

The MEANING of ORANGE

By Daniel Thompson

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor JOEY CRUSE writes...Daniel Thompson's "The Meaning of Orange" hinges on what the title suggests. The meaning vs. the significance, the sign vs. the signifier, existentialism vs. existence. It is the old man from Up + Mickey Rourke's Henry Chinaski (Bukowski lite) in Barfly equaling a Hamlet who knows he should act but, butthurt (yeah, I said it), he can't even form a milquetoast action yet alone imagine acting (I jammed a lot in there, but, to be honest, the style presented in Thompson's writing is weaved well within, and, with more space, I'd have more room to digress and make the references more relevant). My job here, well aware that my simple is not simply put, is to tell you why you should read this work and come to a more complete understanding of the beautiful/horrible/habitual fucking depths one has to go to understand.*

Curt is a middle-aged man that sells cigarettes to kids, with a hard case of OCD, and puts his hope in a balloon seller at the zoo. Spoiler alert.

We should all be so lucky. We should all hold our hope within helium. We should all care about our own existent crises. We should all care. We should...

But Curt can't. Curt can't look at millions and billions of numbers or the stars out of his own ironic existence – there are too many of them to be actually palpable. He sees the objective working within a world full of hard truths about subjective trees or hairs or small habits in the sidewalk that he can see but that still elude him.

Ask yourself. Can you count all the hairs on your head? Can you imagine 120,000?

Neither can I.

But ask yourself again if you have enough hair on your arms to feel the goosebumps that arise when you know your emotions are ACTUALLY real, when your insecurities are dissolved in the present, your meaninglessness turned into feeling as your goose flesh allows you the moment to simply just breath...

If your skin rose, then I hope you want more because Thompson will deliver. If nothing, then I've done a shit job at making you want to read Thompson's work – of which, again, you should.

Thompson is simple, yet elegant; short, but allows his shirt to be stretched out; educated, but knows how to flip over a cushion; concise, when we all need concision; beautiful, when we need balloons of absurdity; walking cracks, when we know the cement may not quite just be dry; tired, but awake when the sun hits; precise, when precision isn't noticed; a good man ("doodie" instead of shit), when bad wasn't even in the cards; empathetic, when all we want is some goddamn empathy.

I wanted to explain to you how language forms meaning and how that when we ascribe words to our perception we're all simply working in metaphors that are faulty at best, misleading at worst, and that that's the fault in our heart's own best efforts to make sense, but Thompson has crafted a story that uses a balloon and our associative colors of meaning to already do so.

So, honestly, just read the fucking story. FIVE STARS

Personal Comparisons Thought of (i.e. – an imperfect list) While Reading:

Bill Hillmann – *The Old Neighborhood*; Haruki Murakami, *The Elephant Vanishes*; Etgar Keret, *The Bus Driver Who Wanted to Be God*; Philip Ó Ceallaigh, *Notes From A Turkish Whorehouse*; Tom McCarthy – *The Remainder*; Adam Prince – *The Beautiful Wishes of Ugly Men*.

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

Shoes scuffing crab-wise, sidestepping cracks, bubblegum, dog doodie before falling into his stride. Indecisively taking one step back for every two steps forward so it appears as if he is walking in the direction he just came as much as the way he is going.

Apart from their colour, the balloons are divided into two categories: translucent and solid, which have something to do with the meaning and significance of the balloon. The solid ones are more straight forward and can be summed up in a word or two; health, sex, money, power, new car, good job... things like that. The translucent ones have more subtle and complex meanings and usually come with morals or koans.

(Spacing and format is author's own.)

The Meaning of Orange

A buzzer rings somewhere outside. Proximate noon tips over the eaves, putting the room in the path of the sun for the rest of the day. Curt often dreams of building a wall, some kind of

fortification or deterrent to seal him off from the outside, but all that would do is keep him in, which is exactly what he wants.

Trees posture defiantly, higher than any wall or authority to cut them down.

A slant of light falls across his face. He doesn't draw the blinds because that would admit defeat. Enduring the rays of ultraviolet crossing incomprehensible distances of space with the capability to burn, singe and sear flesh. The fact that he can't look at it reminds him of God, a being so powerful that if we were to see it, he would go blind.

He reaches out, smearing grease from his cheek into his eye with the swipe of a careless hand. Three nights a week he passes out in the purple armchair by the window. The rest of the time he wakes up in his room on the second floor, laid out on top of the bed as if all he was was his clothes.

Shutting his eyes against the pain, he brings his hands back down to his lap, flexing them in and out of fists. The first in a series of rituals to be performed in a certain order: combing and then gelling his hair while it is still wet, smooth in the back, high in the front. Waiting for it to dry and then going over it again with the spray. Noting the time on the clock with an erasable pen and then flipping the cushion on his chair to the previous day's side before leaving the house. Locking the door behind him, then checking to see if it is locked, but going back anyway to make sure the oven is turned off. Locking the door, again—for real this time—he maneuvers down the overgrown steps and through the obstinate bodies of topiaries crowding the garden path to where it comes out at the gate, pausing to make sure the way is clear before proceeding.

