

Can of Human Heat

Mark Francis Johnson



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N. Y. N. C.

the thumb winter sea continue its choking

up of Atlantis

Oren Mabb (2091)

1: Very Ready for Treatment

The sky: a natural laxative.

Three Blinks. I thought, and it felt strange. Wine and semen blinked on plastic turf. And in the glow—some cheap SEOUL 17 light knockoff that *yellowed* the darkness—I was blinking too, “revery” over. I thought, and I remembered. Yes. Having sweated sufficient money, I’d paid a solar-powered bum to silence my “inner calliope”—that poisonous, official UT roar I hear as a deranging whine. Dollar in gob, the bum had stuffed my whole skin, toes to fingertips to top of head, with stale black bread. This had *muffled* the whine. After one hour a white sun had risen on us. The now motionless bum had . . . blinked. Not a shared experience.

Autumn on This Rock. Deep in its rental clock, I heard the filthy cuckoo break its chair. A nurse's size had nothing to do with the quality of her care! Her footsteps were faint and growing fainter, the Giant Nurse's. She was walking away from us, the Giant Nurse.

An expressionless naive servant wielding sharp fronds had fanned into the corner nearest my cot some wadded giftwrap, an unmolested inch-long rectangle of which displayed, as if *this* secretly were the gift, one of the little blue-and-silver blunderbusses decorating the paper. I sat straight up, gasping and staring, and put a moist hand to my seaman's chest. Rain beat upon the tent (which had lost its gay stripes). A sweaty, brutish quoit of gray hair hung down my wrinkled back, heavy as an arm.

SEOUL 17. One citizen of ten is nine, paper is lank after fingering, etc. Here the coolant factory grows mold without *knowing* it, the factory's shadow without *loving* it: *indoors* vs. *outdoors*. Here the wulfworks grows mold without *knowing* it, the wulfworks' vast shrewd shadow without *loving* it: *indoors* vs. *outdoors*. You have been working on poles, seats and a bull chariot, while I have been working on steam boilers and a dog wagon. Yet neither of us has a dollar. We are not, then, so very different, indeed possibly so similar my wife is living with you under the illusion that she's home with her lawful husband. What illusion can explain your own behavior? Do not say we are so similar you believe yourself to be Alexander, for I am he and cannot believe it myself.

Every day, terrified I am late, I leave my plastic shed with such extraordinary force I melt the frankly meager lip of the miniature vase, nice because purposeless, that hangs outside my door. The vase is replaced nightly—or its lip fixed?—by bosses unknown to me. Why not fix the sag in my mattress?? Every day, I leave my plastic shed with extraordinary force and race to the wulfworks against a salt bog breeze; it moves my shortclothes.

Couldn't launch imaginary products on my pony, sold it. A distinctive smell clung to me for days afterward; I bottled it as SOLD PONY, without success.

Two anticlimaxes.

Early morning
minutes mumbling
stale black bread
on Unflower Place.

Early morning
minutes mumbling
stale black bread
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minutes mumbling
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Early morning
minutes mumbling
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on Unflower Place.

[...]

The way I'd imagined it, other people would simply know, in Midge-Place Market see me and nod their lettuces grudgingly in assent, point me out, whispering—*the creature with a place in another's head*. No. However, one stramineous foamer, hoping my ashen star would rub off in the form of a dollar, soft-soaped me into a tent (which had lost its gay stripes) where the holo "*Introducing Moly*" played on a loop. I didn't linger. At home in my shed I hummed briefly to persuade the King's idiot sensors I wasn't sad. Then I lay down, stirring a rat which, escaping across my cot, tripped over my feet and went tumbling right to the edge. When it came to a stop the rat looked over its shoulder, just as a human would have done. But with this difference: the rat sought only to avoid attack, whereas a human would also have made ready to evade or address mockery. I mocked the rat. *Nobody thinks about you when you're gone*, I roared. My breath smelled like FINGER.

Somewhere I have a bag or box (but not a third thing) of family.

