

The Sacred Cow

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Inaugural
Issue!

The Sacred Cow

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November 2012

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From the Editors

You are holding in your PDF reader the first issue of The Sacred Cow magazine. The name might suggest that our mission is to annoy people, poking holes in their cherished beliefs. That's partly true, but our main goal is to publish good writing. However, since good writing explores truth, we reserve the right to ignore and even tip over sacred cows, wherever they may get in the way.

You will notice that this issue carries no advertising. Is that because we are so independent and free-spirited that we refuse even the appearance of compromising our values by accepting money from corporate interests? No. We just don't have any advertisers yet.

We, the editors, also wrote pretty much all the content. Narcissistic? Maybe; but since this is the first issue we had to solicit all content and it was easier to just write it ourselves. We do, however, welcome submissions from established and famous writers. Or anyone. Writing an entire magazine is hard work.

As followers of Jesus, we do not aspire to be "Christian writers," cranking out inspirational religious material with companion travel mugs, but we are believers who write. For that reason, this magazine will reflect our values, whether pieces are religious in nature or not. We reserve the right to reject submissions we deem to be significantly out of step with our values, as any publisher would. We recognize we don't have a corner on the truth market, so we aren't going to be pricks about it. Good art is exploration, not

indoctrination.

As we noted before, The Sacred Cow is not a forum for religious writing, but writing in general. We'll take short stories, essays, novel excerpts, poems, book and movie reviews, and are willing to be convinced about other works. We can definitely use photographers and illustrators! So send us some good art at tscmagazine@gmail.com!

We hope you enjoy this inaugural issue of The Sacred Cow.

The Editors

Commentary

Real Change Does Not Come from the Top

By Andrew Sharp

We can all be thankful for one thing this November, and that is that the political season ended November 6. That means as a resident of Ohio, I will no longer be crushed under a mountain of campaign mail for several weeks at least.

We can all look back on a presidential campaign that dealt not with concrete and realistic proposals, but primarily with rancorous accusations and vague, brightly-colored promises that will never be fulfilled.

If only righting the world's wrongs were so easy that all we had to do was elect the right leaders and let them do all the hard work.

No, if you want to change the world, don't go into politics. Obama and Romney both suffered from an itch for power, which they scratched at the expense of dignified and brave leadership. Most politicians do this, dragging their feet until they see that everyone wants a certain social change, then rushing in to pompously announce that they've been in favor all along (see "American Civil Rights Movement").

It's instructive that when God wanted to change the world, he didn't get into politics. Instead, he lived everyday life as a poor peasant, a peasant who stood up for what was right even as it earned

him the hatred of the establishment. No power addict, he.

Other people who have brought about change did so at their great peril, willing to be front line troops rather than testing the political winds from back at headquarters. Martin Luther King, Jr. and his army of activists took arrest, beating, and some of them, bullets, to end the evil of segregation and institutional racism in the South. The presidents, safe in the oval office far behind the front lines, hunkered down until it was safe to come out.

A more modern example of courageous action is retired police investigator Zafar Ahmed Qureshi in Pakistan. Qureshi was featured in an National Public Radio story earlier this summer. In his four-decade career, he led corruption investigations that implicated people with powerful connections, leading to repeated suspensions. In one case, he was searching for contraband weapons and found a stash of weapons and 100 kilos of gold. Unfortunately, they were owned by a member of the National Assembly, so instead of a pat on the back he got a call from the interior minister, threatening him with banishment to a remote corner of the country. Not having learned his lesson, he went on to uncover a major real estate scandal involving government officials, and failed to keep that quiet either.

This kind of dangerous and career-dampening persistence is rare among human beings, who usually shrug and say something along the lines of “What can I do? I need this job.” (Or, “I spent a lot of money becoming president.”)

But as Qureshi demonstrates, changing things from the bottom up is hard and involves personal sacrifice. It’s not simply a matter of holding high personal standards. When I was in college, the popular T-shirt slogan for young idealists was a quote attributed to Gandhi: “Be the change you wish to see in the world.” That’s a little too easy to be true.

“Displayed brightly on the back of a Prius, it suggests that your responsibilities begin and end with your own behavior. It’s apolitical, and a little smug,” Brian Morton said in an insightful op-ed piece in the New York Times called “Falsar Words Were Never Spoken.” He examined this and other popular sayings for authenticity. Turns out this little cliché never came out of Gandhi’s mouth. Morton wrote,

Thoreau, Gandhi, Mandela — it’s easy to see why their words and ideas have been massaged into gauzy slogans. They were inspirational figures, dreamers of beautiful dreams. But what goes missing in the slogans is that they were also sober, steely men. Each of them knew that thoroughgoing change, whether personal or social, involves humility and sacrifice, and that the effort to change oneself or the world always exacts a price.

A price our politicians, and most of us, usually aren’t willing to pay. 

If only righting the world’s wrongs were so easy that all we had to do was elect the right leaders and let them do all the hard work.

On Smashing My First Idol

By Sarah Garber

We moved into our new house.
A puja room with
A shabby shrine and dusty Krishna playing his flute
Oversaw the common area.
I would have thrown him out, but he was not mine to toss.
We rented.

I was alone,
Sitting after breakfast amidst a
Clutter of orange peels and chai cups.
In the corner Krishna played his flute, the
Eerie melody of ages in my ear.
I did not relish that song, so I resolved
To stow away the musician.
Putting down my mug,
I marched into the dusky puja room
And throttled the frozen Krishna.
So light!
He was only painted plaster, brown and patchy.
As I lifted him up by his head, the body
Fell away to the concrete floor.
Shattered, fragments
Only plaster.



