

"A strange mixture, only to be found on the American Continent"

By Levi Platt

WHY WE LIKE IT: *Everything Levi Platt writes turns to gold and when he is finished we are blinded by the shine.*

Five stars

For Julie and Karen

"A strange mixture, only to be found on the American Continent"

Porter Rockwell

The distance from our apartment to our chapel – is a mile and a half. From the apartment's south parking lot exit on Orem Boulevard, the road is lined with strip malls, a perplexing neon concentration of 2 4-hour massage parlors; two of which have recently been shut down for "unlawful practice and sexual misconduct". Two of which were observed as being *wildly* favorited among Orem locals over their competition, per their raving yelp reviews.

Just before the right turn at 800 South, toward Utah Lake and Orem's once scrappy community-college-that-could, Utah Valley University, patches of brown grass host a line of unattended birch trees, the only semi-natural plant life along the road. Another greenery has been hamfisted into the landscaping of the overpriced condos beyond: two-bedroom, two-bath "luxury" suites two to a floor, five floors high. The hexagonal formation surrounds a courtyard with a pool set to an ever tepid 100 degrees year-round. I know this because my older brother lived there when he was first married. It didn't take long for them to move on down the valley to Spanish Fork, where they bought a split-level starter home in the middle of a half-finished, half-abandoned gated community. Sometimes I think I can feel why more than I can articulate. Sometimes not.

Heading towards Utah Lake, I pass a sublet home split into three separate spaces and crumbling. The pink stucco is chipped and worn-washed. The poor structure can't bear the weight of three families in a space meant for one, which is unfortunately true of many houses in an area with too many students, too many people moving in, and not enough residents moving out or dying. The pink home's front yard is mostly dead grass and dirt, but during the summer some ruddy pioneer with a big gut and dirty goatee of a beard stakes his space by pitching his tent under the struggling willow. At night I can see the blue glow of his TV flicker and fade within the bubble of all-weather nylon. I secretly--if not lovingly-- call him Porter Rockwell.

He is the only pink house tenant I have ever seen in person. He's bow-legged. I assume his gut was joyously formed by years of heavy drinking and bad nutrition. When it's warm enough, he strolls up and down our street, cigarette bent and snug between chapped lips and fur. He rolls his sleeves to his shoulders and hitches his shorts brazen inches above the knee. He's a wild man by any stretch, unbound and free.

Although we've never spoken, I like to imagine that Porter and I have developed a mutually implicit bond. But maybe it's not him. The most endearing thing about this summer character is actually his skittish, bug-eyed chihuahua. Their relationship is not ideal; the little dog walks with a wince and sometimes the master yanks and drags him along. But mostly they take their strolls slowly, without apparent purpose or destination. Clearly, they are content in each other's company. I envy them. I have this nagging, an intuition maybe: that they belong exactly where they are in exactly the state they persist. Nothing is more right.

Porter Rockwell of the Mormon days of yore was once asked if he considered himself a murderer. He menacingly replied, "I never killed a man that didn't need killing."

I think of the Porters Rockwell often.

The Water Bear

A tardigrade is a microscopically small water-dwelling animal colloquially called a Water Bear. They're an eight-legged half-filled vacuum bag with a filter spout for a mouth--and nearly completely indestructible. He's lived in the same patch of tall reeds and saw grass as long as I've known him. When it's warm, he bathes

with sun and dirt in a kingdom of oddments he's built since time immemorial. His favorite pastime is to shed his clothes to stand bare-chested in the heat of day. His skin is corium baked in the desert. His forearms are pock-marked and tracked. His hands are ink-black--needled with constellations.

The Water Bear has haunted the same half-mile plot of an underdeveloped city block on the corner of 400 South and Orem Boulevard. He's made his home beneath the gaze of luxury high rises that sit north of the plot. The complex was first imagined as a strip mall of sorts in the mid-nineties before settling into perpetually unfinished apartments. The building changed ownership with each surge and valley of the housing market over the last twenty-five years until construction halted for the complex on a semi-permanent basis in 2012. It burned down under less than transparent circumstances in 2014. The Water Bear can sometimes be found in the shadow of the new construction smoking and drinking in its unfinished parking lot. It's where he likes to do his dancing.

Maybe a year ago, half of the lot where the Water Bear lives was used to build a dialysis center. The center now carries a steady stream of patrons in and out of its sanitized doors from open to close six days a week. The parking is ballasted against the remaining unkempt portion where the Water Bear resides. He refuses to dance there. I believe it's out of respect for the ailing souls who frequent the building. I think he feels a kinship with them. Maybe an unspoken one, but a real one nonetheless--maybe it's the same I feel for him and his neighbor, Porter Rockwell. Half a mile south from the plot sits a second, older dialysis center. No one ever goes there.

