



unicorn

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Cover artwork by Steve Doyle

Forty Inches

the snow collapses
on people, like millions
of winter dogwood, out
of control

like white ink flooding
the black distinctions
on a lawyer's deed--smothers
yards and fences, narrow
walks, curbs, erases the lines

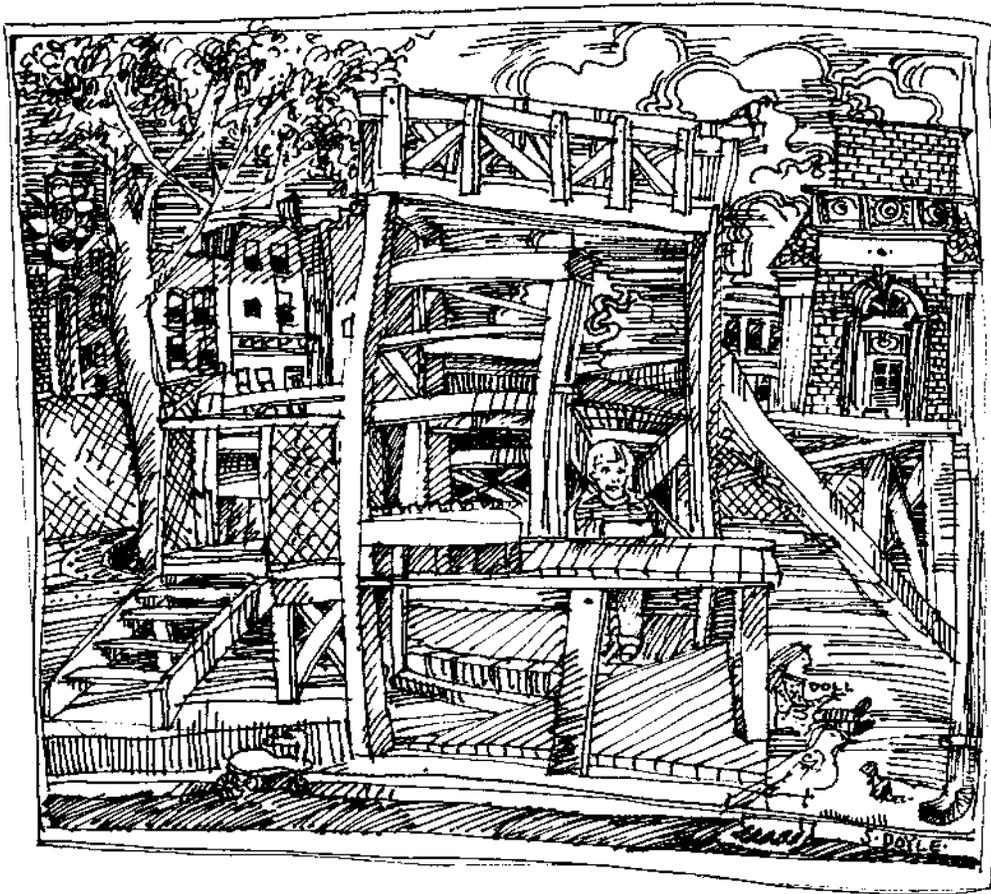
on streets, catching
cars and buses in oblique
confusion, like metal tacks
randomly dropped into sand

and makes our houses
igloos, sealing us in, watching
our preconceptions levelled
to anarchy white

till everything
looks the same as everything else
--equally strange, repossessed,
reminding us

that this may be
the place we live,
but we don't own it
yet

---P. McCaffrey



The Traditional Gift

I thought it was a gift
of light and the sun,
but it was only an orange.

Put it with the other
Christmas things,
by the tree,
hang it with the pears.

Clutching the orb over
a moist juicy voice,
to believe my ears--
This orange interrupts!

"Brilliant!"
the little one cried,
"to be in pairs,
at Christmas,
how wonderful."

Needless-to-say,
things being what they are,
I devoured the sun.

---Edward J. Uhl III

Day after Christmas

The wreathes of Delia Robbia break up
in wind, peach and plum are reduced to twig,
the last persimmon hangs like a bruised sun.
Last night Francis and I put down a fifth
in shots, bought with money saved for a tree.
We resolved that a tree would only die
and pushing thirty, burnt our own blue flames.
This morning bites like gin--with bloodshot eyes
I watch Vandenberg explode two missiles
in spurred and showy flowers--one trail fans out
lucent and veined as the wing of a fly.
And like cloistered nuns, mocking birds cant wry
Te Deums to my enervated ear--
everything comes exposed without regard . . .

