

# PORCHLIGHT

Summer 2009

OUR  
**FIRST**  
ISSUE!

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**Porchlight: A Literary Magazine**  
Where Narrative, Design, and Photography Intersect.

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## LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Dave and I both grew up in the South, land of mosquitoes and copperheads, porches and ceiling fans. As we thought about what we wanted to name our literary magazine, we both kept coming back to the experience of storytelling. For us, that experience often involved sitting on a porch, cold drink in hand, telling stories back and forth for hours. When we were kids, this usually happened on a late summer afternoon with a popsicle dripping down our chins. As we got older, these storytelling sessions moved to the night hours, friends gathered beneath the glow of a light surrounded by moths.

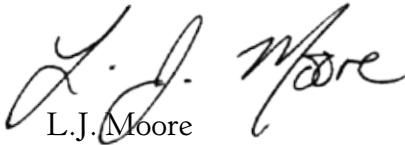
Now that we live in New York, we do not have a porch. But when we see friends we still tell stories, listen, and start tangents with “Listen to this—.” We know that this magazine will most often be read at a desk on a computer. And we know that the ways of storytelling we’ve included—fiction, poetry, essay, photography, and design—are different than the organic exchange of anecdote from friend to friend or family member to another. Still, we hope these short pieces will transport you from where you are, engage your mind, make you laugh, or furrow your brow.

Our first issue includes work almost exclusively from students enrolled in the MFA program at Columbia University. This is only because we drew from the local talent pool. We hope subsequent issues will showcase work from writers and artists around the country. Submissions are whole-heartedly welcomed, and you can find our guidelines on the last page.

Lastly, you may notice that the work we’ve included is loosely related. The theme for this first issue is “First.” First word, first murder, ‘Firsts’ at Cambridge, and more. As you encounter the words and images that follow, we hope you will also reflect on your own firsts, and maybe even take the time to share your stories with us through email.

We hope you enjoy!

Sincerely,



L.J. Moore  
Editor

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# LETTER 3

On the lawn, I think, our meeting,  
though you weren't yet sporting the frock  
that a year on forced me to admit  
an honest defeat. That afternoon,  
when I passed through your hand  
like a salesman, midge weather  
had tempted your arms sleeveless.  
A last hurrah. They were hairier  
than mine, and the exact hint  
of your pragmatism. Also, your guts,  
your brusque and raffish affections,  
the sufficiency that held me off  
well into the winter. How you were  
prone to the wrong end of the stick  
and South American dancing.  
How pollen could stain a bicep blonde.

-Dai George

**Letters from the Desk of the Functionary General**

**BY WILLIAM ADELSON**

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THE FUNCTIONARY GENERAL

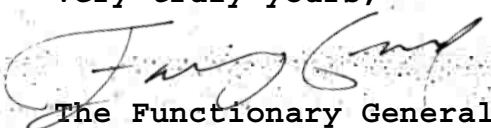
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Dear Inspector General Icyikowski,

I am writing today to ask for your assistance in a private matter. Even though we've never met, and you have no reason to do so, I would very much appreciate it if you would destroy this letter after reading it, and then come straight to my lake house. Will you do that? Thank you. Now, on to business: I seem to have gotten myself into a bit of trouble. As I write this letter I'm at my cottage by the Lake, and as you can imagine I've run over a little girl with my car. The trouble here is that the car belongs to the state, and I shouldn't have been driving it in the first place, but of course the real problem is that I have a very dead little girl in my possession, so the problem is twofold. At least I think she's dead--occasionally she twitches her left arm a bit. Well, in any event, if she's not dead now, she soon will be. As I said we've not met but I must tell you that I'm a very decent fellow and it's not at all like me to run over little girls and wait for them to die in my lake house. But, as they say, we've all been there! So, I'm counting on you as a fellow diplomat and member of the "community" to kindly come to the lake house as soon as you get this letter. Perhaps you know the little dead-ish girl? She's about 12 or 20 years old, I can never tell, and has white hair and she is very real. She is wearing a red dress and carrying a purse, which I didn't think to go into until just now as I'm writing this.

Well, I've gone through the contents of the little girls purse, and having found her papers I would suggest that you most certainly definitely get here with all due speed. I cannot be sure if she is a relation of yours because her Christian name is Helena and yours is not, but her surname is Icyikowski as is yours. As I write this I'm chuckling just a little bit at my clear breach of protocol, but as they say, haste makes waste! If you happen to have any trouble reaching my lake house do not hesitate to sound a loud airhorn and I shall have one of the houseman run to meet you. It's best to follow the signs, but remember that if you pass Otto's Homemade Bitter Jagerhoffel Stand you've gone too far. In fact, just follow the trail of blood from the main road to the large house on the lake, I'll be waiting. Again, I cannot emphasize enough the growing necessity for speed.

