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*SWEEPING GLASS*

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*We want to glorify war — the only cure for the world — militarism,  
patriotism, the destructive gesture of the anarchists, the beautiful ideas  
which kill, and contempt for woman.*

-F.T. Marinetti 1909

There was a time when we ate the things we loved. We did not do it out of spite. After a while, we lived in the bellies of beetles; we fed them coffee down thin-shelled chimneys, and it slid down around us like boiled cream.

The coffee was decent. My girlfriend never knew it was decaf. She just laughed and complimented the beetle, and we sang birthday songs to one another because it might as well have been—

We ate rhino meat in long thin valleys that resembled gods. We were all that we knew about. We created graffiti and dance school and the letter q. We wove our clothes out of mint leaves and mourned anything before us.

Volcanoes came and went and left us with piles of ash to sweep when we should have been sweeping glass. Our feet got bloodied, and we sanded the rhino's horn into a fine powder and placed it on our lips and eyes like bits of

cloud like the last good piece of winter like war paint like time like unleavened bread.

One day we decided the beetle didn't have enough room. The coffee was stale.

We did not remember what the old coffee tasted like. We paid sacrifice in the evenings. I listened to her cry because we weren't the same.

I confessed. We discovered star fruit. We started over.

When we began again, I couldn't hear anything above the weight of the clouds. They churned in from the North, and there was something distant about them that told me someone very far away had died.

We'd been driving an old Ford Executive to the threshold of the desert just to see if it would give out. Powder green, headlights like fox eyes, white-rimmed tires. The chrome mirrors stuck out on the hood like beetle horns. We'd driven two hundred miles to where seventy or so windmills languidly twisted the sky red, and the sun tore the mountains into bits of clay.

We'd packed a basket of mascarpone and roses and some old water I'd found in my uncle's attic. I could have been any age at that moment. Her body made me weightless. I was seventeen and she was twenty, and it was exciting to think about. I remembered my teacher standing an egg on its base, how it would teeter there, defying all the laws that formed it.

A trunk of black smoke budded out of the mountains where she'd started a fire. I was supposed to save her. That was our game.

The car metal smelled like baked pennies in the sun. The leather slid with my sweat. I rolled down all the windows and cradled the cheese in my lap like a bag of glass like family heirlooms. I got out of the car and held my hand to the hood until it cooled, and then I plunged it into the warm sand.

I couldn't tell if it was my burning flesh or the scent of the flame, but something ashen caught in my nostrils. It reminded me of sleeping over my great aunt and uncle's house. They'd play poker for nickels and smoke Marlboro Reds because they were old enough not to know better. The scent of their chalky laughter captivated me. The air, even upstairs where I watched old Marx Brothers films, embraced me like velvet, and I could taste the worn playing cards and feel them on my fingernails as they shuffled.

Sometimes I would sneak down just to listen, pretending I was hungry whenever I was caught. My uncle would place a wad of salami in my fist and send me back up the carpeted stairs.

"What did you do in the war?" I'd said once. I liked asking older people about the war because often they had stories I hadn't heard, and they would let me stay up later so I could hear them.

"Aircraft carrier in the Pacific." His body slumped with cheap beer at the bottom of the stairs. He had a tattoo on the inside of his forearm that was faded blue and wrinkled, but undoubtedly nautical.

"Did you ever shoot anybody down?"

He thought about it for a while. I wasn't sure if I should go back up. I scratched my leg anxiously under my stretchy green pajama pants.

“Mostly, I watched them crash,” he said. “It’s hard to land a plane on a razor blade you know.”

He didn’t say good night. He just walked away. I went back upstairs and watched *Duck Soup* and slept with salami on my breath. Years later I found out that my uncle had nightmares about all his friends who’d crashed into the ocean in 1943. He was the man who was supposed to guide them. He would wake up and scream, and my aunt, whose teeth were Incan pottery, would whisper him back to sleep and then smoke a half a cigarette out the fire escape.

The smoke spiraled up into the sky now. I imagined it as an exhale. I was meant to save her. I got out of our Ford Executive and ran as hard as I could toward the flame. Dark petals fell behind me, covered in long drips of boiling cheese. I looked at the sky and watched the last bits of heaven burn up like whale fat. The sand was deep and slow, and every time I thought I was close I would sink into it and lose my way and start over.

When I was a boy I used to play naked in the sandbox by the River. Sand smells like dough when you’re little. It gave me the illusion of immortality. There’s a certain amount of healthy disrespect for the world when you’re young.

I tried to create my own society of dogs once, but one of them ran off, and the rest disbanded out of solidarity and indifference.

My babysitter would watch me very closely as if the sand might, all at once, swallow me up. There was a wonderfully animated fear in her eyes when she searched

the rocks by the water and attempted, with all her power, not to lose herself in the foaming whirlpools that appeared bottomless in the dark surf.

Her oblong gray head balanced on her flapping neck like an unripe peach. Her dartboard skin rippled with the wind as if she were a body of pink water being pelted by stones. Her short flat hair could hardly support her sunglasses. I used to believe they were made of marble of mortar of shell.

Every time I think of that river now, I wonder now how many bodies lie in its belly. I imagine its silt as flesh and its mouth as lips that suck in small boys when they stray too far from their mothers. I recall the strange and inconsistent lessons of my own youth: say please and thankyou; the more you do the more you can do; if you don't, they will; she will never see you for what you are.

