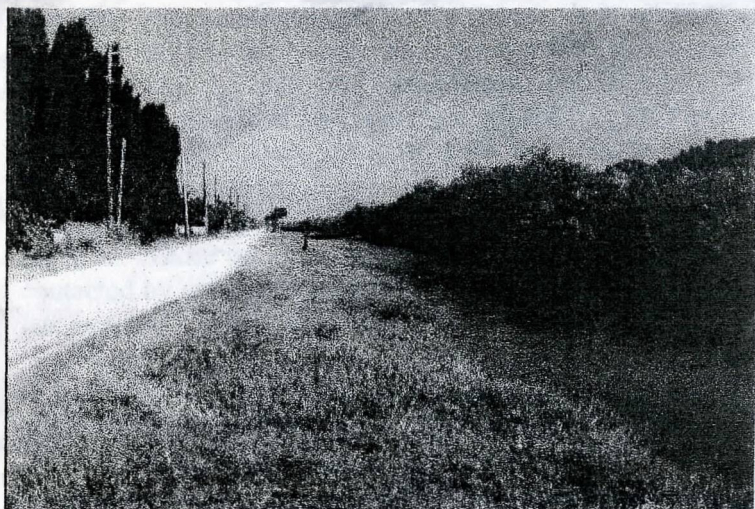


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issue #2

Talk Story

the best literature seeping up from the underground



featuring

Concerto for the Star King

a short story by Justin Bryant

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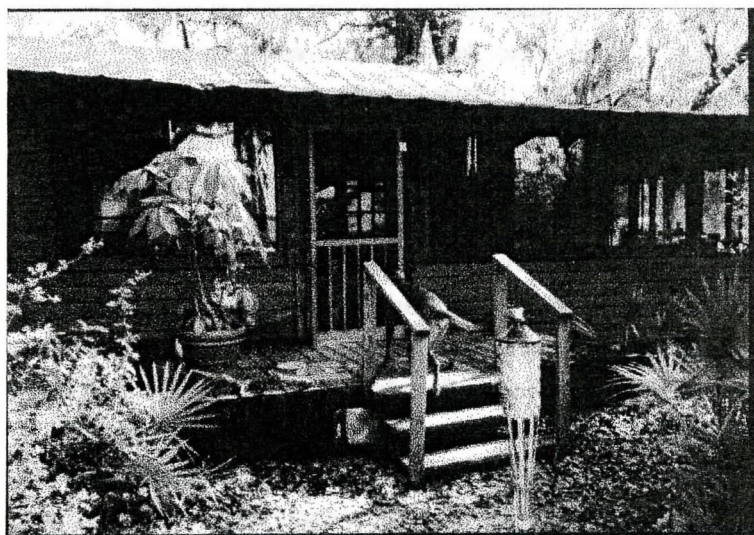
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And Also... A Word (Well, Words) from Felizon:

Attention, Women Readers: Certain individuals here at Gorsky Press fear that Talk Story has been featuring boy stories and may possibly be viewed as a zine written for male readers. Naturally, we want to avoid this and keep everyone happy. So if you are female and have a story you would like to see in print, don't hesitate to send a submission. Nothing really sucks... unless you're trying to be Joyce Carol Oates or one of those snooty-voiced "I'm so bored yet cool" wanna-be literary magazine-type writers. Then you just try Oprah's Book Club. Otherwise, we're really hoping to hear from you!

The Fiction of Old Friends: an editorial



Driving south down I-95 on my way to Miami to visit an old friend not long ago, a feeling of trepidation began to overwhelm me. Though I was born, raised, and have spent more than seventy-five percent of my life in Florida, I'd never been to Miami. I'd never seen that part of Florida that most people from elsewhere picture as Florida: the red tile, Spanish style houses; the fifties version post-modern architecture; the beaches full of the beautiful people; the neon; the low-riding muscle cars; and all the other stereotypes. But that wasn't what filled me with

apprehension. Miami itself didn't scare me. Mark Scholl scared me.

