

## Wilderness House Literary Review 12/3

Daniel Uncapher  
"Hand-Me-Down"

When the family doctor cut off the tip of my mother's nose to remove a tumor he promised her nose would grow back again but that turned out to be a lie, and my mother became despondent.

Her despondency reminded me of the children's story about a nose run amok in St. Petersburg and so, to lighten the mood, I pretended in the familiar way to steal my mother's nose between my fingers.

She burst into tears when she saw what I'd done to her.

"Don't cry," I begged, wriggling my thumb at her. "It's just a joke, see?"

A lifetime of toil and error had made me a wholly unsympathetic character, but when it came to my mother I was unconditionally sensitive. In a gesture of sympathy I picked the peeling knife out of the knife block in the kitchen and sliced off my own nose, which in a second revelation I offered to my mother.

She was an O'Shaughnessy, after all, and hadn't it always been said that I had a distinctly *O'Shaughnessy* nose—that is to say, a thoroughly *Gaelic* nose? I'd sent my spit to a lab for analysis and they confirmed I was 99.97% Gaelic, which made me a white person *all the way down*, which still had some value.

With this in mind I offered my mother my nose and needless to say she *loved it*. She stopped crying the moment she saw her new look in the mirror. It was a great start to a new philosophy, and I decided at once to do away with the rest of myself as soon as possible - to cash out while there was still some currency left.

Naturally I thought of my father, the over-worked chairbler.

My father worked himself to exhaustion every day while I'd always preferred the quiet atrophy of a *waking* exhaustion. He built magnificent chairs, and I liked to sit in them; it had never been a square deal for either one of us. Everyone capitalized on his labor except for him. I seized on the spirit of the day to correct this fundamental unfairness; I was, after all, a Libra.

That was the confident mood I was in when I found my father alone in his refinishing shop loading furniture onto the bed of his truck.

"Lift with your legs," I advised him. His back was already beginning to hunch. He made all those comfortable chairs for other people, for *total strangers*, and this was where it got him - bad eyes and a hunch. Ten years ago he looked like Paul Newman.

"Use your knees," I said.

"My knee's *shot*," he said, and I snapped my fingers.

"Brilliant!"

I set my leg up on a chop saw and, with little ado, brought the spinning blade down on my thigh, just above the knee. "Why don't you try

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mine, then? It's not the best knee, but it's a *good* knee, and I stand by that."

My father stared at the gift in astonishment. "Don't you need it, son?"

"Of course not," I said. "I'm going back to bed for a while to focus on my intellectual work. I don't need my knees in bed. In fact they're something of a nuisance."

This was all very true, and my vigorous mental clarity amazed me. I formed a thesis in my head: mass has an inverse relationship to clarity of mind, and mass reduction was, in fact, enlightening; the ascetics were right. In Japan they call it *sokushinbutsu*.

My father tried on my knee for size, sticking it right over his bad one and admiring his renewed flexibility. I was gratified to see it too, not least because the knee was due for another surgery, and I had neither the insurance nor the constitution for surgeries.

My old man was so pleased that he allowed himself a small joke of the occasion: "I could always use an extra hand, too."

We shared such a laugh that I buzzed off my left hand clear to the elbow and installed it on my father immediately. This time he made a good show of refusing it but I gave a better show of insisting. "I don't need it anyway," I assured him. "Not in *my* line of work."

I was in a state of mental clarity. My thesis was to address this: I would call it *the problem of superfluity in body parts*. That was to be a key identifying phrase, and it represented the catalogue of superfluous body parts and their detrimental effect on the intellectual process. The benefits of self-reduction were increasingly obvious: I felt better than I had in years. Trimmer, faster, some twenty pounds lighter. *This* is the right way, I thought; *this* should be in a book.

That's just what I'll do, I resolved on the spot: I'll learn how to write and I'll write a book.

Before I could announce my resplendent new plans to my father he got a call from my sister. I listened closely but couldn't hear anything, except that both she and my father spoke in sober tones.

"Is everything okay?" I finally asked.

"She's fine," said my father, hanging up. "They're at the Gasthouse. She wants me to fix a wobbly table, but I have all this furniture I need to move..."

"I'll go," I said, clapping him on the back. "I'm on a productive streak today."

"You certainly *look* different," he said, the soft blur of pride in his glaucomic blue eyes.

I hopped on one foot to the Gasthouse, a sordid bed-and-breakfast run by my 99.97% Gaelic sister and indolent Bavarian brother-in-law. Hitler loved Bavaria, I thought, and Bavaria loved Hitler. I always thought that when I saw my brother-in-law; it was, more or less, the dominant thought. But my sister loved him and derived wellness from his love, and when it came to my sister's well-being I was unconditionally sensitive.