Argument. Shepherds and dogs and fat wormy flocks dwelt in that valley until the Fist visited and pounded them all into a gray liquor. Not a shared experience. Let's leave that for now. Take a mass of arguments, all more or less equally implausible, concerning an (illicit but who cares?) *Ethyl Crouton* simulacrum. Cram them together in a memory-cell whose mucousy walls and one frightening blackened window force them to huddle at the center under the shitty chandelier. I'd hope—and I hope you'd hope—that a single argument of supra-human cogency, defending said simulacrum, might spontaneously emerge from the scrum! For instance———*It used up stuff around the house.* And I'd hope—and I hope you'd hope—that your final diary entry didn't lie: *By late afternoon the memory-cell had disintegrated, spewing its contents. I couldn't think for the maze. I could, just barely, imagine lamplit shallows possessed of a peculiar length.*

A Kind of Filth. Long ago the former tenants, hobbyists, had buried seven Still Born!® infants near the well's source, embittering the naiad and giving the water a taste of green fruit. *Thus the Still Born!® infants had work.* Every year on her birthday, Jane Doe, having drunk her fill, considered these Still Born!® infants and the burial policy which dictated they take up their places in the world *as if the world actually had been given them.* This year she was able so fully to imagine the Still Born!® infants' mute disagreement with the policy as to conduct it "whole" into our sphere, where, for a minute, that unnaturally natural silence rid the air over her Garden Scrap® of the nearby wulfworks' incessant grinding din. Trying to think like an inventrix before the silence dissipated (or before the birthday juice wore off?) Jane wondered how she could go away and be sure to leave behind, not only people, but all these little never-people too,—finally, finally *enjoy* a solitary late dinner of sealegs. Obviously she must get *more* lost. How? Abandoning her brain seemed like a good idea, but when she pictured the forlorn organ staining her pillow—no longer able to water its "twin", the fern—the shed cold and empty, the cold emptiness a kind of filth—she knew she could never do it without a can of human heat. You know how expensive those are. Good luck, Jane!

Once-powerful W Dit shipping interests reduced to a handful of sullen families pleading with water-bugs *still somehow* left a mark on our calendar . . . and so today we list right. *We list right.* Not the hobby for a ham! After my bereavement I endured attempts to comfort me. A pie-seller plied his trade on a square all the holos claimed was spacious, chestnut-fringed, finer at night. But it was another tiny aluminum desert plot. In the midst of life this pie-seller stabbed his finger into pie after pie after pie, always drowning the hole with gravy. His finger, it got so sore with stabbing crusts he discovered a new product. You've already guessed that these bandages—his cheapest wares—formed my sad supper sometimes for weeks on end. No way I haven't been paying my way. I've been pursuing a fly; now it's clinging to a wall behind some gey. The fly's plainly weary but I'm *just that little bit wearier*. For the soft spot on its head I have a soft spot. With that spot secured as my capital a series of miracles will commence. The first, nobody will have attempted to comfort me. Subsequent miracles will address the state of the drains, the desuetude into which the general purse has fallen, the desires of the ugly. *Notice even the fly lists right.* When I'm King a stand of consumptive saplings will crown a hill, their leaves too bright.

[...]

Three Ponies. An excellent pony. An unimportant pony. An excellent but unimportant pony.

All night I'd had the feeling I was being watched. To discandy myself of that cloying regard, I coated myself with a thin, expensive layer of medicine. Expensive to me! While I waited self-consciously for the medicine to take effect, I listened to—couldn't avoid hearing—the Totality flanges booming outside. I imagined this directive, on its way to my ears, shredding our white sun's crummy light: *Rain for supper; ready your cups. Rain for supper; ready your cups.* My attention elsewhere, it took a while for the dismay to arrive. Rain. That meant no big shapeless odors, drifting like dumb gods . . . I wasn't hungry for anything but the poor intimations of another world those odors sometimes vouchsafed me. What is a cup? Here I am, a kind of Johnson, my blue paint long since beaten away by rain save for a bubbled line just beneath the eaves.

