

# **It Might Be Serious This Time**



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**scars** **education**

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“If you scrutinize reality closely enough,  
if in some way you really, really get to it,  
it becomes fantastic.”

Diane Arbus

*For Katie and Stephanie.*

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## Thin Soup

We were starving to death  
in the final weeks of the war  
before the Americans came  
with their Hershey bars,  
canned peaches and Spam.  
My sister used to go out  
at night with a short-handled hoe  
to scavenge cabbages or sugar beets,  
anything to add to the thin soup  
that barely kept us alive.

One morning she didn't come back.  
We never heard her laughter again  
or her singing in the kitchen, just  
the sound of the local farm dogs  
howling in the night wind. I guess  
they were hungry, too.



## Fried, Stewed, And Nude

## How Frayed It Is

He can't find an empty seat at the bar until the guys playing at the other end of the pub finish their set with that song about the belle of Belfast city just like the night before. Finally, he says to himself, puts his empty glass down, takes off his denim jacket and spreads it out over the stool. He notices for the first time how frayed it is at the cuffs and the collar. Damn, he thinks. I didn't know how bad it was. He orders another pint of stout, wonders what he might do to keep it from getting any worse, remembers that it was his old girl friend Katie who gave him that jacket for Valentine's Day fifteen, no closer to twenty, years ago. He watches the Guinness settle in front of him, but all he sees is her, and how she always wore men's pyjamas to bed and how that just about killed him. He takes a few swallows of beer, realizes he has no idea where she is today, only that a few weeks later she surprised him with a card taped to his apartment door about an old boyfriend who deserved another chance and not to try to get in touch. He's thinking how much that sucked, how pissed off he was, when, suddenly, a cheer erupts all around him. Startled, he looks up and sees it's a rugby match on tv, burly guys in green jerseys celebrating a score of some sort. He tries to watch for a few minutes hoping to figure it out, but it's a game he doesn't understand, so he goes back to his Guinness, wondering why unbuttoning her pyjamas couldn't have lasted forever.