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I let myself in through the kitchen door and surprised my sister, bent over the flour station making ciabatta. "Look," I cried, "I've lost weight!"

"You were too thin already," she said, without looking up.

"Today's a good day," I said. "I'm embarking on a new career. I already have a thesis in mind."

"As long as you're happy," she said, her hands in the dough.

"Won't you put down that dough and listen? I'm onto something big, I tell you." I pitied how hard she worked, and my pity turned to anger at my indolent brother-in-law. "Where's the Bavarian, anyway?"  
"Asleep at the bar. Don't call him that."

"Dad says you have a wobbly table."

"Oh, that," she said, walking to the stove and tasting from a vat of Bolognese. "I just wanted to talk to dad."

"Well let me lend a hand at least," I said, laying my wrist down on the butcher's block.

"Don't be trite," she said. "What I really need is a second set of legs."

"Of course," I thought, with exquisite mental clarity. I hopped up on the counter and brought my brother-in-law's butcher axe down on the top of my thigh.

My sister screamed, which woke up my brother-in-law. "What have you done!"

"It's not the prettiest leg, I admit," I said, surprised by her reaction. "But hide it under an apron and no one will know the difference." Indeed, it was no great secret that I'd always had particularly feminine legs.

But my brother-in-law got in the way as usual. He stood in the doorway and pointed at my butchered limb. "That's *it!* That's *just* the leg!"

He seized the leg from my sister's hands and rushed it to the wobbly table, which suddenly stabilized. My sister protested, beginning him to stop, but he ignored her over the hammering of nails as he permanently fixed my leg to the table; even I had to admit that it was the perfect leg for the job, and was a little proud for having supplied it.

In a gesture of goodwill I ripped off my ears and stuck them on his cheeks so that he might learn to listen a little better, but he took advantage of my generosity and started pulling my hair out in thick clumps.

"Now you're being gratuitous," I complained. "What good does hair do you?"

"The amino acids, of course," he said, dropping clumps of rich Gaelic hair into a vat of boiling oil. "What do you know about industrial baking, anyway?"

I wanted to spit in his Bolognese but he was immune from me, because we both knew that any harm to befall him would be harm befalling my sister, and despite years of toil and error I remained unconditionally sensitive to my sister's well-being.

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Instead I ordered an Uber home and, when the car arrived minutes later, I asked for a piggyback ride to the backseat. As soon as my brother-in-law closed the door I let out a sigh of relief and lay down across the seats. I recognized the driver from school. We'd been very good friends once, but in the hectic unraveling of adult life we'd become almost unrecognizable now.

"Drive fast, man," I told him. "I'm losing a lot of blood back here."

"My name's P.G., *man*. Don't bleed out on my new seats." I remembered him more clearly. His name was Poetic Genius, and he was voted best-dressed in the senior superlatives.

"Don't you know who I am? It's good blood," I assured him. "High-value. You can keep whatever I lose and sell it to whoever you want. Just get me home alive, or you can say goodbye to a tip."

He shook his head and said nothing.

"You could at least thank me, you know," I said, feeling stymied.

He squinted at me in the rearview mirror. "White folks..."

I leaned over the center console and put my face close to his. "What do you mean, *white folks*?"

"You think everyone wants a piece of you."

"Well, I bet you think being white is easy," I said, falling back into a pool of warm blood in my seat. Why hadn't I noticed all this blood everywhere before? Had I been bleeding this whole time? Was that what spooked my sister?

"Bet," he said. "White people have all the money."

"That's true," I said, drawing circles in my blood. Now I was really embarrassed. "How did you know about that? Well, it doesn't matter. None of it matters. I can hardly give away the stuff. The world's ending for everyone at once, nothing carries any real currency anymore. Drive faster, will you? I'm bleeding all over the place. The last thing you want is for a white man to die back here. Didn't you read Ralph Ellison? If you get me home alive there's a big tip in it for you. Huge tip. Hu-uge. You can have my organs, if you'd like, as many as you can carry. The non-essential ones, at least."

Something in my words must've moved him because he sped up and maintained speed and I settled back in my seat, satisfied. But not even thirty seconds passed before a siren wailed from the side of the road and colored lights flashed behind us, and P.G., cool as a duck, pulled over to the side of the road and rolled down his window.

"Don't give up like that," I hissed. "Keep driving!"

"I'm not going to Parchman over your sorry ass," he said.

"No one's going to Parchman," I said. Thinking fast, I tore my face off with my fingernails and handed it over the center console. "Put this on," I said. "Play it straight. Call it a meat delivery. I know how to deal with these pigs. You hear me? Call me a *parcel of meat*."

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When the officer walked up to the window at last he peered in and asked P.G. if he knew how fast he was going; P.G. admitted the exact speed, and then, in a stroke of good faith, repeated the line that I'd given him. "Delivering meat here, boss."

