

Sinking Poetry

By Dan Bornstein

“Peter, I’m sorry, but... I’m sorry,” said Birch through a fistful of snot-covered toilet paper she had held to her soggy quivering lips. She took a big wet snuffle in through her clogged nose, pushing her bloodshot eyes up into a pair of crimson gashes above the already darkened bags, before she leaned forward and dropped her head into her hands, her yellow crusted toilet paper falling to the ground.

I leaned forward and put a hand on her shoulder. The cold feeling under her cotton t-shirt trembled its way along into a shiver down my spine, but I couldn’t do a thing aside from drop my hand on her like a slab of lunch meat. I squeezed my face up into that standard sympathetic face that wouldn’t have even cut it on an afternoon soap opera, but I couldn’t cough up any of my lines. Birch still hadn’t told me why she was crying yet. She called me up from her campus dorm room choking out fragmented words in between sobs and sniffles and even this clogged kind of screaming. I couldn’t understand most of what she was saying but I could make out that she was in her room so I threw on my coat and made a hasty walk to the building.

“He’s dead, Pete. He’s dead.” Birch was looking right up into my eyes.

“What?” I panicked. “Who?” Was it your mom, your sister, a grandfather? Was it my mother? Who?

“Dead.” She had her face pressed back down against her palms and was shaking with a drowned sort of sobbing. I could hear words trying to make their way out, still cut to shreds by the sobbing, and I understood the word suicide through razor blades and under the pull of a lonely river.

“What?” I mustered.

“Crumb’s dead.” Crystal clear.

I didn’t mean to slam the door on my way out, didn’t want to put an exclamation point at the end of my leaving Birch alone in her room to heave and bawl into her hands, but I needed to emphasize the moment for myself with something dramatic and loud even if a little shit-headed. I had to leave, had to take a walk, had to, just had to. I could have just as easily had to play some sad riffs on my hypothetical guitar or had to thrash a punching bag, but the first thing my legs did when I got the news was to throw my body out of the chair and quickly pace out the door.

It was cool outside, the pleasant late autumn cool where a light sweater and khaki shorts is all one needs to guard against the slow dry breeze. The weight of that night, with its light pleasant air alongside the dim light of the moon and the brittle sound of falling leaves, seemed

almost unbearable in its significance, its incredible rightness, but really I could have attached that same significance to bustling street corner or a lightning storm or a lunar expedition.

I remembered. I remembered all of Crumb's smiling moments, every joke and insight, late nights and early mornings; I remembered all of it then remembered it again, mulled over each flash in my mind with wide eyes and a tensed jaw, hauling a fine tooth comb over that spread of moments. The longer I tugged at some or another scrap of Crumb that I dug up, the more it seemed like I could step into it, just throw an arm over my friend's shoulder and reassure myself of his living presence.

As I passed through yellow pools of street light dotting the main road that cut through the campus I took each snapshot of the fields and walkways and buildings that swam by me, each bit of reality, and managed to extract some chunk of a past with Crumb's happy breathing body. I gave him mouth to mouth, pushing a spat of limp air into his chest with each snap shot I could drudge up.

I stopped dead a few steps past a stone bench in front of the dorm Crumb had lived in freshman year. I had been sitting on that bench with him maybe a month ago, talking in slow airy sentences while the both of us leaned forward every so often and pulled out a tuft of grass to toss back to the ground, blade by blade.

“You ever get that feeling that your whole life is just a television show?”

As we spoke, we bounced our eyes in a lazy up and down from our handfuls of grass to the slow swimming clouds. I looked over at Crumb shortly after he asked that question. Everyone asks that question. Everyone has that center-of-the-universe feeling, and I was totally exasperated with that question and I was swelling up with my own boredom from the subject and, by extension, anyone who even broached the subject.

He didn't look back at me. I inhaled and turned my head to the white and blue painted sky.

“Yeah,” I sighed. “I get the feeling sometimes.”

“And everyone gets that feeling from time to time, you know?”

“Yeah,” I answer.

“Well,” he said after a beat. “I don't really get that feeling. Ever. Sometimes when I wind up somewhere by myself I look around over my shoulders so I can pretend that I have that feeling that everyone else has, the sneaking suspicion that there's a live studio audience tucked away somewhere -has been tucked away since I was born- that watches me and eats popcorn, but I just can't convince myself.”

He was looking at me by that point. I didn't look back when I answered:

“Grasping for a meaning to life and coming up with zilch?”

“Something like that,” he said slowly. “It’s more that I don’t have the energy to come up with a reason to ask the question anymore.”

“Then you’re wise beyond your years.”

“What makes you say that?” he asked.

