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Short
STORY

and Other Short Stories

Poems by Corey Mesler

A PARALLEL PRESS CHAPBOOK



A P A R A L L E L P R E S S C H A P B O O K

Short
STORY
and Other Short Stories

Poems by
Corey Mesler



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FIRST EDITION

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*The world is full of abandoned meanings. In the commonplace
I find unexpected themes and intensities.*

—Don DeLillo

This one is for Mark

Les

Les thought about himself long and hard. It had been another bad night, insomnia, a spat with his mate, food that disagreed with him. The morning brought new light, a feeling that everything that had come before didn't matter. Les looked at himself in the mirror. His face was older, whiskered, dark under the eyes. He wanted to execute some sort of change even if only temporary. A haircut. A gash across his forehead. Sharp instruments beckoned him. In the other room he could hear stirring. Whatever he was going to do he had to do it fast. He did not want to be interrupted in his metamorphosis. He didn't want to have to explain why he woke up and saw that the old Les was just a rest stop on the way to something finer.

A Man

If you don't know what love is, you don't know what it isn't.

—Alexander Theroux

Still in the sunlight he had to squint. His eyes, never his most trustworthy apparatuses, still hurt. Sunglasses were an option at first but they made him self-conscious, as baneful a death as blindness.

She was blond like the waves of a rill, bright like a blister. His memory was retted with estrus recalled. It always is, isn't it? Where is love, where romance, reading? Sex, hot as a swinked gypsy, kept her alive in him, a flame, an old one that still hurt like the sun, the overexposed sun.

Inside he lay with a cool rag over his forehead and tried to remember all the books of Proust's masterwork. He tried counting sitcoms with monkeys in them. His head was yet full of her, a piñata, confetti and old food where clarity once reigned.

He saw her once outside her apartment. He was driving by but it was an accident, an accident waiting to happen. She looked younger if such a thing were possible, her hair longer, nitid, a cruel fire. He stopped driving.

He stopped driving and stayed home too much. His friends called. His answering machine ceased picking up clues. When they found him they said he was blind, at first. Later, they amended their prognosis. A man caught inside can die of lack. A man can only last so long without himself.

New in Town

I went into town because I had tired of playing myself in the one man show. I was burdened with the weight of ghosts and relatives; I fairly limped with old, sticky love. I took wrong turn after wrong turn.

In the center of town I found a man who spoke the language I had invented years ago. Who knew it would catch on? I sat with him awhile and before I left, he clasped my hand tightly and said, "Everyone is revolting."

I did not let politics stand in my way. I wanted to make it in this town. I wanted to live among strangers who would strip me as soon as look at me. I wanted to be naked, lonely, and on top. Years from now, I picture a wife and a small child with a cleft palate. We settle down like a madman anesthetized. I love living here. I am a revenant, myself. My visitations take the form of letters, signed with spite, sent out to do damage from a distance, the appeal of the gun. My door is always open.

Alan's Approach

Alan stepped from the shadows just as she was passing. He didn't mean for it to begin this way. He didn't mean to be in the shadows.

Perhaps Alan, poor gowk, was guilty of over thinking this whole thing. Perhaps what was called for was a more temperate approach, a card, sent anonymously, with a stamp affixed upside down, which Alan thought meant "sealed with a kiss."

No, not a kiss. It could not begin with even the suggestion of a kiss. Alan fretted. Late into the white nights he sat beneath his desk lamp and tried to focus. He pressed his fingers against his forehead as if he could force the insula to react.

He didn't mean to step from the shadows. She was so lovely. He saw her walking down the sidewalk just as carefree as a child at play, as if she were unaware that she was moonquakes and arrhythmia. She looked a bit like the actress Patsy Kensit.

Alan stepped from the shadows just as she was passing.

"I won't hurt you if you don't move," he said.

It was not what he had prepared. Alan was ad-libbing.

