

Scott Taylor

hiding in plain sight

when i was younger,
i was constantly fantasizing about escape.
i was going to get away from it all,
one way or another,
go down to mexico
or off into the wilderness,
or fly off someplace,
spain or italy
or thailand,
find myself a beach
or some attractive hole
to crawl into
and just stay there
until the end.
it occupied my mind
sometimes
to the exclusion of all else,
in certain moods
it was all i wanted to do.

but i stayed,
i stuck around,
and i fought my way
tooth and nail
through all their tricks and traps,
and after about a million years
i came out on the other side
clean.

and now i find myself
right where i'd always wanted to be,
except i'm hiding in plain sight,
right here in the good old US of A.
the exotic locale
was unnecessary,
in the end.

i sit in rooms
and in wooded yards
surrounded by birds and bees,
plants and trees,
and nothing touches me,
nothing gets through at all.
you can shut it out
right from here.

the act

when i get together with the humans,
it doesn't go too well.
never has,
never will.

all i've wanted,
for quite some time now,
is to be myself in the presence of others,
and it's the thing
i find most elusive.
it's all i ask,
and all i'm denied.

i tense and glare
and smile oddly
and laugh wrongly,
erupt at the wrong times,
stay silent,
speak too loudly for spells,
throw my head around,
blink the nasty little eyes,
putting everyone on edge,
telltale signs of disturbance
wafting through the gathering,
touching each of them
on their furrowed foreheads,
warning them off.

it's an act i put on,
against my own will,
one which works
neither for me
nor for them.

my life has never made much sense.

i'm a natural soul
in an unnatural body,
directed by a misdirected mind.

the days pass
and the episodes pile up,
i fall on my face,
get up
and move on to the next one.
what else is there to do.

i've tried the recluse route before,
multiple times,
i've tried cutting them out of the equation entirely
and things do not improve.
there appears to be no solution,
no winning combination
to the lottery of my existence.

they're coming over again this weekend.
maybe this will be the one,
maybe i'll finally get it right
this time.

breath unheld.

sir gawain and the southern night

more searching for signs of life
in raleigh,
my adopted place
of repose.
august, hot, but could be worse.
we've had a pretty mild summer actually.

post-pandemic,
aly sends me out of the house,
her eyes are still bothering her
and she can't go.
so off i go
all by my lonesome
to take another stab at soul-searching
in this godforsaken soulless town.
the place is yuppifying by the second,
selling itself to hades
one square foot
at a time.
the forces of darkness
are ever at work.
armor on
and lance in hand
and i'm ready for my latest joust,
as ready as i'm going to be.
the last couple of times
they've knocked me around pretty good.
but one must ride out occasionally
to meet the infidel,
so off i go.

i park the car on lane
and head west, up hillsborough.
it's hot and i'm sticking to the shade.
people are being friendly enough,
for now,
saying hello whilst walking dogs and things.
so far so good.

through the big circle and skirting the college
and after a mile's walk,
mitch's tavern isn't open yet.
five o' clock,
it's happy hour and they're not open yet.
this place is never open.
across the street and back the way i came,
the sweat really pouring down now,
actually pouring,
my whole face running like a faucet.
i go back a few blocks
and try the player's retreat,
but to my utter surprise
they are actually requiring vaccination cards
for entry.
finally remembered to bring
me ole trusty rusty mask along
and of course they have to take it
to the next level.
what does a guy have to do
to get a beer in this town.

down the hill towards the prison
and i'm feeling faint,
my goddamn old man's constitution again,
i'm breathing too heavy and about to pass out.
i come to the fancy joint at the edge of the hill,
the one with the terrace and the nice views,
but it's crawling with socialite people
all ready to snarl
and so i give it a miss
and press onwards.
couldn't go in there if i tried.
0 for 3 thus far,
a strikeout in some circles.
condition becoming critical,
it's get inside soon
or die.

