

**FURIANT,
NOT POLKA**

charles freeland

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Charles Freeland

moria — chicago — 2008

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first edition

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Furiant, Not Polka

I stack the driftwood in the corner and search my pockets for the pipe I dreamt once I smoked, but which has never since materialized, hard as I might try to find it. Things like this ache beneath the skin. But only for a moment. And then it is time to replace them with duct tape and VCRs and those skinny fish that bite when you are careless taking them off the hook. Sometimes, the mattress begins to look like a barrel organ. Or the monkey that goes with it. That lights its own cigars and makes hand gestures that mean one thing in the Piedmont. And something else entirely in New Orleans. I notice the area between lakes has always been a favorite haunt of men who have no clear idea of what it means to be men. Who suspect it has something to do with the way you pronounce your words. Or which words you choose in the first place. Such as "skein". And "rabbit". And that variation on the verb form that makes it some other part of speech. Or confuses your auditor if he is standing more than a mile away. This is the point at which the self tends to go on vacation. It leaves the cleaning-up to its friends and neighbors. To those who love the self, but worry about it because of the way it behaves. Take, for instance, that man who locks himself in his shed, trying to create his own language, trying to fashion it *ex nihilo* the way you might invent a mouse trap on a planet where there are no rodents. Not even nutria. He makes use of letters and commas and poison. But mostly he relies on rubber bands. And those pictograms that look suspiciously like skeletons in houses.

Man with a Tri-Cornered Hat

This is the terror that keeps you awake. The sense that it doesn't matter what you do, someone is always going to get there first. Before you can manage to untie your harness. Before the gates close and the fishing tournament is cancelled due to lack of community involvement. Are you justified in worrying so, given the catfish have all shrunk down to the size of seed packets? And their reproductive rates have slowed to the point even those who study them are not sure anymore just what reproduction is supposed to look like, what it must accomplish. Oh sure, we know in the abstract, and we root for it the way you might root for the team that hasn't won a game in years. But that doesn't change the fact that the theories all begin to sound like diseases of the mind. Speculation of the kind caused by someone eating lead paint as a child. But what should we take with us that hasn't already gone before? That hasn't soaked up the last enzyme or pocketed the compass that led us to this point and no further? Like those birds hatched from eggs covered on the outside with designs that remind one of Maori tattoos. Or the crest of the waves when the moon has come in too close and stirred the sea up. Out of jealousy, I suppose. Because it is too far away and wishes to be in on the secrets. The same way your secretary knows who's been in your office. Why she left in tears.

On the Dust Jackets of Even the Filthiest Books

But why must they drag it all out? These lessons in the alphabet. How to stand on your own, like a statue of Napoleon, even when the wind has decided to undo its good works in Denmark. On the island of Java. You know the story. The twenty-five different families all competing for the same space above the butcher's shop. The cabal of local magistrates and educators financing the operation on the backs of the very people who decided to undertake it. Who found themselves adrift in the sort of tub made famous in nursery rhymes. On the dust jackets of even the filthiest books. Mark well, though, the taboos with your highlighter. Set them aside as a reminder of what you've been neglecting. At least when the tattooed woman is in town. She doesn't seem quite the same. As if a skull had been moved laterally across her belly. As if there had been three canaries at the shoulder blade and now there are only two. But they are nonetheless impressive for all that, harboring (you can tell) resentment and lust in equal proportions. Like sailors let loose on those who scuttled their johnboats. Or those women who tell you one thing Thursday, then repeat it the following week. But with the light in their eyes missing, so that you know they have accepted someone else's version of events. They have already defected.

What the New Caledonian Said

And maybe you are surprised by the enormity of your emotions. By your tendency to grasp at un-tuned harps. As if they were made out of some rare compound. Some exotic metal so valuable it causes an upsurge in suicide just as soon as it hits the market. Does this mean you will no longer recognize yourself in the pages of the encyclopedia? In the water color portraits painted by the woman who sits in the window? Who looks out at the street below as though at some preternatural ice age? Or is it all made so utterly simple in the end, we pass over it with barely a nod? With barely a cyst under the skin to remind us of what we have been doing so long without. I am of the mind that the regicides and alimony bring us back to the restive condition. That place where we are so completely surrounded by our element, we start to consider it alien simply because we no longer recognize it. Because the nerve fibers are made bare through a process of twisting. Of asking the wrong questions. And then sticking around for the veal. No matter how hard you try to avoid it, the days liquefy. The image of the beloved's body, frail as a vase, and yet somehow daunting, magnificent, fails to stick around. It too becomes a shadow of itself. And then something almost impossible to describe. Just as though it never really existed in the first place. And if you are to retain it in even this most rudimentary form, you will have to accept it is at least seventy-five percent your invention. But what does this mean for the mind that invented it? Why should it be aggrieved? And where is the utility in grief, that thing that makes it stick around despite its drawbacks, like weeds? Like the vestigial digits in the wings of a bat?