Anguish on Carpal Tunnel Lane

The car in the driveway is not my car. I find the world is a little less consuming if I close my heart, if I go out begging for a fight, for some kind of kick-start. I live with the corrupted children of my friends from high school. They mill about as if I had something to tell them. I try, bless me, to think of something to tell them.

It's another year, a new one, they tell me. The trees seem laden with their drippings, as if Jackson Pollock were a type of oak. I venture onto the carpeted front lawn with only a number two pencil in my hand. My neighbor with the great legs beckons from her front porch—she has a place where there is heat but no light. She wants me to invest that place with significance.

I can't get up for the neighbor, though her legs are really quite splendid. And her little boy haircut. At night I can hear her mewling.

Some day, and it can't come too soon, I will pack up my last cassettes and start out for the unknown palaces of sin, where flows the river of need. I don't need your OK, OK? I only have to have the children's wishes to guide me; I only have to reinvent myself along their lies.

Randy at Home

Ringo's singing "Act Naturally." The tea kettle is so close to screaming that time stands still. Randy is motionless in the middle of his crappy apartment staring at a TV with the sound turned off. There's a woman on the screen in a bikini and a bunch of college jock types standing around her, ogling. Randy feels like an alien on his own planet, the planet Earth. Suddenly he hears the music, The Beatles. And just as suddenly the water temperature reaches a musical crescendo. Life is all around. Randy shudders like a wet dog. Sometimes you lose your place and sometimes you pop right back in.

Sweet Annie Divine

Sweet Annie Divine (1925-1976). Born Rooster, Arkansas, Annie May Auspex. Also known as The Duchess. Dropped out of school at the age of 13 to work her parents' cotton fields. Started singing professionally at 16 in juke joints in Arkansas, Mississippi and Tennessee. Toured with Jimmy Reed for a while, sang with Styx Ygg's BamBam Five on Beale Street in the forties. Fronted her own band, The Moxie Seven (or Eight depending on the night), which included Hillbilly Thomas and Sweetie Sykes and they had a mid-major hit with "Stephen Daedalus's Blues" in 1948. Recorded "Chicken Finger Blues," "Write Em Right," "Saint Ursula Goes Down for the Third Time," and her signature tune "Mississippi Low-down Blues" for the Lightning Label. She is credited with the composition of only one standard, the rocking "Lemme Get Up First," later, of course, covered by The Rolling Stones. Her last record for a major label was a cover of Holmes and Howard's "Somebody's Been Using that Thing." Comparisons to Big Mama Thornton and Bessie Smith brought her a brief renaissance of interest in the restless sixties. She died of the drink in a Memphis boarding house, just hours after recording her last record, the plaintive and pain-filled "I'm a Drunk in a Memphis Boarding House." Alan Lomax has said of her, "She could have been one of the greats if not for the hooch."

Seven Finger Tucker

Seven Finger Tucker (1920–2000). Born Belial Alloys Tucker in Watered Down, Tennessee. Songwriter and slide guitar player, nicknamed “Seven Finger” after the devil took three of his fingers on a bet, so the story goes. Wrote for and worked with many of the greats, Charlie Patton, W. C. Handy, Willie Dixon, Little Walter, Johnny Shines and Bumble Bee Slim. Tucker was a studio musician at Chess from 1940 to 1951, playing on many of their greatest releases, often uncredited. Wrote the standards, “The Gal Messed Me Up, She Messed Me Up Good,” “Her Ass Moves I Moan,” “Wrinkle Here Wrinkle There,” “Quarrel & Quandary Blues” and “They Bribe the Lazy Quadling.” Moved to Memphis in the fifties and stayed there until his death, playing anywhere he was asked, sometimes just for the price of a meal. In 1978 he became a regular performer at Club Royale on Beale and earned something of a reputation as a ladies’ man. He sang often with Furry Lewis at the Mid-South Fair, at church revivals and other absurd gigs. In 1998 he received a Handy Award for Lifetime Achievement. He also wrote “Partridge’s Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English Blues” for Willie Nelson’s *Milk Cow Blues* CD and which Nanci Griffith included on her third collection of covers, “Last Voices in Other Rooms, Including the Guest House Out Back.” Seven Finger Tucker invented his own idiosyncratic slide style, which can be heard on CDs from artists as wide ranging as Spiritualized, B. B. King and Julio Iglesias. He died of complications from cosmetic surgery. When asked by *Living Blues Magazine* in 1999 the source of his longevity and good health he said, “Ex-lax and the blues.”