Damnatus: The Reverend

By Jason Ropp

This short story is one of a series set in the fictional town of Damnatus.



The midnight air was crisp. The fog wrapped around the tombstones, the outbuildings, the small gas lantern, and the lone figure in the cemetery. The fog, sensing something amiss, attempted to hold back each repetition of the earth-hungry knife. But the sweating figure was focused, maddened by what he had decided to do.

Disparate thoughts played olympic style ping-pong in his head. But whenever the ball came close to the net he felt sane again, if only for a second; it was at these moments that he had the short lived thought that this was neither of utmost importance nor entirely insane, that it was both understandable and silly. So it went like this for several hours...*Keep digging, I have to know! Yes he was a bit much. But this? Really? But no, you've gone crazy! They all know you're here. They've known you'd do it all along.*

A crowing rooster stopped both ping

pong players in their tracks. The ball hit the net and bounced on the floor, sounding increasingly like a machine gun as it lost the battle with gravity. His neurosis, terrified by the thought of daylight, left him alone to devote all his capacities to digging. He was supposed to be done and gone an hour ago, but he was not the man that he used to be and never the man that he should have been. Even in his days of dedicated exercise he somehow found himself the least athletic of all the athletic people. Had there been a row of grave diggers here now, they would have probably been done and gone an hour ago. Stop! Focus! Chunk, swoosh, thud. Chunk swoosh thud. KONK. The hollow thud reverberated though the fog chamber, but he didn't stop to see if anyone heard. He had noted with hope during the burial ceremony that while the Reverend was beloved, the local citizens were also cheap. As everyone knew, the casket and the man would slowly melt

into earth anyway; why spend \$3,000 dollars to delay the process? Even the mortician Davis advised against it, a kind gesture since he would benefit from its purchase. He fell to his knees, sinking below the grave's horizon. A weeping mixed with the sound of dirt being brushed from old wood, then a creaking sound, then silence. Terrified silence. His head popped from the grave with the intensity of a groundhog. The look on his face expressed what he said anyway; "I wasn't crazy after all." The courthouse bell called for the people of the town to come see the sight. They were not waking with the sunrise, so it called to them again, and again, and again, and again, and again.

Daryll, better known to the town as Barber Hopkins, didn't feel like hanging around. There was no guarantee that anyone would see things the way he did. So he ran, carrying with him a small envelope, not bothering to close the coffin lid. He just left it there ex-

posed to the world, bags of corn seed, three to be exact. Had Daryll taken the time to weigh it, he would have found the total weight of the coffin to be 162.5 lbs. Above the wound in the earth was a slightly mossed marble tombstone that read,

Rev Martin S. Thompson

Dec. 3, 1962 - Dec. 8, 2011

A man of heartfelt friendship and devotion to God, Family, and Faith. An example set for generations to come.

The Reverend drilled a hole through the laminated paper; perhaps he was digging for oil as his gaze was fixed on a spot in the pink expanse of Texas, the most isolated spot he could find on the map. It screamed at him. He lusted after it, then turned his eyes away.

One of the more portly elders, Mark,

The Reverend continued

was in mid diatribe when Thompson rejoined reality. The elder spoke with a bit of an obstruction in his throat, or rather outside his throat. Thompson could swear that at times he counted a third chin somewhere about half-way down the bullfrog-like bulge in the man's neck. It must have pressed against his Adam's apple, because he remembered Mark's voice sounding less like a muppet when they used to play together in the church yard on Sunday afternoons, or when they talked about which of the fifteen girls in their school they thought were cute, or even when they worked together at the factory before he left for seminary. The man's neck puffed in and out as he practically shouted, "It's just ridiculous! Who really would have the nerve to leave? You don't just leave family, right Martin?"

The question tied to his name made him blush. How did they find out? No Martin, they don't know. You haven't told anyone, you haven't written it down. He's just asking you a question, "Well it certainly did surprise me. He did buy a grave plot in the church yard a couple years ago." But he knew that didn't hold much significance. To raise funds for a decaying church building, plots were put on clearance. Practically everyone in the town bought one. Everyone but Melanie,

the outsider, the one who had run the factory ever since they were bought up by some company from the south a few years ago. Even some excited kids talked their parents into buying them a plot. Now in high school, groups of them liked to go hang out at their graves and drink. But he was



disarming like, "Derek! You act like it's the first time you've seen a buzzard sitting on a fencepost in Damnatu before." Derek would blush a little (like Martin had just done), then shift the conversation. Other times Martin saw Derek at the little travel agency, looking at brochures, and he would say something like, "Aren't thinking of leaving us for a while are you?" He would again turn red and stammer that he just liked looking at the pictures.

Martin snapped back to the meeting. He had been talking on auto-pilot for a while now, which wasn't uncommon. The Reverend was expected to have something to say, to be the figurehead of wisdom, the representation of the town's long-standing adages, idioms unique to Damnatu. Things like, "Going the path of a Melvin is sure to bring you the poverty of a Parker." Which was a saying that had picked up in the 20s referring both to the laziness of the Melvins, but also, consequently, to their treacherous driveways filled with potholes. The story goes that a patriarch of the Parker family had broken an ankle in one of those Melvin potholes just before harvest and almost lost his crop and entire farm to the bank as a result. The Parkers still lived in the shabbier part of town, and only

surprised that Derek had left, though it all made sense now.

