

TROJAN PILLS: *The Miss Worcester* and Full

Metal Jacket o o o

By Matthew DuBe

WHY WE LIKE THEM: *In an email along with his submission the author wrote that these short fictions “are...in this form I’m calling Trojan pills because each one is a narrative with a second narrative stuck in it’s gut.” Both the voice and a certain kink in these two literary collages could sit happily on the shelf next to Douglas Coupland’s Life After God. We like the slip and slide of past and present and the kool prose that nods politely to retro. Once more proof that good things come in small packages. (Spacing and font size are author’s own.)*

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

The summer I worked strapping boxes at the Big and Tall clothing warehouse, I worked to hold two contradictory ideas in my head like a novelist. The first was that Mitch, who worked across the line from me, had seen some shit in Vietnam and the Big and Tall warehouse was a place of refuge, the one place where he could still function. The other was that he was famous Detroit rocker Iggy Pop, slumming for some reason, sporting a perfect Jon Rambo mullet and sealing boxes of giant pants and shirts for art.

The Miss Worcester

Christmas break of my sophomore year at college, I was still pulling myself from Worcester like a mussel from a shell. I spent my last night at home out at a rock club, and then took the subway back to my brother’s couch. The next morning, I boarded a Greyhound bus back to school and a woman my age asked to sit beside me. Of course, I said. It didn’t take long to learn we’d both been at the show the night before. She had a plan, I’m sure, to flirt with me till I bought her dinner somewhere along the way, but I was more interested in her stories than her body, her brown hair and eyes. I bought her dinner at my stop in Syracuse, where she had a fifty minute wait till the bus carried her further west, and then we said goodbye. . . . There’s a neighborhood in Worcester called Little Worcester, the way you’ll find Little Saigon in Toronto or Little Italy in Tucson. The neighborhood was planned as a compassionate response to gentrification and initially open to the city’s senior-most residents. Here, the city council promised, residents could live out the rest of their days amidst clapboard three deckers with fitful hot water and cracked sidewalks, non-existent wifi and blue laws in place till 2pm on Sundays. Over time, those

residents died off or were driven out, replaced by those who'd left Worcester in their twenties and thirties, only to return later. They found Little Worcester and stayed, sometimes only for the weekend in the neighborhood's short-term rentals. More and more of them made it their full-time residence. Now, it's the most expensive neighborhood in the city to live in, though services are still substandard. Residents insist that's part of the charm. . . . Sophomore year over, I was back home in Worcester hunting for ways to spend my time anywhere else. My best friend that summer and I drove up to Boston to see a show but got there too early; we watched the bands loading in their gear, milling with the friends they only saw on this leg of the tour; the headliners had been local but a half-decade before had moved, first to NYC and then the West Coast. I found myself looking around for the brown haired girl who they knew, or rather, who'd know them, through friends of friends. The show started, the opener a band we'd seen earlier that summer in Worcester, and then the headliners, gloriously loud, the loudest in the world, it was said, so loud I could pretend I was no place in the world. And then, after the show, the crowds clumped and spread like surf and there she was, the brown haired girl, turned up again, a lucky penny, some pearl dislodged from the ocean's bottom by loud music and me still needing an oyster knife.

Full Metal Jacket

Everyone shopped at the Army-Navy Surplus Store on Main South, across the street from St Peter's, where priests said mass in Vietnamese. The neighborhood was in transition; plywood sheets protected renovations to buildings on the north and barred entry to the buildings on the south. Inside the store was brightly lit, row after row of racks lined up the long way, like any other discount retailer except for all the drab olive. Jackets came in different styles: structured ones with crisp seams and epaulets on the shoulders. Others had badges and detailing. Some had names stitched into the collar, over a breast pocket. Mine was loose and baggy, floppy collared and wide of sleeve, with buttons at the cuff that didn't do anything (someone later told me you could button your gloves to them, so you wouldn't lose them in the field). There was a drawstring around the waist inside the jacket that ended in a toggle you'd secure to a button on the righthand side. If you pulled it tight, it gave the jacket's silhouette its only definition, a gather at the waist. Our jackets made us aggressively unremarkable. Our jackets were a kind of armor. They were a kind of camouflage. . . . The summer I worked strapping boxes at the Big and Tall clothing warehouse, I worked to hold two contradictory ideas in my head like a novelist. The first was that Mitch, who worked across the line from me, had seen some shit in Vietnam and the Big and Tall warehouse was a place of refuge, the one place where he could still function. The other was that he was famous Detroit rocker Iggy Pop, slumming for some reason, sporting a perfect Jon Rambo mullet and sealing boxes of giant pants and shirts for art. He liked to talk about guns, about how the muzzle of the Russian-built AK-47 melted on full automatic, how if you tried to fire an M60 standing up, it'd knock you on your ass. He told me about the fireworks in Vietnam, how scary they were and better than anything you could buy in the states. Then the line would start a Ron Asheton guitar riff, and Mitch would shake out his curls like he was

running into the jungle. . . . By the time the Gulf War started, no one wanted to look like a walking advertisement for US militarism. I spent a Friday night in my college dorm kitchen boiling my jacket to dye it. Somehow, I talked a giant stew pot out of the dining hall ladies and filled it with water and red RIT dye and set it on a communal stove. It took hours, and every now and then, a woman who lived in the dorms would wander in and ask, what are you cooking? None of them seemed to get it. Six months later, I'd hung up the jacket, replacing it with a tailored aubergine Australian prison number.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *Both stories here are from a series I'm working on, all made up of stories from when I was in high school. I've never written much about that time in my life because the stories feel sentimental to me. But in this project, I'm collaging them with other narratives, which to me cuts some of the sweetness and allows for a more complicated response. At least I hope it does.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: My stories have appeared in Construction, Ilanot Review, Front Porch, and elsewhere. I teach creative writing and American lit at a small mid-Missouri university, and I read submissions for the online lit mag Craft.