

streetcake

issue 50

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jeff bagato

The Light becomes the Tunnel

The microphone is dead,
but the projector
shines on,
screening images:

a hamburger dancing
in meat joy,
the hot dog waltz
& the meatloaf
mambo

A film about imperialism
or death
or both

Where a hero like
Bond James Bond
morphs a hubcap
into a semiautomatic
that also shoots cigarettes
& potato chips

This Swedish actress
lifts her mink &
keeps munching
on the big screen

Her teeth become tombstones
covered in plaque;
wind whips
her hair up into a flame
dancing on her skull
in a jitterbug
of just pure
wheeeee!

Bond's hubcap

becomes a condom,
next a skillet, a mop, a shovel,
a laughing,
teasing pop can full
of what's real,

& on screen
that *real* cuts
thru the mountain,
but you can't see
the end

Something Changed

That day
When something changed.

The way you looked, suddenly,
A sad man, repulsed.

Turned like a black sheep.
Psycho.

Your smell,
I flinched at it.

My Love
You make me weak.

We didn't know what to do
What to do, what to do.

O God, I remember
Standing in the rain,

The water cold and wet,
And starting to run

It is hard waiting for you to get better
You sit lost and alone as a little boat

The last one,
Drifting out to sea.

You, a dark thing from the underworld.
Slack jaw.

That day
When something changed.

We watch you
Slowly turn around.

Sectioned

Yes.

Didn't think we'd met.

You know

Once I kind of quite liked you.

You know,

You know.

Think it showed.

We listen to the rain drumming on the roof

As the sky grows dark,

Before the ghosts come again

And wait at the end of the long corridor.

The hospital nurses are dressed as dolls.

Years later

I meet them all on some lonely road

In fog. A dead end.

The girl on the telephone says she is

My Father not my Mother

Will it get better

When I am older?

I lick orange lollies on wooden sticks.

Walking askew.

Walking the walls.

Not so innocent now.

I sleep with my friend,

Waking to horrify

And die again.

I walk through the ward dead.

I feel you next to me

To make me complete.

I know you, I'm not letting you go.

I scream in the bath.

A woman in an ambulance

Bleeds in my bed.

I am beautiful and insane.

There is no way out, no way out.

You know
Once I kind of quite liked you.
You know,
You know.

Think it showed.

One word story

Summer.

Endnote.

For as long as I've been able to write, I've wanted to be a part of the avant garde. That is to say, to write something transgressive, to put words before people that might change the way they read. The alternative – trudging down the middle-of-the-road – has never really appealed. Imagine my delight then, when – having published much work consisting of what might be described as a traditional narrative – I stumbled on the idea of a one word story. Here, surely, was my opportunity.

The idea certainly seemed to be sound. After all, despite its many digressions there is a dominant narrative running through the avant garde. This begins with William James and his stream of consciousness, or with Freud's influence on Schonberg, or with Duchamp and his *Fountain* and his readymades; it passes through the death of the author and doubtless a lot of other French stuff, it passes through Fluxus. It's a reductive narrative. It's about the democratic, anti-elitist and relativist transformation of our art: it has come to mean that anything can be art, that all art is of equal value and that there's no such thing as an Artist. And the one-word story provides a logical end point to this narrative.

Not convinced? Please let me explain. Every story begins with a prompt. A stimulus. Something that triggers a cognitive or cognitive/emotional response in the reader. This usually takes the form of a word or a sequence of words – a sentence, perhaps – and it is usually followed by more of the same. But this approach is symptomatic of an author's desire to influence the character of the reader's response. What the one word story does is remove any such authorial manipulation. It triggers a response in the reader and then leaves him free to explore a fiction – a democratic, anti-elitist and culturally relative fiction – of his own making.

