

Chicago Sportster 48

By Jesse Sensibar

WHY I LIKE IT: *Guest editor MICHAEL HOWARD writes:*

Conveying a sense of place is a challenge no matter how much length you have to work with. Doing it successfully in less than 800 words—good luck to you. Jesse Sensibar pulls it off. If you’ve never been to Chicago, you’ll feel as though you have when you’re finished reading “Chicago Sportster 48.” Straddling the border between short story and prose poem, this impressionistic vignette takes us on a splintered tour through the knotty soul of one of America’s most hallowed towns. It’s via glimpses—here hurtling across the Skyway, there day-drinking on a pimp’s dime—that we’re made to see and feel what life in the Windy City is like for a certain sector of its inhabitants. “Fragments are the only forms I trust,” the narrator of Donald Barthelme’s “See the Moon?” tells us. Reading “Chicago Sportster 48” helps us to understand why. Here’s a sample:

“Everyone had a plan, mine was to just keep moving, attach myself to whatever seemed like it was going somewhere the fastest and just hang on. You’re harder to hit the faster you run. You just can’t ever stop. There is a Golden Ratio of speed to fate, but it’s difficult to quantify.”

5 stars

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

Chicago Sportster 48

I woke up this morning looking down the barrel of a yesterday, turning 48 years old, and to the sound of the Windy City being true to its name; working hard at trying to tear the Chicago redbrick corners out of the third floor of this twenty-two foot wide row house just a few short east-west blocks from Lake Michigan where I was raised up. The radio says the Chicago Skyway

is closed this morning because of high winds and flying debris. This narrow house has withstood these challenges for over a century. It shrugs them off with the help of the Golden Ratio of 1:1.618 and a little Eastern European tuck-pointing now and then.

When I was young, just beginning what for me would be a long shortcut in a life, I worked for a time on cars and motorcycles at a shop on Stony Island Avenue that was just down from a Harold's Fried Chicken Shack and King Richard's Hubcap and Wheel; right at the base of the 79th street ramp up onto the Skyway. Late into the night and long before fuel injection, we'd drink six packs of Old Style, cut and snort lines; tune carburetors and gap plugs, then hit the empty Skyway on fast stripped Nortons, Triumphs, BSAs and Harleys running straight pipes with no mufflers. The power-to-weight ratio was always in our favor; gravity and the rutted pavement that undulated under us like a killer breathing hard were both working to take us to a closed casket funeral or somewhere worse we didn't ever even want to talk about.

We were the immortals. The girls were both pretty and pretty willing, but always for me just a little too young and wanting more or a little too old and out of reach. Somehow most of us survived in spite of everything we did and not because of it. The bike wrecks and the overdoses and the suicides took a toll. Somehow you believed it could never happen to you. Everyone had a plan, mine was to just keep moving, attach myself to whatever seemed like it was going somewhere the fastest and just hang on. You're harder to hit the faster you run. You just can't ever stop. There is a Golden Ratio of speed to fate, but it's difficult to quantify.

Yesterday, I wandered the Museum of Science and Industry with a beautiful genius I might once have had children with if we had both been slightly less damaged in our time. She explained and I learned about the Golden Ratio along with Fractal Branching, Spirals, and the amazing Voronoi Pattern, which supports the structure of some of the world's biggest football

stadiums just as it does a soap bubble. We wandered the magic of the submarines and coalmines of my youth.

The leaves are blowing off the trees; oranges, yellows, golds, and greens. All different shades of brown against a sky of grays which lean us fast and fierce towards the Falcon Inn, transplanted Monk Parrots, and blackbirds. Inside, an old pimp; royalty in shades of brown and expensive cowboy boots, ran the bar in the Falcon at three in the afternoon for my birthday. Buying all of our drinks; whiskey for me wine for her, while a young black woman with red hair extensions sings the blues accompanied only by her cell phone through a single microphone. All the assembled day drinkers and the players just getting warmed up for a busy holiday Wednesday night clap and cheer for her. Somebody yells out, wanting to know if she has a boyfriend. She replies into the microphone in a voice filled with vice, tired and bluesy at the same time, that she has so many boyfriends she has to schedule them in two weeks in advance. The assembled make their assent known and the old pimp at the end of the bar buys another round and takes his bow.

Sometimes, across the street from The Pepperland Apartment - black but trimmed in regal gold and purple - on a grey November day where the elevated tracks cross 57th street and the Golden Ratio is hard at work, you find strange things posted on the windows of the failed, shuttered coffee shop tucked under the four perfect 1:1.618 arches of the viaduct. They'd be sad if they were not so damn odd, but you can't help but smile with the implied joke of magenta masking tape holding copies of blank pet cremation authorization forms to empty shop windows next to Polaroid photos of the lost.

AUTHOR'S NOTE: *I wrote this piece about my 48th birthday which I spent with someone I cared very much for but had never been able to really connect with*

until later in life so there is a little bit of regret and nostalgia there. It's a collection of images from a single day all run together into something I hope somebody finds interesting. It's also a very consciously place based piece of writing. I grew up kinda' rough on the streets of the south side of Chicago in the 1970s and 80s and I view that past with a bit of nostalgia and regret as well. I tend to write about what know and at the same time try not to fall into the trap of navel gazing which is easy to do if you are not paying attention. I see this piece as a hybrid of prose poem and braided essay which is where a lot of my work ends up, in that funny place between truth and fiction, poetry and prose, social media post and drunken rants on bathroom stall walls.

AUTHOR'S BIO: Jesse Sensibar came west to the high desert in the late 1980s and quickly disappeared down the rabbit hole of Southwestern outlaw drug culture. He emerged from that hole in 2008; close to death and with a solid quarter century of hard drug abuse under his belt. You can usually find him in the dying Ponderosa Pine forests surrounding Flagstaff, Arizona or in the old barrios of Tucson, Arizona. Otherwise, he is probably somewhere out on the highway, documenting the passing of his rapidly disappearing American West and pondering the fleeting nature of memory, sin, spirituality, and forgiveness. You can find him at jessesensibar.com.

EDITOR'S BIO: Michael Howard's essays and short stories have appeared in a wide variety of print and digital publications. His website is michaelwilliamhoward.com. His story *at the end of the day* was published in Issue 6.