

Randall D. Brown

Signifiers

In dim light, he hallucinates in silence. An eight-foot woman and a white gown, a six-foot woman underneath a golden robe sit on the opposite couch, wanting something, sexual he thinks, waiting for the sign from him, but he doesn't know the sign. He wants to know what they want so he can participate, but maybe it's his own desire and not theirs. Sometimes, out the sliding glass door that overlooks the parking lot, he sees men in his car, calling to the women, taking them away. And sometimes, when I am with him, my father sees another me, the son that might have been but never materialized. Until now.

"You look good," he tells this son. "Fit."

He also tells this son his secrets. "I've not had sex in thirty years. Imagine that. No. Who would want to?"

And others. "I knew your mother was fucking that Joe Ward. I read the notes. I listened to the phone calls. Still. I didn't believe."

I wish this other son could talk. I wish he could ask this father, "What would it have meant if you believed?" My father cannot see me in the dim light of the apartment. Even with shades and curtains open, no light seems to find him. It's the end of his life, and shades as in some ancient epic visit him. He searches for the hidden truth only the formless know.

"You have to understand something." He leans forward in the Lazy Boy to speak to the hallucinated son. It takes all his effort. He might fall back dead afterwards. "I don't know where they came from, why they're here. Their purpose."

I think of Orson Welles whispering "Rosebud," of Richard Dreyfus searching for the image of Devil's Tower in his shaving cream, mashed potatoes, railroad clay. Signs without signifiers, images separated from their meanings. When Dreyfus glimpses the tower, he finds God. "It's real," he whispers. "It's real."

"I want to know what it means," my father says.

That "it," indeterminate, so little light. The "it" refers to what?—his life, the visions, the women, the men in the car, the fit son he can tell things to. Sitting in a room for thirty years, almost never venturing out, waiting for a wife to return the love she abandoned.

The stiffness of his limbs turn his life into slow motion, each movement infinite, tentative. He walks like an infant, like Frankenstein. He crosses the endless expanse between chair and couch, sits between the visions.

"Oh no. Did you see that? Did you? Every time. Poof!"

This statue of a father might cry. I crawl over and hold him. He doesn't react at first then looks down.

"You," he says.

"I'm so sorry, Dad."

"Where have you been?"

Nothing. That's all there is. It's lightless—and forms move in and out. I'm inside my father's final thoughts. They flicker but that's all I can see.

"I want them to be real."

So do I. I cannot fathom the meaninglessness in this dim life. My father falls into sleep as if by a switch. On. Off.

I sit in the spot where his eyes found my Other, the son that can take it here, the one not overwhelmed by the despair, that one that won't feel, when my father dies, even the tiniest bit of relief. I wait for my father to awake. I'll convince him I'm real, that I'm not going anywhere. I'll tell him what it all means.

Randall Brown teaches writing at Saint Joseph's University. He is a Pushcart nominee and holds an MFA in Fiction Writing from Vermont College and a BA from Tufts University. His stories, poems, and essays have been published widely, with recent work appearing or forthcoming in Hunger Mountain, Connecticut Review, The Saint Ann's Review, Dalhousie Review, Clackamas Literary Review, Vestal Review, Cairn, King's English, and others. He's recently finished a collection of (very) short fiction, Mad To Live.