

The Culvert

“So what’s supposed to be in there?” I asked.

“It’s not what’s *supposed* to be in there. It’s what’s in there.”

He was starting to creep me out. “Hey, how do you do that for so long? With the basketball?”

“It’s a secret,” he said.

“Is it in the culvert?” I asked.

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Sarah and Aileen walked around the block, bought some crullers, and talked about how lonely they were, even when they were together.

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I knew where the other side was. It just passed under some railroad tracks, but even this muted kind of fear screws with your depth perception. I kept thinking, *What if someone seals me in here?*

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“It’s the ritual part of it I can’t part with,” Aileen said.

“I like the smell,” Sarah said.

“The smell’s nice too.”

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I walked the rest of the way to school thinking about the culvert. It was still a few minutes before the bell rang. I asked Jimmy Marchese about that place, if he’d ever been in there or what. “No way,” he told me, “there’s bodies in there.”

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“When’s your birthday?” Aileen asked.

“Let me call my husband.”

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It was taller than me and its inky darkness filled my vision and I could hear the mysterious echoes bouncing off the walls and my heart hammering and I sprinted away until my ribs hurt.

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Listen up. It was sometime in the twenty-teens when the town outlawed feeling. You could still do most things, but you weren't allowed to feel them anymore, except in a muted way. Smelling other people's hair was strictly forbidden. They washed the town in Drano to burn out our olfactory sense, which came too close to the heart of things. The Artery leads away from the heart.

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I sat on the grass, swapped my docksiders for my aquasocks, and took the flashlight out of my backpack. It hardly made a dent, just a little shaft of light illuminating some moss, a spent rubber, a dashing rat.

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“How's your health these days?” Aileen asked, and Sarah said, “Never been better, I'm afraid, except for my hip, which is rickety.”

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I decided to go back in.

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“Hon, when's my birthday?...Goodness, why didn't we do something?”

“What about now?” Aileen said.

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I was just taking a walk after dinner one evening when I stumbled on the feelings. They have to go somewhere, you know. They weren't even particularly well hidden—just right back there in the clearing, a big swirling lump of them, maybe forty feet by forty feet, give or take.

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I'd been dared five packs of baseball cards to go in there once and count to twenty and come back out. I didn't do it.

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All she did anymore was hang out on the stoop talking about the days when she could have had any guy at the drop of an eyelash.

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In their natural state, feelings are healthy and desirable and need to be let out—this is our official position—but let them build up like this and the dark ones inevitably dominate, the mass turning highly volatile. So far we'd been emoting enough in the culvert to keep the lump at bay, but there were only so many of us, and we couldn't possibly emote enough for the whole town, so it was only a matter of time before it began wobbling up the Main Artery.

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“Do you want to know a secret?” Aileen asked.

“Depends.”

“There's a place where they're still doing that dance you invented all those years ago.”

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Blaring light, blinding music. A swinging door. I knew it! I squinted and took cover.

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“Why didn't anyone ever tell me about it?” Sarah said.

“We were afraid you'd disapprove.”

“It was *my* dance.”

“You married the Commissioner. We deemed it a security risk.”

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We watched on our 7-inch battery-operated TV while the lump ran cars off the road, uprooted houses, decimated crops. If only we could teach the lump to go after the government buildings, but feelings are famously ineducable.

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“I’ll explain it all to you in due course,” Jerry said. “For now, just try to enjoy yourself. It’s almost time for the line dance.”

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With her hip and all, Sarah had a bit of a time getting through the colon of the culvert. With each stride, she felt as if she were moving back in time. *My dance*, she thought. *They’re doing my dance!*

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Wind blew the culvert like a whistle. My parents would be worried. I thought maybe I should go out and find a payphone and tell them I was having dinner at Jimmy’s, but there was a spike in the music and I dove into waxing light.

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We liked the way things used to be, when we’d made love in cornfields and thrust bayonets into our enemies’ hearts. But most of the town was so catatonic by the time of the regime change and they just sat idly by while they called in the muzak orchestra and then when they began piping that crap into our homes.

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Someone said, “What the...? Help me shut the door, quick.”

But I protested, “Wait, I just want to know what this place is all.”

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“I could go for a soda,” Aileen said.

“I’ve got gin.”

“Looks like rain.”

“Finish your thoughts, Myrtle.”

“Dearest, this is Aileen.

★

The singer announced that it was that time. Jerry invited me to join them. I tried my best to follow along. Foot in, foot out, spin, bury face in head of hair. My first head belonged to an old lady with sparse white hair and a pink and fragrant scalp. It was like someone had piped a new sense into me.

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Myrtle was Sarah’s first born. Bacteria had eaten her from the face down. Sarah had watched powerless as her daughter disappeared a feature at a time until she was just a pair of twittering pinky toes, and then they disappeared too. Sarah hadn’t so much minded her husband’s crackdown on feelings after that.

