

THE CONFORMIST

By Nick North

WHY I LIKE IT: Guest Editor JONAH HOWELL writes:

Metafiction is dead, and Nick North has killed it. “The Conformist” is the murder weapon: Its only two characters, Nick and Lenny, know their place from the beginning, but rather than talking about it, they act like it, rendering any talk of metafiction old and moot. Their world is inverted, their actions just absurd enough to make perfect sense, and from this relentlessly incomprehensible pool of well-metered prose emerges a conflict of unpretentious, even childish emotion like some Creature from the Black Lagoon.

Lenny swells: He becomes too big for the story. “He doesn’t look so chummy, so no problema anymore, as rankled, jabbed by needles inside him he can’t handle or explain. He has to deal with them some way though he doesn’t know how. It’s the little things that always start the big things.” He rebels against Nick the author and Nick his co-star: He asks, “Why do you get all the good lines?”

Somehow Nick North has found that ever-elusive tightrope between fiction that irrupts through convention and fiction whose pathos keeps it firmly rooted in that same history. Playing with physical law while his characters rebel against him, North simultaneously flexes his authorial muscles and abdicates the power of the same: As Nabokov claimed that his “characters are all galley-slaves,” North adds, “and they sure stretch the limits of their overseer.”

North’s prose is like electroconvulsive therapy.

Five stars.

(Font size is author’s own. Eds.)

QUALITY QUOTABLE (for the love of language):

He took Nick’s face in his hands like he was going to kiss him and butted his forehead. Nick didn’t know if this was an impulsive gesture at the end of a day of work and task, bringing their time together to a formal but unsettled close or something else. Lenny butted him again, harder this time. Nick saw stars. He butted him back. The pain—it hurt, sure it hurt—set off a throb that was like a single loud syllable, like ‘OM!’ All kinds of wild electricity danced up his neck and shoulders.

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To the Concordia Park, Kitchener, Ontario Poet whose name I don't know. This is for you.

Note: Dialogue is deliberately without parenthesis.

This looks like a good spot.

They put the bag down and looked around. The earth underfoot was lump chernozem, shaded by a couple of spruce trees. Some chickadees (Nature's acrobats) hung upside down from the branches. Nick tamped the ground with his foot.

Not too hard, either.

It'll be easy to dig this.

Hand me the trowel, Lenny. You get the plant ready.

Trowel.

He rooted in the bag of tools and handed it to Nick. The good-looking boy with the blonde hair that made you think 'locks' rather than hair, such is its lusciousness, full and lovely, so yellow, fed by oils from his youthful springs, the clean blood ringing in his well-nourished and beautifully shaped boy fingers, started digging.

Remember when we were talking the other day about getting old?

I remember.

Well I've been thinking about it.

He dug a narrow trench. He made it longer than the plant and the pot laid sideways. He piled earth up around it, smoothed the hole with the back of the trowel and patted down the soil. He set the amaryllis on its side, still in its pot. Then he brushed the dirt back into the shallow pit until the plant and the pot were covered.

I used to think it was the worst thing ever. You're born fresh and ready to rock. And maybe until, what, 45, you do, you're still pretty young.

Then all of a sudden WHAM!

All of a sudden you're 50.

You're 60.

65. Where did my youth go? And shit, if it isn't the front end of a train against all the lies you've told yourself. No wonder old people get depressed. Wake up, look in the bathroom mirror.

Where's my hammer?

Damn straight. But listen. How's this? Maybe what we think is the worst thing that could happen to us, growing old then dying isn't what we think it is. Maybe we're looking at it the wrong way. Instead of the body dying what if it's the spirit coming to life? The embryonic spirit inside that one day will take us to the next level draws its nourishment from the body in order to complete itself. Why we lose muscle mass and motor co-ordination we get older. It's the spirit feeding on the body. If there was no spirit we'd live forever. When it's eaten its fill, we die. The flesh dies. We go on.

We go on as spirits. You know...me?...I'm going to travel big when the time comes, man.

First stop the Milky Way.

Nick patted the last of the soil down. Then he stood up. He put his hands on hips.

You know what we forgot to do? The acid.

So we did, goddammit.

We should have doused the plant before we buried it like you're supposed to.

What do we do now?

Why don't we sprinkle some of it over the soil?

That's a good idea.

Some of it will seep down.

Sure it will. Don't let it touch your gloves or it'll eat through the cloth.

See this hand?

Nick poured.

Steady as a rock.

He distributed the liquid that swarms molecules and strips bones with care dexterous. He started at one end of the plot and dripped evenly in a straight line to the other end. Then he started at that end and dripped back again. He made long even lines.

There. That should do it.

Good job.

Some of that juice will get down sure.

Where would we be without gravity?

Is black the new white?

Nick laughed. Well, he had these sumptuous, pearlescent teeth; his teeth cut perfect lines; it was a smile like the Gates of Paradise.

