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The Voice Fiction Edition

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The Voice Fiction Edition

Editors: Leland Stillman and Donald Budge

The Lonely Cutting-Torch

By Leland Stillman

Dustin is dusting off the cutting-torch. I am pulling on my space boots. It is odd to think that we are farmers, the true first profession, now done only on space platforms.

“We’ll be cuttin’ a while,” he says to me.

Space hooligans have mangled our dairy equipment. They come up from the surface, wielding crow bars from fumbling space-suit hands, and laughing lonely in the silence of space. But their friends in waiting orbit cars laugh with them when they return, so I can understand why they do it.

It doesn’t mean I’m not pissed as hell that hundreds of gallons of milk aren’t floating out into oblivion, to burn up in atmo or hit some hapless spaceman who will wonder what idiot is masturbating out the airlock.

“I’ll prime the second tank,” I say, and I reach over to open the valve on our reserve oxygen tank. I pull on my helmet, and tap Dustin’s face plate to signal I am ready. He hits the red button, and the airlock hisses shut behind us, the air sucking through to leave us in our vacuum. And then the front door starts to open. We hung a wreath on it, for a joke, and it now flies wildly as the door judders open.

We crawl out, careful not to launch ourselves into oblivion, and edge toward the hemorrhaging milk tanks. I swear inside my helmet. My microphone is off, and I do it for my own satisfaction. Few spacemen abstain from talking to themselves. We are the best company around.

The space hooligan flies past me, and before I can radio Dustin he has knocked him off the platform roof and into space. I swear as Dustin’s oxygen cord snaps. Precious gasses spew out into space, until his fail safe kicks in and it stops. His air will last thirty minutes. His transponder is already flashing, and he has wisely stopped all motion, knowing it will conserve oxygen. But there’s no reason to worry. These are not the crazy days of early space farming, where a bad jump could send you to your grave on Mars or Pluto, your bones to be puzzled over later, after being scoured by wind into something unrecognizable and so, the scientists will say in ecstasy, possibly alien. The space patrol will home in on his transponder and rescue him.

The hooligan is climbing back into space using a belt mounted jet pack, towards the waiting orbit car, where I can see his friends pumping their fists and slapping each others’ shoulders, and laughing.

I feel my own cutting-torch in my hand. If I throw it, the planet-siders will just send a new one to their brave space farmers. I am a pretty good shot with these things. We spacemen have competitions, every so often, sending broken equipment slowly spinning into space and we send tools hurtling after it, to be picked up by the magnetic fields of scrap-metalers that we call beforehand.

I think of throwing my cutting-torch, a lonely riposte that I alone will enjoy. I wish Dustin were here. Then I’d throw, or we’d both throw, and laughing we would scamper back inside to grab more cutting-torches, because milk is still billowing at four dollars a gallon into space.

I crawl toward the milk cloud, cutting-torch still in hand, wondering where I will need to fuse the pipes shut.

How We Are Changed

By Michael Jude Antoinetti

This is how we are born. This is how we looked. This is you in a blue paper cap, or this is you in a pink one. These are the rows of blue and pink paper caps. This is the noise of the newly made. This is the smell of St. Francis when understaffed. These are the white lights of the Obstetrics Ward. This is how the doctor caught you: by the foot.

This was how you learned to speak. This was how you learned to read. This was how you learned to remember your dreams.

This is your neighborhood. This is your tan and musty glove. This is how you make friends, through holes in fences. This is how you light a firecracker. This is how you eat one: legs crossed, front porch, middle of July. This is the rope your father tied to a crab-apple tree. This is the knot you tied for a merit badge. This is a withering afternoon. This is how the sun goes down behind the swings.

This was how you grew a face. This was how you found a voice. This was how you played the oboe. This was how you cursed with boys.

This is middle school. This is your seat on the bus. This is the cute but epileptic blonde sitting next to you. This is how she shakes her hips. This is how you stare into her tiny nose.

This was where you took swimming lessons. This was how far out you could go. This was how far down you could dive. This is the spot you saw a mommy turtle cradling her young ones in her thick black flippers.

This is the end of Boy Scouts. This is the tree- caulking experiment that won you the State Science Fair. This is the first time you placed in the 100 Meter. This is the water fountain right outside your math room. This is how you cheat the day, in small, wet breaks.

This is you at Prom and this is your date. This is the olive stuck in her teeth. This is how she tastes outside and against the wall. This is your tongue. This is a blue night in June. This is the chaperone that wrestles the two of you apart. This is how your date gives him the finger. This is how you fall in love.