Several times when Martin saw Derek at the post office, which sat on the edge of town, he caught Derek looking at the horizon like he looked at Jessica—that is, before Martin had married her. He would say something

recently had begun to exit their position as the living literal fulfillment of a proverb. The Melvins were still considered the laziest sons of bitches in the county, but were tolerated as they made everyone else feel better about their own work ethic. He visited from time to time, always reporting back to the Deacons what they hoped to hear, that he had informed them of their reputation and what the good Lord wished they were.

Martin faded back into conversation. Mark had apparently shifted the conversation to a group of old ladies who were complaining about new carpet in the church. It hadn't been walked on by their long dead grandparents and was therefore unacceptable. He was quiet for a moment, staring at pink laminated Texas wilderness. The thought of being somewhere else removed all repercussions of what he might say. Like a small gas flame it had slowly then suddenly worked him up to a boil. For the first time in thirty years of steady ministry, Martin him-

self, not the Reverend, spoke. "Well, I don't give a damn! Let 'em pick out the carpet, dig up their ancestors and roll 'em all over the thing if they want. I wouldn't consider myself a pauper if I never hear another thing about the church trimmings again in my life." By the time he realized what he was saying, it was too late. They just stared at him as if he'd pulled off his skin and stood before them with bulging alien eyes, casually informing them that he had in fact abducted Martin several months ago and had been exploring their culture in his place. For the first time he felt clearly that he would rather be on Mars without a suit than be in Damnatus at this moment, at least he wouldn't have to deal with the tapestry concerns of those wenches. No more would he have to see that bag on Mark's neck inflating and deflating and hear the croaking that followed. Then he thought of Derek looking at all those brochures. He saw him look off into the sunset, only this time the pastor went back and joined him in reverent silence, in awe of the free-

dom from the only world he had ever known. But he couldn't leave, they wouldn't understand, they'd track him down. If only he'd had Derek pretend to kidnap him. They could have left at the same time, but it was too late. But those thoughts of freedom fell like rain on his dry heart and brought to life a seed planted by his now dead wife Jessie, as well as the still living Melanie, the one who had given him a taste of the outside world.

The Reverend left that meeting with smiles and handshakes, ignoring the elephant that had entered the room by way of his sudden outburst. That was the last that anyone but Melanie, and of course the now slightly wealthier town mortician ever saw of the dear Reverend again.



The Perfect Church

By Jared Stutzman

The mid-morning sun was bright. As Brian shielded his eyes with his slim-line NIV and sauntered toward the square steel erection that housed The Family Worship and Fellowship Center, he wondered if it always shone brighter on Sundays, or if it just seemed like it. “Probably just seems like it,” he decided. “All the shiny cars in the parking lots reflect the light.”

He tugged cautiously at the untucked hem of his shirt as he passed through the conversational masses of humanity in the foyer and into the multi-purpose sanctuary. When left artistically unbuttoned at the top and carefully disheveled, his shirt revealed both his hemp necklace and an A & F emblem on the chest of the gray T-shirt beneath it—a nice, careless look, but the maintenance of it required his constant attention. Brian looked toward the stage. Corlin the worship leader was inspecting a microphone. His square-cut black spectacles and spiky black hair glinted in the stage spots, and his fair-trade organically-grown black Sumatra steeped in his black french press on the floor near his black Pumas. Corlin’s shirt was also black, but the non-distressed areas of his jeans were blue, as was the small Celtic cross tattoo on his right forearm. The tattoo peeked out from under his half-rolled long

sleeves like a badly-kept secret.

“Must not be a pledge Sunday,” Brian thought to himself. There was a pattern to Corlin’s sleeve-length. On pledge Sundays and for business meetings, Corlin’s sleeves were buttoned down tight with cuff links (and he also wore a tie). For ordinary Sunday morning worship (like today), his sleeves were discriminatingly tousled and half-rolled so that the Celtic cross barely peeked out. At youth meetings, he rolled his sleeves all the way up so that the barbed-wire inscribed on his bicep revealed itself salaciously while the Celtic cross was in full promenade.

Around the multi-purpose sanctuary’s six double-door entrances, families arrived as units. The units instantly dissolved as they entered the room, and the resulting swarm of individuals immediately regrouped into age-segregated clusters. Kid-clusters were gender-segregated as well, and adult-clusters seemed to share hair and clothing styles. Brian felt the magnetic pull of the “college and careers” cluster forming in the module of seats by the far western wall, and headed toward it.

The college and careers people always sat in the western seating section, which offered a side-view

of the stage. The youth group claimed the eastern section on the opposite side of the room, facing them. The stage jutted out between the two side seating sections into a sea of seats. Three center seating sections faced the stage and had a more direct view of the theater-sized twin projection screens, the plexiglass speaker’s podium, and the kaleidoscopic arrangement of guitars, amps, and drums in the worship team’s area. Retractable basketball hoops faced each other across the room—incongruous, perhaps, but Brian knew that FWFC had intentionally designed the building to maximize utility at minimum cost.

