

PEAT CHIPPER
Eric Bieber

THE FAMILY PLAY

I can't remember a first of anything:

first birthday, first cut, first disappointment, first time I was a disappointment,
first time I was fat, first time I was old,
first time I reminded myself of my parents;

I do remember my first kiss, but it's stretched and stamped out like retired skin.

I need to claw into the stories of my botched memories,
they're all I have.

I have this early memory of playing hide & go seek.

Only I didn't tell anyone I was playing so it would take them longer.

I hid in the giant hole of a blue elephant slide's eye overturned.

The rush of excitement when they finally started calling my name.

The whole family was in on it, even my brothers.

At 6 and 9 years,
they were my senior.

Then they all stopped. The needles from the shameful nudity of my bastard
marked the cold red for me. The game slacked into loneliness.

When I came out, there was my mother.

I remember her in the kitchen hanging up a pale pink & corded phone.

She had been talking to the police, but now

there were hugs and cheers from her

and disappointment felt

when my 9-year-old brother called me an idiot,

and my 6-year-old brother gave me a punch,

but that couldn't have been the first time we ran this play.

GRAPPLING HOOK

If I had a grappling hook,
I would swing all about town.
I would get higher than the graffiti artists get,
And my tag would rein supreme.

If I had a grappling hook,
I could live out that childhood dream
I trained so vigorously for by jumping around on the furniture,
And finally leap giants.

If I had a grappling hook
I would carry it on the left hip of my utility belt,
Which would also feature a quarter dispenser,
Wallet fastened to a retractable steel line,
Pez and chewing gum pockets,
Walkie talkie with attached clip,
Revolver holster on the right hip with bullet loops stitched in next to it,
And most important of all,
The striking surface of a matchbox duck-taped to the back.
My armpit trick far from the cuffs; it has saved my skin time and time again.
It's coyote ways have never failed to dance about my enemies
Who think they can get a step ahead of me by charging forth.

Yet alas, to evil doers dismay,
If I had a grappling hook,
I could coil in the shadows as a snake,

(Rustle,)

I could reside over the whole great big batting scene as an owl,
I could bunt heads with the assailant as a ram,
And not have to worry about an exit plan

(Shine your teeth,)

If I had a grappling hook,
I would hide it and my utility belt under a black duster,
I could walk into any building inconspicuously,
And leave out the window with non the wiser.

(Dissolve into shadow,)

If I had a grappling hook,
I could be like the George of this filthy concrete jungle.
I could be like Batman of this godless metropolis,
And I would make the best damn detective this city has ever seen.

(And strike.)

If I had a grappling hook,
I would have many other things.
I would have problems at home.
I would have an arch-nemesis
Who perhaps has a grappling hook as well.
I would have no one to trust,
The only solace to my solitude would be conversations with birds.
I would eventually be outlawed,
Hated, and shun.
I would be misunderstood.
I would be desired.
I would be an idol,
If I had a grappling hook.

TIME TO WORK

We skip stones
to drive the fish away,
unafraid to not catch anything.

The vehement of our breeze
lofts upon the crickets and the frogs
raising their lighters and belching the chorus.

“A boat blunders sunder, sire!”
Fishermen. Our act has found its folly.
Who are we to drive the fish away?

It crumbles wayward,
moping its mane,
shaving the running water of its white.

The crickets paddle their chirp to scratches of grass.
The frogs leave their eldest alone to clock in the blues
as they climbed themselves beneath the mud.

NORTH ON ROUTE 1, RIDGING OVER TO ROUTE 100 SOUTH

In the older fog of what valleys weep for
I find myself estranged from wilting twine that
can't keep these relationships
afresh no matter how much I weep

and now miles later
I look at that anti-hero I strained to be as flat
a film noir vacant iris
solving mysteries of the woman
in the red dress who never walked into his stenciled door

so if she is a figment
let us add action and addiction to this silent film
and make a list of what size her breasts are
boisterous or mystical
what sound her laugh is
whimsical or more foretelling
what color her brazier is
white gray black
or what color her dress is
 it is obviously red
but what shade of gray best resembles this red
and what red is it
 is it fairy tale blood red
 or is it the picnic red of panic
it is as so many developing characters tell
in their whaling changes that cut and siphon like the RV nomads
just beginning their next move
to Zion or Arches
where sought after sons live with their mothers and fathers
hiding in the basement

instead of in an oak slapped office
hiding behind damsels in distress

but I've seen this story played out
too many times for even my ulcer to realize
let alone the coppers
I've seen the Hollywood sign changed
so many times that I'm ready

ready to retire to the mountains
some hick's vacant lot where I run shit over his business
as I walk in out of the fog
putting the fear in him with this face
beneath that boulder hat
tossed out of the crashing fog I've been riding for miles

THE LANTERN IN THE WOOD

Eyes could adjust to a dark wood. Peat was the floor every step taken, an armada of grey and blue ripples. Then came a swinging lantern, interrupting the moon, and mocking the shadows with its dance. The squirrel froze upon a tree, His back flashed between silver and gold as the lantern approached. The squirrel's eyes muted from the radiance of the moon to an ocean black, until firing up with all of the mad laughter and sunder of an oil rig.