down and around and i'm coming up to the flying saucer,
next to that wacky monkey party place.
that's going to have to do.
i go into the blessed air conditioning
and sit down,
my inadequate grey t-shirt soaked through
with heavy perspiration.
the bartender is a young jock kid
and doesn't seem to mind.
i'm half expecting to be attacked
these days.
he offers me a chick beer that's on special,
i say fine,
i'm prepared to drink motor oil
as long as i get to stay inside where it's cool.
i need water,
i ask the kid for water
and he doesn't bring it.
i ask the other bartender for water,
a hot chick with the usual bored supercilious glare,
and she doesn't bring it either.
i'm tempted to reach over the bar and get it myself.
this is a health emergency, damnit.
then both of them realize they've forgotten
at the exact same time
and the glass of water quickly arrives.
i settle down.
there i'd been
just assuming that they were fucking with me as usual,
and as it turned out
there was no fuckery afoot at all,
it was only that both of them
were morons.
one situation was vastly preferable
to the other.

i finish my chick beer
and get out of there, moving towards downtown.
i'd told myself

i wasn't going to go there tonight,
but i wasn't going to drink either
and so all bets are quickly off.
the seal having been broken,
i set about to do more damage.
the big easy is empty and cool,
its usual relaxing cavernous self,
they're short staffed that night
and it's just the gay guy and the tattoo chick
and one or two others.
a black dude is sitting at the curve
with his woman,
his bushy beard grey and distinguished,
both of them staring at the wall.
not a lot going on.
i finish another beer and skip on lightly
to the next stop.
forgoing the pleasure of isaac's, i suddenly come over
all saucy
and decide to tackle the punk bar
for the first time in like forever.
the beer has settled nicely,
i've thoroughly cooled off
and i'm feeling good,
bulletproof
as my dad would say.

the degenerates are camped outside the door as usual.
i ignore them and go inside.
a skinny punk stops me at the door,
sitting at his little podium
like the sid vicious
of judges.
the usual bullshit with this place
starts up immediately.
he asks if i'm a member,
daring me to say no,
really enjoying himself
with his stupid sneer,
i tell him i was once

long ago.
he says i need a mask,
i produce said mask from my pocket.
"well, are you going to put it on?"
he says all sassy, like a bitch.
"sure," i say brightly
and put it on.
he backs off for now.
i'll outlast them tonite,
that's what i'll do.
i go to the bar and the bartendress picks up the reins,
now she wants to start.
i ask if they have yuengling
and she points at the cans on the wall
like i'm some kind of idiot.
they really like to lay it on thick here.
but i'm feeling defiant,
like i say, bulletproof,
so i point at one of her precious cans
and she brings it over
and backs off as well.

and then suddenly
the mood changes,
the tough guys at the other end of the bar relax,
i feel like i'm being marginally accepted
(or at least tolerated more than usual).
the only place in yuppieville
where the grey t-shirt is accepted,
i'll give them that much at least.
the others all flee from the sight of it,
they go looking
for the homeless police.
i eavesdrop on a snippet of conversation,
the bartender girl is saying something about
'all the people in high school i wanted to be like'
and she isn't being sarcastic for a change,
it sounds almost wistful.
just like at the saucer,
they go transforming into human beings

at the drop of a hat.
she's nothing but a little girl,
just like all the rest,
a scared little girl trying to fend off
the big bad world
as best she can.
her heart was showing
for just the splittest of seconds.
i'll be the first to admit
that i tend to overreact to things,
to write people off
and jump to conclusions.
it's one of the main reasons
i'm practically alone.

i go upstairs
into the little attic room
and pound down a few games of pool by myself,
just for old time's sake,
play a game or two of pinball
while i'm up there.
such an incredible waste of time and money,
that one,
nothing ever happens
and you never get anywhere.
then it's back to tangle with the punks again,
the bell rings for round two.
a cute black chick has appeared
in my absence,
all dressed up and looking entirely full of herself.
the tough guys have had enough of me,
they've had time to reconsider
and my status has been relegated to bottom-feeder once more.
nothing further will happen that night,
not for me,
not if i wait there
for two hours
or ten
or twenty.
windows shut pretty quickly at the punk bar.

