



TURKISH BLUE

BY

JOEY CRUSE

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor NICHOLAS NORTH writes...* Turkish Blue, an early work by Joey Cruse, demonstrates that no matter what stage of his writing this represents, it's only going to get better. The essentials are already in place. The bones are there. The architecture is there. Dialogue is impressive and that's key. It's difficult to recreate speech without sounding stilted or 'too literary'. Like adjectives in romance languages, dialogue has to 'agree' with the nominal prose of which it is part. It can't sound like transcription. This in itself, for a writer who has just scrambled on board, is something more than just an accomplishment. It tells me (and you) that Joey Cruse understands the subliminal structure of crafting narrative prose. Most of what happens here, for me anyway, happens beneath the words. And that is what accounts for the pure magic of this story. He has lifted the prosaic in a way that stirs mind and heart. The psychological tension in Turkish Blue is skillfully balanced and saucy with puckish coquetry.

“Are you married?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Would your staring at my legs upset your woman a little...?”

“A little.”

“Then why do you keep staring?”

“Because I feel compelled. Because the thought of touching your legs outweighs my lack of guilt.”

Cruse has a natural feel for the language even in this early work and while the style is ‘simple’ it evinces a contained linguistic charge that rattles the page.

“I’m just an experience to you then? You’re playing stricken husband because you want to feel love through the body of someone else? Fuck you.”

“I think that you are desire incarnate. I desire you. You destroy any reason and crush good sense because you are beyond both. Every love is, and always will be, madness to feel; and you make me feel alive so I’m breathing deep.”

It is like suddenly seeing something very ordinary, something we take for granted and easily dismiss—say a Coke can or a chocolate bar wrapping and seeing it for the first time. So...

You better learn to be like fucking De Niro my friend. You must be if you want to live two lives. Humans are performance creatures. The entire span of human history has been created, duped, and remembered by various humans acting outside of the roles they were told to be. Actors circumvent the rules because you make your own as a different person. Most actors will tell you that they can separate their lives from the character, but most actors are awful. Only the best let their character infect who they are, molding themselves into who they wish to be – allowing them to become who they were meant to be.

The only writer capable of writing a paragraph like that is a writer’s writer who is indistinguishable from his writing. Joey wrote in an email which Charles shared with me, that he was ‘nervous’ about this story but added

‘...this one has a special place in my heart. It has its faults, mainly my personal ones, but I think that it also has some kernels of style and attitude and ability.’

What more needs to be said?

Joey has written the WILI’s for my stories published by FOTD. It is no coincidence that his capacity as an insightful critic is reflected in his fiction. Our styles are very different. My work is largely anti-narrative and I’ve been rightly accused of being obsessed with form and structure. We have never met in person. He lives in the USA and I live in Canada. Bonds across the border.

*So I am honoured to reciprocate. I am honoured to review a work of such promise and quality.
The kernel has taken root and here is the first flower.*

Five Stars

QUALITY QUOTABLES (for the love of language...)

I am Jimmy Stewart walking in on Christmas. I am Marlon Brando yelling, “Stella!” in your ear while tangoing in Paris and forcefully convincing French woman that anal is okay with no names and a tub of Crisco. I am Christopher Walken smiling at one shot.

The room looked like the Miami 80’s had thrown up on top of the cowboy 70’s and then stood above the 90’s and dribbled salmon pink urine along the walls. There were sea foam green edges that really made the pink pop; the remnants of the carpet were a nice hard-sole worn orange; and the gold-faded, nylon diamonds sewn into the depressed comforter tied the room together. The art across the wall pictured a 1920’s ocean landscape of a mother and her two children waving goodbye to their lone father in a rowboat, sailing out of frame. Their white dresses on the yellow sand not being enough to draw the man’s row away from the green and blue waves ahead of him, but you knew that he wasn’t coming back – there is only so long a man can row out into the unknown in a painting.

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Turkish Blue

In 127, to the left, you can hear the old bones of old metal creaking out the moans and groans of pay-as-you-go power thrusting; to the right, our air vent siphons off the free base remains of aluminum and singed hair from 125; and in 126, up until this moment, I have never seen a hairdryer punch through drywall harder than a sting barb through Steve Irwin.