I glanced at him before I spoke. He looked disappointed.

“Well,” I began. “Intellectuals have been asking for the meaning to life before life even existed; we’ve gotten tired of the question. Now we ask for the reason why we ask for the meaning to life. At first we were looking to justify our being on this world, and now we’re asking ourselves why we gave a flying fuck in the first place. You’re just a step or two ahead of all the philosophers we have bouncing around now.”

“So I’m a genius because I’ve given up on finding anything new outside of myself, or just given up on finding myself?”

I wasn’t sure if he was talking to me or not.

“That’s exactly it,” I said enthusiastically. “Now let’s talk about something else. I’m getting sick and tired of this whole conversation.”

I don’t remember where the conversation drifted to from there, probably to a fleeting love interest or a mutually disliked peer, but I had written off what Crumb said with one stupid hairball joke when he was probably running the first draft of his suicide note by me.

I sat down on the bench. What a fucker I am.

That day the news of Crumb’s death spread around campus like a soggy wildfire, small pyres of teary students sprouting up in circles around the places where they knew him best, and those that didn’t know him well went to the places where they saw him last. The bunches of kids who had no idea who he was tried to squeeze themselves in somewhere between the letters of Crumb’s name, tried to find somewhere that might be immune to that echo.

Six or seven kids from an English class that Crumb and I had been in last semester had circled themselves around a spot of grass and were watering it with laughs, tears, and misery. At that point I wanted all of those things.

At least four of the kids were a part of the great middle of our class, that whopping majority that interjects with the obvious and more often than not has a slight confusion spread out over their eyebrows. They were all nice enough people, so I never paid much attention to them. They wore t-shirts and jeans, and listened to indie rock, and cried when they were supposed to apparently.

There were also a couple of the less-than-averages, a guy and girl comically paired in the class with the same coke bottle glasses and dull polo t-shirts tucked into their spaghetti-stained khaki pants. From time to time one of them would raise a hand, and my pointer finger would poke into Crumb's side, quietly letting him know, listen, this will probably be funny. They spoke in nasally voices about their favorite chapters or spouted bits of dialogue that tickled them, hacking up the old book reports that were assigned to us in middle school. Crumb and I used to joke about the two of them as a married couple, one finishing the other's dim-witted sentences, and that one complaining about the mess of Danielle Steel and Hardy Boys novels left on the coffee table.

The last mess of tears in our group was a smallish girl named Speck, with lengthy black hair and a plain face given only a splash of distinction by the thin scar that nuzzled against her cheek. She spoke infrequently in class and when she did she bumbled over her words and ultimately smothered whatever point she was trying to make under an avalanche of nonsense.

I knew her vaguely, through Crumb. They had started to mess around towards the middle of the semester, getting together on empty weekend nights to slink away somewhere for a chance to paw off each others underwear. He spoke of the two of them after one of the first few times I was hanging out in his room when she would stop by and lightly tap her knuckles against the door. They would have a short whispery conversation before he sent her off.

"I don't know what you're doing with a girl like Speck," I had said.

"C'mon, man," he responded. "She's a nice girl, and-"

"And she let you take her pants off," I interrupted, then burped up a small good-natured chuckle.

"Whatever," he had said quickly, folding his arms over his chest and turning his head away, knowing that I was right.

I shuffled my way over to the circle of kids, and heard the tail end of story about a phone prank that had been played on an old teacher by Crumb and one of them on some drunken night last semester. It put a small tick in my shuffle; I hadn't remembered him saying a thing about doing anything like that.

I was a few feet behind one of the less-than-average kids, and I pulled in a thick sigh through my nose, aiming to let them know I was there with a miserable snuffle, but instead announcing my arrival with the sound of a deep breathing exercise.

They glanced over their shoulders towards the ground around my shins, and awkwardly shuffled their feet to the side to make a place in the circle for me to be jammed. I stepped forward and kept my eyes latched on to the same puddle of brownish grass in the middle of all of us where they had been looking. There were a few seconds of chilly quiet.

They were waiting for me to say something, to roll my friend up into a tiny ball and make a teary speech, to fill some hole. His seat was next to mine in each class we shared, we laughed at the same jokes, and knew the same things. I knew him best. They looked at me like I was carrying his death around like a sick balloon, bobbing up and down above my head, turning people's attention with its incredible and cold girth.

"I remember this one time freshman year," said a kid with mop yarn blonde hair and freckled cheeks, stealing away the silence. I hadn't really known Crumb all that well back then. "Us and a few other kids from the basketball team had gone to café for that open mike night they were having. And after a few of the acts, Crumb decided he was going to sign up to do a blues guitar number."