Time lost consequence in the desert. The land burned. The smoke obscured the sand, and the sand mixed with the sky, but still I could see her long black hair, down to her belt and that jade dress she always wore. She was scared when I saw her last. She believed I would save her like before.

After college, I became lightly employed as an appraiser of Fabergé eggs. I made house calls because people who buy Fabergé eggs tend to be wealthy recluses.

The rarest egg I'd ever seen was ice blue with a tiny gilded bird inside. Fabergé always hid a tantalizing surprise inside because the morbidly wealthy are so rarely astounded by anything. It was astounding to *me* that one man could

create something so desirable. There was something primal about their delicacy, like the first kindled flame. Impermanence gave them power.

I received an unusual call from a scrap dealer by an old baseball stadium. They'd turned it into some carnivalesque madhouse where the air smelled like casinos, and, for a fee, you could let your dogs defecate on the grass. They called the ballpark something else nowadays, but like with everything else in my life, I found great value in antiquity. I imagined that beneath the new stadium lay the old one and beneath that, old plastic helmets and wads of tobacco and eyelashes and bone and the heat that warmed us from the center of the earth.

The telephone lines in Queens ran in zigzags above our heads, and the expanse seemed out of place, a remnant from the industrial age. Rows upon rows of scrap heaps and tire repair, the buildings mostly mustard and rust. The place I was going said: *Mufflers Tire Shop* with an implied connection between the two. Outside the storefront, a young black man in a beige hoodie, with a white zipper and work boots, reclined in a stripped car. It looked like a cross section—no wheels, no engine, propped up on what resembled an immobile golf cart, almost teetering above me.

“You looking for Freddie?” he asked.

“Actually, do you have a bathroom? The trip here took forever.”

“No plumbing here. The city says we can't have plumbing so we'll leave, but we don't need plumbing to scrap.” He rubbed his beard, squinted at the sun.

“Where do you piss?”

“Anywhere we want,” he said, proudly.

Uncomfortably, I urinated into gravel behind an old broken down Ford Executive as cars passed on the side of the road. When I returned, the man was smoking a cigarette.

“So, you looking for Freddie?” he asked again, figuring I could concentrate better now.

“Actually, I’m looking for—” The name left me, and I scrambled for the scrap of paper in my blazer. My fingers sweated as I opened the note. “Lou...there’s no last name.”

“I’m Lou,” he said conveniently.

I thought about some of the Lous I’d known. I knew a girl named Lou once who started a fire. “You found an egg, Lou?”

“I don’t really know what it is. You some egg expert or something? Didn’t know they’d send someone all the way out here.” He took a long drag and tossed his cigarette down by my feet.

The glowing ash spread out along the ground. “I deal in things of value.”

Lou leapt down from his perch and signaled me to follow him with his crooked finger. He took me into the garage under the muffler sign and to a small workbench where sawdust almost completely covered a tire drill. He switched on a small desk lamp and handed me a brown lunch sack.

I unwrapped it carefully, half expecting to find a sandwich inside. But there was no sandwich; instead I unearthed a dirty piece of olive cloth covering something very delicate. “Do you know what this is?” I asked. I searched Lou’s eyes.

“Isn’t that why the fuck you’re here?” he said.

Snow fell heavily that day by the Winter Palace. The tsar ordered the carriage closed. He stared mindlessly out the window wondering how much colder it would get before it got warmer. The trees swung in fading unison, weighed down by the snow and brittle, flaking like ash.

Something felt very warm under the tsar’s feet, sharp, something he had never felt before in his thighs and his gut. One of the horse’s heads screamed by his window, and for a moment he held his amputated foot in his own hand. The carriage’s roof lifted off into the sky and never returned, becoming bits of snow and cloud and body.

They carried his remains into the palace and laid him at the duchess’s feet because she was there and because she would now be Empress and because it was too cold to take him anywhere else.

The following Easter, the royal jeweler personally presented the empress with one of his priceless eggs.

“What is outside is for what you have gained, what is inside is for what you have lost,” he said.

She thanked him. She could not help but think of the tsar’s body and how there was now another tsar to whom she was married and soon there would be a new tsar, as if they were all shells and no insides. She never wondered about the surprise. She placed it in her jewelry box, a chest of countless wonderments, and it stayed there, untouched, until the revolution where it was stolen by a group of Italian Futurists looking to further the revolutionary cause.



One hundred twelve years later, a man named Lou found it sitting on a scrap heap and called a man who was supposed to know a thing or two about eggs.

I drove alone to the threshold of the desert. The soil grew orange and rich where she'd been. The bushes and cacti had become husks, wrinkling in the hot wind. The petals and cheese sprouted a small lake where lizards fed off the remains of beetles, snapping their legs and licking the insides of their bellies. Their shells resembled hollowed out coffee beans. I did not look for the sun because it no longer mattered, and I had not lived a single day without stepping into that fire. I felt ancient.

I traced my fingers along old tire tracks. The desert stunk of bone. My hands clasped tightly together, I dug into the earth and opened them like a hatch. Inside lay an egg, the size of a cupcake. Yellow gold, standing erect on lion's paws and garlanded. Inside I knew something awaited. A surprise. I wrapped the egg in a singed tatter of green dress. I let the egg slip between my fingers. The wind picked up. The orange sand engulfed it. I would follow the tire tracks back as far as they would take me – to the altar of the desert. To the fire to be buried and discovered. To start over.