When I sat down to write the one word story however, I realised it might not be as simple as this. The first word I used for the text was 'Love.' It was, I thought, a good word to use. It triggered in me a cognitive/emotional response. It took me into my imagination. But once there, I wasn't set free so much as stranded. Reading 'Love' as a 'One word story', all I could think of was a poster of some pine trees on a sunny day, a bird of prey soaring over snow-capped mountains. Pan pipes, Canada, that sort of thing. This would never do. So I thought again. Next I considered 'Calculating'. Perfect, I thought. In my mind's eye I saw an accountant, eyes down, grey or malevolent, or both. I imagined scheming, Machiavelli, the Borgias, almost certainly sexual intrigue. But I gradually realised it still wasn't right. It was too particular a prompt. It smacked too much of authorial manipulation (not least because of its otherwise pleasing meta-fictional resonance) and I needed something less prescriptive. Eventually I settled on Summer. This was a choice inspired by Jonathan Richman's *That Summer Feeling*, a song I was listening to at the time and which captured the eminently suitable cognitive/emotional generosity of the word. It seemed I had my story.

And yet, and yet. Something was still amiss. Fundamentally so. For the one word story to work in the way I had first imagined, any word would have to do, and it clearly wouldn't. Because a word is not just a word. Or at least it is not a neutral unit of meaning. Every word is loaded, with cultural associations, with subtexts, personal or otherwise. And these were influencing my choice of text.

Now sure, it was possible, in writing the one word story, to avoid making a decision. I could have gone down the old Dada route. Picked the word at random, by sticking a pin, blindfolded, into a dictionary. I could have designed an online word generator, and gone with its suggestion. But words would be missing. Excluded from the process. Old words, slang words, made-up words. And there's nothing very democratic about that. Besides. It wasn't just about the substance of the text. I had to think about its presentation too. Should the title be '*One word story*'? Or just '*Story*'? Did either compromise the conceptual integrity of the project (whatever that might have been) turning it, in effect, into a two word or four word story? Should I italicise the title? The text? Centralise it? Use a full stop or two? An ellipsis?

It was no good. I was stuck. In considering these questions, it became obvious that no art can be produced without making judgement calls about different combinations of cognitive/cognitive emotional stimuli. The sort of judgement calls that are made by – yes, you guessed it – an ‘artist’. Perhaps more pertinently, while anything can be art, some things undoubtedly make better art than others. In writing a one word story then, I wasn’t contributing to the avant garde; rather I was undermining its fundamental precepts, even as I continued to trudge down the middle of the road...

buffalo bones

an unsmoked cigarette
burns for thirteen minutes
without a drag,
and since you're all grown up now
there must be a wedding day.
the town will throw you a parade,
rope off the streets where tanks
have rolled
and armies marched
and teenagers did *the honey pokey*.
they'll re-introduce you to the
man who baptized you,
he says the "our father" often
but he doesn't
look familiar

the blimp banner clocks the national debt
but nothing about all the i.o.u.'s
for last months rent,
or how fast cigarettes burn
as you sit around counting hours.
an arc of time is never real until
your lover pulls the joker,
you're all in, full ante,
and one hand later
the game is over.
you knew it then.
they lied to you but that's ok.
it just hurts real bad
when the rules change
and your professors
still want the homework.
it's never christmas anymore
just exit polls and prom kings

pull out the old box of maps
from under your bed.
you get your revolver loaded and pick a direction,
a spot on the map you've never been before.
hitchhike to the dakotas
where the weather's colder.
where strangers with no faces
stand over your shoulders
counting pages in your notebook.
the wolves run free,
no swings in the park.
maybe the buffalo jumped the cliff for fun,

left their bleached white skulls in the pits
looking up.
they're hidden until the thaw.
that's when you'll find them grinning
with the spring bloom.
don't worry,
eventually we all shiver in the sun

donny marchand

Absurdity Rules (extract)

“Emergency Services. Your estimated wasted time is eighty-two minutes and thirty-three seconds. You are number eight hundred and forty one in the queue. Your call is important to us, please continue to hold...”

Recorded music begins to play. Sometime later a recorded voice interrupts... “You are now number two hundred and seventy-three in the queue, please continue to hold...”

