

THREE SHORTS

Peter Orner

Seep

She grew up in an old whitewashed house, a boxy Greek Revival, in Rhinebeck, New York, that had once been a stop on the underground railroad, and when she was a girl she'd go down in the basement with a flashlight and hide in one of the secret compartments behind the furnace. She'd go barefoot and bring a thin blanket and huddle in the darkness and imagine she was a runaway slave girl named Cecelia Martwell. She used to turn the flashlight off and promise herself that for an hour she wouldn't sleep, but instead would stay alert for sounds, either of the bustle of preparation for another leg of the journey to Canada, or the gushing blood shouts of discovery and capture. In the darkness she'd stare and stare and stare until her eyes adjusted to the dark and she could see pins of lights from the dingy laundry room window through the tiny airholes drilled into the door of the hiding place. And she'd imagine that's what Cecelia saw during those long silent hours of waiting for news of continued life or maybe death.

A few years later she brought boys from the neighborhood down there to test them. How long could they stay crammed with their chins in their knees? Test your mettle if you've got any, she'd say, and push them in and shut the door and lean her bony shoulders against the wood. It's 1857 and Kansas is bleeding and if you say a word the marshals will hear you and you'll be dead man. And then she'd count out loud, quietly. Most boys would whimper after a minute and knock that they wanted out in three. But there was one boy, Byron Nadeau, who could out-last even her Cecelia. Byron Nadeau who would sometimes come over, bowl-haircutted, looking at his feet, letting his tangle of hair stay in his eyes as he spoke, whispered really, and ask if he could go down in the old slave place. And she'd take him down there and not count out loud, but still she'd stand in front of the door and listen to his wheezy breathing. Bryon Nadeau could stay in the compartment for hours without saying a word. He

was two years younger and very small, one of the smallest boys in school, but his brain was huge. Everybody knew that; all you had to do was look at Byron Nadeau's head because it was enormous, bigger than his legs put together. And though she never really talked to him in school, she sometimes spoke to him when he sat in the compartment.

"What do you see?" she once asked.

And he said, "Colors. I close my eyes and I see different colors than the ones we know. Like grik and seep and teffa. Also nupper and lork. They're, you know, not part of the spectrum, but when I'm in here I see them."

"Byron, it's a place where slaves hid. You're supposed to think about history. The Civil War. Human beings getting whipped, bleeding, auctioned. . . "

"You asked."

She told him to describe seep and he said, "At first you think it's green, but when you look harder you see it's not. That it's lighter. Violet, but not violet. Like the color you see when you've closed your eyes for a while and then you look at the sun. Like a black sort of violet. You know what I mean?"

She made him switch places so she could see. She sat in the dark for five minutes and listened to the tap of Byron's foot. "OK. I see teffa. Is it sort of light and blurry?"

"Like looking through plastic."

"Yeah."

"You got it then."

"But I don't see seep."

"What about lork? You see lork?"

"Lork's easy. A lot like blue except that it's on fire."

"Nope. That's cowzert. And don't worry about seep. It takes a while. I'd have to say seep's elusive, but everywhere too. Like what those smiling liars say on TV about God."

"Cowzert?"

He didn't answer and she waited awhile before she pushed open the door with her feet. Byron scooted out of the way and stood up.

"Byron?" He looked way from her. He still wore his furry hooded coat. The side of his face plump and soft in the dirty window light.

"Yeah."

"People say you're sick."

He turned and looked at her. "And that's why my head's so big."

"Are you sick sick?"

"A little, sometimes."

She told him he could come over anytime to see seep and the other colors she couldn't see, but he had to help her find them. "And you've got to stop pretending you invented the world."

"Will do," Byron said.

But it never happened. He had a disease in his bones. It had nothing to do with the size of his brain, people said. Incurable. Only a matter of time. She

never went to visit him in the hospital. He called once in September of seventh grade and his voice was scratchy and he didn't mention the basement, only told her that he hated the hospital and the TV was always on in the room across the hall and how this bugged him. She was standing in the kitchen in her soccer uniform and she wanted desperately to be kind to him, but he was speaking slowly, as though he expected to be on the phone a long time so she interrupted him. She said she would call him, and said she would visit and when she said it she meant it, but that's as far as it went.