This is the car you drive together. This is the country station you listen to. This is open road for the wanderer. This is how your head drifts away and over the power lines. This is the dread of never returning. This is worse than dreaming of a fall to the ground. This is the time to pass, but you stay in the same lane.

This is how you start smoking. This is how you can’t stop. This is what it does to your face. This is how you look on your wedding day. This is why you don’t eat any cake. This is too contractual.

This is why you like to read. This is how you like to sit with a book. This is how you sip your tea, in little sip, sips. This is how you drink your coffee, in big gulp gulps. This is why you feel sick. This is why you get migraines. This is why your sons and daughters never call. This is why we say I love you so much it hurts.

Jungle

By Donald Budge

Eric Newgate was the best marble player in the third grade. On March twenty third he began lunch with single saltine, and kept trading until he ended up with a pack of Double-Stuf Oreos. This feat would never be repeated. In the last nine days, Eric had tried watermelon, riding without his training wheels, and receiving a cootie shot. You name it, he’d try it. Except broccoli, he knew better.

Eric was a closet astronomer. He wasn’t worried that kids would make fun of him, but where Eric lived it was too bright at night to see the stars. So he put some glow-in- the-dark stars in his closet instead. Those stars were his, a private cosmos that looked into the softly glowing plastic heavens.

At the Franklin Park Zoo with his dad, Eric discovered animals that looked like they came from another world. Giraffes with preposterously long necks. Camels with one mysterious hump, and others with two. Larger than life elephants triumphantly spraying water out of their trunk. Rushing to his computer, Eric looked up lemurs and quetzals, baboons to ocelots, and their wet woody rainforest homes.

Eric learned two things at school yesterday: that one human year is seven dog years, and that someone smart said that time is relative. These facts made perfect sense to Eric, and explained why school days were 6784 Eric years, and days off were half of an Eric minute.

Eric’s report cards often contained the phrase: “Has a fifth grade reading level, but has trouble focusing.”

He scaled mountains in his mind during math, and fought alongside Blackbeard’s pirates in homeroom.

“Pay attention,” Ms. Goodman yelled as she led Admiral “3x3= __?” and the entire multiplication table to board Blackbeard’s ship, defeating him and Eric’s imagination.

Ms. Goodman only danced when no one was watching and taught the third grade when people did. She had had four moderately serious boyfriends, all named Michael.

“I miss Michael,” she said to her friend Molly, who was currently dating Michael #2.

“Which one?”

Anne Goodman taught third grade English like she had sex. “Lazily,” “Forgettable,” she wrote on the green chalk board for the day’s vocabulary. Earlier that morning Anne got pulled over for speeding, despite driving exactly the speed limit for the past seven years, even in school zones at night. So she wasn’t in the mood for any funny business.

But this day was 72 degrees and sunny. The kind of day where Eric could become king of the hill, or kick a whopper in kickball. Eric and third graders everywhere were determined to get outside, and people like Anne Goodman would try to keep them in. Eric was wearing his lucky spaceship underpants. Failure was not an option. This was their Waterloo. No, their Gettysburg, and neither would be the same.

“Why are we learning this?” Eric asked, imagining Ms. Goodman slipping on a banana peel.

“Because you have to,” Ms. Goodman said in an “I’m not about to slip on a banana peel anytime soon,” kind of way.

That day Eric sat behind Jenny Frank, the girl of his dreams. Their moms being old friends, Jenny came over for a few play dates where there were lengthy discussions over whether to play “house” or “ninjas.” Reaching a compromise, they agreed to play “Ninja House.” Eric came home from an exhausting day of being a ninja, where he stealthily drank imaginary tea from a small plastic cup. He even thought of showing her his glow-in-the-dark stars in his closet, something he hadn’t shown anyone.

Closing his eyes and dreaming of stars, the classroom was transported deep into the spiral arms of the Milky Way. Desks floated in a space around Ms. Goodman like wooden planets, as she wrote vocabulary words on a green neutron star. Jenny’s hair had transformed into a wavy red nebula that flowed into the “Jenny’s head” solar system, and the cubbies collapsed into a black hole, a body of matter so dense, not even boredom could escape.

“Now class, what part of speech is ‘dreaming’? Eric?” Ms. Goodman asked, causing Eric to travel 349 light-Eric-years in an instant, crashing back into the classroom with enough force to create a life sustaining planet.

“Umm. What?”

“Eric, how many times do I have to tell you to pay attention? Do you want to be sent to the principal again?”