His Vipers, He Writes

We've come to expect disillusion and madness where before there had been simply chiffon. That material you might remember from the early novels of Auchincloss. But enough of the *ad hominem* attacks! We've become so devoted to them, the sailors themselves run the other way at our approach. And I suspect there are days when we so thoroughly lose that sense of being someone in particular that if you were to quiz us, we'd pass, but only by chewing on the paper. By reworking the questions in the meantime to reflect the slant of the other people in the room. Thereby enabling our escape through the kitchen. Through the back passages ordinarily reserved for tornado drills. But not the real thing. Does this mean we are somehow less than we were this morning? When the ceiling fan seemed strangely geometrical, part of the problem? When the coupons were still good through May? Probably. But that doesn't make for a pleasant denouement, by any means. There is the requirement still of fumbling. Of packing away the figurines and the mortar and pestle handed down by your grandmother. And then, that nearly unconquerable longing for people we do not know.

Concerning the Origins of Despair

Whatever's at the root should remain constant. Its precise identity, though, isn't that important. Ask the man who cleans the office windows. Who hangs above the street like an idea in someone's head. He knows the balloons used to represent thought in comic books are designed merely to take up space. To allow their creator to get paid a full day's wage without having to engage in a full day's illustration. You may insert the learned commentary here. We won't wait for it to accumulate. Imagine how destructive it all must be for those who spend the majority of their time in one place. Like New Mexico. Rather than, say, traveling to Azerbaijan and then elsewhere because they are restless. Of course, waiting around for the family to catch up with you, for the children to appear seemingly from out of nowhere like butterflies, remains the single best method of conquering despair. Unfortunately, it also insures you won't be taken seriously by anyone who has discovered some new property of light. Who has recorded the behavior of gibbons in the deepest jungle. But should we concern ourselves with the opinions of people who pay that much attention to everything? Who keep their eyes forever open like statues? And wander the earth with the help of government grants and their collective memory of the magi? Probably it's best to forget everything you've ever heard concerning the symptoms of despair. And, more to the point, the origins. It is not an ailment that lends itself to analysis. It's not composed of component parts like a blanket which you have merely to un-stitch to see how it was made. It is, however -- as everyone knows -- something with the potential to grow unwieldy. To travel from one valley to the next, grinding everything before it to dust. The highways. The rivers. Even the library. Where we keep our topographical maps. The complete Dostoevsky.

To Speak of Species is to Speak in Circles

Just as the clay clings to your shoes when you've been laying pipe, when the bulldozers arrive to create space for yet another municipal park and they uncover arrowheads by the dozen, so the films of the past move at a frenzied pace. Their makers didn't study the same physics we did. The bamboo in the background stands for something. It suggests the frontiers are not so distant as we once believed. Often, the animals get involved, and they behave in ways that seem familiar at first – giraffes looking for a meal in the tops of trees; turtles acting kind of surly. And then some twist, some arbitrary change of location that makes us think we are dealing with creatures that have no reason to keep up appearances. They can doff scales, their pelts, in the blink of an eye. At this point, our instincts try to take over. But there is no room inside the skull for more than two or three. That of self-preservation, for instance, is crowded out by one so new it has no name. We're not even sure how best to describe it, other than to refer to its oddly yellow tint. The way it makes us call, on occasion, to the ravens that stand outside the gate.