Blunge

The false or substituted bride is one of the most widespread of all folktale motifs.

—Funk & Wagnall's Standard Dictionary of Folklore, Mythology, and Legend

I never noticed before. My wife is left-handed. This gives me pause as I stand in the doorway, a mixer dripping with cake batter in my hand. She's always been so loving, with the kids and all.

On TV there is a nature show, the kind of thing she likes, one predator on top of another. I watch her watch for a few minutes. One drip falls from my blades and, in slow motion, careens floorward. It lands and there is that frozen moment, an explosion. Somewhere in the farthest corners of the house I can hear the muffled sounds of our children, lost in their own worlds, lost to us.

My wife turns toward me and sees me standing there. The terror in her face is worth the forfeited time, the mess. I return to the kitchen, a different man. I am armed now. There will be no more secrets, no more surprises from here on out, from the middle of my life till the final reconsideration.

*Carving Deep Blue Ripples
In the Tissues of Your Mind*

What did it mean? What did it all mean? We listened, we nodded. It was all we could do. At the party, Lita danced with everyone. The joy was infectious. The joy was sibylline. At one point, Mark interjected. He said, well, I've never interjected before. The music went round and round. Flat and black like the world we were escaping. Around midnight someone put punch in the LSD. We continued dancing till dawn, but, really, by that time, everyone was in love with everyone else. Sex was something Mom and Dad did. We only wanted the tie-dye explosion. We only wanted the Gleaming Plastic Inevitable. When Lita pressed her lips against my tweeter it was all over. We knew it then and now it seems like a dream. The dream where you end up at school, undressed for the test. The dream where everyone everyone everyone is too fucking far-out.

Hal

A story only one line long about a man we'll call Hal who has been in love with the same raggedy angel for seven years and who speaks to her with deference as if she were a charka of charm and wit when really only her ass is worth all the heartquakes and Hal is as lonely as a little finger in this story which isn't even a complete sentence, though it seems so to Hal.

Character

Tom Meniscus, at first, did not realize that he had found the secret backstairs to the bedroom of his best friend, Rolland Hanson's sister, Katelynn, who was both an invalid and a pink pants, so it was rumored, until he saw the cracked door and its buttery sliver of light and saw the upright, glimmering form of the young woman's perfectly orbicular mammaries, clad only in diaphanous bedgown, nor did he know what he should do with this information except that he must keep it from his roommates, Jeff and Jerry Kinnoson, who were known around campus as party boys with forceful sexual proclivities, including the near-rape of a nubile, freshman bookbustler, according to some sources outside their fraternity ΣAE , not to mention from Katelynn's dipsomaniacal mother, Kathe, and her brutish father, Ron, Congressman Hester's aide, which amounted to a real test of Tom Meniscus's character, I'm telling you.

Following a Red Flame in the Dark

Awakened by the wolf again I followed as far as my weedy legs would take me, deeper into the woods than I had ever ventured. The wolf signaled that I was to get down on all fours. His smile was a slash of red light in the darkness. I tried as best I could to keep up, tried to play down my humanness, the bad habits of a privileged lifetime. Deeper into the gloom I went; all the time behind me the city ticked like a bomb. Later, when I told the children they smirked the way the young do when their elders tell them poesies. I was glad the sun was starting to rise and the city beginning to take shape again, almost as solid as a proffered hand.