“No, Ms. Goodman,” Eric said, proceeding to doodle a picture with his hunter green crayon of Ms. Goodman being hit in the face with a pie.

After completing his drawing, Eric noticed that Ms. Goodman’s nose strongly resembled an egret’s, turning his mind to the rainforest. His desk taking root, it shot up through the ceiling with the others. Crumbling into dirt, the remains of the ceiling covered the wooden floor, while the desk tops turned a shade of leafy hunter green. With a canopy and floor now in place, animals began to move in. Brightly billed toucans flew in from where the chalkboard used to be, and a herd of elephant were taking a look around the new forest.

“Can we have recess early?” Eric asked, as a gibbon swung on a branch in front of him.

“Don’t be silly,” said Ms. Goodman, which was the same response she gave her boyfriend when he asked for a blowjob.

“But it’s the nicest day ever. We can learn words anytime,” Eric said, with a fifth grade level confidence. Jenny turned to look at Eric, as several “yeahs” and nods came from other classmates.

“Eric what did I tell you earlier? If you keep this up I’m sending you to the principal.”

Reality bulldozers sprung out of Ms. Goodman’s words and cut down the trees, using their wood to re-build the walls of the classroom. Yellow anacondas became rulers once again, and the larger than life elephants returned to being smaller than life erasers. Only the toucan of defeat remained in the half-rainforest half-classroom. Perched above “I is for ‘It’s not over yet!’” on the alphabet chart circling the room, it waited for Eric to make his move. Eric

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remembered which pair of underpants he was wearing, and strengthened his resolve.

“We’ll work extra hard and be really quiet when we get back,” Eric said, causing the Amazon River to burst through the classroom, washing away any doubt in his mind. Jenny smiled, and choruses of nods and agreement followed.

Ms. Goodman looked at the class and a thunderous silence followed. She realized if the class wasn’t let out this instant, all hell would break loose. Paper airplanes, endless chatter, and spitballs were a word away. Barging down the Amazon River on the Queen Anne’s Revenge, Blackbeard shot the toucan of defeat with his musket.

“Okay. Just this one time.” The entire class exploded out of their seats into the playground, with Ms. Goodman walking behind them into the sunlight.

The sun hit her like a five-ton truck full of memories. Anne remembered a time where she was excited about life. When she took her hands off her bicycle and zoomed down the hill near her house into Mr. Matthew’s hydrangeas. Nearly breaking her leg and covered in scrapes, she dragged her bike up the hill and did it all over again.

After launching a kickball over the fence for a home run, Eric walked over to Jenny, who was waiting for him by the swings. Eric took her hand and smiled, feeling something hot and fast flowing through him, a feeling that was better than anything he ever imagined.

Watching Eric look into Jenny’s eyes, Anne knew what she had to do as soon as school was over.

After getting home early by driving 10 to 15 miles over the speed limit, Anne Goodman gave the most mind-altering and preposterously excellent blowjob Michael #4 ever experienced. Three and a half weeks later, Michael #4 asked Anne to marry him during an evening at Aquitane, their favorite French bistro. Their honeymoon was a trip to the Bahamas. When they weren’t furiously making love, Anne and Michael #4 spent their nights gazing at the same stars Eric would be looking at if it wasn’t so bright where he lived. The same stars Eric filled the classroom with. The same stars he saw in Jenny.

But if Jenny had known her hair had been turned into a nebula, she may not have held Eric’s hand at recess. Or, she might have explained how nebulas don’t really “flow” into solar systems. Perhaps more troubling was the appearance of the larger than life elephants in the rainforest. 26% of third graders know that elephants live in the savannah, not the rainforest, and 8% know that most statistics are made up. But Eric always had an active imagination, and the important things that happened were very real. Anne and Michael #4 stayed married for 45,938 Eric years, but Eric and Jenny didn’t work out quite the way he imagined, ending things after the incident by the monkey bars. But Eric moved on from Jenny and graduated to the fourth grade, where he became interested in the Aztecs.

Sacrilege
By Ben Gitkind

This is the moment you’ve been waiting for. Picture this: you are 15-years-old, a scrawny little thing, blond-haired, green eyed, and sprawled out on top of your girlfriend. She is 16-years-old, short and stacked, brown hair, brown eyes, and pale as a sheet. You stare her in the eye. You say, “OK?” and you do it like you’re supposed to know how.

She makes a face, a pained face, not right at all. But she says, “OK,” and you keep going.

You say “Oh yahhh,” just like you know that you are supposed to. Or at least that’s what you meant to say. It comes out more like, “Oh yah?” Not at all like you had pictured it. Not at all like you’d rehearsed.