“You’re leaving me for her?”

“Jan, Jesus Christ. I’m not leaving you. I’m going back to my wife. We only come here to fuck. You can’t leave someone if you were never together in the first place...unless you consider the act of leaving to be the permanent physical removal of my cock from your vagina forever. In which case, you’ve certainly an askew version of what this is. Was.”

“You said you’d love me forever.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You said you’d leave your wife and be with me.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“You said you’d take care of me.”

“No. You said that after you had managed to under my zipper with no hands – a talent that you, and no other, can hold above your head and be proud of.”

“You’re such an asshole.”

“Do you see me throwing a goddamn fit? Do you hear me yelling louder than they fuck across the way? Did you almost get hit with a fucking hair dryer?”

I understood why, for all those years, mother told me not to call actual crazies crazy. I glanced around the remnants of the room thinking they could name a hurricane after this broad – Hurricane Jan.

I thought Godzilla at least had a reason for such carnage.

I had never seen a woman with such legs before. My wife didn’t have legs like that, and I love my wife’s legs. She had horse legs that curved right to her spine, and when you followed the line in her pantyhose you’d get lost in the undiscovered country of her skirt. She sat down and crossed her legs, proper, with her right leg resting on the head of her knee – crooking her calf above the ankle. God, I wanted to be the thin stretch of skin in the back pocket of her knee, or the tiniest blonde-clear hair to catch the scant friction of her thighs touching together. She crossed her legs slow enough not to show the honeypot and destroy my fantasy, but enough for me to dribble coffee out of my mouth because I had become an invalid.

She was every elusive, nomad gypsy dancing with my desire for coins; ebony beauty since the beginning of time; Russian love in winter; Mary Magdalene on her knees for Jesus; Cleopatra seducing Caesar and Marc Antony at the same time; Audrey Hepburn wet and with cigarette.

The kid’s, “Daddy!,” as I walked in the door went unheard. The steak my wife made that night for dinner had no taste. The love my wife wanted to make had lost all feeling.

I had been entranced by an Oracle of Delphi.

I went back to the café the next morning, hoping that if ordered the exact same coffee, sat in the exact same chair, and wrote exactly the same crap, that somewhere in the space-time continuum things would fall into place and become beautiful.

I breathed in controlled bursts.

I left an itch on my ass unscratched for thirty minutes because I thought I saw her shopping in a store across the way and didn’t want to draw any unwelcomed attention.

Mostly, I tried to not give her any reason not to fuck me.

I sat for three hours.

She came back.

She was Aphrodite, risen out of my foam memory. My head followed her like a broken clock with hands that only swing from 3 and 9.

Back and forth.

Each sip of her espresso made me sink deeper to the bottom of her cup.

I needed her.

I needed her to burn my past and raise me from the dead.

She got up to leave me forever.

“Would you mind sitting down and having coffee with me?”

“I just finished.”

“What’s your name?”

“Jan.”

I wasn’t expecting that.

Jan.

Jan?

What cruel joke of the gods would retard this beauty with a name like Jan?

“What, you don’t like my name?”

I had paused for too long.

“No, no, I love your name. I just wasn’t expecting Jan, and, well, what the hell kind of name is Jan for a woman with your legs?”

“You like my legs?”

“I’ve fallen in love with your legs. I’ve been staring at them for two days.”

“I saw that. Don’t you have better things to be doing than staring at my legs?”

She sat down.

I wanted to be honest.

“Yes.”

“Are you married?”

“Yes. I am.”

“Would your staring at my legs upset your woman a little...?”

“A little.”

“Then why do you keep staring?”

“Because I feel compelled. Because the thought of touching your legs outweighs my lack of guilt.”

“I’ve got to go.”

“Can I see you again?”

She scribbled a note on the white space of my used napkin.

Turkish Blue Inn. Room 126. 11:30.

The smell of her perfume lingered in the chair where she had been sitting. I scrambled up to sit. This chair held the object of my desire.

She touched the green, chipping paint on the armrest. Her legs and ankles brushed against these heel-scratched, wooden legs.