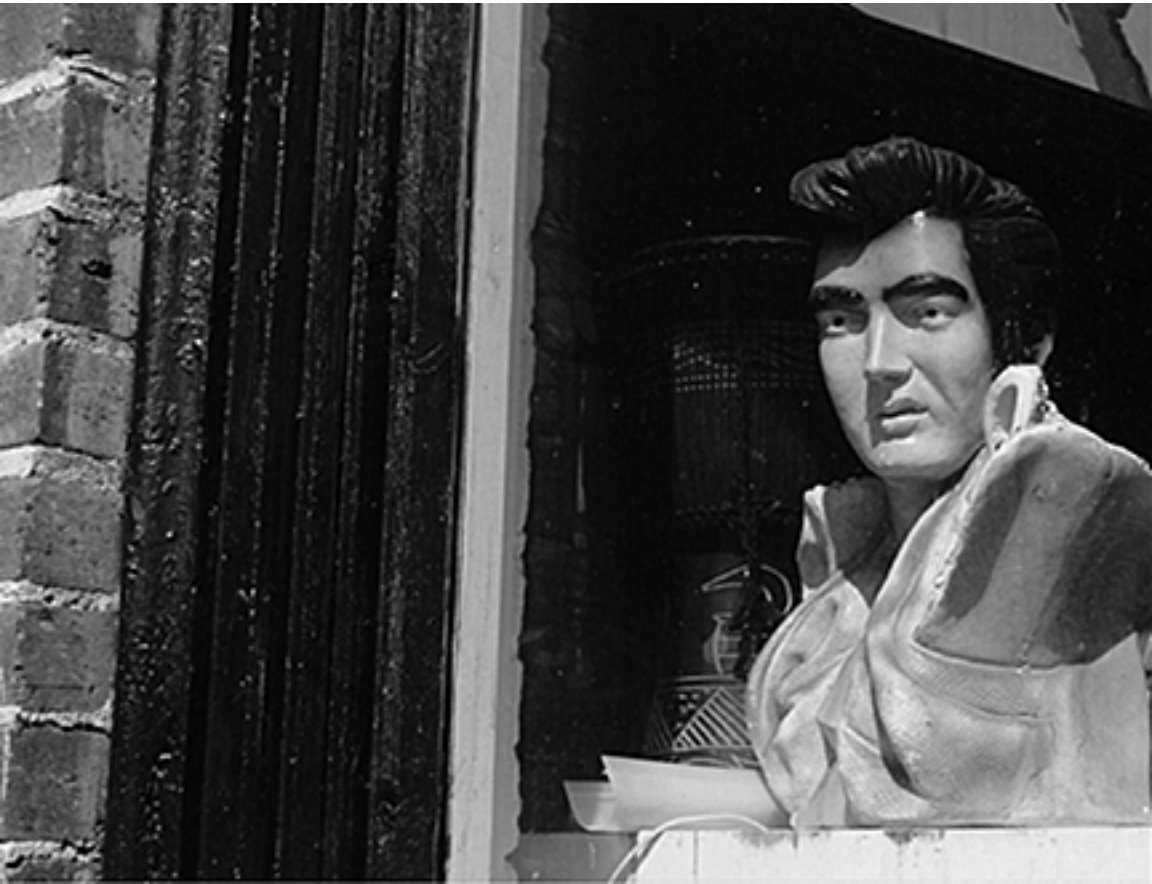




## **Three Mile**

## Just As We Fire

In all my dreams  
I go target shooting  
deep in the woods  
with Montgomery Clift.  
It's very quiet in the forest,  
and we always end up kissing  
as we load our weapons.  
Just as we fire, I wake up  
feeling wet and sticky,  
with a melting pistol  
in my hand, the smell  
of gunpowder in the air.



## **Still In The Building**

## The High Notes

That summer we lived across the pasture  
from a family of Kosher butchers. Stay away  
from those Jews, my father the preacher said.  
You'll stick with our own kind, if you know  
what's good for you, but I ached hard for Lilly,  
their beautiful eldest daughter; she of the dark,  
tumbling hair, alabaster skin, and nipples  
of the softest, sunset pink. We made love  
every morning in the barn after she tended  
to the lone dairy cow. The mad shrieking  
of the horrified animals breathing their last  
out in the killing yard was like the music  
of angels to me in those hours of pure delight  
on the moist morning hay, the cup of fresh milk  
she gave me to drink like the sweetest of wines.

One early September morning, her father surprised us  
with his long killing knife just as we finished  
with each other. He pushed me off darling Lilly,  
and, with a few quick strokes, left me wailing  
in a way like never before as he dragged my love  
away from me. I heard a few days later in the hospital  
that Lily was seen crying at the train station on her way  
to teach at a boarding school for tubercular girls  
up in the mountains far away, never to see me again.  
It was for the best, I guess, I wouldn't want her to know  
that the small, special parts of me left for the barn cats  
to fight over had me trying to remember her touch  
and groping myself in vain at night, hitting all the high notes  
every Sunday in my smiling father's church choir.



## Roast Pork

## **Monday Morning**

My apartment smells  
of bleach, parrot droppings,  
and Axe body spray.

It was a weekend  
for the ages.



## Free Bridge

# It Might Be Serious This Time

My mother's back in the hospital,  
my ex-girlfriend exhaled as she dropped  
her laptop bag on the sofa next to me.  
I think it might be serious this time..  
I booked a flight out at six tomorrow morning.  
Oh, shit, I answered without looking up  
from my book. That's bad. I'm sorry  
to hear that. How you getting to the airport?