Recorded music begins to play again. More waiting, and then a recorded voice enters once more... “You are now number thirty- seven in the queue, please continue to hold... your estimated wasted time is thirty-six minutes and ten seconds. Your call is important to us, please continue to hold...”

Yet again recorded music begins to play. Then suddenly out of the blue a real live person starts to speak.

“Emergency Services, please state your problem.”

“Someone is in my house, stealing my valuables”

“Do you need the fire department, police, or the ambulance service? Anything else and you will have to call the trivial complaints department. Their number can be found in the telephone directory. I’m very busy so please get on with it, what’s wrong?”

“I’ve already told you, I’m being burgled!”

“At this very moment?”

“Yes!”

“And what is your name sir?”

“Mister Fruztraited.”

“Are you married?”

“What’s that got to do with it?”

“I need all of the relevant information before I can catalogue and list a formal complaint.”

“I don’t see the relevance, but yes I’m married.”

“Do you have any children?”

“For heaven’s sake, yes two.”

“And are they boys or girls?”

“Both!”

“So, you have two trans-sexual children, is that correct?”

“No, I have one boy and one girl. One of each, do you get it now!”

“I think so, but it would help if you spoke more clearly.”

“For crying out loud, when are you going to ask me about the burglary?”

“I’ll be getting to that soon sir. Please try and be a little patient.”

“A little, don’t you mean enormously?”

“We do have to follow the correct procedures, and make sure that everything is properly processed according to the rules.”

Rules, what are you talking about? I’m trying to report a crime, and all your concerned about is some dumb rules. Are you insane?”

“Now sir, there’s no need for that attitude.”

“There certainly is a need, more than you seem to realise.”

“Tell me Mister Fruztraited, do you know the burglars name?”

“That’s absurd, of course I don’t.”

“That’s a shame cause it would have made things much easier for the police to catch him.”

“These days, I’m not so sure about that.”

“Right, let’s get back to the questionnaire, do you smoke?”

“Does that make a difference?”

“Oh indeed, very much so. We don’t help people who smoke.”

“Why not?”

“Because smokers attract burglars, and all other sorts of bad people. So it’s their own fault, and we don’t help people who, ask for trouble, like smokers.”

“For God’s sake! No I don’t smoke okay?”

“Good, what about drinking?”

“Do you mean alcoholic drinks?”

“Yes, but we do allow two and five-eighths of units per week, do you fit into that category?”

“I’m not sure. Tell me how much is a unit?”

“I haven’t the foggiest.”

“Well, I do have a glass of beer about once a month.”

“That doesn’t sound like a large amount, so I’ll put you down as acceptable.”

“Fabulous, now can you please send the police around?”

“For what?”

“The burglary!”

“Oh yes, let’s see now where was I?” Oh yeah I remember now, what is your address?”

“Fifty-two and a half Peaceful Place.”

“Oh I’m sorry, we’re only doing even number houses this year.”

“But fifty-two is an even number.”

“Yes, but fifty-two and a half isn’t, it’s odd. Try calling me next year, maybe we’ll be doing odd numbers then.”

“This is all a joke right. You’re pulling my leg, aren’t you?”

“I would never do that! Pulling your leg would be considered sexual harassment.”

“Oh please, Lord save me.”

“You can beg all you want, but I won’t pull your leg. Do you want me to get into trouble, and lose my job?”

“That’s not a bad idea!”

“Hey I just realized something that can help you. Why I didn’t think of it before, I’ll never know.”

“We’ll let’s hear this brainstorm then, I’m sure it’s a real gem!”

“Right, if you stay on the line till next year I’ll come back to you then. And if you report today’s burglary to me at that time, I can treat it as a historical crime, and that will allow me to send the police around to you right away. How does that sound?”

Click!

“Hello, Hello.”

wayne russell

forever

she made an cameo in my dream last night
forlorn out beneath the cold florescent stars
the paper work was placed down upon her
large oak office desk by the type writer
where she toiled away day after day
she looked at me
yet right through me
just for a moment
then she faded
i departed the office
and her life again
forever?