Brian caught a glimpse of Pastor Thom walking through the foyer and realized he was looking forward to the sermon—imagine that! He liked Pastor Thom. After 18 years in a church where the road to God was paved with King James English, fear and trembling, Just As I Am, and the Republican party, it was nice to be at a church where people were into Jesus, but still cool. FWFC people were with it. They were connected, in touch with the world around them. Identification with Providence Free Will Baptist Church had been a social liability in high school, but Pastor Thom was an asset, even in a college town. His conversational grasp of popu-



The Perfect Church continued

lar culture was nothing short of masterful, and everything about him—his talk, his clothes, his mannerisms, his looks—here was a guy who lived in the moment, who had earned the respect of...well, of people like Brian and the college and careers amalgamation. And their friends, of course. Especially the unchurched ones, and that was the whole, point, right? Pastor Thom was a rebel, just like them. He boldly challenged the conventions of pastoral behavior and carriage. He didn't rock the Che T-shirt and tattoo like Corlin on weekdays, but—you got the impression that he could have if he wanted to.

Coffee infused the air; doughnuts were ubiquitous. Brian disgustedly stomped his foot as he realized his tin coffee cup was at the bottom of the pile of dirty dishes on his apartment counter. About half of the members of the college and careers cluster sipped their beverages from cardboard cups; the other half drank from colorful, locally-crafted artisan pottery mugs. Brian would have to use a cardboard cup today—not that he really minded. The cardboard cups had been standard until Pastor Thom's environmental stewardship sermon series last year. The guilt induced by the pictorial display

of African famine (connected to the excesses of western culture) led most of the members of college and careers to a wholesale denouncement of disposable products, though there was some heated debate from a few climate-change deniers.

Brian had noticed that Pastor Thom didn't actually mention climate change at all in his sermon series, but that hardly seemed germane to the discussion. Brian himself was without much of an opinion. He had grown up hearing that all environmental concerns were a hoax concocted by the political left, but then, he had also grown up hearing that the King James Version was the only inspired version of the Bible. When he thought about the African children begging for water, he felt a little guilty, but not enough to spend forty bucks on a pottery mug. Hence the tin cup from his camping equipment—a way to show he wasn't heartless without really taking a side. Once he'd been seen with the mug a few Sunday mornings, it was sufficiently established that he was indeed a conscientious, concerned citizen. The furor over the issue subsided a few months after it began, and some of the pottery-mug types forgot their mugs periodically. It stopped mattering because no one had seen a picture of African children for months.

Brian snapped out of the pottery-mug drama that had been replaying in his head as he settled into his padded chair, tugging again at his shirt hem with one hand while he held his coffee in the cardboard cup with the other. Corlin was already beginning his pre-song spiritual banter over the background of a soft electric guitar. The bass drum thumped, the lights dimmed, and Corlin's voice dropped into a coarse vocal fry. The bedlam of conversation in the multi-purpose sanctuary dipped momentarily beneath Corlin's amplified voice, then surged back to a dull roar, then began to drop away again. The whine and hum of distorted guitars immediately flooded the aural gap left by the diminishing conversation. The decibel level in the room was a constant; the babbling cacophony decreased in inverse proportion to the band's volume.

Brian reflected briefly on the stiff, artificial quiet that preceded services during his childhood at Providence Free-Will Baptist Church—the request the song-leader would call with a plastered-on smile—“please turn to number 141 in the hymnal—number 141.” Brian was glad those days were behind him. This worship style really fit his personality. It wasn't exactly “emo” or “punk”—more indie/folk, but plugged-in and edgy. Definitely contemporary

The Perfect Church continued

and relevant—music for his generation, with hair and clothes to match.

The techies at the sound board spun their knobs, dimmed the lights, and worked their magic on the projection screens. Green meadows swam by; a human silhouette trudged up a hill. Suddenly, there were words. The youth group cheered as it recognized the song. Corlin approached the mic, hands churning on a plugged-in acoustic, black Pumas placed precisely side-by-side and touching, knees slightly bent and flexing to the beat, eyes closed behind the square-cut black frames, spiky hair cocked to one side and undulating hypnotically. Emotion and intensity pushed wordless feelings from deep within his being to the surface, where they forced their way unbidden to his lips, formed almost by accident into English verbiage matching that on the screen. His passion revealed itself in breathy tones; it rubbed his voice into a raw, edgy, clarity; it pulled and tugged at his melody, weighing down the beginnings and ends of his phrases and distorting his pronunciation into a quasi-Australian accent.

Brian knew Corlin's stage presence was a cultivated skill—a form of showmanship. But that didn't necessarily make it wrong, right? What was the alternative, creaky, old-fashioned hymn singing? Three-chord campfire Kumbayas by some kid who "learned" guitar over the summer? With 500 people in the room, some polish was a good thing, especially if it reached people—especially if the people it reached were unchurched.

It occurred to Brian as he tried to sing along that, after two and a half years, he was still trying to justify his presence at FWFC. It was as though a piece



of his brain was afraid that Providence Free Will Baptist might have been right all along—that God really did care about girls wearing culottes instead of pants, and that He really did frown at the very idea of movie theaters and eating out on Sunday, even though Brian knew better now. One of the best parts about moving away to college had been the chance to start fresh with church. Though he never rebelled outright against his parent's church while he had been in high school, he was glad of the opportunity to go to a more relevant, contemporary church. It just took a while to shake off the false guilt complex he'd inherited at Providence.

Family Worship and Fellowship Center was a good church. It was. He knew this. He could tell because it was growing. It was reaching people. It was successful. It was a church you could bring your friends to, even intelligent, sophisticated friends.