I didn't know what time it was, still  
pitch dark. We were in the parking lot  
of the 24-hour doughnut place on the way  
to the highway. What do you want?  
she asked. We need to hurry. I'm late.  
I told her I just wanted coffee, large  
and black. She slammed the door.  
I sat there tapping my palms against  
the wheel. With good traffic I figured  
I'd be back in 90 minutes, just enough  
time to shower and get those copies made  
I needed for first hour class. I sat back,  
closed my eyes. When she got back in,  
she told me she forgot her curling iron.  
We had to go back. It would just take  
a minute. Oh, for shit's sake, I said real loud,  
then jammed the car into reverse pretty hard.  
When we turned out of the parking lot she asked,  
Why are you acting like this is such a big pain  
in the ass? I didn't say anything, didn't know then  
it was the last question she'd ever ask me,  
just kept driving back toward where we came,  
no sign of light anywhere to be seen.

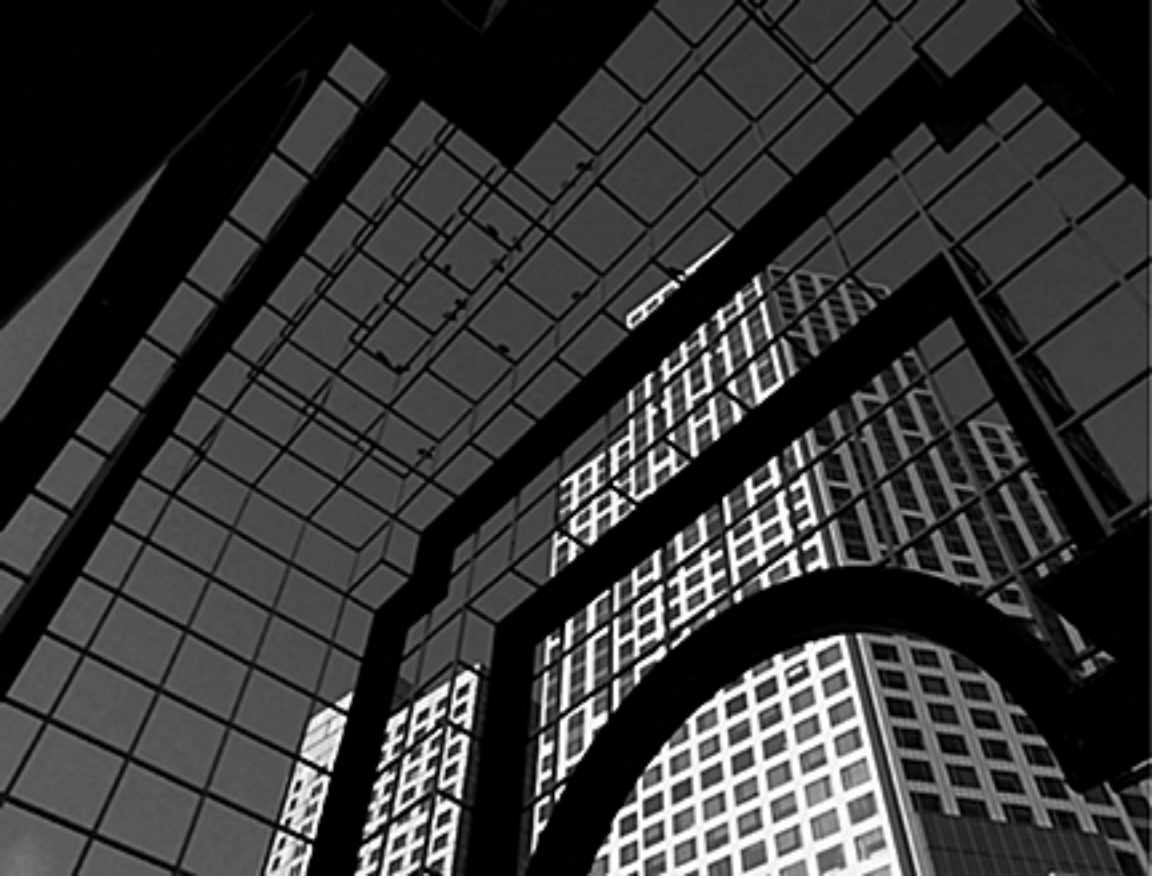




## John's

## Not A Trace

In bed late last night  
my girlfriend whispered,  
Gorillas don't have fingerprints,  
and started to cry. I tossed off  
the covers, brought her a banana  
from the kitchen. She stopped sobbing  
gradually as she peeled it so slowly,  
took, it seemed like nearly forever,  
to eat it there in the near dark,  
then rubbed the last bite all over  
my chest. Like hungry monkeys,  
we made love, leaving not a trace  
of her tears or our most animal desires  
for the coming light of morning.