Shoes scuffing crab-wise, sidestepping cracks, bubblegum, dog doodie before falling into his stride. Indecisively taking one step back for every two steps forward so it appears as if he is walking in the direction he just came as much as the way he is going. The tuft of bangs spiked up

in the front, bounces in rhythm to his steps, giving the impression that he is not only moving both forward and back but also sideways... to the end of the block where the crossing guard is holding her big red lollipop sign. Though her job is to be impartial, she has been known to favor even a single pedestrian over a queue of idling cars. Smiling to everyone indiscriminately, Curt included, who returns her smile like a face reflected in water, not wanting to be seen, much less recognized as he conveys himself to the far end of the school field. Standing sentinel along the perimeter fence, partially hidden, but by no means invisible in a windbreak of trees.

Within seconds he is approached by a small band of adolescents, singling him out by his incongruous style; white track shoes, straight-legged jeans, yellow UNLV sweater and Orlando Magic starter jacket. Not just excessively dressed, but palpably uncomfortable, if not to himself, then to anyone who can see him; a man who is not only unaware of how out of date his clothes are, but of how he feels with them on, perspiring for a number of reasons not all of them heat related.

“Hey Curbie. Gotta smoke?” says a boy, standing out from the group.

“Yeah, how many you want?” sez Curt.

“Six.”

“Three dollars.”

The kid collects fifty cents from each of his friends and hands it over to Curt who takes the money first then deposits the cigarettes in the kid’s free hand.

“Got any weed, Curb?” asks another of the boys.

“Noooo. I don’t sell drugs.”

“You know you can make a lot more money selling dope than these.”

“But it’s illegal.”

“So is selling cigarettes to minors.”

“Barely.”

The kid snickers to his friends as they walk away.

Curt watches the little ones gathered in clusters playing games, breaking off from the group to chase one other, trampling white clover blossoms and tumbling in the soft grass. He might be a man out for a walk, a delivery person, somebody’s dad, but to eager eyes seeking their afternoon fix he is almost sure to have an extra cigarette, especially if they know him as Curt, Curbie, or hurtin’ Curt.

He moves on to four more points of sale during the remainder of the 45-minute break. He’ll be back after school and later on in the park.

On Fridays he visits the high schools and alternates between middle schools the rest of the week. Spending his free time at the zoo, mainly outside the primate grove, home to a family of mountain gorillas fathered and lorded over by ‘Max’ the silverback, who has been with the zoo since Curt was a child. Max is not territorial with Curt. He tolerates him as a stranger in a strange land, two hominid species diverged from different evolutionary lines. One with a clutch of bananas, the other with his cigarettes, BigMac™, fries and shake, each searching the other’s souls and smells for signs of kinship.

Curt does a cursory sweep of the ungulate enclosure; antelope, dik-dik, zebra, water buffalo, passing the falcon cage, snow leopard and beaver dam with barely a glance, as he makes his way towards his rendezvous with the balloon man.

He’s there on the corner in his usual spot.

Curt runs up a little agitated. He knows what he wants this time.

Apart from their colour, the balloons are divided into two categories: translucent and solid, which have something to do with the meaning and significance of the balloon. The solid ones are more straight forward and can be summed up in a word or two; health, sex, money, power, new car, good job... things like that. The translucent ones have more subtle and complex meanings and usually come with morals or koans.

This time Curt is looking for a money balloon, something that will bring him more of that in his life. Although, as it is said, *you don't find the balloon, it finds you*, Curt feels it is he who is seeking out the balloon on these days. Days when he feels close to meaning, as if it were less than a millimeter away; on the other side of a thin membrane.

Today there are white, yellow, orange and a kind of turquoise blue; colours that wouldn't be out of place at a car dealership or corporate event, advertising neutrality, professionalism, function over form.

"What do you have?" Curt says.

The Balloon man knows that this isn't a question directed at him, he is merely the intermediary, giving his customers what is already theirs by right. "There's the balloon of second chance, the turquoise one there beside you, the balloon of pray tell, yellow, that's a truth one, I have another kind of truth one too, the white one over there, it's for giving away, you want one for you?"

"Yes."

"I think the best you could do is orange..."

"Ugh."

"What's wrong?"

"I don't like orange."

“I had a lot more earlier; red and indigo, but those were clearly meant for someone else. I’m surprised this one is left. I think it’s a sign. People very rarely get balloons that aren’t meant for them. They’ll sit here unbought until the right person comes along. It’s a very good one symbolizing diplomacy in the way of influencing outcomes. It’s lucky that you came by when you did.”

“The green one’s no good?”

“It’s just for a reciprocal favour, it’s also a giving one, you give it and you get something back, or you give it because you’ve received something from somebody.”

“What about second chances.”

“Sure, go ahead, but it’s only good for the rest of the day. I’d suggest getting one like this in the morning when it’s more likely that you’ll have a chance to use it. You’d better hurry up though. It looks like we have another customer.”

A little girl rolls up on her bike avidly eyeing the balloons. Curt goes a little red, the pressure of making a choice weighing heavily on him now. He jerks his arm out toward the orange one mouthing the word and making the sound ‘...nge’.