Mark's an old college buddy of mine, one of those guys who I don't see too often now, so he resides in that part of my memory that I try to stay away from. I guess it's the by-product of a wild youth, but when I think of guys like Scholl and the shit we did, I smile and laugh, but it's not a nostalgic smile and laugh. It's a nervous reaction. It's that residual part of my psyche that still thinks, despite evidence and statute of limitations proving otherwise, that someone is going to throw me in jail for all that shit, sooner or later. And the dangerous thing about Scholl and me, though, is our ability to push each other too far. There's always that next challenge, that next dare, that next ill-fated sprint that seems to stop just before going over the edge of something big. Mark's first wedding was a good example of that.

I trashed Mark's first wedding. Well, not the wedding. I missed the wedding. I missed the reception, too. It's a long story. Too much nervous dread to get into, but the gist of it is: Mark got married in St. Augustine, about two hours north of where I was living at the time. The wedding was kind of a sudden thing. I got the invitation on my answering machine on the afternoon of the wedding, and I only knew where Mark's hotel room was. So I packed up into a car with a gang of drunks and a bottle of whiskey that I'd intended to give as a wedding present.

We drank half of the whiskey on the way up to St. Augustine. I couldn't find the wedding or the reception, so I spent the whole night drinking in St. Augustine bars with my gang of drunks. When the bars closed, we walked back to our car, which was parked in front of Scholl's honeymoon suite. We

noticed that the light was still on in Scholl's hotel room, so we busted in with a half empty bottle of whiskey (half full for a guy like Scholl). Scholl's new bride was really angry. Scholl was just happy to see booze after the bars closed, so the gang of drunks, Scholl, and I left the room and walked down to the river to have a drink.

We stayed up for another couple of hours, hanging out alongside whatever river it is that runs through St. Augustine, drinking straight from the bottle, dancing to no music, howling at the moon, pissing off the seawall, pissing off all the residents of Scholl's hotel, and racing at least three fifty-yard dashes. By the time Mark staggered back up to his honeymoon suite, it didn't matter if he was an optimist or a pessimist. That bottle was all the way empty.

Years later, after the divorce, Mark told me that his erstwhile new bride wrote a poem about Mark stumbling into the honeymoon suite and asking her if it was all right for the rest of us to crash on the floor. She called it "Wash Your Dirty Feet Before You Get Into My Bed." Or something like that. I never read it, but I'm sure it was equally hilarious and sardonic. I loathed Mark's ex-wife, but I have to admit that she was a hell of a good poet.

She was also my ex-girlfriend before she was Scholl's anything, so you see how tangled this web is. So you see those trepid smiles, hear those apprehensive laughs.

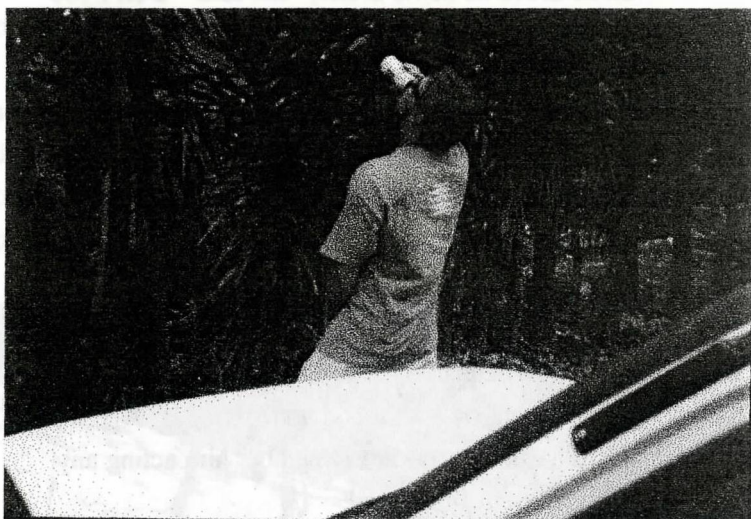
As I drove down to meet up with Scholl again recently, though, the whole wedding thing didn't worry me too much. That was a long time ago. Sometimes it seems like a whole other lifetime, like events that happened to someone else. Sometimes I know that it was all this lifetime, and that the events didn't just happen. I caused them. This is especially clear to me every time

I try to apologize again to Mark, but I can't do it without laughing. It's the same laugh that always seems to come up immediately before I get arrested or get my ass kicked. Mark does neither. So that didn't worry me. The ability to push each other too far worried me. I took some precautions before leaving I-95. I put enough money in my shoe to get back home. I drove past all liquor and convenience stores, hating to be the kind of rude guest who shows up empty handed, but preferring that to being the kind of guest who shows up inviting trouble.

