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# The Rival Confessors

I'm not sure how this fits together.  
I smoked a lot of pot in the 10<sup>th</sup> grade  
with Michael Hanson. His mother  
was very pretty. His older brother  
was very pretty too—I think he was gay.  
His younger brother was a little  
terrorist with red hair. He taunted  
and tortured the effeminate older brother  
mercilessly. There was no mercy. The father  
was gentle and forgiving. The mother  
was irascible and severe. Michael was in  
the middle, taking it all in with a stoned grin.

On a wall in the foyer hung a painting  
of two priests in adjacent confessionals,  
a long line of penitents waiting to confess  
to the priest on the right, whose face was  
the picture of forgiveness. The other priest  
had no penitents, not a single customer—  
his face was the picture of mercilessness  
and envy. I continued to smoke a lot of pot,  
dropped out of high school, got my GED,  
landed on my feet in a college for creative  
fuck-ups on the Hudson, and lost touch with  
Michael. And forgot all about the painting.

The other day I found myself thinking  
of the older brother. How he must have  
suffered. Not just at home, but in school.  
And after school. I don't think he had any  
friends. And I found myself wondering  
if he ever found love. And I found myself  
not praying exactly, but hoping, wishing,  
he did. Then I googled Michael Hanson,  
but there are a million Michael Hansons out there,  
so I'm narrowing my search to the ones with  
an angry pretty mother, pretty brother, merciless  
brother, gentle forgiving father, and a painting  
of two rival confessors. But nothing comes up.

# Special

I wanted to exercise my spiritual muscle  
which had practically atrophied from disuse.  
So I went down to the local spiritual health club  
which was having a special.

“What are the terms?” I asked the attractive  
personal trainer flexing her spiritual muscle  
behind the front desk. She tossed her ponytail  
over her shoulder, and said, “You are not special

and I am not special.” I asked, “Is that  
a two-for-one?” trying get her to smile with  
zero success. She handed me my spiritual towel  
and I followed her sheepishly into the shower.

“I am not a body and you are not a body,”  
she said as she undressed in front of me,  
grazing my body with a breast as she  
reached behind me to turn on the water

which was so cold that my spiritual muscle  
went into a kind of spasm—a kind of baptism  
spasm—somewhere deep inside me, impinging  
on my lung. And I couldn’t breathe for what felt like

a lifetime. Then, suddenly, her heavenly face was above me, administering a kind of spiritual mouth-to-mouth. I started gulping great big bucketfuls of air, which felt like

coming. It felt better than coming. It felt like a second coming. A coming back or a coming to. Later, in the lunchroom, I asked her out. But she said no

in a spiritual nutshell.

# My Best Friend from the Fourth Grade

“We have a *buttload* of catching up to do,” says my best friend from the fourth grade in an email that comes out of the cyber blue. And I think it must be a very large amount, possibly a variant of ‘boatload’. I haven’t thought of him in over forty years. Or else it’s 108 imperial gallons, from the Middle-English *butt*: a large container or cask used for storing liquids, especially wine. “We sure do,” I write back and click SEND. He pours forth about his life, wife, kids, kids’ colleges, house. And it’s more than a person can hold in two hands, possibly from the large size of certain women’s behinds. I’m clean and sober one day at a time, twice divorced, peevish, bookish, parsimonious with words, and disinclined to give him mine. My emails grow smaller and more distant in inverse proportion to his long and sunny ones, until they begin to resemble a retrograde moon of Pluto, then die out altogether. And it’s a surprisingly large amount of something that a customs agent might find hidden in someone’s rectum. It’s all these things. And the bus driver’s name was Karl. The school nurse was Mrs. Knapp.

# The Republicans

So random the way it touched down  
when we were sitting there talking about  
the Republicans. You said: *I stand*  
*corrected*. Then that pause opened up  
like the brief, warm, unstable condition  
ahead of a cold front, the kind that spawns  
tornadoes. And inside of that pause your stuffy  
*I stand corrected* stood there stiffly  
ridiculous and resonating in the itchy  
combustible air between us, and it was so  
random. And it was so ordinary, like opening  
a window, and then another, the way my eyes  
widened and your eyes widened in sympathy  
like a mutual last gasp before it hit us  
and we burst into uncontrollable and inexorable  
and exorbitant laughter rotating violently  
between us and around us and inside of us,  
churning and merciless and devastating,  
wreaking havoc with my respiratory system,  
so I couldn't breathe and I couldn't talk  
and my face hurt and my head hurt and my jaw,  
and just when I thought it was over I looked up  
and saw another one coming.

# Seeing Janine through Deb's Eyes

These days when I see Janine  
I look into her brown eyes  
and I see Deb, who is still in love with her,  
even though they broke up five months ago  
and Janine is seeing some guy now  
and Deb is living in New Hampshire  
and they don't see each other at all,  
even though Janine said  
she wanted to remain friends.  
But Deb said no.  
Because that would be too painful.  
I can see Deb's point, because I can see  
Lisa Durfee from thirty years ago  
breaking up with me for some guy  
back in college, and I remember  
looking into her blue eyes and seeing  
the light of love no longer in them. And I wanted  
to die. Which is why I can see Janine through Deb's eyes  
without even trying.

And now my daughter is eight  
and she's breaking up with Andrew Velez  
because, she says, he's stupid—  
and he doesn't have a middle name,  
and how can she be with a man



who doesn't know his own middle name? I can see  
her point. But still, a part of me wants to slip  
Andrew a middle name to give her to get  
her back. A part of me wants Janine  
to wake up in the middle of the night with Deb's  
name on her lips and drive through the night and the morning  
all the way up to New Hampshire just to tell her  
she can't live without her. And that same part of me,  
which is the part that still remembers  
making love to Lisa Durfee in a fine rain  
in a hayfield out behind her dormitory,  
both of us trembling with hunger like  
any two small animals under the leaves—  
wants to hear her small hesitating voice  
on the telephone all these years later  
asking me if this is me.