A few of the kids laughed that funeral laugh, the sad chuckle of a community from and inside joke that has just lost one of its members and must disperse like a cloud of smoke after they offer the memory a final prayer. But I was on the other side:

"Crumb played guitar?"

There was another pass of chilly quiet before one of the kids who had not been telling the story spoke:

"No, that's why it was kind of funny."

"Yeah," said another. "He just borrowed some kid's guitar and played this awful, awful music, and sang the white-yuppie-college-kid blues."

They all chuckled with the ripple from the sad funny story and I coughed out a small laughing sound when the ripple splashed up over me, and the undertow dragged down our talk for another moment before I broke in.

"It's weird thinking about him now, you know?"

Everyone nodded slightly in agreement.

"Like yesterday he was in class," I stopped and began again. "Well, not yesterday. But he was in class a little while ago, and now he won't be able to come to class or hang out anymore. And we won't..."

I faded off and whispered, I don't know in a breath so quiet that I don't think anyone else heard, but they all gave their slight nods. I wished I had been given some time to get my thoughts in order and maybe shed some words on a piece of paper.

I had thousands of bits and pieces of Crumb, and I had torn through them like a man drowning in quicksand, clawing at the bits of ground around me and everything I could think of

just slipped through my fingers. I was waiting to scrape across a solid hand-hold. I was waiting for something epic.

The churning wreck in my mind was slowed by the cough of word from Crumb's dim late night hookup.

"I hadn't really met Crumb beyond that guy who gives meaning to poems slowly and insightfully after he raised his hand, until just recently, only a few months ago," said Speck. It hadn't dawned on me that she had been crying before she opened her mouth, but she spoke through it in a wet scratchy voice. "Sometimes I took more notes on what he had said than the teacher's lecture, but then I got to know him as more than a class encyclopedia." She must have been talking about their after-hours sweating and panting in whatever dark stairwells they had found. "And he was so beautiful to me then, like everything I knew before then had been drawn for me in black and white and he had come along and filled the picture in with color. I put my head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat, and I would tell him that the beat sounded like waves hitting against a summer beach. I told him that I loved him, or at least I thought I did, and that I wanted to be on that beach and never leave. But I think those waves splashed over a different girl and buried her feet in the sand with their warm lapping pull."

Speck stopped then, and the goofy looking guy with the coke bottle glasses put his arm over her shoulders and she cried into his neck. Her body throbbed up and down in perfect silence that swam over everyone in the circle and I felt the silence like a brilliant glass. Each set of eyes was on Speck and each seemed to love her and protect her just then, even doing nothing besides keeping trained on her back. And I felt so, so heavy in the circle just then.

I wanted to stay, wanted to pay homage to the quiet pyre sopping around Speck just then, but I left. I turned and ran from the kids, destroying a piece of that moment with nails scraping over its brilliant glass. I ran towards Birch's room; I hadn't spoken to her since I slammed the door behind me on my way into my thoughts My thoughts alone.

I jogged up to the building and let myself in, and I went up the stairs quickly, taking them two at a time, and found myself with my hand raised, about to knock on Birch's room door. I paused for a pulse beat, and wrapped my knuckles against the door, ready to soften them if I were striking the wood too hard and something moaned in pain.

"Hey," I said in a quiver. "It's me, Peter."

I waited for a fury. I pictured Birch up in a tidal wave of the grief that I had left her in, and I pictured it crashing all around me.

But all I heard was a meek, "Peter?" like a thin door creaking open, and I turned the unlocked handle and let myself inside.

It was dark; the lights probably hadn't been turned on since I left. She was huddled in her bed facing the wall at its darkest point where the bed leaned against it and created a fuzzy shadow against the eggshell-white paint. The room smelled of dried-up earth and sweat. An

empty Kleenex box sat in the middle of the room in the middle of a forest of yellow crumpled tissues, and she had pulled her stained blanket up over her shoulder and drew it against her face.

I moved to the bed and she rolled over to look up at me with her cracked and beaten face.

Words ballooned up inside of my throat that boiled there and made me wish for so many things to be taken back, and made me wish I had time to say all of them or to separate one from the next, but Birch lying there in a whimper, I was left without any poetry, without any memories of my lost friend. I had just a feeling and a black space.

“I’m sorry,” I said through my swollen throat. “I’m so, so sorry.”

Her arms went around my neck, and with her pulling and with me falling, we crashed down to her bed, and she cried for Crumb, and I squeezed her against me and tried to let all that swollen pressure bleed out of her system. I would put as much of it into me as I possibly could.

“Oh my God,” she cried into my chest. “I loved him so much. I loved him... so... much...”