It turned out to be good that I didn't invite trouble. Mark wouldn't have taken me up on the invitation if I had. Instead, we sat on his porch and drank a Pabst and told stories. Not stories of the days of old, of the wild times, road trips, acid trips, forgotten friends, forgotten professors, and quarts of beer that we sold blood for. We talked about more recent shit, stories full of introspection and small revelations rather than saturated with booze and drugs. Mark talked a bit about his divorce.

It was about sunset at this time. A warm breeze blew through the porch. The high green grass and potted plants and vines in the nearby garden made it seem cooler. Mark's dogs ran underfoot and in and out of an open screen. I glanced alternately at termite shavings along the porch rail, at the light from the oil lamp, and at Mark's face as he talked about his ex-wife, Shelley. Like I've said, she was also my ex-girlfriend, but barely. It's never been a bone of contention between Mark and me. Shelley and I had only gone out on a few dates, and you can't really even call them dates. I took her once to sit on a friend's roof and drink tequila, then we hung out at a few bars a few times over a few weeks, and that was pretty much it. I wouldn't even remember who she was if it weren't for two things. First, she put an old friend of mine through four or five

years of hell. Second, she told me something once that pissed me off every time I thought about it for a long time.



One time, when things were fresh between Shelley and me, before I grew to loathe her, before she grew to feel the same way about me, we had one of those just-starting-to-get-to-know-each-other conversations about our pasts. Shelley told me about being a young girl and going to the country club with her mom and dad. She said that her parents would take her there often. She would play on the playground with other kids or go swimming or do another of the thousand things to do at the country club. Her dad would sit at the country club bar and drink gin and tonics slowly. "Then," she said, "he would drive us all home. Can you believe that?"

Not seeing anything particularly strange about it, I said, "Yeah. I can believe that."

"But he'd been drinking all afternoon," she said.

Again, not seeing anything strange about that, I said, "Yeah, so?"

"So he drove us home drunk," she said. "Don't you think I should be scarred by that?"

My first thought was, are you fucking kidding me? My dad has driven me home when he's been drinking a bunch of times. That's how we get home from bars after an afternoon of drinking. These are good memories for me. So when Shelley said she should be scarred by them, my second thought was to get up, walk out of the house, go somewhere else, and find a new girl. Instead, I decided to try to understand this childhood scar. "Was your dad abusive when he drank?" I asked. "Did he hit you? Make fun of you? Abandon you?"

No's all around. "I don't remember him acting any different when he drank," she said.

Being the sensitive kind of college liberal arts student I was, I said, "I'm not really understanding where the scar comes from here."

"Well, he was drunk when he drove us home," Shelley said.

"Was he a bad driver?"

"I don't remember," she said.

"Then why would you be scarred?" I asked, sensitivity wearing away.

"Because he was drunk. He could've killed us."

I asked her if he'd had any close calls, even though I knew she'd say no. I got frustrated, but kept on prying, only to find out that she didn't feel lonely, had plenty of kids to play with, got tons of affection from her father, he even spoiled her, she admitted, and in general, even the weather was pleasant on those summer days. I got so mad that I said, "So what you're

telling me is that you're just a spoiled little country club girl who's sad because her childhood was so idyllic that she can't cash in on the new trend of writing memoirs of an abused childhood. You're fucking pathetic."

At least I hope I said that. I probably didn't. I probably acted all sensitive in hopes of getting laid. But let's pretend I didn't. For all of us out there who don't have to dig into a country club sandbox to find childhood scars, let's pretend that I put her in her place.