So cunning, the teaser holo—*Pretense of Candor*—that sold us Colwynox. *A billion desolate sheds divide windfall “apples”; it’s impossible to tell what the black objects are at treetop, knobs mutant in the grain or the late, misplaced fruit known as “family parts”; New Citizens often feel they are little more than “remains in motion”; drying one’s tot into a raisin to save money is, ironically, cost-prohibitive . . .* All, of course, true as claimed. On what subjects then have I learned *Pretense of Candor* was silent? A teaser: No matter the world, ruin & exaltation lunge to share a hinge, and the hinge shrieks: *Stop lunging at me!*

Another thing. My W Dit envoy promised me a bucket “*like a basket’s dark nostril.*” That sounded fine, very fine, as a nostril is never empty . . .

The Lung of Midge-Place. Spread out before me across six old seaman's chests is certainly the only map of Midge-Place ever drawn. Resembling nothing so much as a blizzard of fingerprints depicted without the expected organizing license, it cannot ever have been of real use, I think, save perhaps to its maker while he made it, as a distraction from the fears and care it might sentimentally be said more truly to map. Clear amidst the haze of curls, however, squirm the long wide main thoroughfare, Coolant Way, colored a hilarious robin's egg blue, and, flatly colored brown [*a clew*], the Lung of Midge-Place, a park so-called for the function it was believed to serve as an open space occasionally green. Here is a translucent pink fox balding on the run, about to *pass*, seemingly, a blotch that could be a hare. I have chosen to believe (despite knowing that I am being made to think it) that the fox's last meagre meal consisted of the illustrated F page out of a foamer's angrily discarded alphabet book [*F is for . . . foamer?*]. Its ribcage is a clutch of sickle-moons bent around gloom where a tired bag hangs, its tail disrobing thistle. Silver beads of swamp-fog, full and fat astride that corse, jiggle (those wavy lines) on the fox's archipelago of fur as it runs, their integrity a wonder in this place of divided loyalties and crumbling kinds.

Another captain, trembling in a sunless doorway, let me by as too puny to press. And indeed I had been subsisting on mopwater for years. O but why did he have to murmur *I need help??* Stop lunging at me! The tenderness which moments later compelled me to cry out frightened both of us: *How many rocks, spears, arrows, bolts, balls, bullets, energy—plasma or laser—good fighting men have wasted on the mere airy shapes of men!—how much fear!—some learning what they should not, not without a real foe, Sir—that they were cowards. In my dream I saved other soldiers from such ignominy. My invention knew ghost from man, at once and at a distance. Even—in my dream—in a dream.*

My clothes relaxed sooner than the chicken's wintry bones. Nearby in a bowl of dead wine a bumblebee's gummy wings and thoroughly empurpled body evinced a struggle to regain the sky—where, just then, whipped back and forth by an invisible assailant, an albino wren spat and shit and couldn't worry. I remember thinking that while shaken thus its eyes, points of pink light visible for miles, could not be steered by. *Fine, that's what I'll do.* I set a new course, another, another, another, another, another, another. Some small creature in the brush called out my name.

[...]

Mark Johnson is the author of *Can of Human Heat*, *After Such Knowledge Park*, *How to Flit*, and *Treatise on Luck*, as well as a variety of chapbooks and shorter works: *Three Bad Wishes* (Meow Press, 1995), *Exactly Zero* (Steel Bridge Publishing, 2011), *Penniless Greenery* (Editions Plane, 2012), *Everything Isn't* (Hidden Press, 2012), *Dream of a Like Place* (Sus Press, 2013), *rFul* (Hiding Press, 2013), *GRUON BS* (Make Now Books, 2014), and *Yellow Highlighter* (Troll Thread, 2015). He has documented aspects of his worldbuilding practice in *Plastic Shed*, a 2016 Present Tense Pamphlet, and in "The Truth and Life of Lies," presented in 2014 at Penn's Poetry & Poetics Reading Group. He has also published under the pseudonym Oren Mabb.

Johnson attended high school in Albuquerque and then worked intermittently at an Alaskan cannery before learning the ropes of the book trade at Endicott Booksellers on the Upper West Side and Powell's Books in Oregon. He later studied linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania. He currently lives in Philadelphia, where he is an independent bookseller dealing in rare records and antiquarian books, and where he performs as DJ Hiding Place. Some of his mixes have been published by Gauss PDF and include extensive fake liner notes that very few people have noticed exist.