I was sitting inside the perfume ghost of Jan, for only a tiny, lingering second.

But I liked it.

I put the note in my jacket pocket and walked to my car.

Turkish Blue Inn. Room 126. 11:30.

I knew I was going to the motel that night.

I drove home and sat in the garage, afraid to go inside, breaking into tears, unable to decide how to walk inside.

I wanted my wife. I love her.

I felt torn apart by dogs. Each boasting a sense of superior entitlement to the meatier organs, both latched with teeth that go straight to my heart and soul, and neither willing to back down from what they from what they feel has become completely theirs. I was caught between the desire for my wife that I would never lose, and the passion of recognizing the same type of love in another.

Being in love with my wife and Jan was beyond adultery, it was normal.

How do you pretend to be a husband and father when you know by the end of the night you are going to end up in bed with a smarmy goddess?

Fake it.

You better learn to be like fucking De Niro my friend. You must be if you want to live two lives. Humans are performance creatures. The entire span of human history has been created, duped, and remembered by various humans acting outside of the roles they were told to be. Actors circumvent the rules because you make your own as a different person. Most actors will tell you that they can separate their lives from the character, but most actors are awful. Only the best let their character infect who they are, molding themselves into who they wish to be – allowing them to become who they were meant to be.

When you're acting, you can do whatever you want.

I am the best actor in the world.

I am Jimmy Stewart walking in on Christmas. I am Marlon Brando yelling, "Stella!" in your ear while tangoing in Paris and forcefully convincing French woman that anal is okay with no names and a tub of Crisco. I am Christopher Walken smiling at one shot.

The academy would be proud.

The kids didn't know.

My wife doesn't know.

I play it cool.

Super cool.

I wonder what Jan is thinking. Is she worried I won't show up? I can imagine her lying on top of the cheap nylon comforter, staring at the door, ignoring the sounds of the TV westerns in black and white, waiting. Opening the door with hate because I've made her wait for me.

Dinner was spaghetti.

I sat in the parking lot, early.

Smoking.

Jan's note said 11:30.

I had no intention of being late.

I quit smoking after I realized I hated the people I stood around smoking with in college.

The beauty of quitting is, now that I've quit, I can have one, because I've quit. Once you quit, you're allowed to start up again.

There's a moment with every cigarette, when you inhale and the smoke you breathed out isn't as much as you sucked in. How you get to watch yourself burn with every breath, each pull pulling you further away from the illusion that you are safe, letting you know that the thought of losing everything isn't as terrifying as it may be. Reminding you that, in this moment, you have the sole control over your fate – because, simply by breathing, you get to control how you die.

I can see the motel sign in my rear-view. The tubing crinkled, forming a half-hearted neon sign – like the owner saw the mangled mistake the day it was made and was so used to seeing broken people that he threw the fucker up there to show he wasn't ashamed of judgment for the staying service he provided from the sad and the sad and the sad.

My eyes tromboned past the sign and caught my reflection within the confines of the rear-view. For a moment, I think I'm trapped. Trapped within the mirror because only eyes stare back, trapped within myself because there is only me in the car, and trapped in life because life is a series of traps waiting to suction down like a hand slurping in a mayonnaise jar. At each turn, we find ourselves caught between two great loves. Like the empty space between favorite novels along the bones of a bookcase – neither realizing favorites don't exist if their words don't create an equal sense the ephemeral.

You could leave. You could turn on the ignition. Press the gas. Go back. Give up, give up and say that it's impossible for you to get out of the car and walk up to the door and knock and wait because you're scared of what will happen.

You get used to the walls that separate you from life, but not the women inside.

Just get out of the fucking car.

The light that cracked through each curtain window had been on for a long time, watching each new arrival walk up towards the door of their choosing. Each overnigher knowing the correct number on the door to choose, but staring at the mile-long stretch of entrances as if they know the wrong door will lead to the gameshow bankruptcy flop on the right or to the tiger waiting on the left. The wrong choice will destroy your self-esteem or get you eaten by what's inside. The

right choice will do both. The lights have always been there and have never seen another player make the right choice, but they don't give a damn either.