---Christopher Buckley



ache for the weeping plum in winter

I have been as naked
in your hands
and as silent
as the weeping plum in winter
scraping stick fingers
across the gray ice
of a season
that will not thaw
without you
I uncover us
in blue smoke secrets
whispered to the plum
that once you loved me
the way you loved me

winter dream

that sleet could glaze me
into a crystal ornament
you would reflect upon

---Marlis Manley Klein

Peter Kochen's Christmas

---M. O'Doherty

After Pushkin died, Peter Kochen felt nothing--neither joy nor sorrow. He wasn't amused by the women who wondered how they looked with their tears, nor was he encouraged by the women who bravely held back behind their veils. Even the solemn stance the funeral director assumed and his younger helper who hadn't yet perfected the professional manner of folding his hands, did not offend him. If his mother hadn't set the alarm of his clock, he wouldn't have gone to the funeral or gotten out of bed. He should have written his own eulogy, Peter thought, as the pair wheeled the polished casket toward the sanctuary, without effort. If they had known his secrets, he thought, no one would have gone to the church, except Pushkin's parents.

It was Good Friday and throughout the sing-song of the priest's reading, Peter imagined the number of coughs that would be followed by colds and listened intently to the sounds of coughing and sobbing. There was such a subtle difference between the coughs and sobs, due to the distorting echo in the hollow of the church. It seemed plausible that there would be a greater ratio of sobs to pews in the front of the church, where his immediate family sat, than there would be in the remainder of the church. The coughing should be equally apportioned throughout, except where there were oversize groupings of people who lived under the same roof; there his theory might not hold, taking into account not only the factor of contagion--but also genetics, coughing could run in families like beauty.

Pushkin's sisters were beautiful--blonde and broad shouldered with sturdy limbs and trunks, and their movements were strong and deliberate the way his friend's used to be--unlike most daytime women who would bend or even float when the wind flew. It would

have tickled him to watch all of these wildeyed women sending him off. The women would certainly miss him; and there were so many women! Most of them didn't know he was dead and would never know, unless Peter told them. Pushkin knew them all by name: Jamaica at the Boots Saloon, Ginger at the Pussycat, Liza at the Block Show Bar and Laura at the Oasis, who stood on her head at the close of her act, when she wasn't drunk. They all loved him, or at least Peter sometimes imagined they had. Even Tina and the other female impersonators loved him, because he treated them like women. When they asked him to go in the back and lay on the floor with them, he only smiled under his mustache that was coated with the foam of beer--and bought another round. Peter was fortunate that Pushkin loved drinking and whoring more than women, yet he believed he was more fortunate when he thought of the secrets they might exchange on the way home, about adventures they would've had--if they had more money, or didn't have to work the next day.

The rain of three days soaked into the shoes of the participants at the cemetery and while they recited the Paternoster, Peter Kochen studied the fog of their breath and his mother sniffed beside him. It seemed, no matter how deeply they breathed inward, their souls were escaping in the vapor that leaked like smoke from the holes of their mouths. Would possession work inversely? And did he expire only because he had no more mist to steam the doctor's mirror? And should his Pushkin be forgotten only because his body could no longer exhale that little cloud? These were the questions Peter asked as the chant of the priest stopped and the loud wail of his women began--telling him his first life had ended.

Easter Tuesday, Peter was late for work. The senior partner of the firm, Mr. Reed, was in a frenzy not only because he had a stack of late filer's income tax returns to be calculated, signed and mailed, but also because of Chris Yunger's death. He was already one accountant short and didn't want another one 'jumping off the deep end'. So he put his arm on Peter's shoulder and held onto the collar of his suit.

"How are you feeling, Peter?"

"Nothing," said Peter with his thoughts confined to a world where words had no place or importance, until Reed shook him gently out of it.

"I mean, I was all right," he stammered, "I mean I'll be okay."

Mr. Reed hugged him closer to smell his breath, and began: "I know what a blow this thing was on you and I know how tough it is on everybody and you never know what to say about these damned things!" He patted Peter on the back and his eyes shifted back and forth, as if he was in a dream with his lids open, while he glanced around the office for assistance. "And I'm really glad to see you had the courage to face this thing and came to work today." Now, convinced of his suspicion by the smell of Peter's stale and fruity breath, Mr. Reed motioned to his secretary and said, "Pour Mr. Kochen one black and two sugars for me."

