



palehorse

r e v i e w

volume 1

FROM THE EDITORS

Well, here we are. The Pale Horse Review started in the summer with a conversation that basically went like this:

“Hey, we both like literature. Why don't we start a literary magazine?”

“Great idea! Let's do it.”

And then, we had to figure out how to put a website together, how to let people know we exist, how to collect submissions, how to find consensus on what's good and what isn't, how to put together an electronic magazine that looks pretty and well constructed, and a host of other nitpicky things. It's been a challenge, but now we've got a starting point, and we plan to keep doing this as long as we can. We want to give more good writing a home, to make some small contribution to the collective literary consciousness of the world. We hope that we can do that in a more significant way with each future volume we put together, and we hope that the people who are with us today, reading and contributing and helping any way they can continue to be with us. We hope that more people are drawn in by what they read in this issue, and maybe someday we can form some sort of hippie commune, maybe in Humboldt county with the redwoods and the Pacific, and we can all write and talk about stuff and just kind of hang out, man.

Thanks to everyone who supported us in any way on this project, particularly Daryn Shapurji, who did the covers and the logos and much of the design, and the good folks at Duotrope, who do a wonderful service in helping to connect writers with publishers for their work. We thank all our contributors and all the other writers who submitted their work to us. Thanks also to you, whoever you are, for reading this first issue of the Pale Horse Review. We appreciate you, no matter what kind of a jerk you are in person.

Meryn Shapurji and Max Dahlquist, Editors

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MUSSOLINI'S VIOLIN
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The violin was laid to rest
in the violin-shaped grave
of its velutinous case.

The violin is worth
the cost of a college education
in United States Dollars.

There are mourners – mostly retired
Italian actors hired to cry on cue.

The violin, among other instruments,
must ask permission to speak.

Is the violin worth so many
United States Dollars
because it was played by Mussolini?

The violin, when cradled in the arms,
ebony against an Aryan shoulder,
chiseled marmoreal chin cupped in the chinrest,
the F-holes like two seahorses osculating undersea,
is the size of an orphan, a rifle, a pile of clothes.

Or is the violin worth so many United States Dollars
because it is a violin and violins are expensive?

If the violin could speak, the neck's scroll
unfurled, would it speak Italian or Greek?

But the violin is stringless and the luthier is dead,
the violinist is dead and the strings are dead.

The violin is worth so many United States Dollars
because it is a violin played by a lamppost.

String it up, as a fascist violinist once was.

THE TALE OF SAMMY CHUCK BUBENSKI

Cameron Fields

Sammy Chuck Bubenski was a son of a bitch. Mrs. Bubenski, being the bitch she was, had locked little Sammy Chuck in a closet in his younger years. Although the reason for this punishment wasn't clear in every instance, there had been a particular moment in time when little Sammy Chuck had a string cheese obsession. He had sat at the kitchen table peeling tiny fragments of the white cheese off, dropping just as much as he ate.

Mrs. Bubenski quietly snuck up behind him, head cocked just a little to the left, asking, "What are you doing?" When Sammy Chuck clammed up and ignored her, she sent him to the closet for a day and a night. Sammy Chuck refers to this event as his "String Cheese Incident" not to be confused with a band of the same name. A frightful experience in itself, it did not compare to being called "Sammy Chuck" all his life.

Old Sammy Chuck now resides in Pine Bluffs, Wyoming, out of necessity, rather than choice. He developed a slight limp in his left leg, the result of a short stint in Vietnam, the country, not the war. Sammy went over to 'Nam in search of something, and if the something he was searching for was a mild addiction to heroin, he found it.

