

HUMAN INTEREST

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Black
Lawrence
Press

To Patrick, Michael, Anthony, James, and Irving

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The scorched town—broken columns and, dug into the earth, the hooks of the little malevolent fingers of old women—seemed to me raised aloft in the air, as snug and chimerical as a dream. The crude brightness of the moon flowed down on it with inexhaustible force. The damp mold of the ruins flowered like the marble of opera seats. And I waited, disturbed in spirit, for Romeo to appear from the clouds, a satin-clad Romeo singing of love, while a dismal electrician in the wings keeps a finger on the moon-extinguisher.

—Isaac Babel, “Italian Sunshine,” trans. Walter Morison

TICKETS TO THE
GREATEST SHOW ON EARTH

Ka-Boom

I have a post card of a circus midget
with a flap in his corseted costume,
and inside is a little white dog
on a makeshift shelf, hiding
the way some say there is a god
in each of us, whatever that means
since what I hide is straight up sick,
so I half imagine this dog has his own door
and inside is an apple with a fly
sucking on the rind, and that fly has a door,
so you see how it goes, an endless
maze of chambers and alcoves
like the S&M club whatshername
dragged me to one night
when we were so young
we thought we were brave.
The Bowery, as it was then called,
a steep, dark descent of steps
to a red-lit bar and a vampire bartendress
who pointed to a man in a harness
licking the boot of a woman, dog-collared,
and further, a giant black cage
for a dangerous bird, but inside
a man bound from head to foot
in leather, gagged and drooling
and reaching through the bars
for me to release him, I mean
to release me from what secrets
and lies I tell the people I trust
never to lie to me, compulsions, obsessions,
perversions, all that pent up inertia
erupting in a cataclysmic cloud
like the great and silent force above Hiroshima.

Rodeo Good Stuff

I'm following a truck with a gun rack
and the bumper sticker reads, *Take the Migrant
Out of Immigrant*, and I think
I'm an immigrant. I think
of the time José forgot Shangxin's name
and called him foreigner,
and I said, I'm a foreigner
then laughed on the inside, but José
laughed out loud *bababa*
because he thought
I was in on his joke. Once,
a young woman on a bus
shot up the aisle
to get a better look at my face
before asking, What ethnicity are you?
But as I told her, I said
on the inside, I'm American.
I run red lights, tail old ladies,
honk at texters while texting.
I have four American flags on the roof of my car.
How many do you have?

Halloween Burlesque

The first guest at our costume party was Hitler
on the arm of an Auschwitz prisoner,
her Twitter handle in place of a prison tattoo.

Then came Kim Phuc, the napalm girl,
in a wet, white t-shirt on which she wrote *Hot Bod*.
But we knew we had something

when the Statue of Liberty showed up
with a red Deported stamp on her forehead
since she never officially made it to shore,

followed by an executive order
that claimed on the inside
he'd known since birth he was always a bill.

What's funny about satire?
I asked Lenny Bruce
after he'd tightened his tourniquet. And he said,

How else to make sense
of the senselessness we can't take?
Okay, Rumi, I said, is it satire

if Michael Phelps swims away from shore
faster than his world record
but still drowns in a tsunami?

It is, said Lenny, if that Indonesian tidal wave
crashed Hollywood parties
so press-starved celebrities

would have to host countless galas
to raise enough money for the American Red Cross.
As for me, I went as an American Airlines stewardess,

a sliver of lip liner where the throat had been slashed,
then convinced Patrick to go as a postal worker
so he, like Santa showering guests with gifts,

could hand out envelopes with white baking powder
that sprayed from their torn seals.
What surprised everyone was Cheryl,

the toppled Saddam Hussein statue,
who turned out to be strangely less funny
than the wheelchair-bound legless private,

who wouldn't let anyone else
roll him from the drinks to the hors d'oeuvres,
and no matter how drunk he got

wouldn't reveal where he hid his real legs.

The Biggest Baby Ever

...with a baby's cry that sounds more like a lion's roar.
—Daily News Writer

America, you big baby, hurray
for being the least-loved celebrity
on channels you can't pronounce
in places you won't dare go, famous
for being the freakishly loud
yet none the more valid
pronouncement of you.
Your terrible cry induces
instant lactation from nipples
that shouldn't leak milk
as you pound your terrible fists
on this round little rock
while we look around, being like,
Do we just shake the baby, or
do we pacify it with tax breaks
for either the middle or upper
voting class depending on
the trickle up or down theory?
There, there. Never mind
those killed to birth you,
or that there's no breast
large enough to feed you. Tomorrow
you may lose what cuteness
attracts others to you, or
at this rate you may be undone
by your own hand, and that
would be very un-American of you.
But that's not today, this very moment,

which is the only moment we love,
since nothing has happened
so anything can.
Are you ready—
We've baked a cake and lit the candles,
and those without allegiance
to the bipartisan effort of the baking
or the candle-lighting group
have smuggled in a pop star
to sing Happy Birthday
to us, I mean you.