I thought of this as Mark told me of the shambles of the marriage and divorce. I thought of all the bits and pieces of our shared past, of Kentucky thunderstorms; snowy north Georgia mountains; a smoky Panhandle bar after a day of driving; the time he sat in the front seat of an Oklahoma State Trooper's car, the trooper asking, "How well do you know this Sean

Carswell?" I thought about Shelley and her scarless subconscious and the scars she left on Scholl, and I wondered if I was even getting the story right, what with so many years passing, so little time spent thinking about it, with so much time spent pickling and frying my brain. I wondered if I had any of the details right about anything; if I could even remember what Shelley looked like; if I knew this man sitting across the porch from me at all, this man who looked so much like a boy I thought I once knew. At the same time, I didn't want to tell all of these old stories just in case I had them wrong; in case the events I attribute to a wild weekend in Chicago really occurred one week night in Tallahassee; in case these brilliant friends of days gone by were really just angry kids blind to the world; in case I'd been able to forget anything that I really wanted to forget; in case my mind had jumbled everything. I don't want the facts of my past. The facts aren't the point. They never were. They never are. Facts are just things we use to make our lies or misunderstandings more believable. I don't want that. I want my memories.

It was then that it occurred to me how much of our understanding about life and people and patterns of human behavior is really fiction. We take the events of our lives and condense them and reshape them and mold them into a story that eliminates details in exchange for adding meaning. We take the facts that we know about our friends, blend them with their personalities and come to understand them as characters rather than humans, just as I did driving down I-95 South. I assumed Mark to be a static character. Like Sal Paradise in *On the Road*, Mark should be the exact same Mark every time I choose to pick that book up. For that reason, I assumed that he'd try to push me into one more shot, one more joint, one more wild

night. But as he sat on his back porch filling me in on all the episodes of the three years when we weren't in touch, I realized that the characters who are our friends are constantly being rewritten, growing, developing further with a mass of backstory that never makes it into the draft that we get to read. When we are reacquainted with friends after a week or a year or a decade, we're presented with the new chapters, and we have to decide if we still like this book, if it's turning out the way we'd hoped it would, or if we should trade it back in to the library for a new one. Regardless if the people we once knew have grown into different directions or not, regardless if we still like them or not, each and every one of our friends, our acquaintances, our strangers, and ourselves are too complex to really know through a few conversations, some beers, some shared experiences, so we condense, shape, and mold people into characters. By the same token, our life's experiences are too broad and convoluted to understand as a whole, so we choose to ignore most of the details, keep what we think is important, and condense, shape, and mold experiences into stories. That's what makes our true stories fiction and our fiction true. That's why details are unimportant. They can overwhelm us in our search for meaning.

That's what I thought about on that back porch in Coconut Grove when the sun set and the Pabst went down. Then, I wondered if maybe I'd just been writing fiction for so long that the line was only blurred for me. But the events of the night made me think otherwise.

We ended up in a bar listening to a guy play guitar. When the room was fairly empty, he played bluesy songs that sounded like Tom Waits. When the room was crowded, he played old Motown songs that sounded like Michael Bolton. Mark's new wife (who, incidentally, is a huge improvement over

Shelley and Filipino to boot) liked the musician, so we stayed and talked a lot during the Motown songs. Because it's an election year, we talked some about politics.

We differed on the presidential race and debated it for a while, both of us giving reasons that weren't really our reasons but reasons someone else had come up with and promulgated effectively and we came to agree with. Mark's arguments had no effect on my opinion, and my arguments had no effect on his because we'd both heard someone else espouse the same points of view at some other time. Out of nowhere, I asked Mark, "Have you ever read 'The Lottery' by Shirley Jackson?"

"Oh yeah," Mark said. "That's a great story."

And it is. It's about a little farm community that has a lottery every year. Shirley Jackson sets it up as a nice, sweet town and a nice, sweet story. The townspeople are very traditional, and one of their traditions is the town lottery. Most of the people in the town believe that the lottery has some sort of unexplained but direct result on their crops, so everyone in town participates, and in the end, the winner of the lottery (in the story, it's a woman named Mrs. Hutchinson) stands in the middle of the town and everyone throws stones at her until she dies a gruesome death. It's an eerie warning about blind adherence to tradition, among other things.