## **Birds**

## **That Fucking Fogelberg Song**

I ran into my first wife yesterday  
in the parking lot at Whole Foods,  
he said while taking a big bite  
of a glazed doughnut. I took  
a sip of coffee, asked him  
how that went. He dabbed  
a balled-up napkin at his beard,  
told me that it reminded him  
of that that awful Dan Fogelberg song;  
kind of weird at first because he hadn't seen  
or heard from her in years. Christ, he said,  
we got married thirty-five years ago.  
Seems like I was a whole different person then,  
you know what I mean? Sure, I said. Absolutely.

He took another bite of doughnut, said  
they talked about how dumb they were  
back then, how they were going to be different  
from everybody else. You know, he continued,  
hunching more closely over the table toward me,  
I noticed we kept moving closer and closer  
to each other and somehow I started to see why  
I was so crazy about her way back when.  
I mean, she's older and heavier now,  
but who isn't? Nobody I know, I answered.

He swallowed the last of the doughnut,  
licked his fingers, then reached across the table  
for more napkins. Anyway, he said with a hint  
of a shrug, I really just wanted to hold her,  
was thinking about how great it would be  
to maybe slow dance right there in the parking lot  
for a few minutes, but she said suddenly that  
she had to go pick up her daughter at piano,  
had lost track of the time, so it was just a quick hug  
and then I watched her drive away. Now, he said,  
as he rubbing his face with a wad of napkins,  
I can't get that fucking Fogelberg song out  
of my head. Jesus, that's really bad, I told him,  
as I tried my best to look away, but I just couldn't  
take my eyes off the tiny flecks of sugar in his beard  
that he couldn't wipe away.



## Home Cooked Religion

## His Very First Miracle

Don't tell his mom, but Jesus lost his virginity on prom night, just like most of us. His date was Rachel Schwartz, class valedictorian who left for a kibbutz a few weeks later and Cornell in the fall. They were grinding hard against each other during the last dance to The Long and Winding Road, stopped at a party at the Ramada Inn where they drank some Miller Lite and smoked a little weed, ended up ravenously groping each other on a ratty couch in the basement of Jesus' best friend Peter Stone's house. They managed to get naked in high school record time, and when Rachel called out Jesus Christ! louder than a tv evangelist, and went limp beneath him, Jesus knew right away he'd performed his very first miracle, even if it was the kind you'll never read about in the Bible.



## **Cedar Point Light**



## Always Alice

This afternoon I saw Gertrude Stein at the grocery store. I couldn't help but recognize her, she was taking up a whole bench by herself like a queen just inside the automatic doors. She still looks like that Picasso portrait, except much wider now with dove gray hair cut short like a Roman Caesar and wearing a quilted vest and heavy skirt the size of a circus tent. I stopped short and stared straight at her, but she refused to make eye contact. I stood there thinking how I wanted to ask about Hemingway and F. Scott, and all that other Lost Generation stuff I loved. I needed to tell her that I once lived in Paris, too, took some photos of the building where she lived with that big poodle and all those fabulous guests and paintings on the Rue de Fleurus. And had she seen that Woody Allen movie and what did she think of Kathy Bates's performance? I really wanted to know, but no matter how long I stood there practically right in front of her with both hands sagging full of beer and groceries, she just kept looking past me back into the store where I guess now Alice, always Alice, was shopping, probably for brownie mix. Finally, I gave up and walked out into the bright heat of the parking lot which reminded me that actually I had never understood a word Stein had written, muttered to myself that a rose is a rose is a rose is a lot of bullshit, is a lot of bullshit, just a lot of bullshit.