Very truly yours,



The Functionary General



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Dear Vice Admiral Valentine,

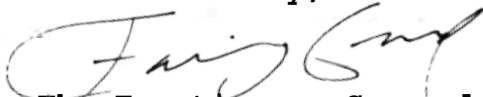
I have made a terrible, terrible mistake. I wrote the word terrible twice to emphasize how terrible a mistake I've made. At first I thought it simply a breach of diplomatic protocol, but after a somewhat less than pleasant encounter with a regional Inspector General whose name I will not reveal here in print because I've probably already said too much and at this point, with all that's happened, the less said, the better. Now to business, this Inspector General is not alive and he is in my shed at the official Lake House, as is his daughter. It's so embarrassing, and as you and I shared an amusing anecdote regarding the Crimean War at the Governor's Easter Party three years ago, I feel I can trust you. Was it I, or did we share a "moment"? Well, whether we did or did not, you've read the letter this far, so I can imagine that you are willing to help me with my double corpse issue. Before you go into hysterics trying to figure out what exactly could have happened I'll just condense the events and give it to you as it happened. I was driving to the Lake House on a very rainy afternoon...it was last week, the rainy week, and I had been drinking a great deal of Mrs. Ingeborg's prune Glögg and I was in a great rush to reach home. Suddenly as I got very close to my house, a young lady leapt in front of my automobile and lamentably was very badly killed. Panicked, I summoned my colleague the Inspector General, who I learned later, was the dead girl's father. Well. When the Inspector General arrived he flew into a rage completely blowing the situation out of all proportion and causing a great ruckus. In a moment of personal weakness, I imagine, he lunged toward me with more than a little bit of malice in his eyes and I had no choice but to shoot him. So here I am. I'm sure you can understand, we've all been in this position at some point in our professional careers, and I've finally come to mine. I could go into all those fun accidental death stories we all heard back at the Diplomatic Academy but I'm sure you know them all. In any event, while I'd like nothing more than to continue this note into a long cordial letter, I don't want to take up more time than is necessary past the point of being too blunt in saying that I do need your help and would you please come here as soon as possible. I'm in the official Lake House of the Functionary General (I am the Functionary General). The house is exactly the same as it was when you were here under the previous Functionary General, only I have had it moved several meters inland as the sea air makes me

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THE FUNCTIONARY GENERAL

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rather ill. So, when you get to the end of the HammerHeimmer Road, do not turn left, turn right then left again, and then go all the way past the vacant lot that looks out onto the Lake. That's where the Lake House was, you'll have gone in a bit of what seems like a circle but it's not, because when you get there you'll be in the opposite direction. It's a long story, but a lot had to be done to facilitate the movement of the residence. Anyway, continue past the vacant lot on the Lake where the Lake House used to be, and turn right onto Gemutlicht Way, and onto the unnamed road where there should still be a faint outline of blood. If you pass Bess's House of Pancakes and Darkness you've gone too far. See you soon!

Affectionately,

  
The Functionary General

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THE FUNCTIONARY GENERAL

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Dear Mr. Plinski,

Please fill the following order on the account of the Functionary General, and have it sent to my Lake House at once:

1 Ostrich Feather Duster  
12 Hamsters  
1 "Family Size" Bag of Marshmallows  
1 Copy "Franz's Booklet of Amusing Odors, Second Edition"  
2 1 Kilo Bags of Servant Food  
7 Ladies Wigs (Assorted Fashions)  
Another "Family Size" Bag of Marshmallows  
A Backpack  
9 Dozen Brandy Crumpets  
9 Dozen Crumpet Shaped Veal Sausages  
Enough Lumber, Nails, screws, Glue and hinges to form three sturdy coffins.  
1 Hammer

That is all. Rely on your memory of the area to find your way to the Lake House, as it is no longer near the lake you may have difficulty making your way. Please hurry, the sausages are perishable!

-The Functionary General

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THE FUNCTIONARY GENERAL

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Dear Mother,

Please accept my apologies for not having written you sooner. Moving into the Lake House for the summer has been quite the chore! I would love to visit for a few days if your schedule will allow. While I certainly would love to see you, I also need your help in a small matter. I ask you not only because you love me unconditionally, but also because you have always been impervious to very strong odors. You always disapproved of my career in the diplomatic corps, and I know this, but you cannot deny that I've been successful. Were it not for the "donations" I've received over the years, and the ample remuneration as a consultant, we would have had to put Reginald into a sanitarium ages ago.

Diplomacy is a stressful career, and it's finally caught up to me in the form of three corpses. I know what you must be thinking--summer camp all over again--but let's not get into that now. The situation is this: a few weeks ago I was driving to the Lake House and out of nowhere a bright red moose hurled himself in front of my automobile. Later, after tea I felt guilty for leaving a mess on the road what with being a pillar of the community and all that. So I returned to the road and discovered that the moose was not a moose, but a girl. I could tell this because there were no horns. I brought her back to the house and offered her some food. After she refused to eat for nearly two days, it occurred to me that she was most likely dead. I quickly wrote to a colleague in the diplomatic corps who, upon receiving my letter came quickly. Unfortunately, he came at me with a large garden scythe attempting to kill me in order to avenge the death of the girl who was in fact his daughter. I had no choice but to shoot him. I then summoned another colleague who again came with less than honourable intentions. I know it all sounds highly implausible, but the noxious aroma is so strong that I have not stopped throwing up for eight days, and despite the old home remedy of sausages and marshmallows I've fallen terribly ill. Oh, Mommy! I'm in over my head, the pressures of an appointed bureaucratic figurehead office have proven too much! Please help me.