Okay, what's next?

Hydrant.

Right.

You got the jewels?

In my pocket.

Let's boogie.

The hydrant stood on the street corner. They sat down in front of it. Lenny settled the bag on his lap and loosened the leather drawstring. Open, glitter bang.

Start with the diamonds.

Diamonds coming up.

After the diamonds, rubies.

Red glass. What comes after that?

Blue glass, green glass.

Sapphires and emeralds.

Nick squeezed glue from a tube. Lenny reached into the bag and passed him the stones one at a time. Nick dabbed glue onto the back of the Dollarama briolette, the un-radiant rose cut where shine was a struggle. Then he slapped it onto the barnacled surface of the hydrant.

Give me another.

He slapped it on.

The day after I had to put my cat down I walk into the Sally Ann and there's this cat on the shelf. Not a real cat but it looks like a real cat. It's too real for a toy and the fur on it is just like a cat's. It was 4.99. I bought it. When I got home I wrote the name and dates of my cat and the two other cats I had before that on a piece of paper. I taped the paper to the bottom of the Sally Ann cat. It seemed to me, after a time, they were all inside this thing. Their spirits had come to rest inside this cat repository and though they didn't like each other when they were alive, they didn't fight once they got inside. I didn't bring it with me today but I take it everywhere. On the front seat when I'm driving cab. On the table beside my plate when I eat dinner in my apartment. When I wake up in the morning the first thing I do is put it on the rug in the living room where it can get some sun. Take it to bed at night and sleep beside it. We're never apart.

While he talked he glued on the diamonds. After that he glued on the rubies then the others. The hydrant twinkled. Nick stood.

We forgot something.

What?

The pearls.

By God so we did.

There should be pearls along with the other gems.

By God so there should be. By God you're observant.

By God, I am. What should we do, Lenny?

Nothing to do. Pearls be gone!

Out, out! Damn pearls!

Hey, that's funny!

They watch the upside down birds above their heads fly through the air each a daring young man on a flying trapeze.

See them fly!

Pearly flashes in the Gates of Paradise.

Why don't we head over to the park? Watch the ole sun rise in the evening sky. Lenny looked at his watch. It's seven o'clock.

All the vegetation fell over itself being green; arms and limbs hung with verdant shag and branches and wise tree trunks with stories to tell. Above them all a blue vapor rose. The boys had their own bench. The bench was claimed by a poem (written in felt pen). Here's the poem.

Oh don't tell anyone I'm here

I brought Tylenol and beer

I was thinking you'd probably call

I was thinking you'd call somebody

Closer to you

Oh but your love is such a swamp

Yet you're the only thing I want

I said I wouldn't cry about it, I...I...

This is the last time.

They watched the sun climb over the trees the same way hope rises, under the same laws that boil water when it ices over. It would reach the top of the sky by midnight.

He's the richest man in France. One of them. Top five, say. He wears a dress during board meetings and when he goes out at night he puts on real jewels. Necklaces, dangly earrings. He puts on eye shadow and lipstick. He makes no bones about it.

Gay is good, man. Gay is real.

He's a crossdresser. He's also a Catholic. Devout. Gives millions every year to the Church and whatever guy is Pope. And the Pope blesses him. It's because he wants the money.

Some things never change.

And this rich transvestite giver of great buckets of cash—

Seau de cash..

Yes. Thank you. He says, was quoted; I know in my heart of hearts—when a reporter asks how can you cross dress, get fucked in the ass and still be Catholic? How do you spell sodomy, right?

Sodom and Gomorrah.

Sodomy and Gonorrhoea more like. How can you defile the teachings of the Holy Scriptures when you smear scat upon thy walls and windows? When thy beverage of choice be semen and not the waters of Jordan? And he says, in this really soft voice like he's really ashamed of himself, Monsieur, I know in my heart of hearts God loves me.

Halleluiah!

Praise the Lord; pass the Trojans.

A crow flies past. It's upside down. Does okay. Across from the bench a pheasant scores with a cat in its mouth. It sees the two boys, crawfishes into the scrub and disappears.

When this story began Lenny was a small man. 5'4 or 5'5. But in the course of the narrative he's grown because now he's 6 feet. He's put on weight, too. He started out at 158, now he tips over 200. He doesn't look so chummy, so *no problema* anymore, as rankled, jabbed by needles inside him he can't handle or explain. He has to deal with them some way though he doesn't know how. It's the little things that always start the big things.

I don't buy that crap about getting old is really the spirit. What you said. People grow old. Grow up and face it. Don't make up shit to pretend it's not happening. Like you gotta mirror. Look in the fucker.

Okay, you disagree. Doesn't mean I'm wrong.

Doesn't mean you're right.

Well, I'm entitled to my opinion.

Maybe I was born on the wrong side of the tracks.