METACOWBOY LETS ON TO CATTLE KATE

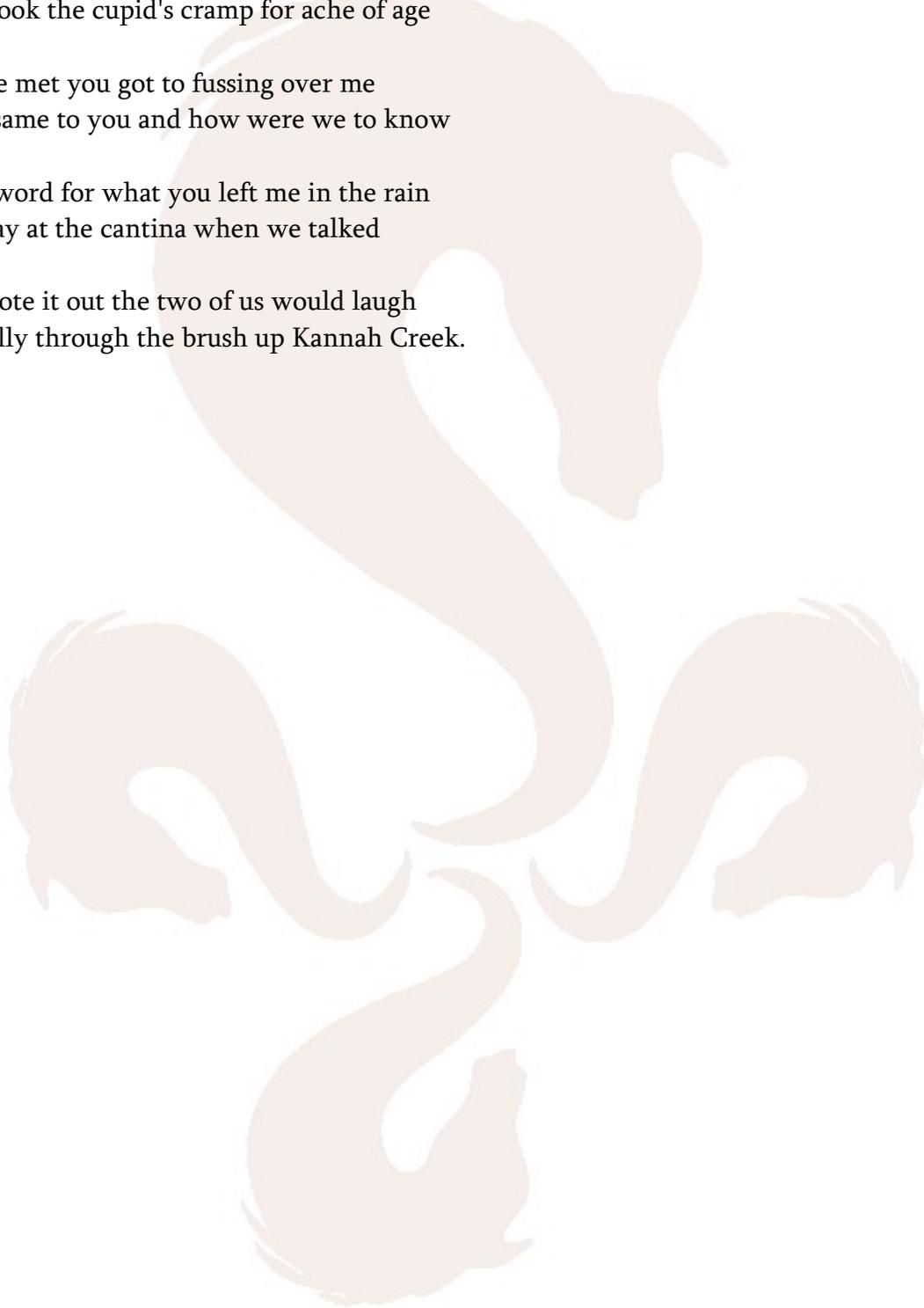
Rodney Nelson

I did not have the word to tell me what you were
and I mistook the cupid's cramp for ache of age

the day we met you got to fussing over me
and I the same to you and how were we to know

there is a word for what you left me in the rain
another day at the cantina when we talked

but if I wrote it out the two of us would laugh
so I am belly through the brush up Kannah Creek.



ROBOTS IN TOKYO

Matthew Burnside

the stone-eye crows of Tokyo will build elaborate nests in your hair
avoiding electrified garbage wired by a private crack crow task force
crouching on pagodas with binoculars, slurping persimmon and sake-
bombs watching impotent business men devour whole squid, perusing
vending machines stocked with soiled panties: 300 yen for two pair
of young girls with sailor skirts & pink hair who lust for tentacles
and battle robots, sucker punch alien wizards on the weekend with
their cosmic ki, each citizen a certified samurai with kung fu in their
yellow DNA, while well-mannered honor-bound boys Tokyo drift
on space highways sucking noodles off their calculators, injecting
green tea and all growing up to be doctors and marry geishas with
bound feet + tame tongues, if not it's seppuku, or casting themselves
into weekly tsunami, or gorging on fish candy and rice pudding
maybe giving sumo wrestling a shot, or moving to America, where
the blond-haired blue-eyed cowboys will kiss your cheek give you a
gun and snap your chopsticks because Big Macs require two hands

THE CAPTAIN
Tyler Adelsperger

He stood there, Christ crucified,
at the bow of the ship

Dripping salted sea sweat, which burned
his eyes into fiery glass marbles.

The waves punched our ancient schooner
like a drunken husband, undaunted by screams

From blood filled throats, rough
with age, whiskey, and fear.

Wood tore like flesh on rock
and lightning stabbed at the ocean.

As the mast cracked and the rigging snapped
the ship was swallowed by dark blue.

His voice thundered over the din,
only peace follows death, men.

And we believed every word he shouted
as we tied ourselves to the bulwark.

With the ropes around our wrists
we followed him into the water.

FIX YOURSELF SOME PEANUT BUTTER TOAST

Danny Earl Simmons

After Galway Kinnell

Our bedroom door was locked,
radio turned on loud enough
for the entire family to know
that traffic was light
and there was a 30 percent chance of rain.

The speed of our movements
was insufficient for sweating.

Caresses and kisses
snapped eyes shut
in a passionate focus
on quiet propriety.

The usual words were transformed
into a skin-to-skin telepathy.

In spite of all this,
or, perhaps, because of all this,
there came a knock at the door
and a high-pitched insistence on pancakes.