The First Whence and the Last Whither

Your first instinct might be to go back over the correspondence. To see if you can pinpoint where exactly things turned sour. Maybe secure a foothold in that future that isn't real or even probable, but simply invented for the purpose of making us feel at home when we are no longer at home. When we are rushing headlong into territory that has been abandoned even by the cannibals. That has lost its identity by virtue of the bland things that occur there. If we wish to remain, the climate will make that decision difficult, but it won't be the sun or the wind or the rain, or even all of them together, joined in conspiracy like the Masons or those children who have a beef with strangers in a Mishima novel. It will be the interval in between. Those miniscule stretches of time when there is no dominant pattern, no temperature, no moisture. No movement of the air of the sort that makes, in a separate context, the noise we recognize as a flute concerto. We capture it on disc and give it to relatives when they decide to stop chasing attractive members of the opposite sex. They devote themselves instead to the arranging of their living rooms, the making and transportation of pasta salad on those Mondays when they don't have to go to work because someone decided to make a holiday, and who are we to complain? Who are we to suggest the warm, wet snap that lasted ten thousand years wasn't the reason the Natufian people enjoyed themselves so thoroughly on the forest steppes, boring holes in beads and gnawing on antelope bones? All of which just goes to show you must work when you have darkness too. Otherwise, you'll begin to wonder if you haven't done everything wrong. From the planks laid one after another across the shallows so the ladies can exit the boats without getting wet. To the sounds you make in your throat when the experience borders on the unendurable. Something so intense, the right to experience it is bound up with the right to forget it ever happened. And yet, we habitually pull at the seams that separate the one from the other. Until it all comes loose in our hands. And then where are we? Not back where we started, exactly. But not far from it, really. If you believe what they're saying in Iquitos.

An Enquiry Concerning the Yodeling Knives

Avoid lists, especially those involving African deities and the painters who found them irresistible. The kind of thing that wakes you up at night when you weren't even really sleeping, that startles you down to the very spleen and gets you to making pancakes, just in case someone else has had a similar experience. You can pull catfish from the river with your bare hands, but this is not something you'll want advertised. Because there are some who will admire you for the dedication involved. For the fearless manner in which you sacrifice your body. You can see where the dilemma lies, like a python. Not in the weeds, necessarily, but in the domestic equivalent. In the space between the armchair and the curtains where almost anything is apt to lurk. And you don't have to step on it to cause the tragedy. You just have to be in the right mood. A stream, for instance, after an earthquake, may be expected to reverse its flow. But it is still recognizably a stream. This is why it's best to write your science fiction novels at great speed, and without going back to check your facts against the physics lectures of Richard Feynman. I won't go so far as to suggest such wisdom is infallible, but you might find something very similar in just about any drug store. In the back aisles, with their unguents and best-sellers. And the children huddled around that one birthday card that reveals too much about the way adults actually live their lives. With their clothes off half the time. And the other half spent huddled up in blankets. As if they are afraid the winter cold will chap their skin. And that the ukulele music on the radio is just something to occupy their minds while the world goes on without them.

Principal Landmarks of the Sidereal Evolution of the Globe

There's a reason we look the other way instinctively when someone familiar walks into our line of sight. Someone who we were as intimate with in the past as Pocahontas was with John Rolfe or Abelard was with sitting down. Would we still consider such illumination a good thing, just because it comes after the fact? Because it rings true only because it *is* true? I like to think the saddles are clean, the pages turned up at the edges even when we aren't there to perform these duties. Because if not, if I am mistaken, then there is no end to the visions that will descend. They'll scatter about like silverfish, looking for the nearest avenue of escape. They are like the motorcycle when there were only donkeys on the road. Who's going to make such anachronism a crime! Who's going to limit it to the jailhouse where it will get written about by every literary genius who passes through? Where it will get turned eventually into the cause celebre of the decade, and then march across the continent like Hannibal? Or those weeds that originated in the labs of some South American country and escaped through the ventilation system, their spores so hardy you can't kill them with lye. Or radiation. Or the chants and spells one purchases from the witch doctor, who is not really a witch or a doctor, but a former medical student who couldn't adjust to holding severed limbs in his hands during the early coursework. He retains his fascination for hinges well past his eightieth birthday. Which is marked, as usual, with an almost total silence. A ring of admirers lighting candles outside the apartment and some of them trying to communicate with hand signals. Or comic books. Holding them open toward the window, pointing out relevant passages from a hundred yards away.