"Think of this upcoming election as the lottery," I said. "Everyone's throwing the stones at poor Mrs. Hutchison. You're in this town, whether you want to be or not. You have a stone in your hand. Where are you going to throw it? Are you going to choose to throw it at Mrs. Hutchison so that you don't waste your stone? Are you going to put it on the ground and walk away, choosing not to participate? Are you going to wing

it at the guy who orchestrated the lottery? What are you going to do with that stone in your hand?"

I could see the lights flickering and flashing in Mark's head like a late afternoon thunderstorm. I could see him really, genuinely contemplating the election. Rereading "The Lottery" a few weeks ago had had the same effect on me. It made me realize that all the truths of the election were fiction, the facts were unimportant, and the fiction of the story was true, so "The Lottery" had some meaning.



The next morning, I had breakfast with Mark, his new bride, and their friend Betty. By way of introducing me to Betty, Mark said, "Sean and I spent most of our college days drinking on rooftops, taking crazy road trips, smoking grass..."

"The *On the Road* phase," Betty said, shaking her head knowingly.

I wanted to protest, to tell her it was no phase. I wasn't some Deadhead trying to recapture a lost time that never really

was, following around a blind messiah in a desperate attempt for an enlightenment that would never come. I wasn't trying to live in a bubble, a dream world in the form of a novel. I wanted to explain and wondered how when Mark said, "No. It wasn't that. We were gassed up and ready to go before that novel came along."

And Mark was right. A book like that wasn't the engine that drove us. That's something I've always found hard to explain. Sure, I'm a huge fan of Jack Kerouac. Yes, I still read him. Despite academic trends pushing the contrary, I still hold Kerouac up as one of the most important American authors (because what the hell do academics know, anyway?). And I know it's become a cliché for writers in this day and age to hold him in high esteem, but fuck, I loved *On the Road*. I loved *The Subterraneans* and *Dharma Bums* and "October in the Railroad Earth" and *Big Sur* and *Mexico City Blues*. I have the album he recorded with Steve Allen. I still listen to it. Often. I can remember not only where I was when I read each of those book, and what library or bookstore I got them from, I can remember what was written to the point of being able to quote long passages from the top of my head or straight from my heart. I know that being a writer and paying tribute to Kerouac is akin to being a pop punk band paying tribute to the Ramones, but I don't care. Truman Capote never inspired me. T. Coraghessan Boyle never made me think. Norman Mailer didn't give me an outline to modern rebellion. It was *On the Road*. Still, *On the Road* wasn't the engine that drove us anywhere. It was, and is, more like a spark plug creating a steady flame, igniting gasoline to drive the pistons to rotate the axle and put us in motion, but it was always Mark or me or one of our other accomplices pushing down the gas pedal and steering.

Driving north on I-95 after a less than twenty-four hour visit to Miami, with money still in my wallet and in my shoe and the strange sensation of not having a hangover, I felt vindicated. Before going down there, I'd been in kind of a funk, wondering what I was doing with my life, wondering why I spent so much time reading stories that never really happened, studying the effects of artificial events, staying up late most nights to hammer away at the lives of imagined people in fictional situations; why I lived and died and cared so much about these figments of my imagination. I wondered a lot why it had any importance to the world and whether I was justified to wallow in poverty so that I'd have time to make up stories for other people to read. Shouldn't I be spending more time on real events? Weren't there enough real people with real drama? Weren't real situations more vital? If I must write, shouldn't I be writing about those real people and real situations? Maybe dedicating my time to investigative journalism, to exposing the ignored problems in our society?

Hanging out with an old friend after recently finishing the rough draft of a second novel, though, made me see fiction and non-fiction in a larger construct. It made me realize that the events of the world are so monumental and the simple things like experiences and people are too complex to understand, so we develop these artificial constructs like stories and characters just so that we can make some sense of the chaos. Understanding this and thinking about the stories of my past, the stories I've told here about the wedding and Shelley's scars, I realized that these are true stories in the sense that they really happened to the best of my memory, but that they're no more true than the stories I just wrote in my novel, because they are both artificial constructs developed to help people better understand life's

complexities. This understanding carries through to my conversation with Mark about politics, because all the political views that reach you through the great media filter is basically fiction, and the fiction of "The Lottery" has more truth to it than anything Fox News has ever said. By the same token, Sal Paradise from *On the Road* is more real to me than Ronald Reagan ever was because neither of them exist in the same world as me, but at least Sal Paradise has some relevance to my world.