Forever yours,

  
Sonny boy

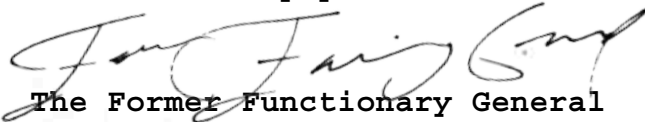
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THE FUNCTIONARY GENERAL

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Dear Chancellor Freid,

I am writing you today to offer my resignation as Functionary General to the Western Sector of the Republic. I am sure that you have read of my mother's recent passing. She was very dear to me and a fine woman who unfortunately left me with a brother who needs a great deal of care, and who now has nobody. My familial obligations are the primary reason I am stepping down from my post, but I must admit that the recent spate of strange disappearances and smells in the area of the official Lake House have set me ill at ease. It has been an honour and a privilege to serve you and if you should ever need to contact me again, I regret that I will be unavailable forever.

Most sincerely yours,

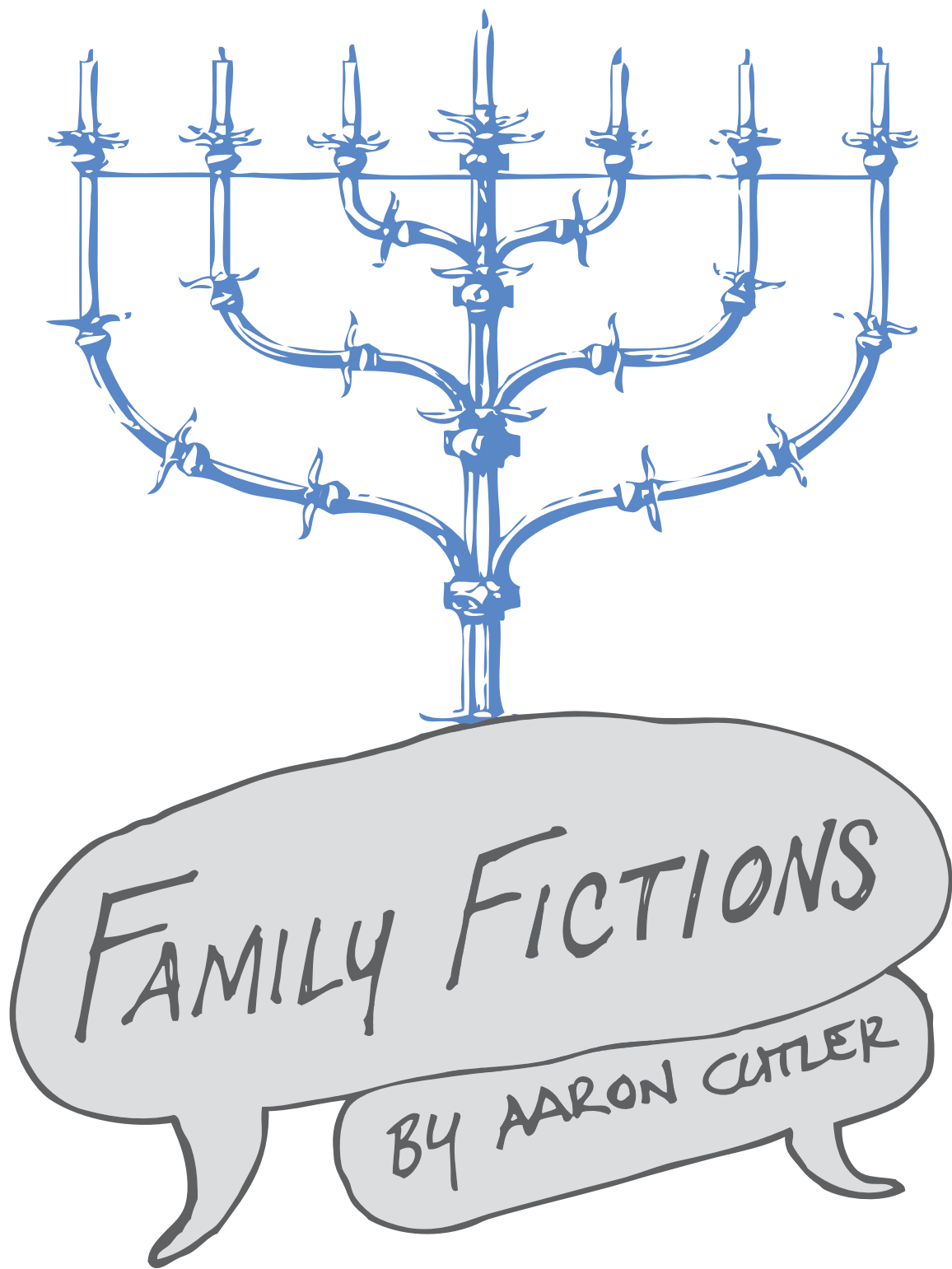
  
The Former Functionary General

Untitled



by Dave Moore





**M**y Bubbe's Chanukah dinners took place in a converted barn in Rydal, Pennsylvania. For my first three Chanukahs my great grandfather Yeyye, who went by Sam Berkowitz to those who weren't family, attended. He was a gargantuan cigar-smoking man in spectacles, with a quick temper and a sweet tooth.