HALF A YEAR SPENT

Smoke Out

you did it to sing better
to be quieter in the winter months
so quiet you could tune a fork to the stars' whistles
refracting crisp on the snow
but as January leads to February
and as February salutes March
the snow is muddied
and your lungs are muddied from the time
you've spent away from your song
it isn't here you left it somewhere
certainly somewhere beneath the cloud line
and above the water mark

Fire In

the angelic lick of a freshly lit match
making shadows on your dashboard
that make 90 miles feel like 90 kilometers
the match that sneezes as it fades from 90 to nothing
when you bury it in a guardrail on the side of I-89
how many veterans have done the same
cruising the same highway in their pickup
or minivan or Prius with their shepard riding shotgun
who think they don't care about oil anymore
and that it is their American right to burn one while filling up
how many soldiers have done the same
shot down in the heat never getting to show chops at the VFW
sent home in a metal coffin so well refrigerated
June couldn't meld their dog tag to their bone
and their half a pack doesn't have a chance to churn into bubbling fat

TENDON SCRUNCH

Great black silk accordion

Brooms its jaw

German Hummel and china

Quiver like wet chinchillas

The eerie music sows itself shut

Clasping to the shark tooth rigged

Red lines on my lacquered lit ceiling

Be it gun and clay or stone and lake

Or gun and lawyer or lawyer and lake

My reaction still is the same

Draw and coast

Hem and haw

Teeter on bright ash

Click the target

As of yet I have no instrument nor audience

I do have cold water in my glass

And I have this glass

Cold, sweet, tin-plaque water

I drink down

It's all I want

All I want is to play a record, read my book, drink this water

Flip that record when it goes spongy. And breathe

Something that isn't me strung up in cloud and vapor and city cough

SHOULD'A GONE APPLE PICKIN' BLUES.

I was walking down a path of roses
I saw my lady beneath an oak tree
I was walking with devil by my side
And my lady
was with some other man
The devil threw the first stone
hit the old oak tree
made an acorn drop
on that other man
my lady lifted her head from his lips
and turned towards me
she said I knew it was you
saw you there the whole time
and there ain't no devil by your side
it was you who threw the stone
you threw the first stone
I saw you do it and all I want to say
is goodbye

I was walking down a path of fallen leaves
all bright red and rosy
with my new lady by my side
we took a rest beneath the old oak tree
we figured no pure souls were looking
so we had ourselves a ride
that tree shuddered
that tree screamed
that tree shook free the last of her leaves
my lady simmered
then my lady steamed
so much so that old oak tree

had to uproot a family of squirrels
to make room for all the violence
we were making up beneath
the oldest squirrel threw the first acorn
threw it on my head
the rest of the squirrels joined in
throwing acorns at my lady
scared her of
and when they got to the road
they picked up the stones at their feet
and tried to throw them at me
only squirrels can't throw very far
so I left too out of boredom not fear
went to find my lady to console her
went to find my lady but when I found her
all I could say
was goodbye

I was walking down a path of fallen leaves
some green and some brown
saw the devil beneath the old old oak tree
playing his fiddle with his teeth
singing some jump song to my new new lady
and he saw me there and said
hey there's stones by you feet
why don't you throw them
throw those stones
and try to hit this tree
I said but that tree is all wilted and free
with no acorns to drop on your head
and besides your the devil
and I ain't planning on going to hell

so if it's all the same to you
and I'm sure you don't plan enough to have it any other way
I'll shuffle my feet leave hands be
after all
all I want to say to you is
that's three lost ladies just this season so
fuck me

GRIEVING THE RED LINE LOSS

Bent lines of cartilage

Grinding cash

Blasted urethras

Hindenburg crash

Breathing shadows

Raspy stoma-bound flutes

A squawk of people

Trashcans bubbling over with bent boots

Canterbury names

Tipsy wired teeth

Good good gas

Freighter moans lit bleak

Plastered subway trains

My own name published in a book

Tombstones glittered with vomit

The neighborhood cat trailing in the neighborhood soot

HOOTS OF LAUGHTER

The harpies spread their wings, suddenly it is night.
Beneath the whisper of crickets, we can overhear
a conversation amongst owls hooting about the latest gossip:

“Did you hear China has been into whicker baskets lately?”

“Have you head Leroy lost his leg?”

“Was it the war?”

“No, it was his missus. She found him with her mistress together with the neighbor’s dog.”

“So she cut him out of anger?”

“No, they were just out of sugar and in the basement on the liquor.”