So, I felt pretty good about all the time I spent writing and reading fiction and publishing this fiction zine, because, in the end, great nonfiction authors like Emma Goldman or Ben Bagdikian can give us all the evidence we need to support our opinions. They may even help us change our minds. But writers of fiction like Jack Kerouac and Shirley Jackson change the way we think about life in general.

My life was finally making a little bit of sense.



About the Author

Justin Bryant is proof that you find talent in some of the most surprising places. I say this mostly because he's a soccer junkie. To this day, I've never hung out with him for more than an hour before he brings up some sort of European soccer tournament. I've never been in front of a TV and VCR with Justin for any significant period of time without him breaking out a worn and warbly videocassette of goalkeeping highlights from the eighties. Ask Justin about Peter Shilton or David Seaman and, one or two hours later, you'll know more about English goalkeepers than any sane person would ever want to. Justin spent a good bit of the late eighties/early nineties bouncing around the US and England, playing soccer for various levels of professional and amateur teams. He is currently the assistant coach of the women's soccer team at Elon College in North Carolina.

Soccer junkie status notwithstanding, Justin is also one of the most talented writers I know personally. He recently gave me the opportunity to read a draft of his novel, *Season of Ash*. It's about one man's attempts to remain apolitical while apartheid falls in South Africa. The novel blew me away. With a little luck, I'll be publishing it through Gorsky Press in the next year or two.

Almost a year ago, Justin also sent me "Concerto for the Star King". At the time, I wasn't publishing any short fiction, so I just read the story, laughed a little, thought a lot, and kept it in mind. It was exactly the kind of thing I wanted to publish: a story so imaginative and original that it would only

baffle a mainstream editor, not because it's inaccessible or even difficult to read. It's just not easily classified. When no one submitted anything for the second issue of *Talk Story*, I jumped at the chance to hunt down "Concerto for the Star King". Thankfully, Justin donated it to this zine, and now we all get to enjoy it.

Justin Bryant

Concerto for the Star King



The crocodile made of stars visited Barton on his fourth night on Celeste Key. It came to him on claws of ice and diamonds, dragging its tail across the marl beach and leaving a wash of phosphorescence behind in the water. It stopped before him and raised its head, displaying the tiny blue-white stars and miniature spiral galaxies that constituted its entire body, from pointy snout to tapering tail, fifteen feet of cottony light, and critiqued Barton's choice of music.

Barton brought his stereo on every trip. His field kit consisted of the bare minimum for a herpetologist: binoculars, several wax pencils, a folding stool, camping gear, and a new concession to the digital age, a night vision scope. Most important, though, was his portable stereo. At night he played his CDs - Debussy, Sibelius, Bruce Cockburn, in recent weeks Skip Spence and Syd Barrett - and these nights alone with the music reminded him of the days when he attacked his field work with the arrogant vigor of youth.

Shortly after sunset on his first night he watched a trail of luminescent sparkles drift in the shallow water before his beach. He waded a few feet out. There was a splash and a swirl of sparkles: a lemon shark with a notched dorsal fin, stirring up phosphorescent algae from the turtlegrass beds. Barton followed the glowing trail until it reached the deep water beyond the coral heads. He remembered the territorial shark from his last visit, and this unexpected flake of familiarity lifted his mood. He built a fire from torchwood, played a CD and sang along with it:

"I'm Lawrence, of Euphoria!"

I'll share your tent, pay your rent,

It's worth every single cent.

I'll rise from the deep,

You'll come in your sleep,

No more will you weep,

'cause I'm Lawrence, of Euphoria!"

After dinner he waded the perimeter of the island with the night vision scope. His beach was less than forty yards long. The rest of the shore was impenetrable mangroves festooned with tiny spiderwebs, each one a silken, dew-jewelled

masterpiece. He eased across jagged caprock until he found the lagoon that squatted in the center of the island, fed by small tributaries flowing through the mangrove roots. He flashed his light across the basin but found no glowing croc eyes. On one side, the current pressed garbage against the muddy shore. Barton registered the garbage with benign regret. He found garbage everywhere. Last October, deep in the Fakahatchee Strand Preserve, he'd found an intact sewing machine and a still-inflated basketball in a stand of perennially flooded cypress trees.