He was a repository of stories, both the stories he told and the ones others told about him. He had escaped from Auschwitz—his family's lone survivor—and had smuggled himself into America, where he taught himself English and joined the Army. He killed 20 Germans during the Second World War. A decade later he cut off part of his ring finger at the tailor shop where he

worked so he could collect disability rather than be fired. Two decades later he was one of the chief planners behind the Walt Whitman Bridge. He once totaled a limo to get out of an airport parking lot; another time he bought my mother and uncle three banana splits, one for each of them and one to share. He had ‘The Samuel Berkowitz Family’ engraved on the wall at Ellis Island so his descendants could know exactly which Sam Berkowitz they came from.

At my fourth Chanukah, though, our Sam Berkowitz wasn’t around to tell stories anymore. He’d been laid in a casket a few months prior, and in his absence, his relatives comforted each other with memories and food.

Lots of it: Brisket, baked chicken, green beans, asparagus, chunky cranberry compote, apple raisin kugel, applesauce, potato latkes, and a special brand of crispy fried delicacy that my Bubbe named “Yeyye potatoes.”

We made a brief pretense of prayer—I’d never spoken a word in any language, which meant that my Hebrew was as good as anyone’s at the table—then slurped our matzoh ball soup. My pained Uncle Wayne, his hair dyed black to stave off gray, nibbled gingerly at carrot shreds while his fiancée Alison watched. She’d be gone within the year. Gefilte fish followed, and my mother, pregnant with my sister, ate it up. My father, who she’d divorce three years later, held her hand. I sat at the head of the table, the buffer between them, cramming food into my face and adding to the belly fat that would one day be gone as well. When I opened my mouth, it was usually to eat; a fear united my parents that I would never speak at all.

Brisket, gravy, brisket, chicken, half a baked apple, kugel. Yeyye potatoes. Then:

“More potatoes please, Bubbe.”

She stared at me. I squeezed my lips together and sputtered:

“More p-p-p-potatoes, please.”

Bubbe dropped her jaw. My mother fainted. I didn’t get more potatoes.

Yeyye potatoes would be trundled out piping hot at subsequent Chanukahs, with the tale of my first words served reheated alongside them. The story took a minute or two to relate, and whoever was present—it changed every year—laughed for the extra half-hour they thought it needed. It became our version of the Passover story.

In time other stories fell onto the pile, as my family members spoke about Yeyye as a way to speak about themselves. My father, himself a homebuilder, pointed enviously to the living room Yeyye had built from the skeleton of a barn; my upward-gazing uncle, picking at brisket, remembered a jar of caviar Yeyye bought once, even though he hated it, simply to prove he had money to do so; and Bubbe, whose college education he could finally afford after she turned 31, pursed her lips and said, “He wanted us all to be educated. He wasn’t. He spoke so well, though. That’s the truth.”

On the first night of my fourth Chanukah, he gave me a taste for words, too.





## GOING ALONG WITH IT

I *have* heard of people  
continuing a game of coin-  
operated-bar-pool after  
the eight ball's been

pocketed—it usually  
happens because no one  
wants to front another  
four quarters just to get

one ball back. You somehow  
incorporated this concept  
into chess—not as a back-  
door approach to keep

the game alive, but as the entire  
reason for playing. Can't say  
I like such a combination—  
but you've thought of worse

before. When the church bells  
clang at noon we'll start  
you say, which would be fine  
any other day, except today

the bells go off at eleven!  
Ignoring the noisy procession  
of the faithful under our  
window, you make your

second of many insistences:  
the game must commence  
right away. Dark pieces  
against the light, brown

squares dividing blue  
*from blue*. I place my  
pieces where you insist  
they must go. I would

never go along with your  
cockamamie machinations  
if you didn't have such  
a naïve enthusiasm for them.

The game as you imagined it  
begins when one of us is  
without a king—that's me  
of course—there's little