The room looked like the Miami 80's had thrown up on top of the cowboy 70's and then stood above the 90's and dribbled salmon pink urine along the walls. There were sea foam green edges that really made the pink pop; the remnants of the carpet were a nice hard-sole worn orange; and the gold-faded, nylon diamonds sewn into the depressed comforter tied the room together. The art across the wall pictured a 1920's ocean landscape of a mother and her two children waving goodbye to their lone father in a rowboat, sailing out of frame. Their white dresses on the yellow sand not being enough to draw the man's row away from the green and blue waves ahead of him, but you knew that he wasn't coming back – there is only so long a man can row out into the unknown in a painting.

“Right on time.”

“Timing is special. If you use it well, you're always where you're supposed to be.”

“Timing is a defense mechanism for those who think they're out of place but aren't.”

“I pretty much show up exactly when I plan.”

“Is that why you stayed inside your car for twenty minutes before knocking on my door? Having second thoughts?”

In the corner of the room, there was a round table that Jan had stocked all the essentials on: “beer in the fridge,” scotch, gin, and vodka, across the flimsy lacquering was her own pack of cigarettes. I think that she wanted the room to look like more than it was; to make it seem like we weren't only in a motel with the same brown ice buckets and the same cheap combination of shampoo and conditioner.

To make it seem like we weren't in the same story anymore.

“Do you drink?”

“I can.”

“Have a drink.”

She turned towards the table to grab a glass. The back of her robe hung loose off her shoulders but clung to the edge of her collarbones. I've been waiting to watch her move for me since I stepped through the doorframe. She bent over to pick up a bottle just far enough for me to see past the hem of her shortened robe – the sides had slits to pull the fabric further apart.

She handed me a scotch on ice, but the ice cubes were black.

“Those are ice cubes that never melt.”

“How’s that?”

“They’re smooth stones that cool down the alcohol and don’t water down the whiskey.”

She held a glass to her lips and took a drink.

“You didn’t answer my question. Second thoughts?”

“I thought about going back home, but I decided to stay.”

“Why did you?”

“Synesthesia, like one sense through another, like smelling a rotten, deviled-egg dust and tasting the tang of mustard because you saw a new shade of sunset.”

You could hear the muscles in her throat tighten to inflect the question. I had struck a disagreeable chord. We were in deal-breaker territory, and I downed my glass.

“I’m just an experience to you then? You’re playing stricken husband because you want to feel love through the body of someone else? Fuck you.”

“I think that you are desire incarnate. I desire you. You destroy any reason and crush good sense because you are beyond both. Every love is, and always will be, madness to feel; and you make me feel alive so I’m breathing deep.”

She was acting in a movie. Waiting for her lighting to be perfect before she’d let me see her in all her glory, yet weak bulbs cast wine-stained rain-shadows heat washed into the folds of her robe.

“Why do you talk like that?”

“Because that’s how I am.”

“Do you love me?”

“No, not yet, but I have a lot of love to give.”

“Would you leave your wife for me?”

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“No, not yet, but I have a lot of love to give.”

“Would you leave your wife for me?”

“No, never. I love my wife.”

Jan walked over from her perch on the fake marble sink. She walked towards me, a cat, slinking her hips back and forth with her drink while pads on her feet massaged the golf-ball skin of an orange carpet. The carpet wasn’t pretty, but she made the room throb.

She sounded like ice clinking.

Her hand smelled like juniper, like gin, like Christmas. She was the fruit of Tantalus. She began to crouch down as she undid the buttons on my shirt. Her arms worked at the buttons while her head worked towards my waistline. As her hands clasped the last two buttons, I heard the zip.

I looked into Jan's eyes, and she looked back. The room disappeared and there were only Jan's lips, Jan's hands, and Jan. I ran my hands up her thighs to squeeze her legs and, when she moaned, I kissed her.

They had either started up again in 127 or a new customer had arrived during the sounds of destruction, and 125 was pounding through thin walls in an attempt to get us quiet before the cops came and asked everyone questions.