Kochen sat at his desk and smacked his lips as he sipped (a habit of Chris' which had often irritated him, but now he thought nothing of it). He felt nothing except the small notebook he held in his pants pocket. And through the day, whenever he couldn't concentrate on his work and no one was watching, Peter pulled the notebook from his pocket and opened it to the first page. It was blank aside from two lines handwritten in Russian:

I refuse to write your eulogy.

There's but one soul between us

They had frequently written poems to one another in that language, but now it seemed to be as futile as holding his own breath, since he was only writing to himself.

The rest of April went slowly and on the first Monday in May, Mr. Reed, upset by Peter's work output, decided to demote him. Had he been any other accountant in the office, Reed would have fired him. But Peter had such a talent for figures, and before the accident he was such a hard worker--and he did know Peter's mother. So Mr. Reed kept him on, hoping that he might recover if he assigned Peter all the trivial duties he usually divided among the secretaries.

A week passed and Peter still showed no sign of improvement. He arrived late every morning, made the bank deposit, picked up the office lunch, returned to his desk not saying a word, then doodled in his notebook, until Mr. Reed gave him another task.

That weekend, his mother spoke to him. She said that she 'had a talk with Mr. Reed' and that Peter had become 'such a burden' on her and everyone and that he 'should try to think of someone else' besides himself, while she sniffed and wiped her nose dry with the back of her hand. Peter said nothing. He only

wondered why her nose ran when she cried, and whether the tears might wash her nose away like paint. How would she look without a nose--without a face?

The deposit bag folded itself in half and drooped over his coat pocket, and Peter stood in line, looking at the floor; his thoughts had just deserted the past when he lifted his head, and saw her. He was surprised by her. He had been to the bank at least five or six times the week before, but hadn't noticed her? Her smile was so frequent and she was so relaxed in her concentration when counted the dollar bills; and when it was his turn, she smiled at him.

On his return to the office, Peter saw her hands counting the leaves of the silver maples, which had just unfolded for him. He noticed the jonquils showing their colors and ants with wings on their backs climbing the office window. He was euphoric and didn't need his overcoat.

So day after day, Peter began taking on more responsibility at the office and Mr. Reed was delighted. He gradually gave him better assignments, and within three weeks, Peter returned to his prior level of competence. Mr. Reed told Peter that he would find someone else to make the deposit and pick up the lunch, but Peter insisted. He said it gave him a chance to get some fresh air, which allowed him to work more efficiently, so Mr. Reed conceded, not wanting to disturb Peter's progress.

In the following months, Peter Kocher misplaced his notebook. He could only think of the future, their future. His Pushkin would have loved her too--her masculine shoulders, thick neck and relaxed smile. It made him jealous when she smiled at the other men in line at the bank. He often thought of comparing the smile she bestowed on the others to the one she gave him, to determine whether it was really true and really love, but he always forgot when she looked at him; he forgot everything except her lips. They weren't thin lips, they were heavy and rolled lazily on top of one another like tired children or the wrinkles of a potbelly. While he was alone, Peter was certain of their love. The two whiskers on her chin reassured him; he was certain that the other men wouldn't understand those things, which presented no problem to him.

After a long weekend with her swollen lips, Kocher waited in line at the bank on Monday. Where would he take her tonight? She wouldn't care, he

thought, as long as they were together!

When it was Peter's turn, he looked for her nameplate on the counter (he thought she should have it changed to Spring, since it was spring when he met her). Although, her name was musical! Maybe, he should take her to the symphony, he thought. And as he looked at her nameplate, Kochen felt the flapping of wings in his stomach and squeaked:

"There must be some mistake!"

"What?" she asked with a smile.

"Your nameplate--Mrs. Mmmums?" he stuttered.

"Oh yes! Aren't you going to congratulate me?" She asked, turning her hand with her thumb. "We were married Saturday."

Peter Kochen didn't return to work that day or any day after. No matter how much his mother coaxed him, he wouldn't leave the house. He searched his whole wardrobe, closet and chest-of-drawers for the missing notebook and when he found it, he wouldn't part with it. He even slept with it.