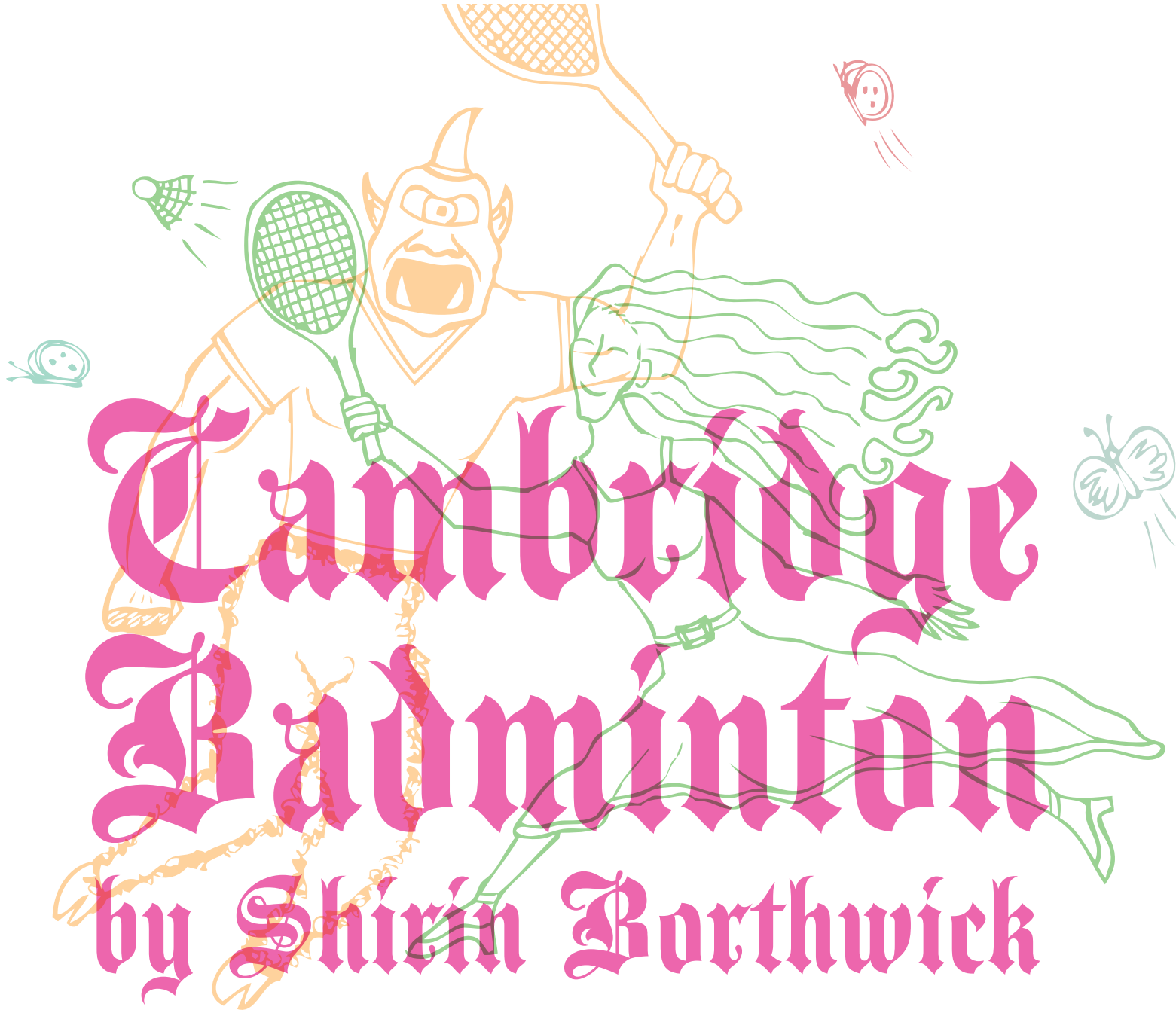
to be said of strategy when  
all the excitement's in blood-  
letting and the fallacy  
that a clean board (the gore

all mopped up) means  
good tidings all around.  
The church bells clang.  
The game is left as is.

Waiting beside the tracks,  
one of us mistakes the roar  
of the express for the local;  
even as it shoots straight

down the middle track  
where there's no platform,  
you insist we're getting on  
that train no matter what.

-Ben Pease



Liberty von FitzVonne commenced her noon game of badminton with Jay Zimmerman by slamming the shuttlecock straight into that gentleman's eye. He fell howling to the green fuzz of the court. Anxious to appear a man, he jumped up, causing the blood to rush to his head, and fell immediately down again in a dead swoon. Liberty patiently fanned his face with her racquet. After this unfortunate false start, and once Jay had assured the lady that he was not in fact blinded, Liberty began cheerily referring to him as "Polyphemus the Cyclops." A rather good rally was underway.

By the second set about one o'clock, when the sun was high, Jay mopped his brow with a monogrammed handkerchief while Liberty employed the hem of her skirt. Since this skirt was a cheeky pleated number—a mere napkin—a fair amount of frilly bloomer was on display. Jay raised an eyebrow and thoughtfully caressed his stubble once or twice before looking politely away, then called Liberty to order, so that she might receive the next serve. Her leap to take the shot was majestic; a shower of cherry blossoms, blown in from the college gardens, left her hair with a fine snow of tiny florets as she returned to earth.

"A veritable nymph!" called Jay in delight, returning the shot.

"Focus on your game, Polyphemus," replied Liberty. "Sixteen twelve, as it stands."

"I'm saving my wrist for more important tasks," insisted Jay, giving the birdie a delicate tap across the net.

"I don't doubt it," cried she, sprinting cross-court. "You *are* writing your thesis proposal by hand, then? Must be an awful lot of erasing. Must be frightful!"

"Somehow I get by," conceded Jay. The birdie protested with a *pock* as he hit it back. "Makes one say what one really means. Anyway how's yours?"

"Something about Ovid's *Tristia*, conceived as paraclausithyron," replied Liberty smugly.

"That's just what you said last week, and you said then that it'd been done to death."