“Good choice. I hope it works out,” handing it to him by its long jute string. “Don’t let it go. Birds eat them and sometimes die. I’d feel bad if that happened. I have to guarantee my balloons, that also means getting them where they need to go.”

“You make all these balloons yourself?”

“No, they’re made by another person, or rather they’re just made.”

“How many are there?”

“Only as many as will sell at a time. They’re like jobs, a job doesn’t disappear just because someone doesn’t fill it right away.”

“I don’t have a job.”

“Perhaps that’s not the right analogy, you might think of them more as opportunities instead, like a second chance or an opinion, everyone’s got one of those, but they’re very subjective, that’s why a balloon that’s right for you won’t go to someone else.”

“I don’t believe in opportunities.”

“Perhaps you could just use some luck.”

“Yes, yes, that’s sorta what I was looking for.”

“Come back tomorrow. I’m sure I’ll have something. Just think very hard when you go home tonight and ask for some guidance. That’s how this one works. The thought will turn into an intention and become a…”

“Okay, okay. I get it,” Curt says, turning in the direction of home.

The little girl rushes forward, already pointing at the white balloon.

“Is this one for you?”

“Yes.”

“Well, may I suggest the turquoise one. It’s good for a second chance, you may need one if you’ve been in any trouble lately or are planning to do so.”

“Ohhh, well, it’s pretty too, but I like white.”

The only problem with the Balloon Man’s prophecies is that they’re almost always good. No one wants to buy a balloon that’s going to make them unhappy, but the Balloon Man is your friend and he’ll tell you the truth, even if it’s hard. Every day he goes to his supplier and selects from the balloons that have sprung up overnight; just enough for that day and no more. The people who buy them are usually in a good mood already or are going to give them to somebody,

which will put them in a good mood, the recipient or the giver, or both, so his news is generally positive, the red ones can be tricky though.

Once in his possession, Curt wastes no time in getting his balloon home. A lot can happen between acquiring your balloon and getting it to where you need to go. People with balloons behave much like those in the possession of illegal or potentially harmful substances. Furtively inhaling their contents in bushes, parking lots, alleyways, gas stations.

Sometimes he gets drunk, but it interferes with the balloon's efficacy. Set and setting are essential, as is one's state of mind. This is not something to be snorted or inhaled in some alleyway. Which is probably why they hadn't worked before. He needs to slow down. Make an intention, and visualize. Taking a deep breath, and letting it out before inhaling the contents of the balloon.

Curt likes to pair the intention with a number. He has great faith in the power of numbers, much more than words. He has a specific one in mind: 120,000; the number of hairs on the average person's head. A number has to have personal significance he feels, something that is important to him. He doesn't know many other numbers with special meanings, none higher at least. There are numbers that are lower, but not a lot that are higher. Millions and billions; the number of stars in the galaxy, the number of galaxies in the universe, have no significance for him. These, for the most part, represent things that he cannot see. He lives in a world of physical objects, things that he can buy, sell, find and lose; if it weren't for these things, he wouldn't know where he is, where he belongs. No, one hundred and twenty thousand is a good number.

He sits and breathes for a minute, thoughtfully running his fingers through his hair, imagining that he were coming closer and closer to this figure with every pass of his hand.

AUTHOR'S NOTE:

A little about the inception of The Meaning of Orange as requested by Charles and co.:

The Meaning of Orange is part of a longer work, based on the character Curt Burton. Conceived by twin minds myself and friend, Bryon (Scorp) Mu, the novel in progress follows the underdog hero in his parabolic rise from lowly cigarette peddler and sometime hair-dresser, to ambassador to Earth after an alien portal is discovered on his front lawn. The alien species, Tchiller, responsible for the portal have evolved and grown accustomed, over the course of a few million years, to life without hair. Upon discovering Earth and its coiffured citizenry, the Tchillers begin a process of devolution to their former follicled state. Fearing the spread of this hair obsession, the Tchillers are promptly excommunicated from the intergalactic federation and left on Earth to fend for themselves, eventually mixing and interbreeding with the fine-follicled race known as humans... so now you know. There is more to it, but I think I have pretty much given you the gist. It is designed as humour and my only hope is that it delivers, at least for those so inclined.

AUTHOR'S BIO: It is said that the world is made of stories. What keeps them going is us. Daniel's contributions to the unfolding narrative have been preserved in *Gravel*, *The Birds We Piled Loosely*, *Clockwise Cat*, *Crack The Spine*, *Grey Sparrow*, *The Gyroscope Review* and, of course, *Fleas on the Dog* (issue 4). He is @shadowmounds on Twitter, and maintains a blog hovering together in the center of anonymity at shadowmounds.wordpress.com.

EDITOR'S BIO: Joseph Cruse is a writer, an actor, a bad painter, and teacher. Recently graduated with a masters in Rhet./Comp., when not getting into trouble he explores New Orleans, sprays graffiti scenes of movies onto canvas, and doesn't exercise. His other short story work has been featured in Phree Write and Viewfinder Magazine; while spacklings of poetry can be found at Cacti Magazine and W.I.S.H Press. His story **She Was Australian** appears in this issue (fiction).