What followed that knock
was supposed to have been
a muffled come-cry,
but sounded a lot like
“peanut butter toast.”

I FOUND A METEORITE WHILE SEARCHING FOR YOUR PICTURE

Ashley Kay Petersen

1.

In Texas there's a city called Abernathy.
1882 brought them a streak of light
following what might have been a
marble rolling across the atmosphere
as if it were on a glass table.

Somewhere along the way it found a hole
and shot out with such force and brightness
that the state of Texas thought night
had become day.

It shook the entire state when it
bounced off the earth, broke in two, and finally
cooled in the dirt.

The marble was lost in the desert
only five miles from Abernathy.

2.

...and I flipped past the thick yellow
cover, yellow pages, business pages,
until I hit white searching for
A...B...E...R...
but the only Abernathys were
Abernathy, Kimberly L
and
Abernathy, Brian D

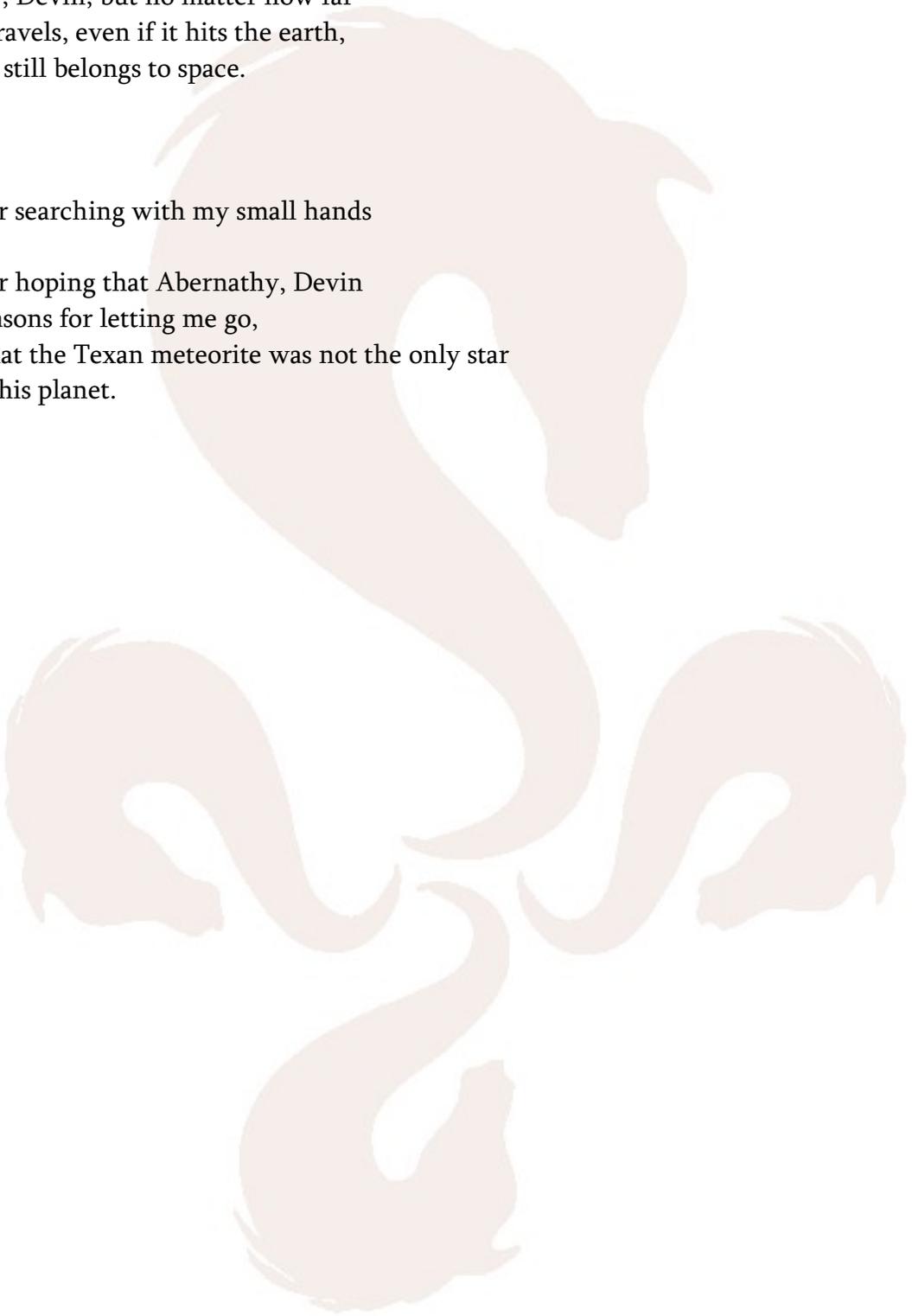
My hands, too small to hold a grapefruit
without gripping each side tightly,
didn't realize that phone books only covered certain
districts, and not the entire world.
So they kept flipping. Flipping and hoping
to run across Abernathy
in maybe the business pages,
or even the blue hued dentist section,
but Abernathy, Devin, my father, did not live
in South Bend's phone book pages.

3.