"Alright, not much progress," admitted Liberty, swooping her racquet through the air with a *swish*! "But it's certainly nothing to be glum about. Though we have only observed him from a distance, I bet Professor Griggle's an absolute darling and won't demand drafts too often."

"Lucky for you. Dr. Fell's sent me a note already, warning me I best come prepared to my first supervision with her."

"Flirtation. Blatant, unabashed flirtation."

"I certainly hope not."

"But that's the only way to do it, Jay," said Liberty factually. "She's baiting you to play the game. A tactical manoeuvre. Yes," she went on, walking in loose circles to cool off. "It's very fortuitous we've each been assigned supervisors of the opposite sex, because erotic frisson is the only thing that motivates one to pursue these dry topics. You must deftly deflect your lust from the person to the book. All the great minds have done it for centuries. My last great passion was for Dr. Dean Francis, and that was the year I won the Fledgley Prize for Latin."

"And I thought you just loved the Classics." Jay paused to examine his new plimsolls; he was concerned by the way Liberty was making him wear out the soles with all this running about.

"I do love the Classics," replied Liberty with a sigh, twirling her racquet impatiently in one hand until Jay served. "But everything in life needs *spicing* up, don't you think?" She returned another doozy across the net.

"Oh, a handsome dropshot!" shouted Jay. "You really are on good form. You should join the team."

"Rowing is my first love."

"Couldn't you just, you know, deftly deflect that love onto badminton?"

"I see why you are so famous for your reasoning and logic skills."

*Pock.*

"So you expect me to flirt with that Medusa, do you? I'd like to live to see thirty, you know."

"She won't kill, she'll only maim," replied Liberty with an objectionable little giggle.

"I object to that giggle," said Jay.

"I knew you would, that's why I did it." She pirouetted, and missed the shot.

"Sixteen all!" called Jay. "Yes, that's wiped the smile off your face."

"I didn't even notice you gaining! Can your math be trusted?"

"More than yours, I suspect."

"Oh, you!"

"Look, don't be bitter about it. What are you doing? Liberty, that won't work."

Liberty was trying to snap her racquet over her knee.

"Liberty! No, it won't work over the fence either. You can't get enough leverage. Be a sport. You still might win, just put those famous triceps to work!"



She responded fiercely, and a silent rally followed for some time. The tide of perspiration increased. Liberty flipped her hair so tempestuously that it slapped her in the face, causing her eyes to water. Taking a dignified breath as though this had been an intended gesture, she raised her finely toned arm to serve. Sore all over, Jay rubbed the sweat out of his eyes, longing for an afternoon Pimm's. A trio of Classicists was crossing the lawn, pointing at them and conferring.

"This ought to be our last game for a while, Liberty," he said quietly.

"Too much for you?" she grinned. "I understand. Only don't feel too bad about it. Heroes of greater stature have quailed before the might of the von FitzVonne backhand."

Jay frowned. "Actually, it's for career purposes that I suggest we cool our sportive fervour."

"How d'you mean?"

"I don't think it's wise for us to be seen together."

"You're worried people will talk? But there's nothing more innocent than banging about a shuttlecock. A little sweaty, that's all."

"They can talk amongst themselves, but we can't risk them talking to our *supervisors*. Griggle and Fell are mortal enemies!"

Liberty's birdie hit Jay dead centre of his forehead. "Ouch!" He massaged his brow and glared at her with one eye.

"Oh, Polyphemis, there you are again," lisped Liberty with a slow smile.

"But listen, this is serious. Selwyn Smyth told me some horrid stories about students of Griggle and Fell who've fraternised in the past. It cost them their Firsts."

"Their Firsts!"

"Truly."

"Well I'm not surprised Jay, these Classicists are very base, carnal creatures. Smeaton referred to it the other day," said Liberty. "He told me, 'Liberty, my dear, you have a head for academia and a body for sin—'"

"Which is of course the reverse, in his case," interrupted Jay, giving a swift flick of the air with his racquet.

"—and when I laughed he said, 'No really. That body will take you far around here.' Horrifying I know, but those are the sad facts. It's a rough culture. All sex and snuff. Though I'm a little surprised at your being so daunted by it."

*Pock.*

"I'm not daunted."

*Pock.*

"You most certainly are daunted, look at you, trembling at a few spectators."

*Pock.*

"I'm not trembling."

*Pock.*

"Look how you're handling these shots! It's like you view the shuttlecock as a stealth bomber, and feel compelled to drop your racquet and run."

Jay disliked this. He hit the shuttlecock so hard his racquet flew over the net along with it.

"Ahem," he said as she stared at him, hand on hip. "Maybe we should call it a day Liberty, I'm about ready for Pimms. What's the score then?"

"I lost count, but I strongly suspect I won."

They walked back to college across the sunlit lawn.





