

CHUBBY CHECKERS: HOW TO WRITE ABOUT SOMETHING THAT DOESN'T GET BETTER

Hannah Bright

There is something unsettling about sprouting potatoes — their spindly eyes protruding into food stores and probing for places to root. It's like when the need to cut your fingernails is the only way to tell time is passing, or when you forget to mail a letter for the sixteenth day in a row. Sometimes, when I run my tongue across my teeth, I realize that they are bones; but mostly they just mash food into uncolored blobs so I can swallow it into my stomach cavity.

I want to write about the metaphysical equivalent to junk mail — errands, paying taxes, annoying service, kisses that don't make sounds, letting tea get cold, staring silences, over-microwaved food, missing daylight, doing dishes, subjectivity, sand in sheets, and knocking things over because I don't have time for anything to go wrong. I want to write about the subtle dissatisfaction that lingers around the fringes of days; like a yellowed fog obscuring the divisions between good things and bad things, tasteful and unsavory, boring and comfortable.

I am tired. I want to write about that.

✕

I do not want to write about my father. How could he be a cliché before ever hitting the page? My dad lived in a house that was big and blue. It wasn't his house and it wasn't beautiful. It was the kind of house where you can't tell the front entrance from the back entrance — a house with sagging window screens and chipped paint. It was nestled in a hillside so that you could walk in the front door and be on the second floor, or walk in the back door and be on the first.

The uphill side of the house supported thirty motorcycles leaned precariously on their kickstands in various stages of disem-bowelment, a row of synchronized dancers all hinting in the same direction. A chain ran through the back tires, connecting them all like charms on an anklet.

Just past the bikes extended a long, thin porch. The railing was missing a few slats so that every couple yards there was a gap the size of a small child. Lumpy dog beds and stacks of stained newspapers littered the path to the door.

To the left of the house was a garden, a multilevel, fenced fortress bordered with tall swaying sunflowers. There were three levels. The bottom looked like the rest of the property, a bramble forest of foxtails, wild roses, poison oak, and blackberry bushes. Above rested a groomed plot and a few sizable wooden planters housing marijuana and tomato plants wrapped in hopeful chicken wire. The top level hosted a heaping mountain of compost, a few crab apple trees, and a home-built chicken coup.

Once, when I was six, a rooster with thin, black-and-white speckled feathers and a broad parading chest leapt on my back and used shit-covered spurs to dig four-inch lacerations down the length of my ribs. As the skin ripped, I screamed, pushing wet, tangled bangs out of my eyes and stumbling to my feet under the weight of the bird. Great black-and-white wings beat against my ears as Chubby Checkers, the fifteen-pound chicken, regained his balance on my shoulders. Heart thundering, I threw my arms over my head and whirled in a circle. Chubby landed on his feet and immediately swung his lowered head in wide vacillations in preparation to charge.

I scrambled for a discarded shovel and hit him as hard as I could; he lay perfectly still long enough for me to step nearer to him, my relentless six-year-old love for animals nearly overpowering my sense of trauma.

Then, heaving and whimpering, I watched in horror as the rooster righted himself and realigned to attack. Tears streaming down my face, I swung again and again, stumbling forward each time from the force of the blow and desperately trying to drag myself up the garden hillside without turning my back on the constantly reorienting bird. Hoarse squelched screams left my constricted throat as I tried not to watch the harm I was causing and wailed for assistance from my father up at the house.

Blood caked my shirt in wide tiger stripes by the time my dad made it to the garden.

✕

The Buddha's primary teaching was that life is suffering — he named it the first “noble truth.” From there, he divided suffering into three categories, reserving an entire third for the unnamable quality of dissatisfaction and uneasiness that hovers in the day to day — the suffering of conditionality.

It's hard to know what to say about this feeling. It's the administrative drain that requires maintenance regardless of level of enthusiasm or resistance. I refuse to do my laundry, but only for so long. Despite my righteous ignorance of my inbox, the emails will ultimately be answered. This is not a story about my father.

✘

I was trembling violently by the time my dad made it to the garden. He cascaded down the hill and dove on top of Chubby from nearly three yards away. When he stood up, a caked layer of mud ran from his nipples to his knees. He stood breathing heavy and holding the bird upside down. Chubby hung limp and soft, a still bundle of feathers.

“Go ahead, Hannah. You wanna hit ‘em now?” He held the rooster out to me. “You can kill him if you want. He can't do a fucking thing now. Look at him!” He shook the bird by its crossed ankles

The look in my dad's eyes was sickeningly familiar to the one I had been battling moments before. I put my face in my dirty hands and cried.

✘

Now I need to say something else about dissatisfaction. Now is the time where I prove that this is truly not about my father. Everyone has ten pounds that they are holding, or hating, or strapping down, or waiting to deal with at a later time, a more digestible minute. Our postponing of this self-improvement is a purely masturbatory form of despair. Who do we think we are cheating by secretly refusing to floss? It's the grocery list, the vision board, the loitering trip to the DMV. It is the mortar that seeps between the interesting bricks of life and fills up the spaces where some people assume there is “peace.”

✕

When I refused to enact violent revenge on Chubby Checkers, my dad pinned him to the wall in the feed shed with a pitchfork. He spread his wings wide and crucified him above our bags of grain and stacks of alfalfa. I don't know whether my dad cracked his neck first or just let him bleed out slowly. I refused to go in the feed shed for over a year after we buried the bird.

✕

The year that Chubby attacked me, my father told me he could die happily knowing that he did his part to make the world a better place by bringing me into it. The same year, he told me that if I ever stopped loving him, he would kill himself. It's funny how until you write about it, nothing in the world seems relevant. But then the moment they are put in ink, ruminations feign an obvious and conclusive connection. You have to write to write. Have to write to be a writer. Every time I start to write, I decide to go to sleep. My egg tooth is forming, as all egg teeth should be, but it's slow progress. I'm sort of drunk, is that exciting? I'm lying on the couch, spontaneous and unaroused. I keep stopping; can't keep writing. Can keep writing, but don't? This is not a story about my father; this is the story of my life.