By 21 I had hoped to be over
Abernathy, Devin, but no matter how far
a meteor travels, even if it hits the earth,
a part of it still belongs to space.

4.

...and after searching with my small hands
for years,
...and after hoping that Abernathy, Devin
had his reasons for letting me go,
...I find that the Texan meteorite was not the only star
to fall on this planet.



THE ORCHARD

Kara Vernor

In the orchard between their houses, Abigail circled the woman and jabbered: Holly Hobby, Orion's Belt, her dog Mully. The woman listened, collecting apples in the bowl of her skirt, smiling at how the girl pressed to her tip toes at the end of each thought. When the woman's skirt was full, she rested against a tree. "Abigail," she said. "Last night Mary came to me with a message from God."

The girl gnawed a strand of her hair. "The mother of Jesus?" She had never seen the woman at church, the only church on the mountain.

"A great earthquake is coming. This land will shake into boulders and drop below the ocean. Some will think it a flood."

Abigail watched a beetle climb through crabgrass at her feet. Meaning no disrespect she said, "You had a nightmare?"

The woman smiled. "Mother Mary left me proof, a map of the quake area that shows the ocean will settle here. Talk to your Mamma; you need to move away."

The girl spit the hair out of her mouth and studied the woman who was covered always in long sleeves and skirts, her straight hair pulled into a clean bun.

"I'm going to start some cobbler now. Come back tomorrow and I'll show you."

Abigail sat in the swing on her porch reading *The Murder of Margot*, a horror story meant for older kids, until movement in the orchard pulled her from the book. She ran across the dirt to the woman's shoulder, and they walked together to the house.

The woman unrolled a thin, brightly colored map of the western United States, where the border of the Pacific Ocean clipped the bottom of Oregon, fanned into parts of Nevada, and receded at the bottom of the San Joaquin Valley.

"Where are we?" Abigail asked.

"We're here." The woman pointed to water.

Abigail ran her fingers over the map, the left edge torn. "But it's on tracing paper. It's been copied?"

"The paper is peculiar, like a moth's wing. Or the wing of an angel—the one who brought it."

The girl touched the jagged edge, pictured an angel tearing off his own wing. "I don't want to die," she said.

Abigail watched from a distance as a sale sign went up on the neighboring property, groups of strangers milled the land, a SOLD sign appeared across the first. Despite her begging, her mother had not packed one box. She told Abigail to stay out of the orchard. "It's not our property," she said. "Keep to the front, or the back if you must, but stay clear of the bees." Their bees lived on higher land in the back acreage, and Abigail thought how they would lift off the earth when the water came, simple as stepping back.

"Okay," she said. "I'll stay near."

The afternoon the movers arrived, the woman returned to the orchard, placing her hands on each tree like she might an old dog. Abigail, unable to obey any longer, ran to her.

“I was hoping you’d come,” the woman said, “I have something for you.” From the pocket of her skirt she pulled a necklace with a glass heart charm. The girl stepped closer and inspected the small nugget inside.

“It’s a mustard seed. I want you to wear it always,” the woman said. “God is with you.”

Abigail thrust out her chest and brushed her hair aside. “Would you put it on?”

The woman paused. She had seen the girl move this way before—so eager to receive. With a door that wide open, there was no telling whether God or the devil would walk through. She took hold of the girl’s chin, bringing it close to her own: “Soon ripe, soon rotten.”

Abigail did not understand the statement, but felt a poke of shame in the base of her stomach.

“Mamma says you’re a fanatic.”

“Well,” the woman said, and then nothing else. She put the necklace in Abigail’s hand, curled the girl’s fingers around it, and left.

The next morning Abigail awoke cold and curled into a ball. The house as still as ever, her clock ticked; no snow floated in the globe on her nightstand. Quietly, she reached for the story of Margot and opened it underneath her blanket. She read in her soft cave until her mother arrived at her door, pulled back the blanket, and forced her outside to meet the day.

SUMMERS ON KAFFEKLUBBEN ISLAND

Benjy Caplan

Before the tests came back that proved he was melting, Perry had assumed he was just a sweaty kid and that his bad posture was from years of not sitting up straight at dinner. It happened in the summer after he graduated high school, around the same time that everyone started fussing about the polar ice caps melting. Naturally, most people cared a lot more about the polar ice caps than about Perry even though more people had met Perry than had ever been to the North Pole. This didn't make Perry feel any better about anything.

If the polar ice caps melted, coastal cities would flood, and weather patterns would change. There'd be mass extinctions, and an eventual end of life on Earth. If Perry melted, the sandwich shop would have to find someone else to make sandwiches. And, if Perry kept dripping into the sandwiches while he made them, the sandwich shop was going to find a replacement anyhow. That he always tasted vaguely of mustard—once his biggest frustration—was now the best thing Perry had going for him.

Perry asked his mom at what age her father had started to melt but she told him that what Perry was remembering was the aftermath of his grandfather's stroke, not melting. Perry wasn't running a temperature, and there weren't any anomalies in his blood except maybe slightly high cholesterol but that was genetic. You know what wasn't genetic? Melting. No one in Perry's immediate family had ever melted, though Perry had enough high school biology to guess that melting was probably a recessive phenotype.