Pastor Thom was a dynamic speaker, and he was a having a real impact on the community. The way

he talked about Jesus—it made you want to be His friend. He preached about tough, real-life issues like poverty, racism, and the environment. He spoke about what mattered now, here, today—he knew what was trending on Twitter, and he talked about it. His sermons were full of references to the movies, to the news, to sports, to politics, to the things that Brian's generation cared about.

At FWFC, Christianity was—well, Brian would have called it “cool,” but that sounded too juvenile. Hip, maybe. Culturally conscious and aware, socially engaged, sophisticated, growing, successful, relevant—it was perfect. What more could you ask of a church, anyway? 🐮

Chores

By Sarah Garber

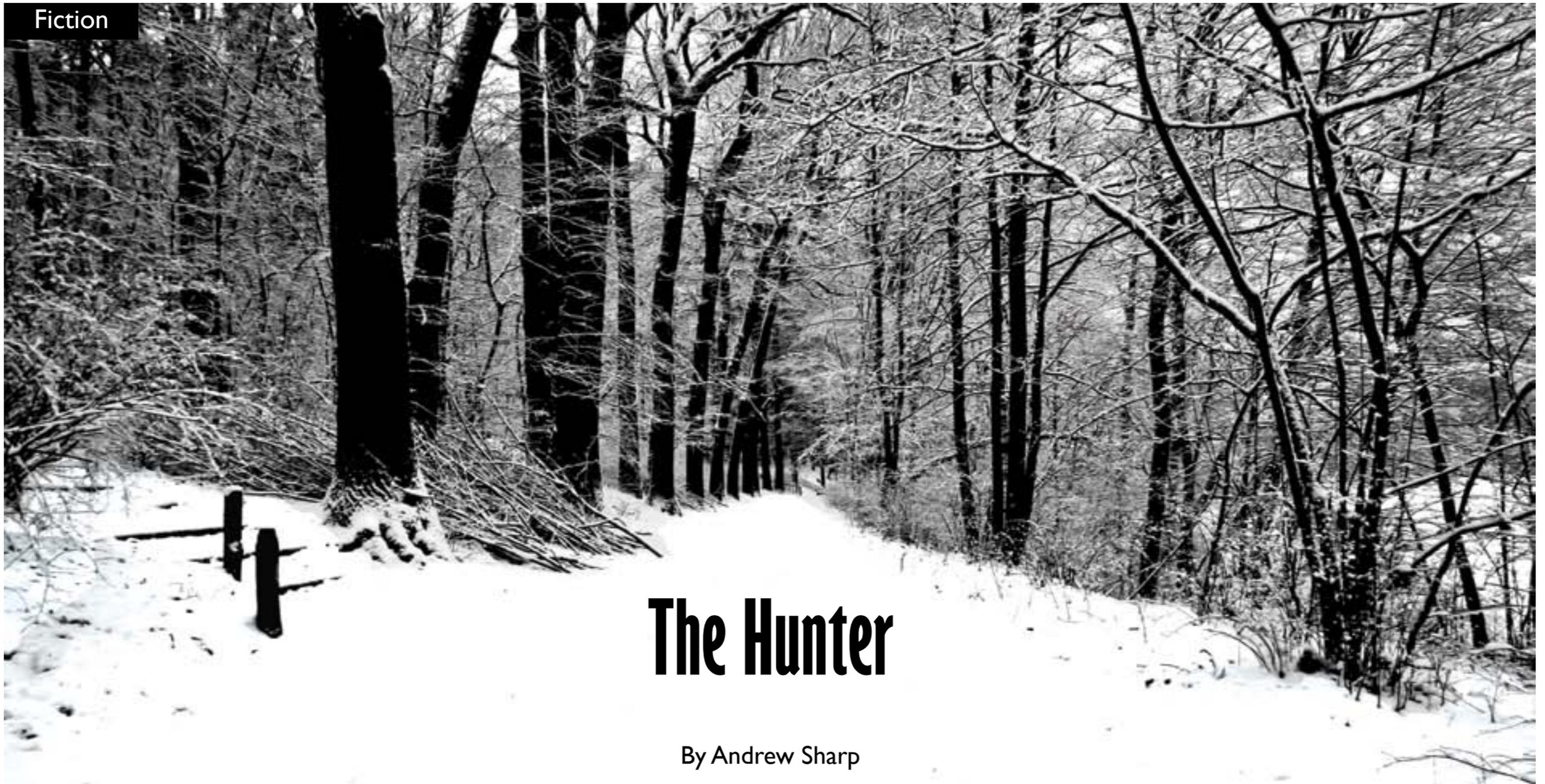
I start with the mirror:
Whisk away the spots left over
From our nightly flossing and brushing.

The soap dish is heavy
With sloughed-off, saponified fat.
I rub and scrape
And soon the glazing gleams.

I pour acid in the bowl
And drench the seat and tank;
I erase all traces
Of daily elimination.
This toilet is nothing
But porcelain and water.

I sweep and mop the floor,
Gathering up and discarding
Hair—
 fine and straight
 coarse and curly
Orphan shreds of paper
Shards of fingernails.
Unidentifiable blots and streaks
Give way before the uncontested force
Of my wash rag.
Blood? Urine? I don't want to know.

At last, with a new roll of toilet paper,
Empty trash can, and fresh hand towel,
I have rendered
The room of our mortality
Clean.



The Hunter

By Andrew Sharp

A light snow landed on the lazy noonday traffic in an eastern Pennsylvania town. The exhaust fumes from the few cars idling at the stoplights sometimes rose straight up and sometimes careened off down the valley as a fitful wind out of northwest did sprints through the streets.

