

At the "Y"
Dan Goodrich

Shakespeare woke up and felt something tickling his ear. He brushed at the side of his head to move the hair away from it. Feeling no hair, he remembered he had gotten it shaved because he was lousy. But there was still that something moving around in his ear. He gave his head a shake and saw a gray spider the size of an aspirin appear on his dirty white pillow case.

"First lice, now spiders," he mumbled, "Jesus! They're getting bigger."

He shook the pillow over the side of the his bed, hoping the spider would be thrown to the other side of the room. He put the pillow back under his head and stared at the ceiling, thinking about ashtrays.

Dirty ashtrays, clean ashtrays, ashtrays with the butts arranged like Stonehenge, and big cannister ashtrays in hospital lobbies, with gray sand in them. He couldn't stand those ashtrays. There were always two or three half-smoked cigarettes with red lipstick on the brown filter ends, sticking out of the sand. Whenever he saw those butts with the lipstick on them, he thought of old women with wide mouths and false teeth, hacking into one of the lobby magazines and waiting for a stooped husband with his cataracts, bad prostate and distended asshole. Shakespeare couldn't stand old people. He preferred ashtrays. Ashtrays kept his mind off food.

Ashtrays—

Disposable foil ashtrays at fast food places where they serve cheeseburgers. Ashtrays with apple cores in them. Apple cores!

Shakespeare walked into the daydream and took the apple core from the ashtray. He planted it in the back yard he was going to own when he got rich from reading his poetry to crowded concert halls (it was a big back yard). After the tree had sprouted from the fecund soil, it grew, blossomed, and bore apples large and heavy enough to break the branches. Shakespeare plucked a large shiny one from a branch that was sagging from the weight. His stomach rumbled and twisted. Other parts of his body were complaining too. His bladder felt like a water balloon filled near to bursting.

He got up from the flat mattress on the floor and walked to the open window. He parted the fly in his boxers and pissed into the alley two stories below. He winced from the pain. It felt like his bladder was trying to empty all at once, but there was only a thin stream trickling out, ceasing, then starting again. After several minutes had passed, he finally felt relieved.

Feeling in a lighter mood now, he stuck his bare, scabbed head out the window and shouted some poetry—

“A rose! A rose!
My mistress’ eyes
are nothing like a rose!

She got a horse
like cherry pies.
Creamy thighs! Creamy thighs!
My rose for a horse
Like cherry pies!”

When he pulled his head in from the window he was no longer smiling. He knew no one had heard him. If anyone had, they wouldn’t care. No one appreciated good Shakespeare these days.

He lay back down on his mattress and scratched his balls. He thought about a girl he’d known once who’d had crabs. She said she’d gotten them from sitting on a toilet at the Y. She’d shaved off her pubic hair to take care of the problem, but it itched worse with the hair growing back than when she’d had the parasites crawling around on her.

Lillian! Her name was Lillian. She used to work at a bar. She had thick, heavy eyelids that made her look like she was permanently intoxicated. Lillian. He wished she were here now, shaved or not, because he suddenly had an erection that was feeling neglected. He stared at the ceiling and fondled himself, thinking about Lillian.

“Gordon,” she’d say (only the other bums called him Shakespeare), “what happened to your lovely blond hair?”

He frowned, this was no good. He stood up and put on his torn green corduroys. He often forgot to unzip them before taking a piss. He also had a sweater, its color long ago forgotten. He’d found it in a dumpster with a litter of chewed-up rat pups scattered on top of it. He smelled like stale sweat, urine, and dead things. He slipped on his

broken leather sandals and walked to the park.

Shakespeare often rummaged around under the oak trees in the park, hoping to find acorns that he could munch on. They weren't bad, actually; but it was better to have something to wash them down with. And he had to be careful not to get a hold of the green ones. There was nothing worse than getting laid up by green acorns— they got caught up in your guts and made you wish you didn't have any.

There was a large oak tree by the duck pond, where he ate the acorns and thought up poems. If someone walked by within shouting range, he'd recite a poem as loud as possible. Sometimes he'd get a crowd of his fans cheering him on and tossing coins and rolled-up dollar bills.

His fans were mostly kids from the community college. Some of the crueller ones liked to infuriate him by telling him they'd used his poems for their classes.

"Hey Shakespeare," it was always one of those long-hair bastards, "remember that poem of yours about the drunk rabbit?" Well I used it for my poetry class and got an 'A' Thanks a lot man!"

Nothing upset him more than the thought of being ripped off. It set him into a rage that kept people away for weeks.

"Thanks a lot! Thanks a lot! I'll fucking thanks a lot!"

These episodes always ended with him trying to piss on the crowd; failing that he'd bang his head on the ground until he forgot why he was doing it.

He sat under the large oak and watched the ducks sail around the pond. It had been a fantasy of his for some time now to lure a duck to his feet with acorns, and wring its neck. It wasn't that he disliked ducks, but he'd heard that you could get a hefty dose of good luck from drinking the blood of a freshly wrung duck.

"Hey Mister." It was a little girl with a duck embroidered on her white t-shirt. She had one little hand under her plaid skirt digging at her ass. "What's wrong with your head?"

"I wonder," he thought, "if you can get good luck from wringing the neck and drinking the blood of a little girl with a duck shirt?" He started laughing.

"Sit down little girl." He winked at her, "and I'll tell you all about it."

The girl stomped her foot, "I don't want to sit down! I have to poop and I don't like you!"

Shakespeare stood up and stuck his greasy nose in her face and screamed a poem into her eyeballs—

“My hair! My hair!
It’s everywhere!
It’s growing in
Your underwear!
The bugs’ll crawl
right up your ass!
They got small feet
but move real fast!
And you better be
Careful when you pee,
Because the bugs
in my hair
Belong to me!”

She clapped her hand over her ears and shrieked. Shakespeare was laughing. He was laughing at another idea that had leapt out at him.

He grabbed her by the arms, pinning them tight, and picked her up and carried her over to the duck pond. He had to hold her at arm’s length—her little legs were kicking frantically and she had a pair of hard shoes made especially for kicking adults in sensitive places. One of her feet drove home, he buckled a little but kept on laughing.

“Rrmmmm!” He did his best Frankenstein impression, “Bread good! Pretty flower!”

He set her down long enough to grab her by the hands and start swinging her through the air, spinning himself in circles, picking up momentum. The little girl was shrieking like Hell drinking holy water. He spun her in the air a few more times and then let her sail into the pond.

“Swim little duck! If you come to shore I’ll wring your neck!” As an after thought he added, “Watch out for those snapping turtles!”

The girl was floundering, flailing, crying, and scaring the ducks away. Shakespeare was slapping his thighs, jumping up and down, and laughing at the sport of it all.