The doctors didn't have any idea what was happening to Perry. It wasn't even that hot of a summer. In fact, it was cool enough that even Perry had to question all this talk of global warming. One of the guys in his coffee club said it was global warming precisely that was throwing things off and making it so chilly but that really didn't have any bearing on Perry's situation.

Just about the only thing Perry could do was alternate which side he slept on at night so that over time, he wouldn't droop more one way over the other. One other thing he did do, however, was to stick stacks of old magazines under the foot of his bed to try to counteract the melting that took place all day as he stood, his feet getting larger by the glance due to the spreading and the increased proximity to his eyes.

As the months went on, the melting continued. It began with him just leaving smeared fingerprints all over everything he touched, but got to a point by the end of the summer where he'd lost an inch and seemed to be frowning all the time. He wasn't happy about things, but sadness is all the more difficult when you don't have the option to put on a brave face.

Perry started spending more time at home with the air conditioning blasting, something that made his stepfather frown as well. The carpets were ruined, and now Perry was going to put him in the poorhouse, one BTU at a time. The worst thing was that Perry had to give up going to his coffee club. Not only did the hot coffee seem to speed the melting but the coffee shop was at the bottom of the hill and after he slipped on a drop of his chin and smeared his way down the hill as he fell, his mother decided it just wasn't safe for him to go out anymore.

So he sat in the tub and drank cold drinks and thought cold thoughts. He hung posters of icebergs and penguins on the bathroom wall the way some kids hang pictures of pop stars. He read about Admiral Robert Peary and his expedition to reach the north pole and then finally about a place called Kaffeklubben Island.

Kaffeklubben Island is the most northerly point of land in all the world. "Eighty-three degrees, forty seconds north...twenty-nine degrees, fifty minutes west," he read. "Holy moly, that is northerly." A mere 707 kilometers (440 miles) from the geographic North Pole. It had to be pretty cold there, cold enough that there was no way Perry would melt there like he was melting at home. The summers on Kaffeklubben Island had to be better than the winters at home.

He turned the page and saw a black and white aerial photograph of Kaffeklubben Island. It was shaped like a mittened hand, waving to him and welcoming him home. It was all too perfect for him to be anywhere else. Just a few of the things too eerie to be coincidences:

Coincidence One of Many:

Kaffeklubben Island was discovered by Robert Peary with whom Perry always had felt a kinship, despite not being named Robert nor being an explorer. For years Perry had been begging Santa Claus to bring him a pair of walrus-skin trousers like the ones Admiral Peary wore. Year after year, Christmas was a disappointment and year after year, Perry was no closer to learning where the Admiral had gotten his trousers. He'd take the cordless telephone from his parents' bedroom when they were downstairs and sneak it back to the bath to call consignment shops and disreputable furriers. Nothing. Perry long suspected that the Admiral suffered the same sourcing dilemma and the Admiral's own frustration with Santa was a large part of his reason for his trip to the North Pole.

Coincidence Three of Many:

Kaffeklubben Island took its name from the coffee club in the Copenhagen museum of mineralogy, of which the first person to set foot on the island had been a member. Not only would Perry stop melting but on Kaffeklubben Island, he'd have a whole new coffee club to join, one with a far more prestigious pedigree than the crummy one at the bottom of the hill. The coffee club had been the best part of his week but on Kaffeklubben Island, the best part of his week would be wherever he was, whenever he happened to be there.

Coincidence Four of Many:

Kaffeklubben Island lies just north of Greenland. Greenland was long a territory of Denmark even if it never seemed like one. According to an op-ed piece he read, Greenlanders felt an innate independence and separation from the Danish identity, and so did Perry.

Perry thought about all the times he had drank a cola out of a glass of ice and how much more quickly all of those pieces of ice had melted than he had. He had outlasted hundreds, maybe thousands of pieces of ice, and those were just the ones he knew about. Chances were that if he was right alongside the polar ice caps, he could beat them, too. They were just ice, but he was a man, or at least would be one day.

All his life, Perry had been the one in his family to turn the lights off when leaving a room, or to keep the refrigerator closed while deciding what to eat. With him gone to Kaffeklubben Island, the melting of the polar ice caps would only speed up. Perhaps with the ice caps out of the way, people would finally start caring about Perry. In the meantime, he'd have Kaffeklubben Island.

The photograph showed an empty island, empty of everything except possibility. There wasn't a date on the photograph, but it was black and white, and so was probably old enough that by now there would be all sorts of interesting people and things to do on Kaffeklubben Island. Artists and retired contortionists and vacationing rebel leaders. Snowmobile races and rock concerts in the snow and snowman building competitions.

His new friends would be better than his old and his old friends would find that out when they'd visit him in the summers on Kaffeklubben Island. He'd even invite the old coffee club to meet the even older coffee club. There'd probably even be a girl just like him up there and they would hold each other and kiss so warm that they'd melt together.