Over the next three days, he built two observation blinds from palm fronds, even though he'd known at once that the mating crocs he'd come to study had long since departed. To keep busy, he measured the salinity of the lagoon, snorkeled through the mangrove roots in the clear water surrounding the island and checked the mud banks and beach for crocodile slides or footprints. At night he waded with the night vision scope. Through it everything looked green and fuzzy, but other than a few raccoons and the lemon shark which returned every night, there was nothing to see.

By the fourth day he succumbed to a general sloth, and didn't bother to prepare breakfast or lunch. Shortly before sunset he speared a hogfish, but was too hungry and impatient to wait for it to cook properly, so he ate it half-raw. It twisted and groaned in his stomach for an hour, before resigning itself to assimilation.

When he felt better he played a CD, the Violin Concerto No. 2 by Prokofiev. The starfields of the Southern Milky Way arced from the Gulf of Mexico to the Atlantic like a jewel-encrusted tapestry, framing the satellites that streamed with orbital precision towards the horizon. Barton heard soft

splashing from the shallows and saw the trail of sparkles from the lemon shark just before he dozed.



Twenty minutes later the crocodile woke Barton. "I don't care for this," the croc said in a Floridian accent, as it heaved slowly towards him.

Barton lifted his head. He was not afraid. He suspected he was delirious or dreaming. He laughed involuntarily.

"What is this? Shoshtakovich?" the croc said.

"It's Prokofiev."

"All the same, it's a concerto. Nothing but madcap violin solos."

Barton smiled. If it was a dream, at least it was a new one.

"I don't like concertos," the croc said. "They're too formulaic. Three parts, all showcasing the virtuoso. Don't you prefer music that showcases the composer? The performer is just a craftsman, but the composer is an artist -- a creator."

"What's wrong with being a craftsman?" Barton said.
"You're being elitist. We can't all be creative geniuses."

The crocodile shook his head. Although made of stars, he emanated very little light. The ground under him was only faintly illuminated, as if by the dim shine of a gibbous moon.

"It's craftsmen who are the elitists," the croc said.
"They have a little skill, so they show it off and make the rest of us feel clumsy."

"But what about Beethoven's piano concertos, or Mahler's short chamber pieces? Some of them are simple and easy to play, but still beautiful."

"Well, sure -- Mahler. Now you're talking about a real creator. He got it right."

Barton knelt close to the crocodile. His stars pulsed and flickered, and the spiral galaxies and ringed planets moved in arbitrary vectors across his body. Every few seconds, all of the galaxies simultaneously reversed direction. He saw through the stars to the inside of the crocodile's body, where a chalky nebula drifted. Barton reached out a hand and touched his back. It felt like any other crocodile.

"Is it possible to be delirious or hallucinate, but at the same time be coherent enough to know you're hallucinating?" Barton said.

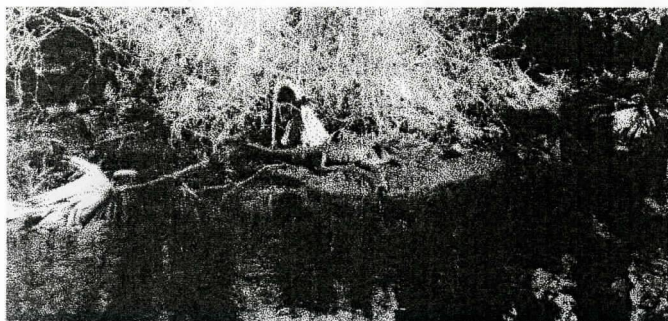
"Sure, it's possible. But if you're asking for my opinion, I'd say they'd be mutually exclusive."

Barton thought for a moment. "Okay, then what are you, God or something?"

"Not the God. Not as I understand it, at least."

"But you're made of stars."

"So are you! Your stars have just been distilled to their core elements - hydrogen, carbon, nitrogen. Anyway, that's nothing. Watch this."