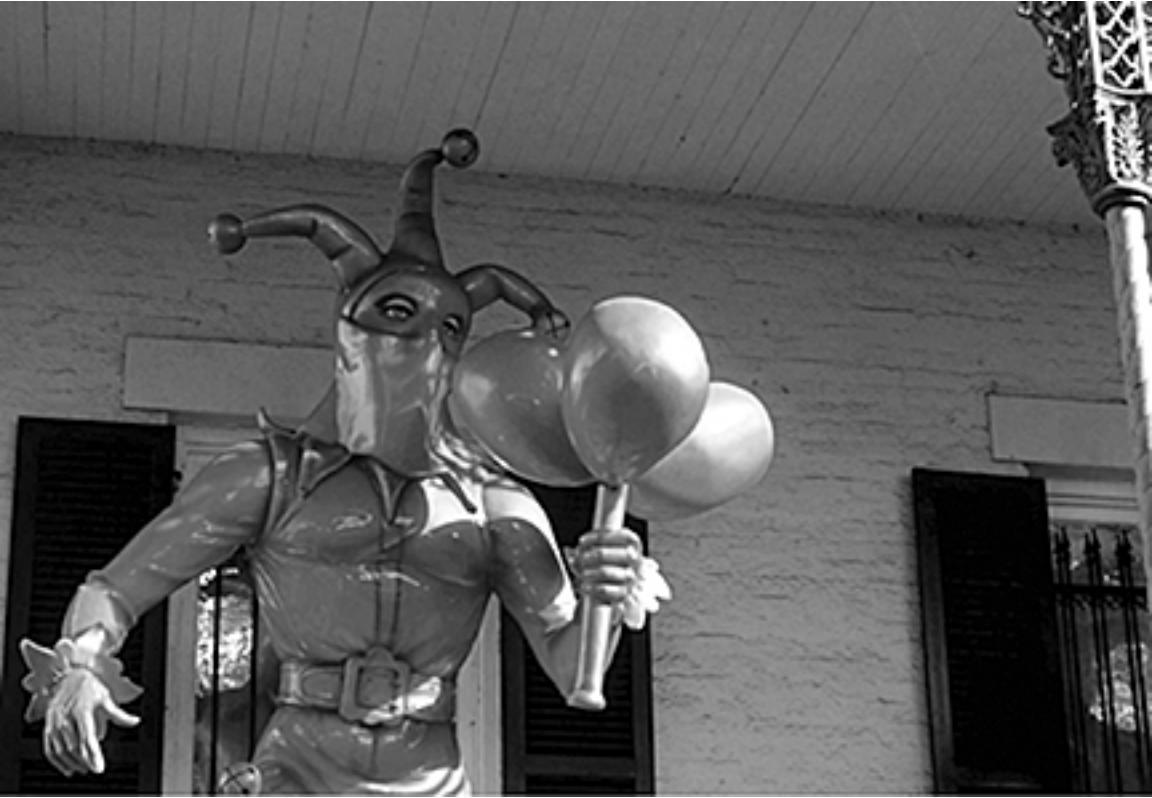


## McCarthy

## **Where This Comes From**

My new girlfriend believes  
a virgin queen and her army  
of white rabbits rule the moon.

I don't know where  
this comes from. I think  
she was raised Baptist.



## **Mardi Gras**

## The Girl He Never Said A Word To

He's thinking the party was fine,  
good food and beer, funny people,  
but this hour long drive home alone sucks.  
He's taking a sip from the Coke  
he brought to help stay awake  
when he recognizes the opening  
notes of the Rolling Stones' Angie  
on the radio..Damn he says to himself.  
Goat's Head Soup. Had that one back  
in high school. Wore it out senior year.

When he put that album on his stereo  
while he did his math homework  
it wouldn't be long before before  
he started thinking about that girl Angela  
whom he never talked to but sat next to him  
in French class. He'd picture her sitting there  
in faded jeans with the thickest brown hair  
he'd ever seen and evident breasts pushing  
against a black ski sweater, put his pencil down  
and reach eagerly between his legs. He thought  
about whispering the words to that song  
in her ear and about kissing her slowly,  
moving his hand up the front of her sweater.  
When the song ended he'd check the hall,  
then step quickly into the bathroom,  
lock the door behind him, be finished  
in a few minutes, ready for more equations.