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“I don’t mean to be rude,” I said, “but aren’t you supposed to be retarded?”

“That’s just my cover. I’m a recruiter.”

“Why would you recruit me? I’m just a kid.”

“Pigeontoodness always bespeaks a rich inner life.”

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Jerry got Sarah a glass of lemonade, thanked her for all she didn’t know she’d done.

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After the line dance, I asked Jerry to explain this place to me. That’s when he told me the emotional history of our town. I asked if it was true. He said it

depended on what one meant by “true.”

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“Let’s go to church,” Sarah said, flakes of cruller sticking to her bearding chin.

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The retarded guy in the park was twirling a basketball on his finger, same as he always did. I was walking up the path to school, minding my own business.

“The culvert,” he said. “All answers lie in the culvert.”

“Are you talking to me?” I said.

“You see anyone else around?”

“What’s a culvert?” I said.

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Sarah and Aileen walked hand in hand to the church. They heaved open the great oak door, moistened their tongues with holy cola. They sat in the front pew, found Jesus reclining on a black leather couch, legs crossed at the ankles, in bunny slippers.

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They house the blob in a silo somewhere on the outskirts of town. No one knows exactly where. The revolution is growing, but we’re not at a critical mass yet. And there are factions. Some of us are content enough to keep going like this, living our real lives down here and keeping the lump at bay for the sake of all those deluded townspeople we were once legally permitted to love. The more fed up among us are calling for total revolution, a murdered orchestra and a ban on feelings even down here until the lump floods this wasted town and restores the natural state of things.

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All that was left now was Myrtle’s memory, and the bacteria were having their way with that too.

Statement

Italian, Irish, droplets of German and English

My hunch is that being a writer is pretty difficult wherever you live, whatever you look like. The work is painstaking and slow, the audience is dwindling, and the pay is usually nonexistent. In a sense, writing is my worst vice, but I suspect it may also be my salvation. I don't often use the word "spiritual," for all its overtones of patchouli and bad science, but writing is the closest thing I've got to a spiritual discipline. I have no particular faith in the sky, though I do believe in what Virginia Woolf once called "the deep places of human psychology," and my goal as a writer, these days anyway, is to excavate down to that substratum underlying our diverse human contexts; to tap, in other words, into myth. I'm hinting at a false dichotomy here—ideally one arrives at the universal *through* the particular—but the gesture toward the universal happens to be one with very practical consequence for a writer navigating this very complex, very beautiful place called Hawai‘i.

Other writers are always telling me, "All writing is political!" to which I want to respond, "And biological! And cosmological!" It's not that I haven't wrestled with the semiotic complexities of whiteness in Hawai‘i. Pale foreigners have visited unspeakable pain on these islands, and the last thing I want is to sound glib. The problem—as always with issues of race—is that time passes and categories slip. I'm not sure "whiteness," broadly conceived in 2012, is any more meaningful (or any less racist) a category than "brownness," and in general I'm not crazy about identity politics anyway, which so often ends up bolstering the very essentialisms it seeks to undo. The real violence these days (as ever?) seems to me to be economic, and while the one percent may still come primarily in one flavor, the ninety-nine percent don't discriminate—so to schematize the intricate network of forces structuring our reality chiefly in terms of race just seems to me sort of lazy and counterproductive. Nor do I mean to vilify the one percent *tout court*, though at the very least they ought to pay their share of taxes. So if I'm essentialist at all, it's only in terms of our species. Whoever you are, whatever your circumstances, if you're human, then your genome is all but identical to mine (and if you're a chimp, it's still pretty darned close). At the most basic level, what it feels like to be you is a lot like what it feels like to be me. Good literature forbids us to forget this; it is, as someone once put it, compassion technology.

I have been in Hawaii over six lucky years now. I originally came to do a PhD in English at UH and now teach science fiction and creative writing at Punahou. I have tried to write about Hawaii only a couple of times and will try again as soon as I feel I can do a better job of it (my teacher, Ian MacMillan, lived here for decades before writing about it). Part of my hesitation, I think, is that I love

this place deeply, and if I'm going to write about it, I want to do well by it, with the authority of lived experience. What I don't want to do is to tell the same old postcolonial story again. There's nothing *wrong* with that story—it's vitally important to many people—but where my own writing is concerned, I don't want to see Hawai`i perpetually defined by its trauma.

The stories that follow have precisely nothing to do with Hawaii, except that I wrote them at Glazers, the coffee shop near King and University that served as my office while I was going through grad school. These are just two of thirty or so stories I wrote that are set in a kind of surrealist, suburban dystopia where all manner of human feeling has been suppressed. They owe something to the influence of Samuel Beckett and Donald Barthelme, and, psychologically speaking, probably grow out of the long disillusionment of my twenties, when my dreamy disposition clashed unremittingly with hard-edged reality. These days, the clashing isn't quite so violent—or I've grown numb, which will have to do.