He raised up on his short legs and turned back towards the water. His star-body darkened suddenly, and for a moment he was an ordinary croc, covered with bony grey-green scutes. His jaws gaped and his body convulsed. He slapped his tail against the wet marl and heaved an incandescent gelatinous mass into the water. The mass soon resolved into thousands of dime-sized crocodiles. They began swimming, some venturing towards deep water, others unintentionally beaching themselves and pawing helplessly at the big croc's feet. The crocodile regarded them impassively for a moment, then waved a beaded paw over them. They stopped glowing and died with a fleeting, collective wail. The croc's stars flared back to life.

Barton recovered his lucidity. "What the fuck was that?"

"Ah, my little failed concertos. They didn't come out quite right."

"So you just killed them?"

"You'd prefer they live and suffer?" The croc settled in the shallows. "There's more under heaven and earth than is dreamt of in your herpetology."

"Yeah, good point. That's why I'm quitting."

"Because you don't know everything? How's quitting going to help that?"

Barton shook his head. "There's more to it than that. It just isn't fun anymore. I seem to be some kind of mosquito magnet, and I've had it with the heat. I'm always sweating, and scratching at bites." He raised an arm speckled with red welts for the croc to see. "And I hate trying to cook out here, and shave, and I never get a decent night's sleep."

"You're quite the tough guy, aren't you? You want to abandon your life's work because it makes you a little uncomfortable?"

"Okay, how about this? I'm not all that damn good at it. I've been doing this for twenty-two years, since I finished grad school. Never documented any kind of unprecedented behavior, never discovered a new species. A few years ago, I thought I'd found a rare lizard in the 'glades. I made a big deal about it around campus. Then I looked through my Audubon field guide, the same one you can buy in any bookstore, and realized it was a common Central American basilisk. Probably was someone's pet that got a little too big, so they turned it loose out there."

"I can see how that would be a little disheartening."

"Nah. By then I wasn't even surprised."

The crocodile swam in a slow arc away from the beach, then back again. "What you really want isn't some minor discovery that gives you bragging rights. You want something greater than that, isn't that right? You want to know something nobody else knows -- and you want to keep it to yourself."

"If you say so."

The croc raised a paw and pointed at the sky. "Okay, I'll let you in on the secret of the cosmos: don't eat raw hogfish." He laughed. Barton waved at a mosquito, then laughed with him.

"So that's it," Barton said.

"That's it." The croc said. "At least for now. Farewell, mister scientist."

"You never told me your name," Barton said.

"Oh, I rather like the name the biologists gave me, *crocodylus acutus*. It sounds Homeric. The Sirens, Sandy Pylos and the rosy fingers of dawn, and all that."

The crocodile submerged and swam away from the island. When he reached the reef, he surfaced and called out, "On second thought, I don't like Homer." He snapped at a small fish that leapt in alarm at his approach, missed it, and torqued his starlit body across the bay towards the Saddlebunch Keys.

Barton was overcome with fatigue and curled into his sleeping bag. The violin concerto ended and automatically replayed five or six times throughout the night as he slept, until the batteries died.

In the morning he packed quickly and kayaked to Big Pine Key across sheets of water as flat as mercury. He didn't look back at Celeste Key as he paddled. It was just an island, one of thousands strewn through the Keys backcountry, hot and buggy like all the others. He had a long drive ahead of him, and he pulled at the water as the sun swung west.

Next year, he thought, he'd have to remember to bring some mosquito coils.



The book is a collection of essays by the author, who is a well-known figure in the field of environmental science. The book is divided into several sections, each focusing on a different aspect of the environment. The first section deals with the history of environmental science, while the second section focuses on the current state of the environment. The third section discusses the challenges facing the environment, and the fourth section offers solutions to these challenges. The book is written in a clear and concise style, making it accessible to a wide range of readers. It is a valuable resource for anyone interested in environmental science and the future of our planet.



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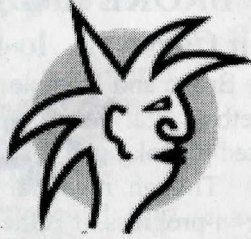
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