And then there’s the noise from behind you. The door opening. And over your shoulder, the look on your sister’s face that will forever be imprinted in your memory. Her, standing in the doorway, 7-years-old, sprite-like with shocking blue eyes.

Now picture this: you, sitting in front of the supreme court: Mom and Dad. The girl is gone and this was no sort of Romeo and Juliet love-will-conquer-all shit; she won’t talk to you for a couple years to come. Your parents use phrases like “too young,” and “the implications,” and “for safety’s sake.” But you’re too busy staring between them at a slight tear in the couch where the stuffing is fighting its way out to notice.

The aftermath is predictable. You’re not to see each other off school grounds. You’re not allowed out on weekends (for the next couple months), and your church schedule has officially changed. This is what really sucks.

A couple of years ago, your parents had decided in a moment of liberal surplus that religion was a matter of “self-exploration,” (who knows what ‘parenting’ books they had been reading). Though your parents both choose to attend the local Congregational Church, Mom said she would accompany you to whatever church you chose, as long as you made “an educated decision,” (ludicrous). So you went with the Unitarian Universalist Congregational Society of Salem. You no longer had to believe in God, you no longer had to believe in anything. Sunday school consisted of going to the bathroom, while 65-year-old Cynthia Porter talked philosophy, to inhale the entirety of your new-found friend Derek’s one-hitter and breath it out the window. You got a lot out of church.

This is where you met her. This is where you courted her with all the class of a newly christened pot-head. You bought her a brand new bowl for her 16th birthday in the shape of an elephant, you knew what you were doing. She was the kind of girl who dug early Dylan and Bowie though she was too young to appreciate it, who had that kind of strut-your-shit gait that had the high school seniors talking and hated football machismo enough to overcompensate by screwing a stick figure like yourself.

These were the glory days. You had your own one-hitter then and you both went to the bathroom. You would pack it twice, finish it and make out with a real girl. This was a religion to live by.

But now is judgment day, in front of the Gods, you see your sister’s face and say to your parents the only thing you know how.

“I didn’t know what I was doing,” you say. And your parents’ authoritative stance quivers. “That church was confusing I guess.”

And then you have them, all you need is the final push.

“I think I just need to go back, you know, to real Church,” you say.

And there goes Mom’s arm, around Dad’s shoulder and she’s ready to forgive.

“He didn’t know any better,” she would say later that night in hushed tones in the kitchen while you strain to hear over the TV in the living room. “It’s our fault, we should have known better.”

And now here you are, back to church. Back to waiting until marriage.

BFC
By Caitlin Scott

“Jesus and the Gratitudes”
play outside Dallas in the bars.
Their neon halos beaming yellow blue
on bottle necks like organ pipes,
hollow singing spouts gurgling lower
in the depthless beer;
uncapped mouths fat with flatland wind,
deep sick wheezes from the streets,
huddled under junkie’s lips,
prayers slip in and join
the butts of cigarettes like incense smoking.

“My Lord Saves”, the tattoo sells
bright with sweat on the bikers arm
the holy sober up with soda pop,
and rub their elbows in the verse.
At the German clubs and the county lines
their praise reverberates in tongues.
Scriptures rolling and wrinkled in muscle,
fade away into a fuzzy armpit.
The highways run out of the towns
to the east
and the Harley's make their pilgrimage
in the deserts crowning Tuscan.

“His Highway, My King”
the chrome and kickstand
hot engines chorus.
Case Grande after dawn
and one long procession past the motels,
farms and exhausted Laundromats.
Annual, a ride to freedom
new chapters for the once wounded gangs.
Anoint the born again with grease
and baptize them with diesel fuel.

Hypothermia, in Two Movements
By Shelly Alminas

I. Expected

masterful, he	quieted,
	the swan,
whose call	grated,
	at the nearest innocent ear,
til the swan hated	itself,
	and died of disgust.

II. Unexpected

Froze alive, that was what they said my father did just after
He died. (They were mistaken.) This past
Summer, Along

The banks, a gathering: fruit and people
Who wanted to be rid
of said fruit. Shortly
Thereafter a winter came and these wants

Became Famous, observed on the day
When all the fruits withered at the very same instant. I asked my father
about how did it happen. *The frost*, he

hymned. *That first frost was a real one. The first time
I ever saw them shrivel back like fear. Must be some*

Frost, my father whistled, low and secret, as if saving

something up. *Some Once*
In
A
L i f e
Time
F r o s t.