seemed a little sober. Meanwhile, they only saw each other every couple of weeks, wasn't it? While there was a city of talent right here. Tommy *was* aware that, well, oh, that he had nothing to be ashamed of. In the way of what he had to offer. A woman. If he knew what Max meant.

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MOLLY BASHAW

Every Time I Have Never Been Here Before

Dark beans
string their velvet tongues.
A horse eye blinks

through a curtain of mane,
purple the shake of black, black
the shade of sound.

Nights on the farm
eggplants unbutton and sing,
mares whip the air cantering.

The field reveals another node.

JANE DELURY

Ants

The last passenger, an old man in a straw hat, was making his way along the reef toward the boat. He stopped and bent down, feet amputated by the water, the canvas bag on his shoulder skimming the ocean. Three times since he had quit the beach, he slipped his hand into the water but only once had Myra seen him find something. He stood up and continued to wade, calf-deep, his face cast down. He didn't seem in a hurry, though the islander manning the boat had waved at him twice and was now standing astride the bow, chewing his beetle nut impatiently and spitting the red juice over the side. By the time the trails floated past Myra, they had bloomed into hibiscus flowers against the turquoise field of water.

A bench down, Myra's mother, Iris, was talking to the Australian couple about the things adults discuss when they meet in a foreign place and are marooned together in a boat. The Australian man wasn't much for pig but he enjoyed last night's hog roast. His wife liked the breakfast buffet for the fresh papaya. Though she thought the spa might not be hygienic, she tried not to think about it because the coconut-milk facials were so nice. She and her husband came to the islands each winter, she told Iris, she to plunk on the beach and he to play golf and tennis. They

had been all over the Pacific and felt that this was the most beautiful country and the natives the friendliest, always smiling as if they hadn't a care in the world.

"Aren't you lucky," she said to Myra. "To go so far at thirteen."

"Dad needs help with his article," she said, but Gray didn't look up. A stretch of orange cushions away, he was writing in the notebook he had opened when they boarded. With his face coated in a chalky layer of sunscreen, he resembled one of the African tribesmen he had written about once, who painted their skin with mud to fend off evil spirits.

The islander dropped off the side to help the old man up the ladder. After sitting down next to Myra, he sandwiched the bag between his ankles.

"We saw you out there this morning," Iris said. "We thought we were the only people up at six."

"The earlier, the better," the old man said. "By noon, the tide starts to stir things up."

The Australian woman raised her voice over the snarl of the boat's motor. "Six a.m. God forbid." She had the kind of face that you might imagine behind the counter of a bakery, and a marbling of varicose veins on her thighs. Her husband's mirrored sunglasses flashed each time he turned his head.

“Gray wanted to write about the sunrise,” Iris said. “The sun doesn’t ever sleep in.”

The boat chopped a path through the water. When the Australian man lit a cigarette, Iris said, “Don’t tempt me. I quit last year.” She cocked her face to the sun. Her skin glowed around her black bikini top.

“If not here, where?” the Australian man said.

“Don’t pretend you’re an old hand,” his wife said. “He only smokes when we’re away,” she told Iris.

Myra checked the horizon for the island where they were to snorkel but nothing broke the blue plane of sky and water. She pulled her T-shirt over her knees and down her legs. Her bones pressed into her skin as if trying to escape; her body was all angles with new fleshy places like clumps of clay pressed in as an afterthought. In the bag between the old man’s ankles, something was moving. She could hear clicking, under the putter of the motor. A hump rose like a muscle under the canvas, then disappeared.

“You like shells?”

Myra looked at the old man. He squinted, as if studying her through a microscope.

“I guess so. I used to collect them when I was little. We rented a house on Cape Cod in the summers. Mom and I dug for clams.”

The old man shook his head. “Then you haven’t seen anything. American clams are little bastards. You should go to Mexico. The Venus Mortoni. That’s a shell with a soul.” He reached down for the bag. “Look what I found this morning.”

The shell he gave her was full and heavy as a small cantaloupe, the outside white with calcification, the inside a smooth and glistening pink. He dug a bent finger into the slit where the two sides of the shell came together. “The mollusk’s got its operculum closed. It’s hiding from us.” He wiped his finger on the leg of his shorts.