The wet snow stuck to fences and fire hydrants. It tried to move into the roads but was only successful in coating them with a film of dingy brown

slush, churned up by the passing traffic. A well-used pickup churned through the slush and turned off the main road through town, splashing up the road that led up the mountain.

As it passed out of town there was less traffic, and white specks quickly dotted the tire tracks. The truck passed fewer houses here, and the yards gave way to cow pastures. Now the tires kicked up powdery white snow.

Higher still, up on the mountain, the cow pastures petered out and surrendered to an unbroken forest, where the farmers had not thought it worth clearing the rugged, stony landscape. At the clear, undisturbed entrance to an old logging road, the truck swung off the highway and came to a stop. The man inside switched off the engine, and there was instant silence, except for the tiny impact of the heavily falling snow as it hit the windshield,

The Hunter continued

then melted away.

The man got out, strapped a small pack to his back, pulled a warm orange cap over his head, and slung a smoothly worn .270 Winchester over his shoulder. The bluing on the barrel was rubbed away in spots from the thousands of times it had brushed against branches and wool hunting jackets, and the bolt worked smoothly and almost si-

He grinned to himself. The heavy snow had barely dusted the fresh hoof prints, which were medium sized—a round fat doe or a decent sized buck. He concluded he might get some venison for his freezer after all, despite taking the chance of waiting until the last Saturday of deer season.

The woods seemed quiet and motionless as before, as if no living thing had moved through the trees

as a pileated woodpecker whooshed high overhead, shouting to itself.

As he sneaked along the trail, his attention fastened on a flash of gray. His hand tightened instantly on the stock of his gun and his arm tensed, ready to throw up the barrel and squeeze the trigger. Seeing a bushy gray tail whisk down a thin green pine, he relaxed and laughed inside.



lently as he chambered a shell.

He was an accountant down in the town. But as he left a straight line of tracks on the logging trail, he walked away from the office and swung into the quiet, deliberate rhythm of the woods, a rhythm so slow that loud and ignorant outsiders frequently mistake it for silence. He had been much more comfortable here years ago, before he had gone to college and moved to town. His visits were much less frequent now, and it took some time to ease his mind out of the high speed traffic of thoughts and problem analysis that it was used to.

The logging road wound up over ridges and sometimes back down, but mostly up, for half a mile or so until the truck and the logging road were gone, as if they no longer existed. It was only the trees, lonely or inviting, depending on one's frame of mind. The hunter stopped to catch his breath, rest his legs, and look at a set of tracks that meandered across the road and up the mountain.

and brush for days or weeks. This persistent appearance offers false comfort to those who fear its unknown depths, and maddening impatience for those who are looking for the motion of a game animal. But the hunter knew from many past hasty and false moves that it was a lie, that the trees hid all kinds of life and that it could appear at any moment, especially when he was not ready, puncturing the silence with a sudden flurry of activity, then fading away again. He knew that the deer was not far ahead of him, though many trees and a thicket stood between them.

The hunter eased into the thicket, following the tracks into an opening big enough for a deer, but not made for a man. Powdery snow slid off the rhododendron branches as he pushed them aside, carefully feeling for twigs with his boots. Raspberry stalks reached out and grasped at him as he moved along. He scanned the brush, but there was no movement and the only sound was a rapid, high pitched call

He watched as the little animal hopped through the snow away from him. Then it suddenly sat straight up, whirled and stared in his direction. He was confused. He hadn't moved a muscle, yet the tiny creature had somehow sensed danger. Instead of jerking its tail and scolding like a squirrel usually would, it almost did a somersault turning around and raced with short rapid strides out of sight. Watching it run made some instinct in him almost want to take a shot and bring it down. But he watched it vanish without moving his gun.

He stepped on into a more open area filled with gray beech trunks. An icy breeze picked up behind him, then shifted directions and blew back downhill. Dry beech leaves rattled and branches tapped together coldly. He focused on the deer tracks in front of him. He knew he had to keep going; the dull gray snowy light was beginning to wane slightly as the afternoon peaked and drifted toward evening.

Working the trail carefully, he moved cautiously

The Hunter continued

and slowly scanned the thick trees ahead, searching for any jump of movement, the flicker of an ear or tail, the outline of a deer's back or a black nose among the branches.

The afternoon became elderly as the hunter threaded around cedar trees, picked his way over creeks, and scabbled down a gully and up the other side. Up here on the mountain top, the stony, uneven ground was filled in and covered over with a gently rolling, fluffy white surface that told him little about what was underneath. More than once he lurched forward as his foot found a hole where it expected solid ground.

He saw no sign of the deer except its footprints. As he plowed through a wide thicket of thin beech saplings, he more than once snapped twigs and swished loudly against branches, expecting each

time to find running tracks not far ahead. But the biting wind covered his sound, and the tracks stayed close together.

As he leaned on a big poplar and puffed his breath in clouds into the cold air, he didn't see the deer walk into view up the ridge, but suddenly it was there, out in the open, flicking its ears back and forth and staring in the opposite direction. A longish shot. He quickly knelt down and steadied his aim on his knee, trying not to shake from the icy cold that was now seeping through his hands and feet. When the peep sight settled comfortably on the deer, he paused.