But first: dinner. Perry air dried so as not to rub any of himself onto and into the good towels. When he made it to the table, his mother was already clearing away the plates from the first course and his stepfather had tightened his nasty glare. One of the upsides of the melt was that his stepfather couldn't complain to Perry to hurry up before his food got cold. Perry's menu for tonight: unthawed frozen peas and ice cream, and for dessert, more ice cream. Perry loved ice cream and he figured that ice cream had no reason not to love him back.

Perry addressed the dinner table and the people seated around the dinner table responded.

"Do you even speak Danish?" roared his stepfather.

"They don't speak Danish in Greenland," At least Perry didn't think they did. "Jeez..."

"How are you going to get zere?" His mother asked.

"I'll walk if I have to," Perry answered. He hoped he wouldn't have to.

"Do you know how to get there?" His sister cut in.

His sister ruined everything when she could. But here, she couldn't. Perry had it covered.

"Well, I'll go north. Even if I overshoot the island, the worst that happens is I go to the North Pole and then I'll only be 440 miles away."

His mother tensed up. He placed a hand near her shoulder, but not close enough to drip on it. "That's 707 kilometers, Maman." Her hands loosened their grip on the table cloth.

"Martin," she said to Perry's stepfather, "zat's not so bad. If he heads norz, he can even stay wiz my family in French Canada for a while on ze way."

Perry's step-father pressed his fork flat down on his rare meat so that some of the blood fizzed into a puddle, dark and thick and round. He then stabbed and steered the meat through the puddle before jamming it so deep in his mouth that he nearly bit off one of his own fingers.

"Yeah, well if you do even make it to the North Pole, your compass is going to flip out and you won't know which way to go." Satisfied with this, the stepfather began to spy on the other plates at the table for more meat he could stuff in his mouth. The family knew better than to sit within his reach.

"You want to know what I'll do if I get to the North Pole instead? I'll go south. And, the compass would only flip out at the magnetic north pole. I'm going to the geographic north pole." Perry looked around the table for dissent. His stepfather raised a heavy eyebrow, but said nothing.

Perry traveled by night, when it was cooler and no one knew to look at him funny. He kept the tidal sounds of the cars on the highway to his left and the woods or graffitied bulwarks to his right. The graffiti didn't vary much with latitude. Wherever Perry went, people just wanted to leave their mark or turn the love of one set of initials for another into something tangible.

Throughout Connecticut and Massachusetts, he quietly hoped to encounter the near-mythic Sheila, about whom several sets of handwriting made rather lurid claims. One hand was far shakier than the others and Perry wondered if the hands belonged to a one-man grassroots effort. The author or authors were long gone and now only Sheila would know for sure.

And so it was. The night was a flexing muscle, striated with great serried trucking convoys, and Perry moved unnoticed alongside the peristalsis of industry and progress. He moved through the forgotten carnage of blown-out tire treads and soft drink cups. The occasional diaper was forgotten quite easily when tossed from a speeding car but vivid to multiple senses as one slowly approached it from a few yards downwind.

Sometimes, when the traffic ebbed and he could see across all eight lanes of the highway, he'd see a stiffly shuffling silhouette coming from the opposite direction and wonder if it was someone who found himself slowly freezing and was headed the equator. Ecuador maybe. That's where Perry'd go. Of course, with Perry, the Tropic of Cancer was practically the equator, which made Cuba just like Ecuador which, as far as he was concerned as a person who could never visit either, was basically true.

Indeed, the monsters were out at night. They stayed away from the lights of diners and truck stops and so Perry stayed away from these lights, too, so that the monsters might think him one of them and leave him alone. Short, squat ones bounding across lanes of traffic, ducking below the headlights and going unnoticed by drivers. Skinny ones dragging things in and out of the woods. Something darker than the night that floated in a glowing white nightgown and disappeared just when Perry began to hear her voice singing to him.

The ones heading north, Perry tried to size them up by their coats and their hopes to determine if they were headed to Kaffeklubben Island, too. They always turned off the highway, though, and then the traffic rolled back in and Perry quickened his step to try to keep up with its impossible pace.

Days, they were spent in a half-awake trance, leaning on shopping carts in frozen food sections of supermarkets. He could only spend so long in one place before being forced by someone to move along to the next market and abandon his shopping cart and its items. Nice things, the kinds of things he was never allowed to have. Sandwiches with ice cream for meat and chocolate chip cookies for bread. Frozen microwavable dinners he had no intention of microwaving. Before putting them in the cart, he'd press them to his forehead and try to taste them with his mind.

His mind. He'd do math problems to prove to himself that his brain wasn't melting along with the rest of him but sometimes he wasn't so sure. On one occasion he was trying to determine which size of low-fat ice cream was a better value, but couldn't get past the concept of how anyone could see the value in low-fat ice cream.

He would stand there, sweating, sliding his hands back and forth along the grip of the cart when they kicked him out. As he left, he'd hear the thunderclap crackle of "Cleanup on aisle X" where X was whichever aisle in which Perry had been. He always left at his own speed because the assistant managers and butcher counter guys never wanted to touch him.