I first saw the Water Bear in the dead of a sudden cold snap; he was washed in moonlight dancing in his parking lot. He was clothed from head to toe in stained coveralls with the hood face funneled forward and cinched tight. Against motionless, frozen slabs of slip-shod concrete, his breath steamed out in erratic bursts from a hole just big enough to fit the top of a beer bottle. He snaked his arms in waves, thrashing his head to the song only he could hear. It was an act where every breath was a protestation declaring towards some greater truth he was compelled to create with his body--to do so by any other means would have been profane. I tell myself: it was January, he was trying to stay warm. But his dance never felt like survival or instinct, it felt like prayer.

This isn't about church, or god, or even mormons.

"No mercy will be shown...you should all be exterminated, and by God, you will be."

In 1838 Governor Lilburn Boggs of my home state of Missouri ordered that the "growing scourge" of "The Mormons" be forcibly, violently removed from the commonwealth. Shortly thereafter, seventeen mormons were corralled and murdered in Caldwell County Missouri by local militia, two of which were a boy age fourteen and a girl age ten.

In 1846, once again, mormons were forcibly expelled from Nauvoo Illinois during the harshest months of winter in the midwest; all this just two short years after their leader was murdered while imprisoned awaiting trial. Winters in the midwest are a miserable ordeal. The wind blisters in from the great plains completely freezing the landscape. It's a violent, unforgiving cold that snaps trees at their base and eats at you from the inside. My point here is I know exactly the conditions those wretched exiles were forced to endure, it's beyond harsh, it is nearly unbearable.

In 1847, that same fraught and homeless band of christian pioneers, ordered to be exterminated, arrived in Utah valley. In 1847 as the first act of settling into their new Eden, those once hunted pioneers promptly began to violently, systematically wrest the ancestral home of the Ute nation away from them. They did so through starvation, encroachment, and according to the accounts of the Ute people, "indiscriminately killing tribesman, women, and children."

In 2007, a housing contractor in Nephi, Utah found the gravesite of four skeletons in the hills that overshadow the city's suburbs. They were all bound by the wrists and ankles, were smaller than a full-grown adult, and showed signs of a body in mid-development when they died. Children, they were children. The damage to their spines and skulls indicated they'd been executed. A journal entry submitted to the local historical society would tell the story: four Ute boys were caught, bound, and slaughtered by local militiamen--for thievery.

Every July 24th, the state of Utah celebrates Pioneer Day, marking their ancestors' great exodus to find a place to call home. The roads and streets of Orem fill with plastic lawn chairs and gaggles of onlookers celebrating and singing praises to the kith and kin. Those first "wanderers in a strange land" carved home into the flesh of the valley. I have no pioneers in my blood. We're a brood of feckless German swindlers on one side, and pacific island-dwelling savages on the other. But still, I'm at odds with myself. I ache for and am ashamed of the people who share

my same burden of seeking meaning and the divine. I feel the same longing for home: to be with and without. I know it. I know them.

Sean is a Cinephile Hermit

--hitting his mid-fifties with crippling back pain. He shuffles into the restaurant methodically, painfully, and I watch him tread as though he walks through a minefield. Sean is completely bald on his crown, but still, brilliant white hair on the back and sides of his head grows to an unkempt length. It corresponds with the time he's spent bedridden in pain. White silk now pools gently on his shoulders. Weeks have grounded out in physical agony since the last time he left home, he wears them on his face. I've missed him.

"Cad?"

"I'm trying to be nice."

We're sitting at the bar of Asa Ramen just roadside to the glut and congestion of State Street in Orem. It's still early in the afternoon, but already the street continues to have regular intervals of bumper-to-bumper traffic. A large window stretches almost completely across the shop's facade, we watch the ebb and flow of cars while we wait. The restaurant is one of my favorites, it's small, and affords only a wall of tables and booths on its south side and a bar lined with maybe a dozen stools on its north side. The interior is mostly a smattering of pastel paper mache lamps implying a vaguely eastern motif. All the furniture is stiff, darkly stained. Sean shifts uncomfortably trying to find a painless inch of barstool. He distracts himself by examining the Macey's in the front window across the street: it's currently being demolished. Just beyond the naked skeleton of commerce and concrete, the very top of the Wasatch mountain range peaks over, looking back down at Sean.

"She says she's an artist."

"Really?"

He pauses long enough to stifle a giggle as his heavy cheeks, "wood signs."

"What?"

"You know, those signs you see in homes that say something inane like "CIRCA 1998" or quote a "family saying?"

"What?"

"She's a wood sign *artisan*." again he starts to fit and giggle soundlessly. It's wonderful.

"I shouldn't," in between great heaves of wheezing, "I shouldn't laugh."

“Is she any good? I mean, it would be one thing to throw the title “artist” around so seriously if, you know--”

He doesn't miss a beat “She doesn't make them, it's a paint by numbers thing. They're god awful.”