As the song ends, he's singing along  
at top volume. He checks his grin  
in the rearview mirror, but a glimpse  
of his white beard reminds him  
that Angela of the gorgeous hair  
and prominent breasts is now  
sixty years old, too, probably  
a plump grandmother back in  
Poughkeepsie somewhere.  
Jesus Christ, he thinks to himself.  
No wonder I don't jerk off anymore,  
but he goes on singing anyway,  
and dreaming about the girl  
he never said a word to.



**30<sup>th</sup> Street Station**

## Tiramisu

That was heavenly, I sighed  
as I sucked the last taste  
of cake off my dessert fork.  
My new girlfriend shrugged,  
told me she was glad I liked it.  
This afternoon, she explained,  
I was praying to God for a vision  
of the mystical body of Christ,  
but all I got back was this recipe  
for tiramisu. I handed her my plate,  
asked if I could have some more.  
Sure, she said cutting another slice,  
Take, eat; this is my body.





## **Rose Colored Glasses**

## The Silence She Left Me

In the weeks before she moved out for good,  
we were fighting about everything – bills,  
housework, families- even Ike and Tina Turner.  
I said that Ike was the real genius behind them,  
she said that he was nothing without Tina's talent.  
And besides, she'd yell from another room,  
Ike was a real dickhead. He used to beat Tina up.  
I'd mute the ballgame I was watching and say  
real loud, No wonder. Do you think Tina was easy  
to live with all those years? That always shut her up.  
She'd turn the vacuum or the dishwasher back on,  
and I'd go back to watching football.

All I found was a short note saying she'd had enough  
of my bullshit, not to try to call her anytime soon.  
I loosened my tie, started wondering right out loud why  
the hell that crazy bitch would ever leave me while  
I took the last Pabst from the fridge. I sagged my way back  
to the table, kept on asking the empty kitchen if I was  
really some kind of abusive asshole like Ike Turner  
until I realized all my beer was gone, and the silence  
she left me was the answer I couldn't stand to hear.



## Wolfman

## Stop Reading Keats

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains  
My sense . . .

The air is dry and clean up here  
at the mountain sanatorium.  
They carry me out to the terrace  
and wrap me in heavy blankets  
every afternoon. Breathe deeply,  
they tell me, but I can only drift  
in and out of sleep and squint  
at the snow, listen to the silence  
until the evening shadow creeps  
over me and covers the valley below.

Six months ago I shook my bride  
awake, and pointed at the pool  
of bright blood on my pillow.  
I asked her what she thought it was;  
she rubbed her eyes, kissed me quickly,  
and said, I'm sure it's nothing, but  
maybe you should stop reading Keats  
right before you go to sleep at night.  
I started to laugh, went to pull her close,  
then started to shake and cough and cough  
a loaded, shrieking cough I could not stop  
no matter how close I tried to hold her.

Was it a vision, or a waking dream?  
Fled is that music: - Do I wake or sleep?



## **Bethlehem Steel**

## Meow

My new girlfriend hands me  
her neighbor's noisy cat  
and a caulking gun. She says,  
you know what to do.



## Night Off

## It Would Be Like Poetry

Watcha reading? he asks.  
I look down from my porch  
to the sidewalk. It's the old guy  
who always wears a Tigers cap,  
and lives, I think, with his daughter  
and her family down the street.  
Oh, I say and hold up the book.  
It's a biography of an English writer  
named Rupert Brooke. He cocks  
his head, put his hands on his hips.  
Yeah, he says slowly, grinning, nodding.  
I heard of him. His granddaughter was a whore  
in Papaeete. She had pictures of him  
all over her room. Good looking guy.  
I fucked her once. Everybody on ship said  
it would be like poetry. I guess it was a joke.  
I didn't think she was that great.  
He shakes his head, puts his hands  
in his pockets. Take it easy, he says,  
gotta get home for dinner, and walks away.  
Sounds like he's starting to whistle.