“It’s beautiful,” Myra said. Light simmered on the surface of the shell. She felt that her face must be glowing, but when she looked up, Gray was still writing and Iris was showing the Australian woman how the sarong she’d bought in the resort gift shop could be reversed to show palm trees rather than angel fish.

“They don’t get much rarer than that,” the old man said. “I’ve been coming to the islands twice as long as you’ve been alive. This is the first one I’ve found.”

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JENNIFER MILITELLO

A Dictionary at the Turn of the Millennium

Hello to devouring, hello to digest,
to the end of lostness and the chill of less.
Hello to living like sardines.

To solace. To the offspring of hello.
Hello to desperation. Hello to welcome in.
Hello to generations that etcetera as we watch.

Hello to experiment with us.
Hello to angels at the mouth-ache
of more. Hello to the surgical morning.

Hello to the delicious red let of lakes,
to being gone like a long underwater.
Hello, it is an ordinary world, hello

limited time and autumn's pent-up monsters.
Hello, routine. Paralysis. Paradise.
Adrenaline catastrophe. Hello.

CHRIS GAVALER

The Hole It Would Leave

Paul is in the door watching me. I know it before I roll from the wall, startled, my mouth wet, my pillow, my cheek. I'm awake, like that, I'm awake. Nothing comes before it. I squint at his five-foot silhouette and the blaze of the laundry room fixture above his buzzcut. I'm in the laundry room. I live in the laundry room, this half of it. Scott, Paul's dad, he rigged up a wall, a pre-fab from Home Depot, and Paul and I leaned it in place while he tightened the screws. I like to be helpful. The wall is temporary.

Paul shifts, eyes me, tilts forward. His feet, those dad-sized sneakers, never move.

"Hey," I say. My voice is strangled. I can't remember how much beer I had before bed. There are no empties blocking the clock.

"Hey," says Paul.

I squint but can't see his expression, don't need to. He's got something to tell me. My nephew doesn't come down here without an excuse, even a dumb one, a homework question, any reprieve from the adults upstairs. I don't count. That's a good thing, a function. Paul can use me. He's okay, not everything you might want in a kid, but he's fine. Maybe it would be different if he were mine. Gina used to say my feelings would change if we had a child, that I would like my own kid; everybody said so. I would fall in love with him.

They always said "him." I like my nephew fine.

"What's up?"

Paul raises his chin toward the lopsided curtains, the mismatched spares his step-mom, Angela, hung when I got here. A shadow wavers behind the glass. The buzzing noise isn't in my head. It's the lawnmower. Paul's dad is out there every Saturday, first thing.

"Scott wants to talk to you."

Paul calls his dad by his first name when talking to me, only to me. I'm useful. I pinch the bridge of my nose and elbow up from the mattress. "What about?"

He waits until I'm looking at him again before he shrugs. What I don't like is the shape of his head, his skull. I want the hair to grow out, but Scott razors him in the kitchen every month, stretches the electric cord from the socket beside the microwave as the clippers hum in fast full arcs. I do the same to my own head. I like things simple, functional, nothing to comb, little to wash. But it's wrong on a kid. With the light behind him, he could be bald, one of those monstrous children on chemo, or a military punk. His desert camouflage pants cycle through the wash every Sunday.

My legs pop from the sheets as my body rights itself. The room vanishes, crumples into a speck

of pain, then rights itself too. I blink at my legs,
pink and bare, like poultry flesh under supermar-
ket lights.

“Thanks,” I say.

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RAY AMOROSI

In His Own Acre

Teach me your madness.
Is it in the Silver Bell not pink enough,
the dandelion press too sweet.
No tent moth on the trees mouthing perfect
holes, dripping slime. No
mite or borer.

Me. I'm not so good
as what I do, grow, or appear to a tap
root that can't be dug or poisoned out.

Teach me the worm's method, becoming two.
No festering. No
gawking out the window.
Let the weed I bend over for
be yanked up without spite.

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