A Uniformly Emotionless Performance

It's possible the pipeline that feeds the area oxygen has been compromised in some fashion. And what appears at first to be a mere wilting of the flowers is, in fact, the beginning of the end of all things. Not just those to be found within the confines of the project itself, but everywhere. Up the street. At the beach where the not-so-fashionable mingle with their very discriminating neighbors. And the moon comes in so close to the swing set, even the bats that cling to the cold cross bars seem upset. They whimper and whistle and begin to circle overhead in such an agitated state, you might almost suspect they can see the future. Our comeuppance, of course, comes up from the caves beneath the town. No one suspects he is living above a morality play. A sulfurous patch of cavern home to additional bats, and even the earwig. Which is a pest we might have thought extinct just by the look of it. The way it has of rummaging through our closets in search of high heels to gnaw on. In search of those boxes of old correspondence that throws us in an unfavorable light, at best. And ruins all chances of beatification, at worst. The sort of thing we'd prefer buried, out of view and far away, and yet, perversely, we cling to even as the mob begins to grow enormous. As it gets intoxicated at the prospect of knocking down our doors.

Your Word of the Day

Our experience of the hedgehog is limited to the file with which one smoothes its quills, if the beast will stand still for such treatment. Or if the neighbors volunteer to restrain it. Their motives are apt to be as murky as our own. Sure, we do good and proper things when the opportunity presents itself. We buy cakes for the disadvantaged and deliver them with ribbons tied at the top. And a Mariachi band in tow to help dispel any gloom that might otherwise mar the proceedings. In fact, you'll find any number of examples here that defy convention, that suggest we are not as dismally self-oriented as everyone claims. This is why the comely women go to one island or another. They know spells that eliminate the competition as effortlessly as one lances a boil. But they will not share them with us for fear that the word will get out among the Swedes. And suddenly you've got people knocking on your door day and night. They're asking to use the restroom. Or they wander out into the narrow fields. Those crowded with plain-wrapped moths and the fever trees sloughing their bark off for the weekend. And we're all a little vulnerable, what with the flesh coming in for calumny and outright assault by those who don't wear it. Or claim they don't wear it for reasons that have something to do with claustrophobia, I imagine. Or that nearly universal desire to be considered extraordinary. An individual of such unique ability and features, the rest of us line up in endless rows just to get a glimpse. To call home with details of what we've seen. And what we merely thought we saw when other people got in the way. Those with such a love of miniature things, their scale models look like misfirings of the mind. Like cobwebs with nothing at the center. With no respect for what Otto Rank terms the *causa sui*, which is a concept we are so fond of, we will abandon just about everything else to keep it around. Our silky terriers. All those jigsaw puzzles depicting the modern suspension bridges of Spain.

The Indictment of Galileo was Rational

They show up with news on their lips as if it had been tattooed there. By an apprentice not long for his field. If we object, the walls move a few millimeters, but that's it. There is no long-running feud to record in our journals. Just a few minutes to reflect on why we always end up in situations like these. How the vaccine might have made a difference if the patent hadn't been delayed. The alternatives seem just as grotesque. Just as likely to send us wandering, alone and miserable, through the alpine forests. Our ankles swollen to twice their normal size. Our memories stirring themselves like paint. Until we can't tell anymore where we came from, which village houses people with our same name and triglyceride levels. And which merely seems familiar because the children there vandalize houses on the outskirts with bricks. Bless, then, the idle, if you are inclined to feel hopeless, to brood. If you wish to analyze your fondness for pecans, and those foreign students who would like nothing more than to change everything about themselves. To become so much a part of the surrounding culture, they no longer answer to their own names. Preferring instead to adopt that of the state of Montana, for instance. Or the capital of the state of Montana, should that prove easier to recall.

Wallpaper Dawns

We limit our shivering to the vicinity of the legs, but this is no way to make the forensics team. No way to erase twenty generations, say, of people so clumsy they are given parachutes for graduation. Or invited to pen autobiographies that have nothing to do with their places of birth. With their love lives or everyday procedures. Like cleaning the sink. Our eyes have a long history of deceiving us. We imagine the soil infested with miniature, mythological beings just waiting for their day to emerge and frighten away the population that no longer believes in them. That turns its collective nose up at the pictures they are forced to paint to keep themselves occupied in the meantime. Pictures so obscene, the artists themselves are apt to get embarrassed in the explication. They wave their interlocutors away – usually just flies drawn to the canvas, not by the subject matter, but the tint. They seem to think they have found a fresh source of nectar.