Kochen made such an effort with the poem; he must have written a thousand lines and reworked some of them half that many times, but couldn't finish it. The poem would be three lines in length, three lines of truth, he thought. But what purpose would all the lines serve, the lines he had already written? After he finished all the hard liquor in his mother's wine cellar, he started on the dry sherry, then the cooking sherry, then the anisette, then the mint schnapps, and he drank himself to sleep. Then one night amid his delirium, in the clearing of a footpath that led into the dusk and woods, Peter met his first love. At first, he was afraid of the face that seemed to emit its own light, the way inanimate objects do in the afterglow of the sun. But in a moment the memory of his older emotions overcame him and Peter made a step forward to follow him into the shadow of the woods. He walked beside him and clutched his hand as he talked about women and the poem he was writing to him, in a hope to win his approval or even nod of acknowledgment for what he had said. But his Pushkin seemed not to see him, or hear him. It was as if Peter did not exist in that woods, or was only a ghost in it who had no substance. But still the joy of having seen him, gave Peter enough reason to talk endlessly and as he laughed by himself, their breaths converged in the silence of that world.

The morning after, as well as the days after,

Peter Kochen only had time for his notebook, which soon evolved into volumes. His nights remained open for his dreams and his Pushkin, whose approval Peter hoped to win by the lines of poetry he had created or revised in daylight.

Peter's mother worried about his health. He wouldn't eat, grew thinner and paler, and coughed his way into winter. Sometimes she overheard him speaking in his bedroom and thought she heard another voice, but when she knocked on the door the talking ceased. She thought if he would speak to her, Peter might return to her world--the real world. So she read his poetry while he slept to find a subject that might interest him. When she mentioned she read the poem entitled "Below the Egyptian Moon" Peter didn't reply, and when she said she loved the images of "My Nativity" Peter said nothing.

It was Mr. Reed's suggestion. Peter's mother thought it was too harsh, but Reed argued "that only a great shock would bring him out of this thing." His suggestion had worked before and she could think of no other recourse. "And besides," Mr. Reed would argue, "it's only junk anyway." He also said that he went through the "sane stage" when he was younger.

So one night, while the fireplace in the study popped and the sparks from those pops went out like fire bugs, Peter coughed in his sleep, and his mother fed the fire. As the fire blazed out of control--too late to change her mind--she stood with the poker, pushing paper to the rear of the fireplace, praying she had done the right thing.

The next morning, Kochen's mother was in tears. She said she was sorry and that she had made a mistake, but Peter couldn't hear her. He moved his lips, but couldn't form a word. The only sound that came from his mouth was a long moan as if his soul was in flames. Then silent again, he returned to his bedroom and collapsed into his bed. Only his Pushkin could help him now.

But no matter how hard he tried, Kochen could not find his friend to comfort him. He went to bed sober, he went to sleep drunk, he even tried overdoses of pills. Nothing worked! When Peter woke, he couldn't remember anything. His mother, day after day, brought him trays of food and set them on his bed; Peter never touched them. He only rocked in the chair in the corner of his room, staring blankly at the ceiling, and waited--since he could no longer

dream.

Then, slowly, Peter gave up his fast and his mother was very pleased at first. They even began having their meals together and Peter conversed with her after desert. Their conversation, mostly small talk, was about white sales or about the local gossip (who was wedding whom, and who was expecting). Often, Peter would ask his mother questions about her pregnancy. How did you feel? What did you feel like? Do you think a man would ever really understand the miracle of birth? But with these questions, his mother began asking herself questions, which she tried to forget.

Soon after, Kochen began walking with his hands at right angles to his arms and his voice became smaller and higher in pitch, the way it had been when he was younger. She had second thoughts when he asked her how to knit, but brushed her inhibitions aside, thinking it might be good therapy--especially after that tremendous shock. Then, as Christmas approached, she couldn't forget her worries; in the wash, she found some of her undergarments that she hadn't worn.

A few weeks later, near the end of Advent, she was horrified when she opened his bedroom door to wake him for breakfast. On the top of the spread, Peter sat hunched over on his bed gagging and bare--except for her brassiere and panties.

She told Peter to take them off, and he did. She told Peter to never wear her clothes again, and he didn't. She told him to wear his own clothes, and he refused. Peter told her they 'no longer fit,' he was 'swilling so!' Instead, he decided to wear the afghan from his bed.

By Christmas Eve, with the off-key humming of "Silent Night" from the carolers outside, Peter's mother walked up the stair to her bedroom with her spirit and heart almost broken, while Peter rolled in agony within his afghan on the hardwood floor.

Then, as the sounds from the outside faded, Peter Kochen screamed, "it's coming:" And he sweated and banged the heels of his feet onto the floor, and he panted with his legs spread like a woman, "It's coming'."

His mother was silent with the whites dominating her eyes.

"It's coming! I feel it! It's coming! Oh Lord, here it cases!"

She pulled off his afghan, yanked out the pillow that he had strapped to his stomach, then held it in the air.