# Duende

To tremble the trees  
Through a house with a view  
Like a boil of earth  
Like a house in a garden  
And the house has two doors  
One on the left  
And one on the right  
The left one opens  
It is dark  
The right one closes     it is bright

Through the crack in a little balcony of Assisi  
I fasten the roof of my mire  
Beaten with tin  
In voice of a shadow  
Through the double breasted earthquake  
In a garden in a house  
I waving  
Like a tree with one hand  
At the door half-stopped  
Out the door out

In and walking in at once  
Wind sleeks like singers vice  
Asleep to the East  
Dead as a mutton to the South  
And the house has a house  
Two houses with no windows  
Morning rows red by  
I blow or blood into  
I sun you mirror in  
And bird draws out

A moon long bow in the water  
Quiet and you are here  
The sound of flight out of  
Open and shut  
Like a fist that knocks at the ivory  
If the piano feels and quakes  
With a body  
Too lean to stay in the air  
Can you see me slit  
Through the first round of trees

Performing a sleep  
That you are then in  
And no eyes and no ears  
The windows are doors and the doors shut  
Like a man with a fear  
Of  
And the windows are not  
Like the sound of a fear  
Out of him.

-Alexandra Zelman-Doring

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REMITTER

Lenius L. Moore

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March 13

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# SEX, CRIME, WAR, CRIME

## ON WILSON, ORWELL, POLITICS, AND LANGUAGE

BY AARON CUTLER

**A**t a panel I attended last October on current issues in film criticism, former *Chicago Reader* critic Jonathan Rosenbaum argued that criticism's problems run parallel to journalism's. American journalism, he said, has lost the ability to tell the truth. He cited calling a biracial President black and the Iraq occupation a war as two examples. Listening to him, it was difficult not to think that those best able to comment on society's ills are not political pundits, but cultural critics. It was also difficult not to think of Edmund Wilson and George Orwell, two exemplary cultural critics who demonstrated nearly a century ago how to write about politics by writing about art. Both men used forms of "low culture"—Wilson burlesque acts, Orwell pulp fiction and post cards—to discuss American society at large. Wilson made his points implicitly, illustrating a society straitjacketed by sexual repression, while Orwell made his points explicitly, showing the same society's worship of power.

Orwell wrote, "All issues are political issues." Wilson, one of the first prominent American literary critics, might have had a similar thought in mind when he wrote his 1923 essay, "The Follies as an Institution." Wilson took a piece of light entertainment and used it as a mirror to reflect society. He saw the Follies not just as entertainment, but as a commentary on American standards of beauty. He believed that Ziegfeld had found "the American ideal of womanhood and [had] succeeded in putting it on the stage." The Follies dancers were meant to be archetypes of American women, with "not only the Anglo-Saxon straightness...but also the peculiar frigidity and purity, the frank high-school-girlishness which Americans like." The words "purity" and "Puritan" come from the same root, and by using these terms, Wilson cut to the contradictory quick of the prevailing American attitude toward sexuality—one simultaneously prudish and prurient, desirous both of mothers and of whores, wanting sex yet dying to suppress it (an attitude seen today in legislative fights over nudity on film and TV). Ziegfeld, he wrote, "appeals to American idealism, and then, when the male is intent on his chaste and dewy-eyed vision, he gratifies him on this plane by discreetly disrobing his goddess." The key word here is "discreetly," signaling the American male's inability to confront his desires openly. The dark Follies showroom was a fantasy realm where men could have both Betty and Veronica, the only



place where Wilson's "semi-bacchante" of Main Street was allowed to exist.

Wilson then hinted that, for the American male to reconcile his contradictory lusts for purity and carnality, he had to deny his humanity by regarding women not as people, but as machines. By writing that "what the American male really regards as beautiful" was "the efficiency of mechanical movement," Wilson suggested that men of his time often displaced their desire to make it more acceptable. This self-annihilation for the sake of the group was the same philosophy behind European Fascism. Mussolini had assumed power in Italy only the year previous to the publication of Wilson's essay. The Follies show "is becoming more and more like a military drill," Wilson wrote, and then used a series of carefully chosen words and images to illustrate this point: the "deliberate and rigid goose-step" that the dancers performed; the way that "expensive, punctual, stiff, it moves with the speed of an express train"; the "cold" entertainers; and the "metallic" laughter of the audience that deemed it acceptable. "As each cartridge of abuse is exploded," he wrote, referring to onstage entertainment, "the audience lets off its automatic roar." The imagery calls to mind the action of a machine gun, with the audience firing on command.

Wilson went beyond critiquing art to critiquing its consumers, arguing that the suppression of sexual urges led to release through violence. Wilson wrote "Follies" five years after World War I's close, which he reminded readers by casually mentioning "the war" in his last paragraph. Wilson's message—unstated but ever-present—was that if the Follies audience did not confront its desires directly, then its frustration would find release through more violence.

Equally as concerned about America's fascination with militaristic might, the British novelist, memoirist and critic George Orwell, also looked to pop culture to inspect the American relationship between sex and violence. In his 1944 essay, "Raffles and Miss Blandish," Orwell reviewed a British pulp novel, *No Orchids for Miss Blandish*, that had been written in the American idiom—not just with American gangster slang, but with an American obsession with sadism and cruelty. (As he had noted in an earlier essay, American adventure stories were both typically more violent than British adventure stories and more knowledgeable about violence's effects upon the body.) After describing the book as replete with rapes and murders, Orwell wrote, "only one motive is at work throughout the whole story: the pursuit of power." Like Wilson, he then analyzed the work's audience, who did not consume *Blandish* for pornographic value, but to marvel at its "efficiency." That one spectacle efficiently idealized women while another efficiently massacred them was as trivial a distinction as whether a story's protagonists were cops or robbers; all that mattered in the text was "bully-worship," regardless of who was bullying or being bullied.