Nightmare of the Common Lisp

These attempts at masquerade, at pitching the quarters back in the face of the man who minted them, aren't going to win us any converts. But, who knows? Perhaps venom is just the sort of thing one needs to bring the past back from its cluttered grave. To revitalize it the way toxic bacteria knock the wrinkles out of one's skin. You have merely to put the dictionary down and walk off into the forest, just as a woman might get up out of the dentist's chair and head for the car even with the bib – stained and looking a little like a half-complete map of northern Europe – hanging from around her neck. Every last one of us looks for the idea of history in history, rather than at the perimeter. Because we have no practice with it. We think such ornate operations something pre-determined, like crystals materializing in stone. Cleveland, for instance, prefers the tympani to the organ. And Venezuela has no organs at all. Only those pianos with four keys we give our children when we think they might be prodigies. But we want to be 100% certain before we make that commitment. The fashion, in the meantime, is to stick out your tongue at the fine ladies enjoying oysters on the boardwalk. They seize like electric eels whenever someone mentions allegory. The possibility of finding value in the things we say. In the Olive Ridley sea turtles hauling themselves ashore to lay their eggs and ruminate a spell on the Atlantic Ocean.

Ensoule Your Deeds

They look at me with blank incomprehension on their faces. As if I'd just mentioned the last unmentionable name. The incident that brought them down from the plateau in the first place. And spread them out in their rain slickers and their bone jewelry like silt from a river. Whatever needs said gets said. Just maybe not with the sort of sophisticated intonation that puts people at their ease. Soon, I am crouching for cover behind the sofa, shaking my fist at the heavens. In a sitting room where no one has ever uttered the word heaven before. Let alone considered the distance between it and us. Or how we might measure that distance accurately enough to provide detailed directions, in the memoirs we are continuously scribbling, even if only in our minds. I make mention, for instance, in yet a further appendix, of a woman who left more than ten years ago. Because the appliances stopped working. First the dishwasher. Then the iron. Which, you'll notice, I keep now on the mantle, as if it were an urn.

Axiom for Let

Every endeavor leads to failure, that madness you refer to as mundane because you happen on it with such regularity it becomes like the sun. Or the soil beneath your feet. Something to be remarked on occasion, but otherwise so much a part of the background, the texture, it's easy to forget it's there. Even when it does stand out, it has lost all power to astonish, no matter how virulent or odd its formulation. Just like those newspapers that sweep along the ground in fragments when the wind picks up and a storm is coming and people scurry for the doorways, hoping to find there not just shelter from the coming inclemency, but companionship. Maybe for an hour, or a week. Conversations that start with inanities and finish in grunts and monosyllables, sighs and unwise declarations. Instinct becomes something grotesque then. The spawn of those brought together unnaturally. By the sound of the symphony coming through walls. The bassoon turning into its opposite. Cold mushroom soup. And any reassurance to the contrary settles to the floor like a tin can to the bottom of a lake, revealing itself only after the passage of millennia. After the monkfish has succumbed to its cousins. You get enough spite stored up like that and there's no end to the good you could do, even if only accidentally. As far as mottoes go, that's a good one. But even better is a saying of the Aztecs. It has something to do with serpents. How they rarely change the color of their plumes.

The Axis of the World

The axis of the world is in your closet. It's probably a tree, but there are no leaves and so you can not see it. You only know it's there the way we know someone's thoughts just by examining his features. The grimace that precedes the compliment. The saliva on the bottom lip. And if you have no luck here, where will you have it? In the backseat, when the van makes its u-turn, the driver remembering suddenly sentences don't always mean what they say? That his wife, for instance, may have intended menace with her mention of the leotard. We are outnumbered and ultimately defeated by those who care nothing whatsoever for the niceties of geography. Who consider *Tom Sawyer* a myth of epic proportions. They circle the cul-de-sac at night and call out on their bull horns. Until such time as Venus wades her way into the sky. And the ringleader gets sleepy. He curls up in a station wagon, stuffs wads of cotton in his ears to keep out the sound of his accomplices muttering oaths and accusations. Discussing how they'd like to try their hand some day at topiary.

In Debt to Pleasure

Recall ridges lined to the horizon with barbarians who favor pastel colors. Headbands and silk shirts and jewelry of the sort that makes people's mouths water. But serves only to weigh down the wearer so that he doesn't float away. The heavy stuff. The gold that comes from the bottom of the sea. Talk about your difficulties in extraction! The value of aimless travel lies in its tendency to deceive. To make one remember the marble quarries fondly, the work there something not without its glamour. It's a wonder, though, we don't just fall over dead as soon as we're back on the surface. Smoking, incinerated -- just a pile of bones beside the stroganoff. And the faux crystal glasses. My guess is the body doesn't react to the elements -- rain and thunder and oxygen -- the way it has been explained to us in the textbooks. Rather, it follows its own line of reasoning. One that is no more open to our understanding than is the origin of the moons of Jupiter. Or the thought processes of the limpet clinging to its mossy rock.

