

Burning Butterflies

David Brent Johnson, 1990

After I was born, my father brought me home from the hospital, placed a giant stereo speaker on each side of my crib, and welcomed me into this world with the voice of Jim Morrison screaming “Break On Through (To The Other Side).” I’ve told you this already, I know. I’m telling it to you again only because we are both LSD babies, red and purple microdot children conceived and born in the year 1967, when the Summer of Love burned to an end in the streets of Detroit and Newark, when Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King were both breathing and well on their way to the year 1968.

I told this to you on our first date, in the dim place we called Coffeehouse Hell, with windmill fans and huge potted plants that hung just a few feet above our table. You ordered lemonade and when the waiter brought you iced tea instead, you held the glass up and said, See? That’s the story of my life. Then you laughed and banged your head on the table. I must seem like such a freak, you said. So I told you my story and when it was over we both looked up at the potted plants and you said, We’d better get out of here.

Where we went from there—the flood of young-body passion, the careful lowering of guards that is like nuclear disarmament, the inevitable disappointment of discovering the other will not solve all your problems—felt like familiar territory, but you refused to erect the usual signposts. You never said I love you; you thought it destroyed something, began the bogging-down of conventional commitment. When we decided to live together, you insisted that we rent separate apartments across the hallway from each other. When I pointed out the economic impracticality of this arrangement, you fell on my couch and bit a cushion, exasperated with my ignorance of your spiritual practicalities. Even then, you must have sensed that some day you would disappear.

You’ve disappeared before. You drove to California to see if the swallows really do return to Capistrano. You called from Carbondale, Illinois, and asked me if I wanted to run away to Wyoming with you. Wyoming, I said. Why Wyoming? We could be cows there, you said. We could sit in a field and eat alfalfa sprouts all day. This is Indiana, I said. We can be cows here, I said. But I want to be a cow in Wyoming, you said.

You’ve disappeared before, I know, and I’m sorry if I’m being unbearably paternal. I’ve always had the urge to take care of you, feed you, take out your trash, water your plants. I came over to your apartment today for the sole purpose of watering your plants. We keep a vigil at your windowsill, your plants and I. I play a game: I stare at the droopy green leaves and try to make them rise with the force of my eyes. So far, the leaves still droop.

You left a pair of sunglasses on your kitchen table. I put them on, I look at your world through transparent circles of green, I pretend that I am you. For a few moments, we share the creation of a green glass mind. I listen to this dummy oracle, not wanting to lift the glasses from my face, but the only secrets it has to offer are the ones I never told you.

Through your window I watch a flock of black birds in the grey sky, swirling like ashes in the wind. Leaves flutter like butterflies as they fall. You thought that you would go to hell because you burned a butterfly once when you were little. You caught it and set fire to its delicate green and black wings that reminded you of an Oriental fan. And when you woke up the next day, you started to cry. You discovered that the bed forgives everything, but the morning offers no repentance. You went to church that weekend and when you picked up the program, it said, Welcome to our Sunday Service. The story of your life. You walked home and prayed to God to change the rain into flowers. And when He didn't, you walked home and drew a picture of it.

You warned me, I must admit. Once, drunk on the roof outside your kitchen window, you told me I was another butterfly. I'm in love with doom, you said, and I laughed at how seriously you took yourself. I turned my collar up, Dracula-like, and moved with bared teeth towards your neck. It's not funny, you said. I'm happy being unhappy, if you know what I mean.

Go to hell, it's where you want to go anyway, I told you the last time I saw you. Still, sometimes it seemed the only place to go. We both understood the lure of a statue in a cemetery at night. Dissect a joke and it's not funny anymore, we knew that too. You are what you beat, we used to say.

An aroma of spices and soap is most of what's left of you here. I can't embrace the air, the clothes in your closet are bodies without souls. Your sunglasses stare at me from the kitchen table, green circle green circle do not add up to eyes. If you were here right now, I know what you'd say. This, you'd say, makes all the sense of a vegetarian hamburger. Well, they exist. Vegetarian hamburgers are everywhere.

I step outside and the night comes down around me like a coat I love to wear. We were the kind of people who don't turn on their lights as soon as it gets dark. Sometimes I still worry about you. I worry that the star inside you will collapse and turn into a black hole. You will walk alone with a ruined face and nobody will say hello. You will have what you thought you wanted, and you will try to cry, but only Moses could draw water from a stone. How will you avoid it? You might kiss a statue. You might touch your face to see if it's still there. You might pray for a rain of flowers on the funeral pyre of a butterfly.