It swiveled its ears toward him and stared in his direction, then flipped its tail and began to paw the snow and nibble at the ground. The hunter felt the satisfaction of knowing he was unobserved, a motionless piece of the landscape. He rested his finger on the trigger and considered. It had no antlers, and wasn't that big. He didn't value antlers that highly, but he didn't think this was the decent sized deer he was tracking. He would be happy enough with it, but there would be that feeling that he had been impatient, settling for the first deer he came across when a bigger one might be nearby. The deer glanced back his way, and suddenly became alert. Both ears strained toward him and the animal froze. The hunter narrowed his eyes in irritation. He had not moved a muscle, the wind was blowing in his face, and he had no idea why the deer suddenly was on high alert.

The animal bounded forward. As it did, the hunter instantly made up his mind, prompted by a strong instinct not to let prey escape. The rifle's

muzzle followed the brown form confidently as it bounced, with the familiarity of years of practice. The sight settled naturally and when it felt right, the hunter squeezed the trigger. The silence was blown away by a resonating boom that he barely heard, and the stock punched backward into his shoulder, a kick that he barely felt.

A ringing silence filled the cold air as the gunshot rolled away across the valley. The white tail continued to bounce away through the trees without faltering, then disappeared over the crest of the ridge. The hunter cursed quietly, but he was not that upset, only scolding himself for taking the shot at all.

He knew, however, that he might not have failed, or that even if he had, the deer might be wounded. So with an effort he pushed himself up out of his crouch and walked over to where the deer had stood. The snow was mixed with dark brown leaves where the deer had churned forward into a run. There were no red spots of blood or clumps of brown hair, and they should have been easy to spot in the blank whiteness. He sighed, then smiled, took off his hat, and ran his hand through his hair. Another one in a long list of deer that had gone on to eat another acorn after his errant shots.

To make sure he had truly missed, he strolled along the trail for a good hundred yards or so, never finding a trace of blood. Satisfied, he considered what to do. The light in the solid gray sky was beginning to dim and although he was not afraid of the dark, he knew that it was useless to start tracking again with so little time.

This was a good spot for deer though, with several trails of hoof prints cutting across the ridge in the



The Hunter continued

new-fallen snow. It was worth sitting on a stump for the few minutes until dark to see what might happen by, if there were any deer that hadn't been scared into the next valley by the shot.

He brushed the snow off the rough bark of a fallen oak and eased himself down. The woods was now deathly silent, except for the rising and falling sigh of the wind in the bare black branches. The dark trunks of the trees stood out sharply against the snow. Little caps of snow topped the brush and the scattered stumps.

Then behind his back, a blue jay began screaming. He couldn't see it, but he could see nothing in that direction and assumed it was screaming at him.

He faced forward again, but a branch snapped behind him and he jerked around and saw a fox, running full out and low to the ground. It passed within a few feet of him with flattened ears and its tail bushed out. He looked right into its eyes as it flashed by but it took no interest in him whatsoever. Behind it was nothing, only the deepening murkiness among the beech trees.

An owl hooted over the hill and the outlines of the branches began to grow fuzzy and melt into the flat gray twilight. The hunter checked his sights, and finding that he had trouble seeing them, stood up to leave. He was bothered by the fox. He had heard no dogs barking or men shouting, but it had been clearly terrified. The woods seemed less friendly in the gloom and he had a sensation of being watched.

He shook his head at his imagination. He had more than a mile to go to his truck and he didn't like the thought of making his way through all the ground

he had covered with that cold prickly feeling on the back of his neck. He cleared his throat. The noise sounded loud in the dim trees. He clicked on his flashlight and the dusk immediately grew deeper outside the puddle of harsh light. As he marched along, flashing the light over the boot prints he had made on the way in, he tried to think about a warm truck, steaming coffee and his wife waiting with supper. She would smile and ask him if he had seen anything. He had a story to tell, at least.

His attention was jerked back to the blackening surroundings as his flashlight played over an unusual pattern in his tracks. He bent over to look closely at the small circle of brightly reflecting snow with sharp interest. In the center of his footprint was a deep impression that he had seen somewhere before. The cold prickle ran down his back and he almost choked as he realized that he had seen it before in his own yard, but it was much tinier there. It was the footprint of a cat.

His breath was quick now as he stared around into the shadows and he mentally cursed the heartbeat that thumped loudly in his ears. He knew he could see more if he turned off his light, but it seemed like his only security, a small dyke holding out the lapping waves of darkness. He didn't want to leave it on, either—he couldn't shake the image of two glowing eyes that forced its way into his imagination. Two glowing eyes that did not appear.

He looked down at the tracks again, to make sure they were actually there. They did not cross his tracks, but stayed with them, always in the thickest cover on one side or the other. Always following.

It was all wrong. The big mountain cats were long gone, all killed by the first settlers in the valley. But these tracks, twice as big as any bobcat, said it was a lie. Some might doubt, but he had seen too many tracks and he knew. He knew. He clutched the cold stock of his gun with sweating hands. There would be only a split second to react if...

Mountain lions rarely attack people, he knew. "Rarely" did nothing to shorten the long black mile to his truck, or the horrible sense that there in the dark, on the lonely mountain, a dark form was coiling to come hurtling out of the deep shadow.

He began to run. 