Peter raised his head to see the pillow, and asked as he squinted his eyes, "Boy or girl?"

"Neither!" she screamed.

"Oh," said Peter, smiling like a Madonna, before his head dropped back, and hit the floor with a loud thud.

His mother waited till morning to open the window, and let out his soul.

A Celebration of Lights

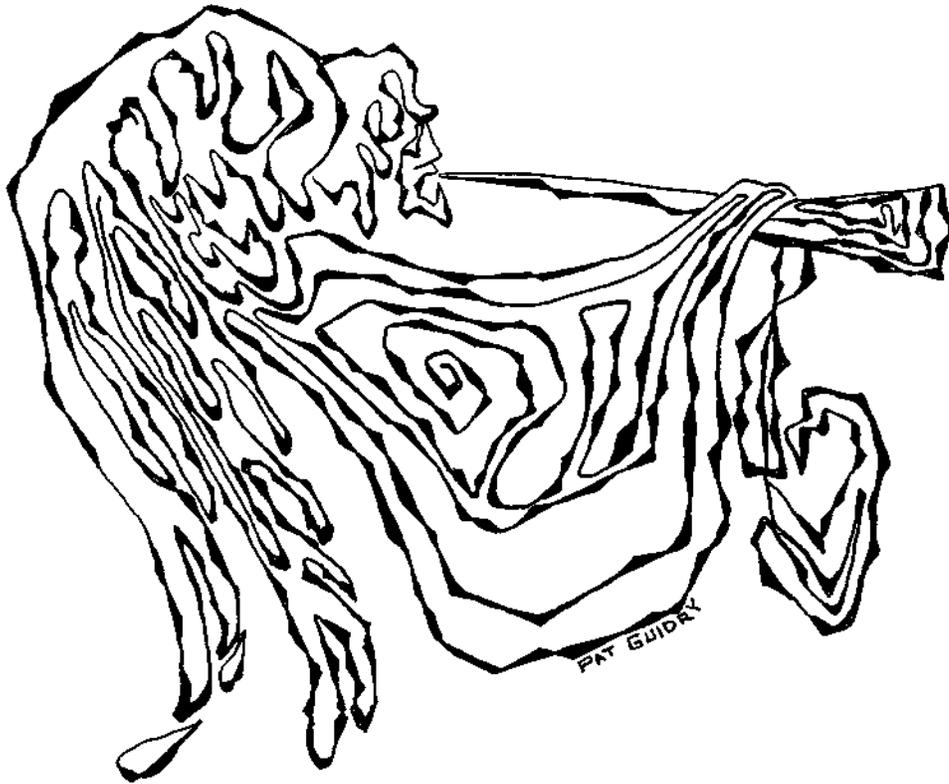
Turning in plateaus of light
This day now quietly is set
In burnished gold, in antiqued rose
A vesper recast from the snow.

Darkness brightens, grace descends.

Old rose and gold upon these fields,
Soar on the solstice of the year,
Sustaining shimmering lambencies.

Gaudete! Rare, ah rare, reflection,
A fleeting second's still perfection.

---D.M. Eddy



messiah

from a tribe of twelve
ears pricked
toward the new sound
comes
the son
angel hair glistening
off street mirrors
feet dancing
between shadows
image of a god

the first time
the appearance
struck me odd from
then on
i saw only a sad
santa claus without
reindeer or toys

---frank rossini

Quintuplets for Sister

They were all she asked:
the Dionnes had been born that year
and dolls in fives filled every shop
in town, \$10.00 the set. But Santa had
only \$10.00, and five of us to gift.
Necessity invented--the dimestore
had babies fifty cents a piece
with no clothes on. Mama didn't like
to sew, but sew by night she did--
five flannel gowns and five pink rosebud
blankets bound in blue.
Sister loved them for years, never knowing
that her babies weren't the patented,
authenticated, real Dionnes.

---Bettie M. Sellers



second grade

notonebuttwo

memories have i

one in color

one in blackandwhy

a babblingbabybrother

born in may

and a drearydrizzly november day

when i

bowedmyheadclaspedmyhands

sighed

to keep president kennedy

alive

---vicki avera

Thief

A fog filters through city streets,
Washes the brick browner,
Tangles among the streetlights at night only
Like a reasonable criminal,
Steals the air of sunlit indulgence,
Of light, order and meaning,
As slowly, insidiously as winter rapes the fertile fields
And here I fester Janus-faced,
Believing, as Plato wrongly believed,
That Beauty belongs with the sun.

---Bob Smith

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