Movie theaters, though, they were a much better situation. They were dark and air conditioned and with all of the ads and trailers before the films, one ticket could get him an uninterrupted REM cycle. And Perry was maybe the only person to never be disappointed when the concession kid filled his cup all the way to the top with ice.

But Perry liked movies and he didn't mind watching the same ones over and over. He knew what the characters would say before they said it, and in the way it was a lot like every conversation he'd ever had, except here the people were better looking and if he didn't like what they were saying, he could walk out and get an ice cream sandwich. No one complained so as long as he was sitting on the aisle.

As the couple groped each other on a rainy street, just before the man broke off their reunion kiss, Perry would inquire, "Who was the person you were kissing in the rain on the poster in the lobby?" The man would stare out from the screen, directly at Perry, and say, "It was you. It was always you." Perry shook his head. Wrong again.

Or Perry would ask, "If perception is a myth and time is the only constant by which we can measure such experience, what does that say about time?" And then a towheaded man with a powerful jaw and blood on his undershirt would bellow, "There isn't any time!" Perry would think about this and then set the alarm on his digital watch for the moment in the next showing when he should ask the question again.

He began to measure his travels not in miles but in motion picture release windows. Maine was a slow-burning melodrama about mediocrity and discord in the suburbs, and those weeks moving up the coast were the toughest, most nostalgic weeks. He felt homesick but then he remembered that Kaffeklubben Island was his home now. Rather, it had been his home all along. All the ills, the angst, the pain he had felt in his life: all that was just homesickness. The trouble had always been that he had never been home before.

Just crossing into Canada was like stepping foot into a whole new country. The highway slimmed down to three lanes per side, something having to do with the metric system, Perry guessed. The road signs said please and the air was clear enough that as he kept walking north, Perry could make out constellations above him. The stars looked a lot like the ones in America but up here he didn't know any of their names.

In Canada, the night belongs to the lost, to the damned. Perry didn't see any evidence of this but an old man said so at a gas station Perry stopped at for directions. It seemed to Perry that mostly the night belonged to raccoons and, as these raccoons weren't rabid like the ones he was accustomed to seeing during the day. The nights in Canada were a lot cheerier than the days in America, at least in terms of raccoon sightings.

The old man clarified that when he said "the lost" he was referring to Perry, in the service station for directions, and when he said "the damned" he meant his keys, which is why he was hanging out in the service station at such a late hour. They chatted a bit more.

"French Canada, eh? I know a short cut. All you have to do it cut straight through the magnetic north pole."

A shortcut. Perry liked the sound of that. Perry bought a few lemon pies and then the old man led him to the door and pointed. His finger trembled and was so knobby and crooked that instead of pointing at the horizon, he was pointing to a spot on the ground about three meters in

front of them. Perry walked to that spot.

“Good. Now turn to your left and walk straight for about three days. North magnetic pole. Then three more days. French Canada.”

Perry walked for three days at the pace he expected the old man to expect him to walk at. The nights stuck around longer the farther north he went until by the third day he was walking without a break. Twenty minutes before the end of three days, Perry cleared the top of a small ridge and looked down upon the north magnetic pole.

In the valley of the north magnetic pole, snow fell in a black and white checkerboard pattern. The pattern was constantly smudging like teary mascara for from all around the valley, small pieces of metal were hopping the ridge and rolling down the snowy hillside towards the nadir of the valley.

Perry was glad that he didn't have any loose change in his pockets but also felt silly for having spent all of his loose change on paperclips. The paperclips launched from his pocket and galloped towards the massive onyx orb sunken into the center of the valley. Standing atop it was a very old man, far older than the man at the service station. This man was wearing what, even from this distance, were clearly walrus-skin trousers.

Perry stood precariously on the edge until one of the discarded tins from his lemon pies struck him in the back of the head and caused him to tumble no differently from the desk lamps, colanders, and cameo pendants that yearned for their destiny at the north magnetic pole. He came to rest at the bottom and before he could choose to look, the fillings in his teeth snapped his head towards a skeleton in a suit of armor.

The two fillings freed themselves from his teeth and sped towards the empty eye sockets of the skeleton. The fillings glowed dully in the moonlight and the skeleton seemed to smile. Or frown. It's hard to tell what a person thinks who doesn't have lips to guide you. The skeleton, his mouth was just open enough that he looked forever as though he was about to speak.

“Hungry?” the Admiral asked, his face resembling the skeleton's, but fleshier and more bearded.

“Uh, no thanks. I just had a lemon pie,” Perry replied.

“I see.”

A ding and two slices of toast sprang from a toaster just as it smacked into the side of the orb. The slices landed in the Admiral's waiting hand. The other hand, he reached it towards the starless void above him. He closed his eyes and a metal butter knife appeared in his hand, already gobbled with fruit preserve. He spread the fruit preserve on the toast, that trebly scraping sound just audible above the steady hum of the black orb.

The Admiral licked the knife and dropped it. It clattered against the orb but when Perry looked by the Admiral's feet to see where it had landed, he spotted it just in time to watch it get absorbed into the orb. It was then Perry realized it was not an orb but a highly compressed pile of oxidized metals, compressing at a rate nearly equal to the rate at which it was supplemented by new metals. This caused it to pulse but Perry had no idea why it hummed.