The Root of Our Word *Vespers*

The story makes its rounds at the VFW, salting conversations that might otherwise center on how to spend money you don't have. Or why aluminum behaves in such predictable ways. It is a point of pride with anybody in that part of the city that they are not made of the same substance we are. They are more creative by virtue of the humiliations they must endure. But does that mean we are supposed to just sit and molder because the rain is the very worst thing we have to deal with for whole months at a time? Because there are no polar bears unless they got loose from the carnival? No sand fleas so enormous they can be expected to drain the little ones dry in a matter of hours? Up the road, they have a center for experimental psychiatry that is painted pink because its director believes divorce is a byproduct of the industrial colors favored by our parents. By people still arguing about who is going to purchase the shoes and who is going to call emergency services when a pine tree comes crashing through the roof. Again. All of which suggests habit is meaning enough. Once we start doing something a certain way, there is no reason to change it. Unless we desire change for its own sake. A thirst akin to that for speedboat racing. Or insulting people you don't know just as soon as you meet them. Our phone books, though, are another matter altogether. We run our hands over their pages with all the angst and regret one ordinarily reserves for the lid of a coffin.

Epic of the Insomniac

We know the details because we've been paying attention. To the obit pages. To the *Readers' Digest*. The cabinet sits in thirteen pieces, not all of them the same size or color. Which indicates it is not intended for everyday use. But rather to throw off whichever pursuers we dreamt about when the wine was chalky. Oh, they will know this is coming! But what's to stop the fountain once it has begun? What's to keep the garden shears in their drawer after the lights go out and the dogs start barking in unison? It's as if we have an inkling ahead of time of our rivalries, our difficult decisions and what goes into them, the way turmeric goes into the bouillabaisse. But as for the rest -- those who balance the pencils on the end of their shoes as a parlor trick, those who decry such performances as buffoonish and cruel -- they will remain exactly where they were before this day ever rolled around. Which is to say on their backs in some fashion. Whispering to folks who haven't been seen in years. Who exist primarily to remind us that the highways and access roads don't wander close to streams for no reason. They are there to allow the teenagers to play their fervent games. All in the vicinity of the box elders. And the power lines mumbling their incontestable lessons overhead.

The Structure of Fable

The pictures of the garden get replaced every two weeks or so with pictures of someone else's garden. Just as if we'd grown tired of admitting we live in one place. That the air above our heads is rife with mud daubers and harp music, while several kinds of salmon swim in our direction. They turn right at the boulder with initials painted on it, the testimonials to the love of one person for another. Even if neither one of them is still breathing. Or apt to remember those starlit nights when they searched each other's pockets for tell-tale signs of bad faith. A telephone number written down on a package of sugarless gum. False fingernails smelling faintly of gin and reflecting such unusual colors, you could be forgiven for considering them hexed, even sentient, when you found them in your palm.

Animated by Something Light

The obsession with inked objects – oriental fans, tattooed arms on the lady who lives upstairs, manuscripts composed by the founding fathers when they were in the mood for something light, like satire or biography – will get you noticed by those who already have their affairs in order. Who pretend the Earth is one great big chaise lounge someone took to the curb. But such blessings as they claim are in all actuality as irregular as Addison's heartbeat. Things that wait for the moon to phase in just right or the waters to rise above the flood wall before they'll make their appearance, stick their heads up just long enough to get shot at. Or sketched by those who make a living without a camera as a way of commenting on the modern world itself. You see what it is you're missing, they seem to say as they parade about in the most outlandish garb or duck under train trestles just when you thought there was nothing to duck under anymore. Only white hot deserts where one may bleach bones. Assuming one brings them along, of course. In a burlap sack. But there's the rub. We have no more need of solidity, of the firm undercarriage and the primeval design than a man has need of ontological speculation when his toaster won't work. And that's why we squander every trip to the marsh, why we pursue one another like jackals. And then there is an interlude, a catastrophic pause that seems at first like it was written in intentionally, placed there by someone who knew what he was doing. But on closer inspection turns out to be an accident of the grammar. Of the rules that make such composition possible in the first place. Strange, brittle things you may look up in the encyclopedia if you feel the need. But are really best left to operate unnoticed and unmolested, just beneath an otherwise perfect surface.