Cheese

You're in a bar, a bandstand, a barbeque,
with forty of your new best friends,
your first love, your next lay,
and someone with a camera says, *Cheese!*
so you slide cheek to cheek,
flash a peace sign, a gang sign, the middle finger,
and pucker in a posed posture that says,
I'm with you, but it's all me, baby,
the irresponsible babysitter, the pregnant grandmother,
the felon, the pervert, the hot mess
in the reality show I film
in a desperate darkroom of the mind
where I'm the director, stage hand, makeup artist,
who will one day, at the right angle, with the right lighting,
get my big chance, my lucky break, and then
bugles will sound and cannons will fire
as the largest volcano on earth will erupt
to cover the land with new land,
and that land will sprout a forest
in the shape of my name, teacups
will find their saucers,
pen caps will find their pens, and at dusk
a swarm of starlings will sweep and swoop through the sky
in the shape of my name, and my darlings,
I'll be the first to tell you
that when I make my big splash
I will never die.
I've bleached my teeth, sprayed my tan,
extended my hair and lashes
since anybody can be a superstar
and I'm so anybody I know it's me.

My mom, my kids, my husband
insist I'm special, a winner.
I just need to prove it
to one more, one more, one more.

The Price is Right

When Drew sweeps his hand across the Price is Right stage
toward the shimmering panels that reveal
what the announcer confirms is *A new car!*,
Drew knows the contestant opening her mouth
to let rip one distressingly loud yowl
even Drew must step back to give it room
to expand and time to release screams
not in joy, for joy has the ease of an exhale,
but this, motivated more by hysterical adrenalin,
is panic. And Drew, too, knows
from her fidgets and shakes, her maniacal
hopping from foot to foot,
that what he's looking at
is her fear of that panic. And when
the contestant recedes farther inward,
forgetting the date and year, her name
and age, unresponsive to Drew's cues
coaxing her to get a move on
stage right or stage left, only to
raise her hands to her face to salvage
whatever smidgen of pride she has left,
Drew sees there her shame of that fear.
Because what's really at stake
for these folks, folks like Drew once was,
dishwasherless folks and jet skiless folks,
is not the chance to spin the ticker-tape wheel
or land a spot in the Showcase Showdown
—among the unapologetically American
glitter and glitz of winning and losing,
girls in high heels, Drew's own bleached teeth,
and an endless electronic dinging of bells,

what's at stake is this exact part,
this grotesque public display,
an aimless, endless expression,
half dance and half flail of gratitude
for the luck they knew they always deserved,
and at the same time, an admission
of how pathetic and desperately ordinary
that luck really is, is, for the folks watching
at home, the real show—a true spectacle.
Drew knows this. He knows it so well
he pinches his mic even tighter to quell
what I can imagine must be a disgust
muddied by pity—a rancid combination
of arrogance and self-hate at the knowledge
that, let's face it, each contestant year after year
will go home to record the show when it airs
so later on birthdays and holidays
each can narrate to family and friends
how I jumped from my seat when I heard
my name, and here I come down the aisle
waving my hands, and there, that's the bar set
we could have had, and wait, here's where
I guess the wrong price, and here's where
I'm bawling as I can't find my way offstage.

The Real Millionaires of Kardashian County

When the Kardashians talk
at once at each other, I hear an aria

to the first-person pronoun, an icon
as sleek as the four-inch stilettos

girls wear to class where I teach, teetering
like skyscrapers in high wind. But hey,

when I cheated on my ex with his ex,
I, too, thought I deserved

an access to rival my actions
so I traded my wedding ring

with diamonds the size of salt crystals
for a ring with diamonds the size of capers

that glisten like a fountain in a desert
in the town where I live

that shoots ninety feet in the air
each hour for ten minutes straight, the geyser

a man-made mirage of potency
in a parched landscape of strip malls,

asphalt and extended cab pickups
with wrap around decals of the American flag

driven by cowgals with French tip full sets
who pump through subwoofers an operatic gluttony

so loud the raised veins on the blue rubber testicles
hung from the hitch of her 4 x 4

pound with such pent-up, patriotic arousal
even my blood runs red, white, and blue.