Twin

Perhaps this. Perhaps I was a Siamese twin at birth and, through a remarkable, historic even, operation was successfully separated, and the twin, alive though deformed, say, was put—where?—in a home or somewhere. It's crazy, I know, an absurd idea. But the feeling remains. It occasionally flickers through me like dyspepsia. Sometimes my heart hurts, as if, almost as if, another heart were being torn away from it. Literally, physically, pulled apart, ventricle rending ventricle. The pain in my chest is momentary, but the lingering hollowness, the *longing* haunts me.

Somewhere maybe my twin cries. Wrenched awake from a freak's dream by a terrific palpitation. An existential arrhythmia. And perhaps he/she knows. And dreams about it, me.

I lie awake all night. My phone rings one-half time.

The Night Mojo Nixon Played the New Daisy

I was recently divorced. A friend suggested an outing, crowds, din. I stood near the stage, the singer was outrageous, the bass player eaten up with cool. The music entered me like a flu. I stood stock still, my feet nailed. She was red-haired, a siren. She danced like atoms in the light. She approached me, a wandering storm, her electric eyes burning me. She looked me over, coolly. Finally, she leaned close and the heat of her was solace, static, bugs. She whispered in my ear, I'll fuck you if you'll dance. She was the last boat out, the test of what was left of me. I looked at her hard—I couldn't help but smile. The rest of me was cryonic. In the end she sighed and condemned me, an ape in a cage, a numb celebrant. Where is that red-haired woman today? Dancing still, a dervish, drawing men the way fire draws air, still dancing, a winged but lonely and beautiful and evermore distant star.

Jeff/Lynn

Jeff returned from his trip with a lot of baggage. His wife, the one he discovered in high school, as if he were the first male to touch the first female, did not meet him at the door. She did not meet him at the door because she was not home. She was across town fucking a lawyer she had consulted about divorcing Jeff. In the end, well, not the final end, of course, she doesn't go through with the divorce but the affair with the lawyer stretches out for a year or two. But, back to Jeff, who has just walked into his empty nest. The den is a long slide downward, a slope without music or sense, ending in the center of his life, a place of no return, a Rubicon. He puts down his gatherings and looks at the mail on the credenza. There are no letters because people don't write letters anymore. There is a notice from the power company about the wonderful new things they can do for their customers. Jeff sits down and reads it through thoroughly as if it were addressed to him personally. He wants to not feel powerless anymore. When Jeff's wife comes home—her name is Lynn, she is a busty 37 year old woman with a slight stoop—she smiles at Jeff, a smile that hides what lies beneath. "Hello, dear," Jeff tries. Lynn counters with, "Yep." And they tumble on into the rest of the story because what else can they do? It starts and ends so many times that no one can get a fix on anything, where one sentence begins and another is up for parole. Jeff and Lynn—God help them. They're as small as you or me.

Noah, at Home, Afterwards

The children were a problem. They learned to mate from the animals. Their offspring, polydactyl and dwarfed, now scabble in the still retted muck. Was this New Man? And my wife, tired from decades of natality, began knitting our fatal shroud. The house creaks; many of us still feel at sea. All my grapes shall be raisins anon. With a world destroyed by God's Seas, I know not if I am up to the task of remaking it with such base materials: bantlings, wildlife, and an ark now beached like a dying whale. All our plans come to this in the end: swept clean and pregnant with both rebirth and insistent annihilation. I stand on arid Ararat and the rainbow is just beyond my reach, bent and as colorful as Heaven's brow. I can almost touch it. I can almost touch God's promise. In the newspaper I read there's only a 20% chance of more rain.

At the End of the Day

Marcia went to bed that night as usual with her Golliwog she's had since a child. Fred had called about ten thirty but he was distant. Something's wrong, Marcia thought. Fred said he'd see her tomorrow and Marcia believed him. He's so handsome, Marcia said, inadvertently hugging her doll. And, right before sleep came, she thought about that woman that works with him, the one with the big tits, the one who calls Fred honey.

