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There Was Something Mean in the World That I Couldn’t Stop

— from “Brownies” by ZZ Packer

Even years later, car parked behind the school, near the very spot I used to climb to avoid knuckles crashing down like so many cruel waves, to hide on the flat tarred roof above the first-grade classroom and the big windows that let in the sun, even at nineteen, veiled in the sweet smoke of all that trying to get away, as we passed it back and forth (our brief ticket out), sucking at the unlit end as if it were the teat of letting go, of maybe I’m not so different after all, even then, as our blood changed us, I could hear the names, could taste that red drip at my mouth, and I flashed back to the day I stood above them, their tiny balls of hate on the ends of every wrist, the way they cheered as if I were some rock star on a stage, the way they opened hands and called me to them, as if they suddenly realized I belonged, and the teachers finally showing up from their parking lot cigarettes, to find me, in the eyes of everyone, hoping that for the first time it was love, but I knew, even as I jumped, the truth, the distance between us enough to shatter bones, to make a crooked child, and maybe more than my forever limp, it was what I gave them that kept me reaching for the blunt, knowing, even years later, there was something mean in the world that I couldn’t stop.
A Syllable is a Latch, This Word a Door
You Shouldn’t Have Opened

—from “I am not a man; I am dynamite” by Leigh Anne Couch

Isn’t that the sort of thing that does little good (learning of it, I mean),
after the fact? Like in the movies, landing on that skulled-out island
and walking, all innocent and going-to-be-an-actress like,
right up to the hundred-foot gate, sticking your sweet blonde head
in, and yelling, “Is anybody home? The door was open.”
Isn’t what’s lurking on the other side of any new endeavor
the sort of thing you need to know ahead of time?
Like how, in the movies, not all puzzle boxes are created equal,
and knowing how to open the wrong one doesn’t mean you’re a genius,
but just the opposite, as you unleash Hell upon the world.
How was I to know he’d react that way and invite me hunting,
just the two of us, like in the movies? With you over there
on the other side of the table shaking that head of yours,
as if you thought that would get me to make an ass of myself
and turn him down. I mean, couldn’t you have kicked my leg,
or just subtly have said, the last guy he took into the woods
never made it out with his heart? Couldn’t you have maybe hinted
at that sort of thing, oh, on the drive down to see him
in the first place? Or maybe before you moved in with me?
How about then? Couldn’t you have told me
how he’d get all Carrie’s mom and want you back in a closet
with the good book in your hands, the one you haven’t even taken
out of the packing box, the one in the attic?
Couldn’t you have maybe even just dropped it in
when you said not to talk about sleeping in the same bed
(which, I guess, I could understand more than this)?
Couldn’t you have told me, I don’t know, somewhere
in all those times you’ve told me what a good listener I am,
how all I had to do was mention it to your dad
and his eyes would change, and he’d, oh, I don’t know,
want to kill me, like in the movies? Isn’t that the sort of thing
that could have used listening to? I mean all you had to say was, honey,
whatever you do, don’t use the word love around my dad
because ever since mom left him for the man who rescues cats
he’s hated love, as if it were a virus, like in the movie with Will Smith,
where everybody’s been turned because of it into these hungry things
that can’t ever get enough, that need to have their hearts staked
or they’ll try to plunge their hands through your chest,
which is why he’s so protective of me, why you shouldn’t
say that word, right now, because it’s a door he rages against
like the sun, and if you open it everything you are,
everything we have between us, will turn to dust.
From the Sound of No-Sound
the Soon-To-Be-Beheaded Is Aware
the Steel Blade Is Beginning to Descend

—from “The Method” by Marvin Bell

It wasn’t the worst thing that could happen,
since it wasn’t her dad throwing his flash-
light in your eyes, since the officer hadn’t
shown up a few minutes earlier when you
were still wearing nothing but her, seat back,
hers hands against the ceiling, head cocked
to the side as if weighed down by the pain
of all that feeling good, which neither of you
had known before, and since he didn’t get there
when you were breaking the ice with what
you kept calling “primo herb,” which just proved
you were trying something new, and since
she wasn’t the underage runaway sister,
since she was the one who stayed behind,
the one who didn’t end up under that bridge,
sixteen and silenced, unprepared for the cold
world, with all those questions—

had she been taken advantage of, killed
perhaps—and, though the answers were the best
kind of negative, the worst of it was the asking,
the waiting with all those wrong thoughts
in the head, which might have been why
you ended up in the parking lot during the storm,
snow covering your tracks, her need
to get away, searching for those few moments
of living, as if to remind her, as if to say
it’s okay you’re still here, and you oblivious
to anything but the chance, at the party, that came
with her, can you give me a ride home,
and since the officer said he’d been young once,
since he let you off with a warning, saying
he’d be back in ten, your heart beat again,
and, as he pulled away, she kissed you, reached
down, fumbling with your jeans, and you knew it could have been worse, much worse, you just didn’t think about how, until today, when you tried to remember her name.
Author Notes

After graduating from Spalding University’s low-residency MFA program, Lafayette completed a Young Adult novel, which is currently seeking a home. In the fall of 2000, he began focusing more seriously on his poetry. He has started two Young Adult novels-in-verse and has had some recent success, placing about forty stand-alone adult poems over the past few months in journals such as Word Riot, Foliate Oak, Thick With Conviction, Stirring, Big Toe Review, FRIGG, and Boxcar Poetry Review, among others. Lafayette once worked as a production assistant on a low-budget movie featuring Amanda Plummer and had the good fortune of playing her dead husband in a scene that was eventually scrapped. His car, however, made it into the movie.

About the Work

Most of my poetry could begin with the line, *I wonder what it’s like to be*, as I tend to write narrative poetry of witness, poetry that thrusts, perhaps, a brief moment from my own life into a life I have observed or into one I have imagined. I try to use that moment, not as recollection, per se, but as my way in, as a lens thru which I can examine the other life (as I envision what part that oft insignificant event might actually play in the other life). For a two week period, in April 2008, I added to this approach to writing poetry by taking a line or a phrase from a poem or from a short story and using that emotional thread as another way in, as a catalyst to my examination of some other life. I produced a dozen poems during this experimental time, including the three poems which appear in Segue: “Something Mean” being loosely, and perhaps a bit cynically, inspired by my own experiences with meanness and its seemingly inherent place in the makeup of the human species; “Beheaded” being inspired by the wonderful line by Marvin Bell and the idea of such a dramatic moment of epiphany that comes from a sudden awareness of imminent tragedy and how, in many of our lives, such awareness often goes unheeded, after the initial shock, until much later; and “Latch” being inspired by my love of movies and a curiosity in the concept that there exists a word which most people might perceive as innocuous, if not wonderful, but from which someone might actually recoil, to at least allude to possible reasons for such a reaction, to briefly explore a word powerful enough to begin or end a life. Despite being an extremely upbeat, positive person, my writing tends to focus on those kernels of thought which get stuck between my teeth, from time to time, and keep me from smiling. I like to examine the lives of ordinary people who endure, who overcome, who persevere, often times without ever finding that happy ending.
Lafayette Wattles on the Web

www.eclectica.org/v11n4/wattles.html

www.mannequinenvy.com/wattles.htm

www.sundress.net/stirring/wattlesl.htm

www.undergroundvoices.com/UVWattlesLafayette.htm

www.boxcarpoetry.com/014/wattles_lafayette_001.html