"Meat delivery?"

"Meat in the back, boss," said P.G., pointing at me. "You can see the blood for yourself."

"That's not blood," said the officer, scanning my mess with approval. "It's pure myoglobin. Nothing at all to be squeamish about."

"Barbecue," I said, throwing my voice a bit so as not to disrupt the illusion. "Pulled pork. Memphis-style, all the fixings. Piping hot."

He tapped his knuckles on the roof of the car and licked his lips twice before waving us off. "You get that meat to the barbecue, citizen."

"Yes, sir," said P.G., rolling up the window and pulling away.

"Dumb pigs," I said, laughing. "Don't even recognize real blood when they see it. *Myoglobin!*"

But P.G. didn't share my jubilation. As soon as we were out of sight of the cruiser he ripped my face off and flung it out the window.

"Hey! You're going to get us pulled over again!"

"Your face was the worst."

"What a waste! It's because I'm white, isn't it?"

"No, it was itchy—but so what? You *are* white, aren't you?"

"White person all the way down," I admitted. "It's all I have left. So please, I'm asking for your help. Take my kidneys from me. Make *some* good come from them."

"I don't want them."

"Then a lung—"

"No way!"

"The old twig and berries, then?"

"We're at your address—get out!"

"Don't let it end like this. Take my eyes! My liver! My large intestine!"

"Get out, get out, *get out!*"

He reached across the car, opened my door and pushed me out. I pulled myself off the hot asphalt with my remaining hand and whistled to my dog, who saw me from the front porch and ran down to help me. P.G. sped away with a screech, and I felt somewhat resentful that he never even recognized me.

The dog bit down on my wrist and dragged me across the yard and up the porch.

"I'm developing a thesis," I announced to her, my head bouncing on the concrete steps. "I'll be busy with that from now on, which means

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you're going to have to learn to take care of yourself. From here on out I'm a bedfellow, do you hear me? A brainstem. My work is to be in the intellectual tradition, not in feeding and cleaning up after wild animals or any of that other ridiculous nonsense I used to do."

She turned the latch with her paw and opened the front door, and I pulled myself in. I slid along easily now into the kitchen, where I saw that her dog bowl was empty.

"I'll fill it up one last time for you, and then you've really got to do better without me. My mind is my work now, and I can't be minding after every wild animal that comes begging."

She sat down in the middle of the floor and cocked her head at me in her usual way, and when I smiled facelessly back at her she laughed and licked my open mouth.

It was time for the final reduction. Originally I'd had grander plans: my lips for a Polish girl, my penis for a boy in New York, my inner thigh to a fetishist I'd met on the internet; my tongue to my grandfather, so he could keep telling his repugnant stories; my brow to my grandmother, because hers was so heinously furrowed.

But that was the stuff of literature, not reality; in reality, with realistic resignation, I simply cut everything off one by one and discharged my contents straight into the dog bowl. It was an easy climax achieved without a touch of romance or irony; I hardly had to put any consideration into it at all. The only thing that I needed now was my thoughts, and those were elevated to a permanently higher pitch, that which remained impervious to discharge at the most basic level.

Under such a rigorous weight loss scheme my bones became virtually purposeless so I broke them off at the tendons and gave them to the dog, who dashed each one off to bury in some potting soil, or under a cushion, or in a pile of clothes. Another escalation: as a bundle of optic nerves I regarded myself as a creature of the world again, a bundle of beings made of multiple selves. That was the chief ideological figure of the time. It was, as they call it, the pedagogy, and I in my multitudes at last understood it.

In my state of near-perfect mental clarity I saw even my moments of failure and loss with a thorough, instructive indifference. I saw that even in my charity I was selfish and destructive; I wasted my face, I insulted my friends, and I vindicated my Bavarian brother-in-law in his worthless existence once again. What must P.G. think of me now? Positively racist! But that was the cost of doing business, and now at least I'd paid it in full. I'd paid the notary and handed a personal courier several bundles of cash. There was now a vested interest in my future, and my family and friends would prove to be a better investment for me than I ever could. So what, I'd made some mistakes. So what, I'd had some strange bedfellows. What mattered was my work.

Finally, in a state of total perfect mental clarity, I did away with the idea of a resting place at all, letting myself relax astray the contents of my own carving-out as though the offal was still attached to me. I'd finally done something worth doing: I was lighter than air. It was time to share my secret with the world. I held my phone up over my head and tapped

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out a few possible titles for my great work, a few working first sentences, before I started to get a little bit bored with the whole thing, and then the lingering unease of uncertainty set in, more than a little embarrassing, and I fidgeted nervously as the dog had her fill of fresh meat.