It Was Forty Years Ago Today

My name was Swen. I lived with my Thisbe, Butter, on The Farm. We raised hogs and our consciousness simultaneously, and, when the revolution came, we were not the ones lined up and shot. In the White House, O hoary House of Blanch, they were making lists and we were down near the bottom. Even so, The Man hung around The Farm, with his lapels and his labels and his secreted piece. We fed him when we had extra stew and, sometimes, late at night, Butter would spread him Eagle. It was the least we could do. We never said his job was any worse than ours. Just at odds. Since then Swen disappeared and I was reborn in Silicon Valley, and on my laptop I keep a picture of Butter, her Astrakhan just skimpy enough to show off her political correctness, and every damn time I look at that picture—she's smiling like a Jimi Hendrix solo—I wish we hadn't started making those bombs, there in the basement, where the detonation destroyed the integrity of the floorboards above our head. The ones we had painted with stars.

Harmon's Dilemma

Harmon wrote his wife a letter outlining the various reasons he had been unfaithful to her. He folded the paper neatly and placed it inside an envelope and put it next to the Mixmaster where she was sure to find it.

Harmon then went for a long drive. He needed to clear his head and, somehow, alleviate the guilt that was building in him like a heart attack. It was barely dawn; there was still a little silver sliver of moon above the refinery. Harmon looked around at the town where he and his family had made their refuge. It all seemed meet and right to him. Harmon was sorry he had cheated on his wife. He was sorry he wrote that letter.

By the time Harmon had turned around and gotten himself back into his home his wife and children were lined up in the living room with money in their hands. They were buying off Harmon's share in the family and cutting him loose.

The first thing Harmon did in the motel room where he landed was to dial his lover's number. The phone rang and rang. But she was far away now—how could Harmon know this?—meeting a man who had been married to the same woman for 27 years. Harmon listened to that dead ringing for a full minute. His life was shrinking fast and he didn't have the first clue how to slow things down.

Chin-Chin on Golgotha

Jesus on the cross turned to his new friend, Gestas, and confided, "I'm no masochist, you know." The thief squinted into the sun and nodded toward the rabble. "Tell it to someone who cares," he said. Jesus smiled that secret smile he had and the thief spit on the ground. The crowd booed. "I love you," Jesus said to the thief and Gestas began wishing he had Barabbas to talk to. Now there was a guy who understood a good retribution. Later, as the sun was setting, the thief softened a little and turned toward the carpenter from Nazareth. "Wanna hear something funny?" he asked in a whiskery voice. Not really, Jesus thought, not just now, but he smiled his encouragement anyway. He was a damn good listener, Jesus was.

Just a Song

She puts on “She’s Leaving Home” because she is. She looks one last time at her husband’s coffee cup on the sink edge, crusted. She puts her hand on the dishwasher and its warmth transmits something to her, something comforting yet forlorn. He’ll have clean dishes for a while, she thinks. And he’ll have a long memory about their life together that will include all the affection, all the hellos and good byes and all the times he called her names that she still believes.

Evil Going On

What is strength? What is courage? Simply this, I imagine: the will to keep on living amid darkness and destruction and the capacity to keep on loving amid loss and despair.

—Frederic Prokosch

The telephone squatted in front of me, a flagitious toad. Within it was the power to call her. I stared at that devil's channel with all the magic I could muster; its magic was more potent than mine.

I had her number right there in my mind, like a ticker tape, like e-mail from Pandemonium. I could call her. It would be easy.

Years ago when we parted she said she was not good enough for me, that I deserved someone better than her. It was an out, a particularly well-conceived and tricky out. I admired her for it.

She shed me as cleanly as a skin.

Every year since, despite two marriages, one good, one bad, her number appeared in my dreams the way Einstein must have envisioned $E=MC^2$ until his dying day. The hauntings of the particular and the concrete are the worst hauntings.

I picked up the phone. I struck her number, each small punch like a hole in the known universe. I punched all seven numbers, the secret code, the Revelations of John in numerical sequence.