The Back Page

By Matt Swartz

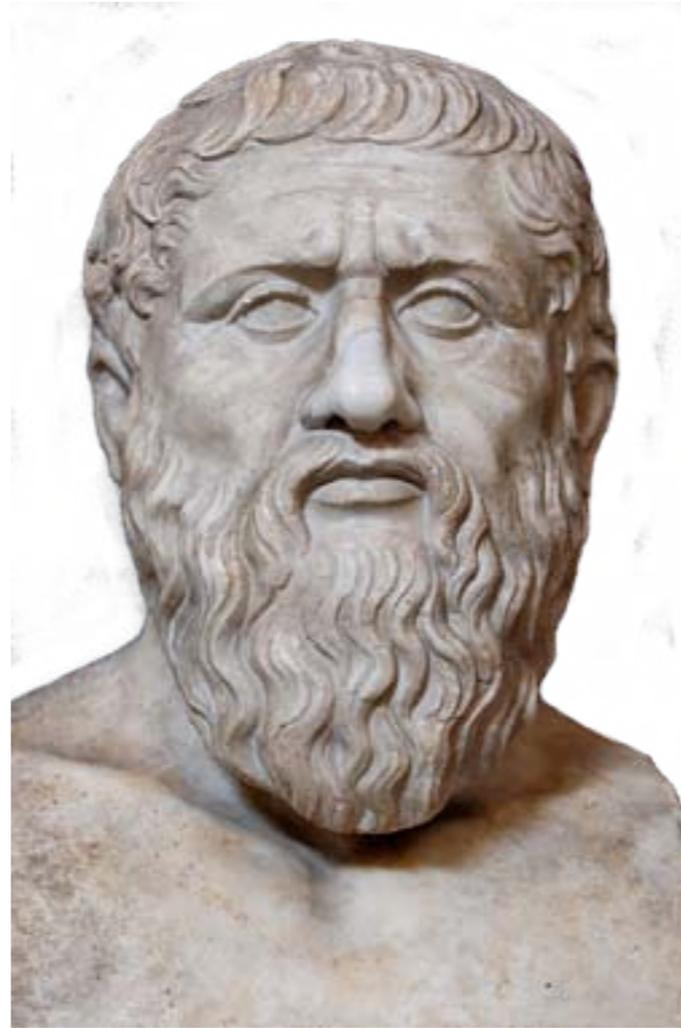
If You See Plato on the Road, Kill Him

A while back, I ran into a friend of mine at a pre-Halloween house concert; a few people were wearing costumes, but most of us were not. He asked me if I had anything planned for the week's festivities, and I inadvertently let a little of my actual personality slip out: I told him that even in something so unimportant as making a costume, I was paralyzed.

I had an idea that I loved, but I couldn't reconcile the perfect, hilarious idea in my mind with my actual costume-making skill set, and I knew it. The real thing, once extant, would be only a shadow of the perfect thing in my mind, and I couldn't move forward for fear of exposing exactly how wide the discrepancy would be. I may or may not have said aloud that this specific instance of inability more or less illustrated my entire life in microcosm.

"Oh," he said, lowering his voice a half-step like he does, "that just means it's time for you to kill Plato."

I quickly scanned my (hazy!) mental police lineup of Greek philosophers in hopes of figuring out what he meant. It took too long, and he could see what I was doing, so he went on: "I mean the idea that every thing has an imaginary, perfect essence, that there is some hypothetical perfect costume, or joke, or chair, or whatever, that the thing you're making has to conform to. Those things are made up. Kill that Plato, with his idealized essences, and just do what you can do."



I reflected more on my friend later. By trade, he is a graphic designer. His day job then, as close as I can tell, consists of applying abstract concepts to specific visual situations in ways that do not offend the eye. This is done, I'm told, with computers, by people who have studied and tweaked and formed strong opinions about text, color, fonts, white space, and the philosophy behind what sort of things people like to look at. One week he might be flown to San Diego to make sure that a certain batch of ink, when applied, matches, to the nth degree, the shade he had selected when designing some product packaging or advertisement. And when he comes home, he scratches his cat on the head, tromps downstairs to the basement, and just hacks.

He makes furniture. He retools, overhauls, and customizes his menagerie of tiny bikes. He likes this lamp's stand, but that lamp's bulb housing, so he cobbles the two together, he has a new lamp that is both new and old, and by this point I suppose it goes without saying that he's never had a moment's worth of formal instruction in the electrician's trade. It's as if, after chasing Plato and his idealized forms all week, he rushes home for the weekend, rolls up his sleeves, and finishes the hoary old fellow off.

An idea, before it is implemented, lies outside the scope of credible, objective judgment. Every opinion about that idea is speculative, in much the same way that the idea itself is. Neither exists. We call ideas "creative," but on their own they create nothing. In fact, ideas are a hindrance to creativity, because at their idealized bests, they seduce us away from action, and it's easy to throw them aside for new, less obviously flawed ideas rather than following them to fruition, out into the risky, frustrating, bitter, complex real world. But to chuck away the practice of making them real is to cut off a part of the human experience; a person who doesn't make things, who thinks things up, talks about what he's thought of, and then moves on to the next thing, is missing out.

Cliché-mongers often say that illiteracy is a self-imposed prison of the mind, that ideas cannot form fully unless they're communicable. Maybe they're right, but if they are, how much more imprisoned are those who only think of things but never do them? They think up lots of good costumes and inventions and dishes and stories, but finish none, dragging nothing from the womb-like privacy and safety of the mind out into the tangible, visible world we hold in common.

That's a remark that I'm afraid I must say I resemble, even while I resent it. But to the extent that I learn to kill my inner Plato, I'll resemble it less. And may the same be true for all who are similarly afflicted! 🐮