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a little money down

by doug milam

Because it's not the singer, it's the song, for only what's written can hold out long.

a little money down. *Speak too soon with sudden authority in a stab at power...*
In my head the dark blue sky is only made stronger by swimming. I'm paddling in inkward waters and something, perhaps a mere hint, a premonitory urge, is writing itself around my legs. The water is temperate but I feel it shot from the splash of keeping afloat.

How I got here should be more than one's surmise. Night is coming down as shades on the setting sun, and all I know of purpose at this moment is that I must climb up the deck ladder and enter the backlit cabin.

In the span of a solo I'm standing now on the wet wood, pitted from years of wind-ed salt and sun and buckled with a swash of gasoline, kerosene, whatever is refined enough for propellers to ax through ocean. The sounds of my footing are dimmed by waves and slick dread, yes, dread now at the sight of an arm curved to a point and going down, down...

I'm struck dumb by the thought of real estate and mundane reason mixing with pleasure, and this tropical outing has, I see it now, brought an innocent deal into the making. The pitch: a small amount of time and a personalized tour of the farm of your dreams, a stretch of rolling blue guaranteed with a little money down splashed around the throat.

Voices overhead and voices underhand, my cup runneth over warmly as arteries...as veins blue-black with the bruise of fruition, recalling a mine hot for gold.

"Those turbans," Odi began. "Why do they wear diapers?" He waited for the requisite *I don't know, why?*

Our pause, he leaned into the shade. "Cause they got shit for brains."

I forced a chuckle as my brown brother laughed outright.

Odi was on a roll, now. "Why do they have the towel-head up here," pointing to a thinning head, "a dot here," between his narrowing eyes, "and no teeth?" He rubbed his upper lip, his forefinger stiff as a salute.

Our pause again.

"This is the pull-start," at the head, a few strands of grey matter, "this is the push-start," going myopic, "and this is the kick-start," indicating the root of his canal that carries his horseload—he whinnied gleefully, shuffling in his leather loafers and argyles, the khakis and madras long out of India, dry-cleaned and shopped out of sweat.

I shook my head and exhaled in embarrassment as my brown coworker laughed upward, head rising with the tide, checking my reaction.

We had been talking real estate, development, stagnation, minimum wage. Sixty-eight percent of the schoolkids are on assisted lunches. The border ain't what it used to be. Odi wanted to know why more profiling wasn't being done.

"Those turbans, they just wave 'em through. Who knows what they've got stuffed up there?"

So this was shop talk.

Odi wasn't done walking to his truck, that ambulatory excitement picking up. He turned into the sun, an encore. "What's the difference between an East Indian woman and a hockey player?"

"What?" my coworker offered.

"A hockey player showers after three periods."

My eyes rose to the sun, though my estimation of Odi—beyond white, he's transparent—sunk like lead shot into a lake. And I asked within if this temp job could be permanent. Did Virgil guide Dante through shit like this? Was Dante ever a temp for a Christian-run quarry?

"See ya, Odi," my coworker said, knowing that Odi needed to go back to his north border town, his dry-cleaning business, his crabby old customers and his underpaid blond-only college girls just getting acquainted with finger-pointing and spots that don't come clean.

I was back in the warehouse after Odi left, sizing up some boxes, when my brown coworker wheeled the dolly past and said, "Someone's a little racist."

"Yeah," I muttered.

I looked down at my newly-calloused hands. I wondered if they would now better form a fist or two—to give, somehow, more credence to the blows hooking in my right mind, where the aesthetic lies.

As it was a half day, after lunch I walked home along the gravel shoulder of an industrial road. The company was moving shipping down to California, thinking it would save money, flow-charting that corridor migrant workers were just worthy as pennies above the wages of sin.

Here I was working with people who were getting the mining shaft, where the body turns a black that is not beautiful,

Dig this: that gal standing behind you in the bus line might well be picking your pocket. Herein find **Doug Milam's** "A Little Money Down," a brilliantly discursive narrative portrait of the joy and depravity of the criminal mind. Milam's an old Chicago hand, frequent contributor to these pages (see the2ndhand.com for more of his work), and lives and writes in Bellingham, WA. We cannot recommend more highly his *Still the Confusion* chapbook of stories, available via his site: futuristick.org.

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where the air is barely given over to mercy for canaries who are a fat cat's play.

Another coworker, Octavio, had moved up from San Jose, where he could no longer afford the \$1,200 two-job, two-bedroom apartment for himself and his two young daughters. He worked with us two days before the company asked the temp agency to recall him. His English was fine enough to work with, I thought, but rumor had it otherwise. I passed him on the way home; he was driving exactly the speed limit.

And there was Phil, prouder than most, escaping to Alaska to work on a fishing boat. He couldn't manage the upkeep of his aging car and was going to sell it for scrap before taking the ferry up the Inside Passage, "from where I'll hitch to Homer and hope for the best." I asked him if he'd been hired yet. "Nope. But I've got to do something. Don't even fish. Anyway, this week's worth'll keep me fit." He slapped his huge belly and then rubbed it like a magic lamp. Wishes and spirits, hard about the bow, gold and liquor and the stern meeting of finality: this could be it, a monument to last rites, a last meal before being taught how to fish for a lifetime.

be fishers of men, indeed. So, you see, there are two notions that I live by. The first is that crime in America does indeed pay. The second I cannot yet tell you, for rea-

sons of delicacy unbecoming a criminal (unless you believe none have taste and for that I can assure you a mind's swift death). But I digress into some bit of "acquired madness" here on this tropical isle sipping my gin and juice, laid back, with my mind on my money and my money on sampling the goods. *Avec stram?* you may ask, or licked fingertip gingerly placed into some blanco powder? Nothing free-traded, nothing gained/nothing stolen, nothing...

I have the luxury to tell you that I was once a safe cracker of the get-high-tech variety, so clean and anonymous that the only reason for my capture lies in a matter of some complexity, requiring jargon which would surely fail to explain to the fettered how I once became one of you: bound, chained, scared of making leaps beyond the rules for living.

A hint will tell you that I was a kind of mitnick, whom the media labeled ever so ignorantly a "hacker," when that honorable term merely implies one who mantles and dismantles for the sake of curiosity, investigation. He writes a book about his reformation from catholic principles, cuts a deal with the Feed Machine, a.k.a. Hollywood, the Industry, the Insiders, et al, whose idea of the esoteric is nothing but superficial.

I digress again—it's time, nothing expected, on my hands, dripping down, Francisco Franco's *rojo cardinal* and I get lost in turning the tide like some laundering come to mind. In this venerated mental paradise I am supposed to convert iron to gold, bars to bullion—at least that's what the contract is for. It's a hit to top off the charts for the one whose Second Marketing we await.

*So I am to endure unto death do us part two
the second course of eye of the needle
through which Camelot can pass as a locus swarm
of civil fights angling for the crops
cut with a line drawn in the sand.
Tap it, well well what have we here, gasoline?
Yea out of the mouths of bombs on TV comes the
video you cannot veto,
no matter how vacuous it's brashly devoid of signifying
nothing.*

*I've put the shell to my ear. The way the tale is to be
told:
it's the ocean...missing the blood.
the salt...missing the vein.
the crash of the needle and I'm
out.*

Waking up, not for the first time, with sand in my stomach like having swallowed stones to make up for a meal long missing, and it's mutual, this, this wretched feeling, for surely the earth hates my guts as

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