She answered just as if it were an ordinary day and I might be a siding salesman or current lover. Her voice set dogs loose in me.

"Hello," I managed.

From far away she answered, the words echoing as if through a horny cavern of molten rock. She spoke simply, plainly, openly.

I was to go to Hell. I was not to pass Hie or Endure.

What she did not know was that right then I became a cipher, still part of the empty equation of How Things Are, but an invisible part. What she did not know—or perhaps she did—was that it would be years again before I returned to humanity, at which time I would be a new man, a wild man with injured thigh, fresh from the trials of the barbarous, a man capable, Sweet Jesus, of calling anyone at anytime.

The History of Lungfish Melody

In the dusty light of nearnight he plugs the last word in and it's done, a first book. He sits and stares at it as if it may come to life in front of him, wriggle off the desk and drop to the floor to scurry under furniture or worse out the door. He likes the name, emboldened and larger-fonted: **Lungfish Melody**. He says it over and over to himself like a pop ditty stuck in the mind, a snag of lyric like "Cry Me a River."

When he puts it into the mailbox it doesn't quite fit and he has to angle it slightly, a child bending its head down so you can nail the crate shut. The address looks as if it could be any address, a random house. But his label affixed to the upper left corner spells out his name and residence as clearly as the peal of matins, the peal left over. Will it find its way back here, along a bread crumb route? Will it need to?

Did he remember phone number, e-mail, alternate address? Did he put return postage on the return postage place? He begins to sweat. His heart pounds like a nine-pound hammer and the sun has never been this hot before, mean as a swinked gypsy, bearing down on him, baring its teeth, bearing ill will.

It's not worth it. Nothing could be worth this. What if he receives a call from their solicitor? He can be sued for his words. He's heard tell of it. Writers with books burned, names dragged through the mud, dragged into a courtroom to defend their right to say such things, to say anything.

He doesn't want it published or even read. He was a fool to send it to strangers. **Lungfish Melody**, what could be worse? Everyone is stranger, his life is out there on the line, his lines hanging up, words without meaning. He only wants it back, his book, his life. He takes it all back. He'll never write again. He is sorry. Lawks, he is so fucking sorry.

Short Story

A man whose communication falls just short of sense—says whirl for world, lie for life, etc.—meets her in the Laundromat, or an all-night grocery, meets her again a few days later at the flea market, sees her at a stoplight late one night, looking into the other cars, too.

She's the woman looking for serious commitment, in search of the long term, finding only short stories, a world of short stories, a world of missed connections.

She's the kind of middlebrow with pretensions toward higher ideas, who writes "aw, come on" in the margins of her Norton Anthology. She writes him a letter.

He stands in the bright sunshine on his sidewalk holding the unopened envelope in his hand. He looks at it so hard.

Aftermath

Right after the crash Ralph went around talking about it as if he were the ancient mariner. “The guy came out of nowhere,” is a phrase I remember from numerous renditions. It was soon reported that there was trouble at home, his still young wife was spotted at Arby’s with Jack Diamond from the church choir. Later Ralph would say he could have predicted it all, the dirty affair, the acrimony, the loss of his self-respect and then his job. Ralph really went downhill. “The only thing I didn’t see coming,” Ralph was saying, “was that goddamned Plymouth.”



COREY MESLER has published poetry and fiction in numerous journals including *Pindelyboz*, *Orchid*, *Thema*, *Mars Hill Review*, *Poet Lore*, and others. He currently has four chapbooks available. A short story was chosen for *New Stories from the South: The Year's Best*, (Algonquin Books, 2002). His first novel, *Talk: A Novel in Dialogue* appeared in 2002 and his recent novel, *We Are Billion-Year-Old Carbon*, was published in 2005. He has also been a book reviewer for *The Memphis Commercial Appeal* and *The Memphis Flyer*. With his wife he owns Burke's Book Store in Memphis, one of the country's oldest (1875) independent bookstores. Most important, he is Toby and Chloe's dad and Cheryl's husband.

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