I was born on the other side. Both sides are wrong, Lenny.

Uh-huh.

Uh-huh. I'm entitled to my opinion. Uh-huh.

I don't believe that crap about your cat, either.

Come home with me. I'll show it to you.

It's a piece of junk. There is no cat spirit.

This was when they turned away from each other and watched the sky. Way up there smoke rolled like clouds and the clouds actually looked like smoke; maybe golden and red-amber wands and golden and ruby-red instruments of light impaled and quartered these clouds as high noon stalked towards midnight.

What I notice is you do most of the talking. I don't get to say as much. I want to but I'm not given the chance.

What do you want me to do about it?

Like when we were burying the plant. We still friends, Nicky?

I guess so.

Why do you get all the good lines?

I don't know.

Gluing jewels. Same thing.

What am I supposed to do?

We're still friends, aren't we?

What am I supposed to do?

It's not fair. I got just as much to say as you do.

Hey, man. It's not my party.

Not your party.

It's out of my hands, amigo.

Amigo.

Okay, then. Muchacho.

Okay, then. Ragazzo.

All right, why not hombre?

Seau de cash.

Le crossdresser. Le travesti.

Dude. *Dude*. Look. There's worse things in life. Isn't silence supposed to be golden?

I don't want to be silent. I'm the one who wants to say stuff about the body dying and what getting old really means and about the Pope and gay guys.

And don't forget the cat.

You keep the cat. I don't even like cats. We still friends, Nicky?

I don't know, are we?

He took Nick's face in his hands like he was going to kiss him and butted his forehead. Nick didn't know if this was an impulsive gesture at the end of a day of work and task, bringing their time together to a formal but unsettled close or something else. Lenny butted him again, harder this time. Nick saw stars. He butted him back. The pain—it hurt, sure it hurt—set off a throb that was like a single loud syllable, like 'OM!' All kinds of wild electricity danced up his neck and shoulders.

Go home why doncha!

Get a life!

Heads pressed together, eyeballs touching, jellyfish sting. Sad rancor rolled in the steam of rut. Nick felt lidded and dumb. He butted again but he was shorter, smaller than Lenny, and while he got more lines he hadn't grown. So Lenny could hard-knock Nick.

Go home. Go home to the cat I hate, Nicky!

Get a life! Nick shouted. He stood up. He reeled back and swayed on his feet. The ground swirled.

Go home!

Get a life!

Break a leg. Kick a dog. Make a bomb! Lenny shouted.

Get a life! Nick shouted.

We still friends?

No.

Hey, what happened to your face?

Hey, get a life!

Nick is a good boy. He brushes his teeth; heats canned food according to the directions on the tin and changes his whities every morning. It's a Canadian face, open door to a brightly lit room, no lines on his forehead. A tooth falls out. Nick limps out of the park. A bone has broken in his nose. He holds his hands to his cheek. It's a good face. As was said of the young Lenny Bruce...*'all the restraints and inhibitions and disabilities that formerly kept him just mediocre began to blow with a spontaneous freedom and resourcefulness that resembled the style of..of..of what precisely...'* Blood streamed through his fingers.

April 13, 2019 @ 11:27pm

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I was playing around with the idea of fiction as a closed system and when I started writing this story, the idea kind of took over. By closed system I mean a fiction that exists qua fiction that may parallel our reality but does but does not replicate or describe it because the*

necessary infrastructure has been replaced. What Lenny and Nick do in the story is absurd but everything fits if you grant the initial assumption: in this case, that natural order has assumed a different shape and the classic, even Newtonian laws of physics (and by extension ‘macro-reality’) have broken down. It’s sort of like sci/fi but not really. The point where the story turns from linear narrative to metafiction was something that just happened. Traditionally, fiction has necessitated a duality between author and story that exclude one another. I’m a participant in The Conformist but also a character outside of it and on top of this also the author. It’s like looking at a mirror image of myself to see the mirror image of myself mirrored in the story. This story led to others in the absurdist style and represents a departure from my earlier writing. The metafiction starts when they reach the park. I want to say that I did not write the poem included here. I don’t know who the poet is. I discovered it written in black marker on a bench in Concordia Park, Kitchener one day when I was biking. I left my phone at home so couldn’t take a pic and had to memorize it on the ride back. I hope whoever wrote it will read this some day.

Once again I want to sincerely thank Guest Editor Jonah Howell for his elegant and penetrating analysis of this story. Writers need people to survive and people who understand them to thrive.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Not much has changed from when I wrote *9 ordinary words*... so just read the bio under that story.

EDITOR’S BIO: Jonah Howell lives in central Germany. You can find his recent work in *Half Mystic Journal* (Issue 8) and *Expat Press*. His story **Amor Fati** was featured in Issue 5 and **Anatomy of Melancholie** appeared in Issue 7.