

Hummingbird Fights

By Chris Cover

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest Editor TURNER ODORIZZI writes:*

This story is a beautiful illustration of what it means to be left with an empty feeling. While telling the story, the narrators only give us sparse dialogue, short barbs that are quick, low-brow, and so emotionally evocative that they single-handedly construct the setting without ever doing the actual legwork of elaborating. The banter often comes in line-by-line form, with short, hyper-realistic sentiments. I often found myself transported back to the short and volatile fights and conversations I had with my own father. In addition to this story of family emptiness and legacy, there are ruminations on colors and identity. When describing the nature of rural America, the narrator places us between red and blue, reducing our personal and political aspirations to all the “purple” or in-between colors. I felt a sense of relief as I was reading this story, like someone was stripping away chipped paint on my psyche, leaving bare all of the fragility and mistakes I made, but giving them a clarity that you only get from a personal honesty I don’t know that I’ve ever had. Is it hard to tell such an Earth-shattering story without more than dialogue and a few vivid images? Obviously, this story proves that it knows how, and that this author may know more about inner turmoil than any of us ever could. After all, has a character almost weeping at not being as agile and beautiful as the hummingbird which he sees felt so prescient? Likely, nothing ever will. This story is beauty, frustration, and deep sadness captured by the short, working-class conversations of two brothers desperate for meaning in their lives.

Favorite Quote: Fields the same golden colors and trees with leaves of green and orange and red and people like they’ve always been and in different colors too. Who wants to fight?

5 Stars

(Spacing and font size are author’s own.) Eds.

Hummingbird Fights

He said he wished our fathers or anyone else would have told us more than just it goes by faster than you think. What does that mean? he said.

I don't know, I said.

We could've figured that out on our own probably.

We keep talking about it.

But it wouldn't of mattered anyway.

I don't remember anyone else ever saying anything do you?

No, he said. But I suppose it's pretty common talk around puberty or somewhere in between the ages of twelve and seventeen wouldn't you think? And by eighteen you're either supposed to know it and if you don't life still goes on, it doesn't stop. We were what, sixteenish? Then it's never talked about again unless brought up like now.

Pretty much every chat.

Was it you or me this time?

I think it was me.

No, I said something like, Boy I wish I'd been told a lot more and you laughed.

I'm still laughing.

Advice for generations.

Heavy stuff.

Go and ask them old timers what they think about the time passing, Lenny said. They probably never even thought about it.

Didn't wear watches neither.

My grandpa never wore one. Grandma too.

I watched mine throw hers away.

And now it's all so calculated and so crunched the way we live, he said. But coming from the right mouth like your father's you always think twice about it. Too much. Maybe that's it. You listen because you want to listen. It's your fucking dad. I guess with some people like us the conversation never ends though. Makes you wonder if it all boils down to relevance or something like learning how to ride a bike. You just remember, you just know it. Do all people talk like this or is it just us? It's not only us, Shep, come on.

Would it have mattered? I said.

What? Hearing more from dad? Or mom even.

Yeah.

I don't know. Probably not. They were right.

What else could they have said?

This kind of talk coming through the telephone, the airwaves cellular, the dog huffing against my knee and her back warming in the sun. Walking. Huffing. Sweating. Two sides of the country. Coastal west and near east depending on who you ask. U S A. Red and blue make purple. A capital in the middle. It's the big cities which define them one way or the other and in between is either mixed or anti-government. Both. Free. Always free. Intelligent and free. Ignorant and free. Indifferent and free. Fields the same golden colors and trees with leaves of green and orange and red and people like they've always been and in different colors too. Who wants to fight?

What about . . . Lenny said then was interrupted by his wife calling from the kitchen asking about dinner, distracting him. What about . . .

Cooking was happening. Sizzling sounding from a grill that I pictured smoking the house up inside and all the windows open. Not true. Hotter weather than here though. Humidity. A child screaming. Len strolling the yard around the curved edge of the pool talking with his hand up against his head. He said so. Said he was so close to falling in while balancing himself that he had to flail his arms and break the chain of communication for a few seconds. Check on dinner. What'd I say? Nothing. What'd I miss?

I've got to clean this damn thing, he said.

There were only a few minutes left to talk. Time differences. Sun out strong here and the world darkening there. Earth upside down. I could think of at least two or three other topics we could've covered but it always boiled down to the one because it was the silliest one between us. And yet he went on about the yard and the pool and we didn't talk about his job at all and that surprised me. Finances, money. I didn't comment about the pool. I don't work. He just went on and on. I'm a bum.

You know we're gettin old, he said.

I know it.

Where'd it all go?