By the summer before eighth grade, Bryon was dead. On that day (May nineteenth, 1979) she tried to go back down into the basement, to pay homage, to honor him, but she stopped short, not weeping, just quiet. In the dark half-way down the stairs. The old life or death quiet she used to scare the boys with.

Touch

And in lonelier hours, say now, on this quiet lake in northern Wisconsin, you remember riding your bike to Eddy's house, the rundown Shafner mansion on Lake Michigan. (Eddy lived there because his father mowed ball fields for the park district and they owned the land the house was on — this was before Eddy's father left Eddy's mother for the nurse and Eddy's mother moved the whole family to the cramped light blue house on Greenbay near Highwood.) So you were riding your bike across the little bridge over the ravine where you and Eddy and Marise and Chantal used to sled in the winters when out of nowhere two dirty-haired hippydippy assholes jumped out of the leaves under the bridge and grabbed hold of your banana seat and asked you where you thought you were going little fuck and you were too scared to just say you were going over to Eddy's. They said we're going to kill you little fuck and kept yanking you back and forth on your bike and you kept staring at them, dumb and shivering in June, and after a while, after they got bored of scaring the hell out of you, they let you go, and now you think of yourself, your chuble-headed self pedaling away so fast to freedom your right shoe fell off and you left it.

And the way that grand old paintless house looked like when you came out of the lip of the path and rode up the crumbly asphalt driveway and the way Eddy's grandmother, past eighty even then, looked like standing in that dark cavernous kitchen beside the long metal table Eddy said was for cutting up bodies in the old days when the insane Russian doctor lived there. She was tall standing there, taller than Eddy's father, and hadn't spoken a word of English in the nine years since she'd come from Haiti, but after you burst in the side porch door she walked over to you and knelt and said something in creole because she knew. She smelled your sweaty fear, saw the relief in your scuddy cheeks and red red eyes. *Par pur*, she said. *Par pur*. And she touched you. The only time Eddy's grandmother ever touched you, two long untrembling fingers on the

bottom of your chin before you ran, scrambled up the winding stairs with the hundred broken balusters, one shoed, two at a time, to tell Eddy and his gagging sisters about the two lunatics under the bridge — like a couple of trolls down there — waiting for anybody.

In the Cemetery on South Black Diamond Road, Wretham, Iowa

The cross broke off the top of your grave in the 1950s and your husband and his second wife and their two never named infant children lie on the other side of this green sun-soaked patch of weeds. The old German Joann Strickler your closest neighbor twenty feet away. This afternoon a freshly dead deer with bloody eyes lies curled in a ditch by the road.

*Bevins
Mary J.
Wife of Richard
b. co. Clare, Ire
d. Oct. 7, 1883
aged
19 years 4 m 22 days
may her soul rest in peace
amen*

But know this: the day you died Richard went back to his brother's fields and worked until they dragged him home. And he wouldn't go to the church for the funeral because he told anybody who would listen that he hated God and would break his neck if he saw him.

You could never have known he'd behave that way. He wasn't a man to put on a show about anything. But that's what people started saying. That his grief was too much. Unbecoming, they said. An embarrassment to the family. And the women standing outside Lillis's Store also murmured that there were certainly other women around. What about Thomas Maher's daughter Bridget? *Girl's sixteen now and at least got some meat on her bones.* Man has to buck up and move on, they whispered. But when they were alone in the wind with their sick babies, they cheered him. That man who loved so hard he couldn't stop working, knew no other way to endure sorrow other than keeping his red hands clenched and busy.

The cattle on the hillside low. A car whooshes by — a flash of moving white and it's gone. A hawk lands on the deer and flaps off. And you. This hazy green and pink five o'clock light. You here alone. Mary who they said was too feeble, who they said was too meek, who they said would never make it here and how right they were, how right. They hated you for your big eyes and the way you jumped on your toes when you walked. They hated that you sang to

yourself. The way you smiled for no reason, the way you licked your lips sometimes when you saw your husband coming up the road. *Yes licked like her husband was some food!*

And they clasped their hands together in Richard's brother's house full of mourners and sighed as if they were sorry for not being wrong, but down deep they were never sorry. They were pleased to know they were such good judges of the odds of surviving here. You didn't have it Mary — *laughing little barren thing how'd you think you'd make it?* — and everybody knew, including your Richard. Richard shouting Mary as they pried his hand away from the spade the afternoon you died, in that little bed, in the kitchen.