“So she boiled him over with the diabetes?”

“No, they drank the liquor healthy and were happy, happy and up to climb a mountain.”

“But was’t it the middle of the night?”

“Yessir, and they saw the sun rise when they reached the peak.

And when they made it up top

Leroy wept and said his legs were no good, but the missus told him, ‘No, that ain’t it at all, one leg is still good, the right one that keeps my own feet warm at night, but you’re right about the left one, it ain’t good at all, so i’ll take it,’ and she did.”

“Really?”

“Yessir, and then they stayed from sunrise to sunset until the crickets could be heard again, then they climbed back down.”

“Leroy didn’t fall down on the way back?”

“Well now, I didn’t say that.”

And then the owls laughed only owls don’t laugh so we just heard it as hoots.

BIGGER ME AND LITTLER ME

“Now, now,” bigger me repeats to littler me.
and it isn’t often bigger me speaks, but he fancies
littler me, wants littler me to be happy, wants
littler me to smile a LEADBELLY’d do smile
LEADBELLY’d do and all the blues musicians, enlisted and officer alike do
and drafted try to smile like this, like bigger me wants littler me to smile
that authentic watermelon smile
one you can print
a smile for the scant birches and the fuddling elms
but I think bigger me is fuddling this one elm
or no fuddling elm
I think he has the wrong cartoon
the wrong season
the wrong brand of cigarettes
the wrong size mattress
the wrong for him wrong
but the right for littler me right
(scene: a prominent and wealthy stick-figure finds time to leisure on a brisk mid-
October sundown) and does so the right way,
with his favorite smoke, the only smoke he’ll smoke, Happy
Apples:
“Candy Apples
are for those other Dads, Happy Apples are for
the YOU type of Dads. No son
will think their Dad a pussy when he-she see he-she
smoking these he-shes. Available
in reds and the blues.” That’s a good ad.
He will smoke a hive for that ad.
He will smoke a hive before he will achieve a he-she on
par with the he-she from the ad
And that’s noble and that’s right

Not right for bigger
me right but right
for littler me right
the right of his own leisure
a mid-October sundown spent
on a collection of maple leaves and rabbit furs
that would make some church jealous, any church, pick the church
out of a hat if you can't pick a church on a street, any street
as long as it's walkable, car rides and car sickness is like Superman
to Kryptonite for littler me, only a hop greener for trouble, right

and his right is sharing with bigger me
and right by bigger me is a right
share to share with littler
me but bigger me isn't right on
sleeping under trees. sleeping
under trees is wrong for bigger
me but littler me understands this
he b's the bigger me and does right
by his friend bigger me and makes
right bigger me a wrong dream
for littler me know
what bigger me dream bigger
than bigger me dream otherwise
bigger me dream he do how
the young dumb blistered dumb ones
yelp yellow like LEADBELLY'd do
but LEADBELLY'd never do yellow
LEADBELLY'd do and only do the
blues like all the other ranks in the
blues militia, the only ones trained
to kill redcoats or pinkos or yellow-

belly varmint in these parts these
smiling parts, these blues smiling
states of America smiling a smile
like LEADBELLY'd do a smile like
this, like LEADBELLY taught
only no LEADBELLY, nor enlisted, nor officer,
nor draftboard, nor bird ever
taught bigger me
only littler me ever taught right
from wrong for bigger me
but still bigger me had this weight
and littler me could wrong it right
out of bigger me but he never did
he didn't want that, he wanted this
weight, this watermelon for a smile
weight, this non-authentic weight,
this juicy weight, this laugh at me
bigger me insecurity complex, but
I have faith littler me will one day
wrong bigger me right into his bigger
me dream of becoming an actor
working in an actor stall in vain
for a love LEADBELLY'd do
a LEADBELLY'd do love do smile
that authentic watermelon love
watermelon grinning a LEADBELLY
watermelon teeth truth that bigger
love bigger smile bigger vain that
littler me and bigger me and me
just can't do like LEADBELLY'd do
(scene: "Now this is the blues. Never was a white man had the
blues, 'cause nothin' to worry about. Now you lay)

DEAR MANCHILE,

You hold the corners so well

with your determined gray hand.

It's not stress, no wrinkles in the blanket.

It's not hate, the loose yarn for the tree still looks as if

not even your yellow spotted caterpillar has touched a bit o' its twine.

It's not longing, your towel is dry.

It's not sadness, your fingers remain still

as you hold the corners so well.

It is happiness, the yellow yarn that stitches your sun and

holds it home, has never lost a lick o' its hue.

It is love. As a baby, it was your blanket.

And when you learned to play it was your towel.

And when you learned to leave and come back again,

you took the sheers to it.

And with love in your heart and a danger

in your hands, you made that old thing whose

corners you held so well new again by removing the corners

and knitting yourself a sweater for

love,

in the time of

doubt.