Throughout his career Orwell believed in writing clearly and urgently (his essay "Politics and the English Language" serves as a primer) and so, while Wilson conveyed meaning subtly, Orwell dealt it bluntly. While Wilson described an audience's escapism through artful military metaphors, Orwell wrote, "One's escape is essentially into cruelty and sexual perversion." While Wilson described Fascism's ideology without identifying the movement, Orwell named Fascism, and wrote that "the countless English intellectuals who kiss the arse of Stalin are not different from the minority who give their allegiance to Hitler or Mussolini, nor from the efficiency

experts who preached ‘punch,’ ‘drive,’ ‘personality’...” Orwell outed words like “drive” and “efficiency” as code for Fascist principles (calling to mind Wilson’s hidden messages), and his discussion of how art and politics are intertwined validated his view that art is a microcosm of larger cultural values. “The book [*Blandish*] has not the smallest connection with politics and very little with social or economic problems,” he wrote. He called it a statement on Fascism, though, because “People worship power in the form in which they are able to understand it.” A dance, a pulp novel, and a political stump speech could all express the same message. Though Wilson and Orwell discussed different mediums, they recognized the Fascist underpinnings in each.

However, Orwell differed from Wilson on two key points. Orwell argued that many countries were gripped by the will to power, and none for the good. He illustrated this point by picking a popular British imitation of American pulp rather than an American original. Wilson, on the other hand, focused on what he saw as a particularly American neuroses; furthermore, he offered an unstated alternative to Fascism—self-recognition. Orwell claimed no solution, beginning his argument with a discussion of an earlier, more genteel crime novel to show how greatly moral values had deteriorated between 1900 and *Blandish*’s publication in 1939 (the year of World War II’s outbreak). Orwell saw the thirst for supermen everywhere. Boys worldwide worshipped Jack Dempsey and Al Capone, just as men worshipped Stalin. By casting Fascist adulation as a universal phenomenon, Orwell gave weight and force to his claim that between different kinds of bully-worship, “There is a difference in intellectual maturity, but none in moral outlook.”

Even now, the will to power thrives in America, helped by a mainstream media that consistently fails to hold itself accountable—journalists like Danny Schechter and Rory O’Connor have argued that news networks have helped sell Americans on the Iraq War, and if the press cannot analyze politics *qua* politics, then how can it look to politics in art? It could be argued that the blockbuster film *The Dark Knight* was a thinly veiled apology for the Bush Administration, while the recently closed Broadway revival of Arthur Miller’s *All My Sons* turned an historically anti-war play into a compassionate account of an American soldier’s return home from Iraq. Yet when these works opened, most print critics failed to discuss the politics in either, preferring to check off whether they liked the acting, lighting, and music.

Orwell wrote, “The opinion that art should have nothing to do with politics is itself a political attitude.” Art reflects the society producing it and, as both he and Wilson showed, examining art can reveal a great deal about a society’s problems, while ignoring art can only exacerbate them (it’s no coincidence that totalitarian regimes often employ heavy censorship). I spoke to Jonathan Rosenbaum after the panel ended, and he said that, even with change in Washington, we still needed public intellectuals to dissect America’s problems. It worried us both that there are not more arts critics who also question the war in Afghanistan or Obama’s status quo, because it suggests that the public intellectual’s authority is dwindling. Where are our Wilsons, we wondered, and who are our Orwells?

## Doors: a photo essay











by L.J. Moore and Dave Moore



# MISPLACED WALLET

*The odor of love is the scent  
not of bought but stolen apples*

What struck up the desire for a milkshake  
down the street at that Tasti-D-Light  
nestled in the back of a candy store?  
No one seems to like it there but I don't mind.

The moment presents itself on the street—  
makes the earlier unplanned nap & sloshing  
around in bed feel like a preordination  
to do whatever all the time especially since

there's at least a hundred bucks in the thing.  
That's like 20 milkshakes or dinner anywhere  
they'd let me in—lord knows peanut butter  
and jelly is getting old no matter how well

the contrast of sweet and savory delivers  
each time. Not to mention this woman  
has a Central Park West address—  
what's a few hundred bucks to her...

so the mind feels it must address itself  
while the stubborn body approaches  
the address found on the woman's license.  
I assume her apartment will have a door

guard, no need to leave my name, just  
confirm the person on the license lives  
in said apartment and make my way home—  
but of course the guard asks for my name

and number and I do not refuse him.  
On the way home a man without his shirt on  
stands in front of the blue light of his TV  
eating from a Häagen-Dazs container. A man

and a woman cross the street and the man asks  
"So you live somewhere around here?" They  
are laughing, she says yes. I order a milkshake  
with my own money and head back to my place.

-Ben Pease





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