I was barefoot and stepped on a broken shard of beer bottle that broke through a small part of skin. I reached down and grabbed one of the leftover beers, not destroyed, and opened the top off the edge of the table. The head flowed more angrily than normal out of the top.

"Why are you leaving me?"

"I'm not leaving you. I'm telling you that any feeling in which I thought I could love you in has ended. What can I say for you to understand?"

"I understand that you used me."

"No, but I can understand how you see it that way."

She hurled the nearest hairbrush and clipped the last three fingers of my hand.

"Quit! Quit throwing shit at me. Alright, Jan. Alright. I was enamored with you because I thought that you were a woman who broke the mold. Now I see that you're a woman who broke the mold and made a bed with the pieces to prod yourself. You've broken everything, Jan. Do you think that looking around this room makes me want to stay?"

She slid down the back of the bathroom door and started crying.

"Jan, stop crying. You sound like a duck when you cry."

She made a sniffing sound that sounded like how a duck sucks snot back into its head, packed up a few of her things on the sink into her purse, picked up her coat with the last of the scotch, and walked out of the door. When the lock clicked shut, I knew that she wasn't coming back – the metallic grating of the door clanged against the frame with such velocity that I wasn't sure if I would be able to get myself out. I stood up off the bed and walked across the room to the table and sighed into a surgeon general's warning.

There was a pair of socks hidden underneath the fabric of a ripped-up comforter and I almost fell over trying to put them on without sitting down. Jan had crushed all the cigarettes I brought with me, so I stole the last from her forgotten pack and walked to the bed for the lighter. I lifted the edge of the pillow and saw the poor devil, shivering, in the corner – even fire can be cold and lonely when you toss it aside.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, I wondered which side I had thrown my pants on.

There was a knock on the door.

Chloe.

I opened my mouth for air, but my lungs had receded deep into a cavern within my chest. I backed away from the door, hoping wisps of smoke would shield me.

Chloe glanced down at my hands.

“You’re smoking again?”

“No, just this one. I had another earlier.”

“You left this napkin inside the pocket of your jacket. I hang up your jackets, you ass, so I found the napkin.”

Turkish Blue.

Room 126.

11:30.

I started to look around for the pants around the floor. Chloe picked them up from underneath the bed and threw them down upon the mattress.

“Why have you done this to us?”

“I haven’t done anything to us.”

The palm of her hand stung across the hollow of my cheek.

“You fucked another woman.”

“Ja-”

“I don’t want to hear her name come out of your mouth.”

“I saw Jan and couldn’t help but fall in love with her.”

“Can’t you feel that way with me.”

“I do feel that way with you. I’m still in love with you. You love me unconditionally, and I love you the same way, but there has got to be a way in which love isn’t bound by personage. I saw Jan, and there was love, and I went to her because I wanted to be connected to another.”

I couldn’t make her understand. I wasn’t even sure if I understood.

“Don’t I give you enough?”

“You do.”

“You can’t have two types of love.”

I could only nod back at her eyes that only stared at me in sadness.

“I guess I thought that I could.”

The owner must’ve gone to sleep for the night, the motel’s sign was dead except for flashing a glaring and unwelcoming no-vacancy. I followed Chloe’s headlights through the crack in the curtain as she exited. I stared at the wall, disappearing behind grey curls, watching the ember get swallowed in a blue and green ocean.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *I’ve always been nervous about this story, but I cut my teeth on it so to speak and still like it...this one has a special place in my heart. It has its faults, mainly my personal ones, but I think that it also has some kernels of style and attitude and ability.*

AUTHOR BIO: Joey Cruse, yours truly, is a fiction editor for Fleas on the Dog, and an adjunct at Middle Tennessee State University. He enjoys teaching his courses on Composition and Rhetoric for as long as they’ll let him, writing fiction, poems, and reviews, and making his son, Alfie, laugh - for he has the best laugh of all the babies. He drinks, enjoys your writing, and tries to make his own.

GUEST EDITOR BIO: Nick North was born in Canada and grew up in Italy. Some of his stories have been published by FOTD. He lives in The Big Bad (Toronto) and hangs with CP and other miscreants. He speaks English and Italian.