What else did you want to know, Len?

Anything, he said. I can figure out the time all on my own.

Can you?

It goes by. I look at the clock. So what.

I can't, I said.

Why are we still talking about it then?

It's about regret isn't it.

I guess so.

What do you regret?

He said he had to maintain his yard regularly but didn't think of it as a regret. Having to do it. He was aware of his decision when he took on the responsibility and said so. Distracted he repeated that he had to clean the pool and didn't regret anything. He thinks. Something is kicked. A toy. He hates that pool. He loves it. An inflatable ball. I've been there only once a few years ago and it's bigger to me every time we talk about it on the phone and all I can smell is the chlorine. I imagine it now all the colors have changed. I wish I had a pool but it would turn green overnight. His sparkles blue. I maintain my own yard poorly and if he lived by me like he used to I would get an eye from him next door every time I get home with the dog. Like now. Trim the bushes, sweep the stoop. He's not there but only his voice. Then I'd be invited over for dinner and we would not talk about anything we were talking about on the phone because we'll be fifty in a year anyway and not on the phone. What would it matter? It would be changed. It would be different. I'd be closer. This way we can talk in distances whenever we want. The same. I was home and no one lived next door and I got hungry. Like from a bell ringing. Salivating.

I guess they could've included more, he said.

More of what?

More than just, Son it goes by faster than you think. What is that? Hey son you're gonna die and it's gonna be soon soon soon. Anyone can say that. I guess I need explanations. I guess I need to know why.

What more would you like to have known, Len?

Everything! he said almost losing the phone again and his voice. Everything. What's it mean for one.

He again mocked what his father had said to him long ago.

Like a daily lesson, I said.

Yes!

Lenny didn't have a father anymore.

Maybe he didn't know any better, I said. We still don't and we're older now than they were when they told us. You can't blame them.

Who then?

No one. God. No one ever figures it out. Life's not meant to be completely figured out. They've got special houses for people who try and all the others are just pretending.

He said: When I used to see him after school I'd get all excited to hear about what he had to say. About anything. About living, about life. Man stuff. And women stuff too of course. Lori O'Connolly. I was afraid I'd grow up to be a fag. So was he. I think. Maybe he was. We never talked about that. Speaking of women Maggie Mayfly.

Who was she?

Then there was working on the farm and him being whipped with a mouth and a whistle. I always used to joke that that whistle must've been a big one. And why didn't he just strangle the son of a bitch with the strap it was tied to, sneak up from behind. It must've been huge too.

I laughed.

Lessons and disciplines, he said. What he had to offer over spaghetti which he couldn't rid himself of because it tasted so much better than what he was used to being served in the can. Noodles crunching like bug exoskeletons. Ketchup. Brown basil. His work day, my school day. Our present conditions under examination. How was work, pop? Same as any other, son, how was school? Shit. Tomorrow too. On some days we talked more than others. Some days less. Some days worse. Even some days better, great. Hands folded over one another and a candle in between us on the table. Yeah right, there wasn't no damn candle, Shep. Nothing but his busted up hands clasped together resting with knuckles scarred and dry and breaking the skin and mine gripping the utensils scarfing, not yet scarred or scared to death of death. He ate too fast of course. Then we'd fight afterwards in the basement. To the bone. Wiping our mouths as we called it. We were always fighting but not always in the basement. No. Maybe that's what he was trying to teach me. Fighting. Taking it outside. And not with fists neither. Not fighting fighting but other kinds of fighting. Life fighting. Maggie Mayfly.

I remember now, I said.

All fighting is so mixed up anymore, Lenny said. Diluted. We used to spar in the garage and I'd tell mom it was from a wall I wasn't allowed to punch anymore because they can punch back when you're least looking, she'd said.

That's why you hate cleaning that pool.

Mom, he said.

Silence on the line.

The pool bites too, Shep.

No your hand I mean.

He wasn't listening and I did. Three topics back to one. Dinner, the pool, fighting.

Time doesn't change, he said.

I concurred.

Then it can't be that. It can't be the time. It's us, Shep, it's us.

What's us?
Don't you feel like dying?
No. I don't.
I'm gonna give myself a heart attack.
You're nuts.
Not on purpose. Time will.
What's for dinner?
A punch in the mouth.
Look out!
We laughed.
How's Liz? he said.

Gone.
Really?
Really.
You let her.

I did.
What. She just walked out the door?
Yep.

Gravy.
I guess.
A long pause of silence. Wind catching the mouthpiece.
I'm a bum, I said, remember?

I don't want to get into politics, he said, but that's one example. Politics. Fuck. And your being a bum. Har har. You remember Cindy?