The 98 Cent Body

Drastic transformations of the landscape almost always occur outside the city limits. But when they do occur within, we have a way of covering them up immediately. Wrapping fences around them, building gazebos, so that if you fall in at that point, no one really considers it an accident. You have, in your perversity, willed the thing to happen and you get what you deserve. Which is almost always a lingering death by hypothermia, though you might be so lucky as to find your way out again (by following the light in a crevice, say), but when you emerge nothing is ever again the same. Your wife makes the toast and looks you in the eyes when you eat it, and when asked to explain this strange behavior, she shrugs her shoulders as if to say any explanation that might be forthcoming is so necessarily alien and incomplete, there is no point in even initiating a response. It is best to just let the silence that sits between us do whatever work is necessary. At least then we'll know where we would have wound up eventually. Despite the path the swans take to safety when startled. Despite the pain in the palm of your hand that radiates outward just as soon as you try to swallow any resentment you might feel at this disclosure. It's like a spider web, that pain, except it's not visible on the surface. And you're pretty sure it doesn't really exist beneath the surface either. It has been invented, the way you might invent the sights and miseries of someone else's childhood. The way you might, if you had the means and the power, plunge an entire coastline into darkness on little more than a whim.

How to Miniaturize the Soul

Commend the idea of flags, of snow. Of sand grains in the layers that might otherwise seem identical if you were to look at them through a microscope. One specially designed to fit your eye socket -- a necessity ever since there was that dust-up in the tavern where no one pays in cash. They don't have the patience. The true culprits lie in wait behind the benches, in the yard-tall grass. They say prayers that sound suspiciously like laundry lists. Or those chronicles of what occurred on some island nation where nothing has ever really occurred at all. They know how to miniaturize the soul, if need be. They know how to turn it into a package of seeds like that you'd find on the shelf at a hardware store. But without the pretty photographs on the outside, of course. And the addresses. The suggestions for how to turn your cabin into the kind of fabled destination people drive for hours on the weekend just to visit. Just to tell their friends about when they return because their friends make such stupid, snap decisions. They stick to the edges of every photograph where overlooking them is to be expected. They blend in well with the bald cypress trees. And the sea gulls just arrived from some body of water that, evidently, lies beyond our line of sight. That waits there by implication. And drowns neither actual beasts nor figurative saints. But buoys all things equally. Perhaps it isn't really made of water after all, but something else entirely. Hydrogen gas. A diminished nihilism. The sort of thing one looks for in the newspaper when the car won't start. And breakfast sits half-eaten on the table.

Acknowledgements

Harpur Palate: "Furiant, Not Polka"

The Furnace Review: "Man with a Tri-cornered Hat"

Juked: "On the Dust Jackets of Even the Filthiest Books"

Arabesques: "What the New Caledonian Said", "Concerning the Origins of
Despair"

42opus: "His Vipers, He Writes"

The Blotter Magazine: "To Speak of Species is to Speak in Circles", "A Uniformly
Emotionless Performance"

The Iconoclast: "The First Whence and the Last Whither"

Shadowtrain: "An Enquiry Concerning the Yodeling Knives", "In Debt to
Pleasure", "The Root of Our Word *Vespers*", "Epic of the Insomniac",
"The 98 Cent Body", "How to Minimize the Soul"

The Stone Table Review: "Principle Landmarks in the Sidereal Evolution of the
Globe", "Your Word of the Day"

Mad Hatters Review: "The Indictment of Galileo was Rational"

The Tusculum Review: "Wallpaper Dawns", "Ensoul Your Deeds"

Bombay Gin: "Nightmare of the Common Lisp"

Great Works: "Axiom for Let", "The Axis of the World"

Pank: "The Structure of Fable"

580 Split: "Animated by Something Light"

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Furiant, Not Polka

Charles Freeland's prose poems take us on a high speed, dizzying trip. The everyday world of laundry lists, half-eaten breakfasts, and cars which won't start — the world we think we know so well — takes on a terrifying yet exhilarating sheen. Freeland weaves and whirls from image to image, but somehow, like an improvising jazz musician, he is skilful enough to take us with him. And not so far beneath the zany, ever-changing surface, there are quieter and darker echoes of an almost-metaphysical presence, which, however inconvenient or disturbing, refuses to leave our lives.

— Ian Seed, author of *Rescue* and editor of *Shadowtrain*