i pound one more beer
and get my unworthy ass streetside.
a long tired forced march clear across town
and i'm back with my trusty steed,
prepared to gallop home.
i sheathe my weaponry
and mount.
my fair maiden awaits
and so does dinner.
not so bad,
all things considered.
i don't want to kill anyone
and no one wants to kill me.
a raging success,
by the usual standards.

a new phase

i'd only ever bathed
sitting down.

i'd sit there in the tub
and my mother would scrub me down,
washing my chest, my limbs, my back,
behind the ears and all that.
it was a good system,
seemed to work pretty well.
i didn't see anything wrong with it.

but then, there was change.

my mother stood me in the shower
and started fiddling around.
i wondered what i was doing
standing there,
when it was much easier to sit.
she turned the knobs that controlled the water,
drew the curtain
and quickly disappeared.
i heard hissing and a small burst,
like some strange puff of breath
from above.

and then, calamity -
the water was coming from everywhere,
like the worst storm of all time,
like the hurricane we'd had last year,
it was hissing at me like a snake
and i couldn't see a thing,
it was in my hair, in my eyes,
in my lungs, everywhere!

the whole world had become aqueous.
this was it, the end,
i'd barely gotten started
and it was the end.

but after awhile
i realized that you could step back a little
to avoid the onslaught
and that way you didn't
have to die.
which was a relief.

when i was finished,
my mother came back in
and turned the knobs again
and the water stopped rushing down from above.
she told me 'good job'
as she toweled me off.
my days were full of surprises,
new ones every single time i woke up.

i'd entered a new phase
in my life.

polaroid

i had gotten another job,
i didn't want to
but there appeared to be
no choice.
it was either that
or sleep outside,
and the weather was getting cold.

my new manager told me i had to get my picture taken
for the ID card, so that
i'd be able to make it past the security guy
in the morning.
i found the room
and went inside.
a black girl was there waiting for me,
somewhat on the plump side.
she didn't look up,
she didn't look down,
she looked somewhere in between.
a mask of neutrality,
belying
whatever else there was
inside.

she mumbled something at me
which i didn't quite pick up
but i got the feeling
she wanted me to sit down.
i sat down.
she didn't object.
i figured i'd guessed right.

she got the camera and
mumbled some more.
a whole string of words, followed by
"polaroid".
it sounded like
that was what i was supposed to say,

right before the flash,
you know,
like people say "cheese"
to try to make themselves smile.
i didn't know why "cheese" wouldn't suffice
in this particular instance,
but i didn't press the issue.
she picked the camera up and pointed it at me,
the little red light starting to flash.

i said "polaroid."

the black girl cracked up,
falling all over the place laughing.

it was now explained to me
through a further barrage of mumbling
that she'd only been going
for her polaroid camera
and was telling me about it in advance,
and that she had not intended
for me to say "polaroid" at all.
god damn it, woman,
then make yourself heard.

i smiled back
by way of obligation
and she did a few more things
and then i was on my way again,
released back into
the cube farm.
i would not get my ID card
for another few days.

now, these days,
whenever someone goes to take my picture
i have an almost overwhelming urge
to say "polaroid"
right before they snap away.
happens every time.

i never do, however.
i doubt anyone
would get
the joke.

foregone conclusions

you get up in the morning
at the specified time
and everything is in the right place,
and must be:
the soap, the toothpaste, the towel, everything.
you brush your teeth, shave, shower,
towel off and put shorts on,
open the blinds
(the same ones in the same order every time),
make the coffee,
put the dishes away from last night,
tidy up some more,
blow nose,
drink two glasses of water,
wait til coffee is ready then pour it,
clean out the pot,
get shirt and book and glasses
and take it all outside onto the patio
to read.
when finished,
the shirt and book and glasses
must all go back to their assigned places,
without fail,
every single time.
the coffee pot is dried,
another glass of water is drunk
and then the stairs are climbed
to enter the next phase.

and this is only the beginning.
it goes on like that all day.

the madness of the routine
is what will get you in the end,
be it breakfast and lunch,
work then play,
backwards then forwards,
whatever ten or twelve or hundred-step program

you've come up with
for yourself,
in the end
it's going to get you.

the same thing
over and over again
for thousands upon thousands of days,
and then,
although the routine won't change,
something in your head
will.