“Because the metal kazoos get absorbed too quickly and the plastic ones never make it up here,” said the Admiral.

The two listened as a vibrating toot grew ever louder. They directed their attention to the southeast, from which a small metal kazoo was zipping through the air. Perry tried to pick out the

song and though he didn't know it, it had the sound of one of his mother's cousins accusing him of something in a formal manner. "Vous!" it cried and then was silenced as it became a part of the pedestal upon which Admiral Peary stood.

"Admiral Peary, right?"

"Right. Regular Perry, yes?"

"Yes." It had begun to snow and Perry had to squint to keep it from blowing into his eyes. "The black snow. Is that going to stain?"

"Yes, but a lot of people like the way it looks."

Aside from the jagged pieces of metal leaping at them from every which way, it was rather picturesque. Everybody said so.

"So, you've just been standing right here for the last hundred years or whatever?"

The Admiral sighed and the orb swelled.

"Don't be a fool. Of course I haven't. The location of the magnetic north pole is constantly changing. We've moved three millimeters in the time we've been talking. Stay awhile and we'll see the world, or at least a bit of the northern part of it."

"I...I can't. I have to be going to French Canada to see my family so that I can make it to Kaffeklubben Island before summer when the ice floes melt and I can't walk across the Arctic Ocean to get there."

"Kaffeklubben Island isn't all you probably think it is."

"How do you know? You never went there. You...you only spotted it from your ship."

"A lot of people think I never made it to the North Pole, either. Why don't you just go to French Canada, visit your family, and then turn around and go home?"

Perry thought about this. He thought about visiting the French Canadians. Francoise and Francois. Lauren and Laurent. Eve and Yves. He'd met them only once before, at a wedding in his youth. They were all in tuxedos, even though it was a casual beach wedding. Yes, he remembered, they started fetching drinks for the other guests and collecting tips.

"They're a hardworking people, Perry. Very industrious. They could teach you a lot about character. French Canadians are exceptionally good at catering. It's in their blood. It was the only thing left after the beaver pelt bubble burst in the late nineteenth century."

Perry thought about all of the family photos in the house in which he had grown up. He'd always thought that French Canadians were just fancier than the other Canadians he knew. He'd credited that to the French part of them. But now things were making sense, the things he had seen his mother do over the years. All the things she knew about wine, how she always seemed to have a canapé at the ready just when he wanted one, and boy, how could she handle a chafing dish. If it were in her blood, it would be in his blood, too.

It was probably pretty chilly in French Canada. He wouldn't have to worry about melting as much and could get a job at a catering company pretty easily. Lots of nice people to meet and he'd probably get to take some of the leftovers home.

"Let me show you something, Perry." The Admiral tugged open the left hip pocket of his walrus-skin trousers in time for a silver compass to land in it like a bird returning to its nest. He produced it for Perry and explained in precisely which directions Perry could find French Canada, Kaffeklubben Island, and the town in which he had gone to high school.

The poor, confused little needle. It lurched and spun in all the directions of the world,

pausing and reversing direction constantly, knowing that as long as it kept moving around the dial as fast as it could, it wouldn't be lying about where north was *all* the time. It wanted so badly to tell the truth. It was going to tell the truth if it killed it.

When compasses dream, they dream of true north. When the wake, all they know is magnetic north. The sad, sad ones that find themselves at the magnetic north pole never even know that they know nothing at all.

In one direction was French Canada. In another Kaffeklubben Island. In another, the place where Perry had come from, where he had grown up. And in infinity minus three directions were a whole host of other places, most of which ones where Perry had never been.

Actually, no. In infinite directions were other places because if he kept marching past French Canada, Kaffeklubben Island, or where his parents lived, he'd wind up somewhere else altogether. Infinite directions and only one of them the right one and even that one only worked if he went the exact proper distance. Probably the timing had some say in if things worked out, too.

The Admiral let go of the compass and the orb breathed it in. In a merciful world, the needle would have been pointing true north at the moment the compass ceased to be a compass. In a merciful world.

There was thin laughter on the wind, or maybe that was the wind, and then a bloody hunting knife sunk into the orb, wiggling and then pulling itself inside. The Admiral looked expectantly at Perry.

"Well?"

Perry took a deep breath and took a step away from the orb. All the iron in his aching bones, all the other minerals, they begged him to stay but Perry knew his destiny lay elsewhere.

Another step forward.

Perry needed all of his might to keep heading up the hill, dodging decorative cookie tin lids and wraiths of Christmas tree tinsel along the way. He couldn't turn around and so he couldn't see the Admiral's face, his mouth, his lips. He couldn't see if the Admiral was smiling or frowning. There was so much snow, black and white, all of it blinding, and so Perry closed his eyes and saw nothing at all.

Perry needed all of his might and so he couldn't even turn around to acknowledge it when the Admiral said, "You've made the right choice. You're headed in the right direction."

Perry smiled. The daft old loon. How could he know? His stupid compass didn't even work.

OUR CONTRIBUTORS

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