I did.

Friends, fuck, what happened to them? Pets, children, what to fucking eat, what to fucking fuck. Work. School. Taking the kid. Every. Damn. Day. Catching the bus. A cab. Running down the street a damned fool. Yelling and screaming your damn head off. Or riding a bike but then you end up sweating your ass off and tired. Not like that. No bikes. A straight line skewed. Time warps along. Destroys a fence, creates landslides, creates avalanches, tidal waves, floods, divorce, you name it. Earthquakes, Shep, fires. Swirling doom. Nooses. And we always see it, it's always there, it's always ticking, it's always coming, we know it, we always see it, it never stops, it's always there, we always see it, it never stops, it's always coming. Do you see it?

That was good, I said.

Boulders man! Death! What's one task to fit one that another one can't? Bringing down homes in the rubble in every damn state, every damn county. The whole country. Night and day. The world! Oh fuck him, he's gone. Fuck it, fuck him. Fuck it, he's gone. I miss fighting. We can't fight anymore. I'd fight you. Wanna fight? No honey please. Yes, I got it. No, sit. No not you. Shepherd. You there?

You gotta go.

He's dead and I'm dead and you're dead and she's dead and she's dead and he's dead and I'm . . .

There was more. The potatoes. Inside. And steak. And more.

Use the Thyme.

It's all dead, he said.

Sorry to hear.

What?

You said gravy.

I was talking about. Never mind. What time is it there?

Three.

It can't be.

Hours, I said chewing on an apple. It's three hours behind you.

That's what I thought. Cept in Arizona.

You got me there.

Why are all the people so young and so beautiful where you are?

I don't know. Maybe they know more about this time thing than we do. Or our fathers.

Our fathers.

We come from a strange place.

I gotta go, Shep.

See ya Len.

All right.

I waited on the line.

Hey Shep.

Yeah?

I almost forgot. I saw a hummingbird today.

A hummingbird?

On a purple cone of flowers yeah.

A butterfly bush.

I don't know. He paused. You know they can fly backwards?

I know they like butterfly bushes, I said.

I saw it. They can fly backwards and up and down and all around. Like a bee.

Small.

A thing like that, he said and stopped and sighed. Swallowed hard. You would think a creature like that would be able stay young forever don't you think? He sounded about to cry. Being able to fly backwards n all like that don't you think Shep?

Now I was about to cry.

Shep?

What makes you say that? I said.

The way they function, the way they move. The way they live—it's effortless. And they're so happy. A hundred miles an hour those wings can go and you can't even see em. Zoom! Makes you wonder about their hearts too. How fast they beat. Man.

How many were there?

Huh? Oh One. There was just one.

Oh.

They probably got it made, he said. Probably don't even fight.

He thought.

You okay Len?

Huh?

Animals know themselves, I said. They know what to do.

I never wished I could fly, Shep, did you?

Probably at some time, yeah.

People still do though right?

Yeah. I think so.
Why must we try so hard?
Lenny you come sit.
You think those little birds do?
I didn't answer.
Hummingbirds, Shep.
Hummingbirds, I said.
That's gotta mean something don't it?
Lenny the gravy!
All right honey. Don't it Shep?
I guess so, I said.
I gotta go.
I'm not dead, Lenny, she said serious as sin.
All of it does.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *My dog and I go on many long walks together and during these walks occurs many thoughts and ideas. Narratives, inspiration. Some of it so gut-wrenching it begs to be creatively filtered through the artist's lens and shared with others. A long while ago I read a book by journalist Hunter S Thompson and then one by novelist Cormac McCarthy and decided to write fiction. Other influences followed. This story was essentially an exercise on dialogue fueled by regret and time about the frustrations that one may never be fully satisfied with the notion of death.*

AUTHOR'S BIO: *My name is Chris Cover and I'm a fiction writer originally from Pittsburgh Pennsylvania USA. I currently live in Seattle Washington. I plan on self-publishing my first novel (Forget Dogneck) when it's ready. Currently the manuscript is under review by those I've asked to help advance it to its final state.*

I've been published online by One Throne Magazine and Electric Cereal and a short poem somewhere I can't remember. Recently most of my time has been spent novel writing but short stories happen too and here we go.

EDITOR'S BIO: *Turner Odorizzi is a writer from Austin, TX who graduated from the University of Texas at Austin English and Creative Writing programs. He is as of yet unpublished, but has been writing for a number of years now. In addition to graduating from UT, he worked as an Intern for the managing editor of Bat City Review, UT's main literary journal. His story **Postmortem Character Assassination** appeared in Issue 6.*