“You should write something about it.”

Sean dodges the suggestion.

Sean has two children, Sam and Katy. According to Sean, they're maniacs. Sam, as far as I have been able to glean, is a lot like Sean: hyper neurotic and tends to let people walk all over him. Sam, also like his father, loves to start things and leave them half-finished. This isn't a fault. When Sean finds something he loves, he loves it until it completely consumes and then exhausts him. At the expense of leaving a novel, two films, nearly a dozen plays, a law degree, and even a career in Hollywood, Sean's left behind more lives than most people will live, in the fires of infancy. It's a kind of love without guile or desire for reciprocity.

“No, No, that's not it.”

Sean still has his jacket on. It's the same leather jacket he was wearing when we first met several years before. Blue striping from his shirt peeks out of the tear in the left elbow, and I try to remember if the hole has always been there. Sean looks down at his swollen hands frowning. They're shaking, and he can't make them stop.

“I really shouldn't laugh.”

I've never known what to do when he gets in a bad way, “It *is* funny.”

“I asked my dad for money last week.”

I stumble to break the silence with talk about our theories of what the last season of Twin Peaks really means. As with most things, Sean sees it as a series that ends like it began: in tragedy. The return to beloved subject matters for the next two hours is a good distraction. We eat and argue until Sean's phone vibrates without pause for nearly a minute. Texts from his son, daughter, and wife rattle off in urgency and concern.

Katy is freaking out because you've been gone and haven't texted her back. She thinks you're dead--

Pls don't be dead.

Pls Pls text me back

“Oh Jesus, I gotta get going.” He starts for his wallet in his back pocket and immediately doubles over onto the bar gasping.” I try to help Sean straighten and steady himself.

“Hey”

He waits for it--probably hoping for the same thing I am. The words. The thing that makes it all fit.

“It’s not a tragedy.”

“Sure”

Sean snorts it out, grins, and delicately lumbers out of the restaurant.

I track him across the front window until he disappears out of frame, towards home. And there it is again: the nagging, the aching, the shame, the love. All of it smashed together, an indecipherable static sitting in my throat and on my tongue. I try to measure it out at the bar, counting patrons as they enter. First, an elderly couple who speak Spanish with a lyricism and flourish of double “L” and “Y” that betrays their hailing from Argentina or some country thereabout. The wife is stout with eyes enrapturingly blue. The husband is a slight man with sloped shoulders and a beautiful head of fire brown hair. They’re followed by a take-out carrier. He lugs an orange crate of a backpack, hitting everything within reach in the tight space of the restaurant. He knocks over a glass jar full of toothpicks and it shatters. Briefly, the hush of conversation stops, and everyone looks up to see the poor soul turn a crimson shade of embarrassment. Then another couple enters. Young, and perfect in every way. The man can’t be more than twenty-two maybe twenty-three. The girl is just leaving adolescence. They enter hand in hand and greet the overworked host.

“I made a reservation.” what a surprise, the man’s voice is barely not a boy’s. It whistles through the top of his mouth and out of his nose as he speaks. He sounds like he’s trying to speak from somewhere deeper, but it isn’t there. The host stares back confused--the ramen shop doesn’t need a reservation, it’s basically a dive.

“Oh--oh Yeah, I remember, you’re the guy that called in right?”

“Yeah, yesterday, I made a reservation. We came early--it should be under Allred.”

Allred, a good strong pioneer name with good, strong pioneer roots. A name full of broken and tired bodies who trudged through plains and privation. Bodies who thrived in the desert once their handcarts settled in the valley. Allred is a survivor’s name, it belongs here. The letters tumble around inside of me and I think maybe there’s something to it, but I can’t shake the others who belong here too. Those pariahs, this is their home as well. Clarity, ephemeral and sudden hasn’t come to me yet, but I think it’s here: somewhere between the surly duo shuffling around their haven of nylon and dirt, and the tardigrade, dancing in the shadow of gaudy concrete.

AUTHOR’S NOTE: *A friend of mine recently asked “Don’t you just hate those moments where you think something is great and it turns out to be awful?” I hated that idea, it felt perverse and more importantly false. Sacred, profane--breathhtaking, grotesque. Everything is everything, both*

*answer and question, damnation and grace. Nothing ever is “either/or”, or maybe everything is-
-I don’t know. I think this piece is my attempt at trying to fit that incongruity into actual people I
love so it didn’t just drift into the air like the fucking masturbatory chatter my ilk is known for.*

AUTHOR BIO: L.W. Platt currently resides in Pennsylvania and is a recent graduate of Utah Valley University, though Missouri is where he writes from and will always be home to him. He’s taken to preoccupying himself with that space where language braces up against living and then completely fails. Sometimes he finishes what he writes.