## **Exclusion Zone**

# How's He Doing These Days?

Did you go to Riverton College?  
a voice asks. I look up  
from the new arrivals table,  
then down at my chest to check  
what t-shirt I'm wearing.  
I realize it's the woman at the register  
with the long gray braid and  
clean scrubbed face who's talking  
to me. Yes, I tell her, class of 1978.  
Oh, she says, then did you know  
a guy named Gary Watkins?  
I think for a second, scratch  
the back of my head, then suddenly,  
Yes, I answer, smiling, nodding.  
Skinny red-haired guy we called Waddy.  
That's him, she tells me.  
I used to play Frisbee with him  
on the quad, I continue stepping closer  
to her. He could throw a Frisbee  
like nobody I've ever seen.  
Yes, she replies. He was my boyfriend  
in high school back on Long Island.  
Jesus, that's so weird, I say.  
How's he doing these days?  
Oh, she says, and I see her shoulders sag.  
He's dead, died a few years ago  
walking up some stairs at work.  
The doctors said he had a bad heart.  
We stare at each other silently  
for a few seconds. A customer comes  
between us, puts some books on the counter.  
I go back to browsing, pick a book  
off the shelf, but all I can think about  
is how far Waddy could throw a Frisbee  
and how when the breeze caught it just right,  
you thought it would never come down.



## **Dime Store Pony**

## Sailor Man

I often wonder about the sex life  
of Popeye and Olive Oyl. I worry  
that he treated her like he would  
any shore leave whore in Manila  
or Hamburg or Rio De Janeiro.  
I hope Popeye never said anything  
unkind about Swee'Pea's real father  
or Olive Oyl's anorexia, and just tossed  
some money on the dresser and hurried  
back down to the Union Hall with his buddies  
to ship out again. But no, that can't be,  
I know the sailor man wouldn't do that  
to a woman like Olive Oyl, the object  
of so many lonely shipboard dreams.  
I'm sure he brought her silver bracelets  
and silk robes from his voyages,  
and especially ornate Turkish slippers  
for her huge feet she loved him  
to massage. Popeye must have been  
gentle and pleasing as a sea breeze  
in the bed where I'm certain a patient  
and grateful Olive Oyl scattered  
spinach leaves among the rose petals  
to help make more than his biceps grow.



## Boardwalk

# Just The Opposite

Looking for something to read  
before bed, I find Hesse's Siddhartha  
on the shelf in my friends' guest room.  
I pull it down, stare at the cover,  
still familiar forty years later. It was  
my favorite book in 10<sup>th</sup> grade,  
back when, I remember, all I did  
was play basketball, think about  
making out with Sharon Miller,  
the new girl with the shiny blonde hair  
who was always chewing gum,  
and listen to Dylan's Nashville Skyline  
until I wore it out. I sit down on the edge  
of the bed, turn the book over, read  
the blurb on the back. I try to recall  
what it was like back then to want  
to get older, how urgent to hurry  
toward a driver's license, then  
to turn eighteen to buy booze legally,  
hang out in bars, and get away to college.

Now it's just the opposite, you dread  
getting even older, your parents long gone,  
friends your age now with cancer or dementia.  
It's all sped past, heading quickly toward  
what you can't even force yourself to consider.  
You drop the book on the floor, shake your head  
at all that Hesse spiritual odyssey bullshit,  
turn out the light, and climb under the covers.  
For a moment you wonder what it was even like  
to fantasize about hitting a game-winning shot,  
or bubble gum kisses while Bob Dylan sings  
a scratchy Lay Lady Lay in the background;  
then you close your eyes to another day  
about to slip by as quickly and silently  
as teenage dreams that never came true.



## Keeping Watch

# It Might Be Serious This Time

Poetry by David J. Thompson, Photography by Mark Myavec

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