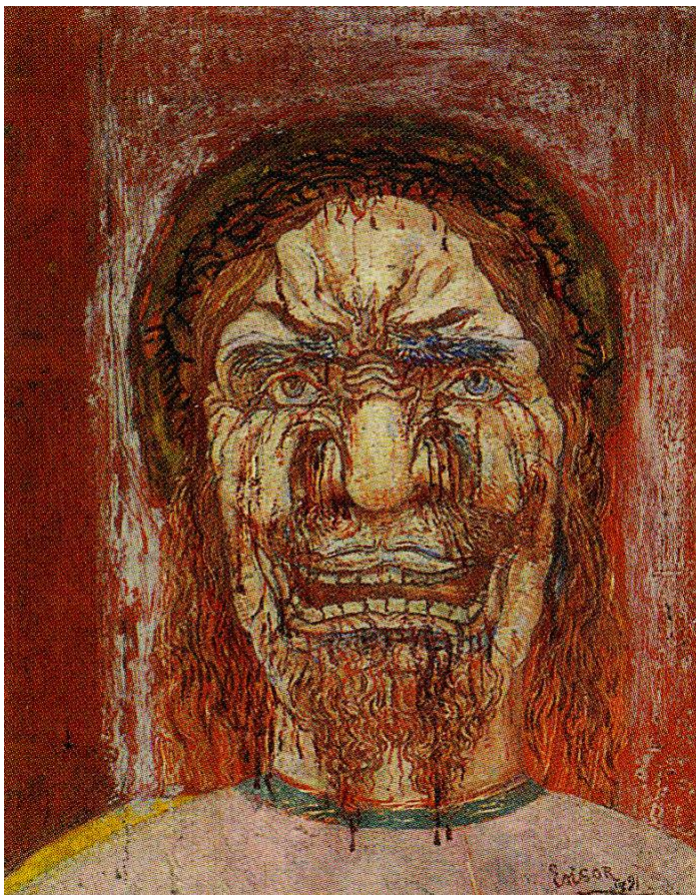

HOT BUTTON PRESS

Contemporary Issue

WOES INNUMEROUS



MICK MCGRATH

2024 PAMPHLET SERIES

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How did I get to the bottom of this well? *How*, when I have a decade of teaching experience in higher ed.; two master's degrees, one of which is a terminal degree from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville; and a lengthy list of publications, albeit in small magazines? I remember being a kid, wondering what would become of me. Now here I am – thirty-six, unemployed, and utterly alone. Sometimes I think moving to Knoxville was the biggest mistake of my life.

I moved here about five years ago, in the summer of 2016. I was thirty-one, then. I'd been teaching English at a Michigan college, but I'd made dogshit for money, and the writing was on the wall – they would *not* be promoting me any time soon.

So, for lack of a better plan, I came to Knoxville to get a second master's degree. A Master of Fine Arts this time. In creative writing. I wanted to be a fiction writer. *Things have got to be better in Knoxville*, I thought.

I figured why not. I'd gotten into UTK, a good school, and the MFA would be paid for. They even gave me a small stipend.

In 2018, I got my MFA. But, so far, the whole writing thing hasn't panned out, and much to my mother's irritation, I cannot bring myself to look for jobs.

I have, to be fair, submitted dozens of applications to colleges major and minor, but I'm running out of gas now. I detest, despise, *loathe* filling out job applications. There's nothing I hate more than job applications. Especially when you know you're not getting the job because you're a white guy.

Really, my contempt for job applications cannot be overstated. The way they make you type out your education, your experience... *As if they can't just look at your fucking resume – or curriculum vitae*, in my case. And I've filled out so *many* job applications. *I really have!*

I cannot *believe* I'm still filling out job applications at thirty-six. *I would rather live a miserable life of indigence than fill out even one more goddamn job application! I would rather work as a paid intern at Goodwill for*

the rest of my life than fill out another job application! And, anyway, so many teaching positions these days – about half, I’d wager – require a diversity statement, something I do not have and refuse to fake.

Some days, I go to Market Square, which is just a few blocks from my apartment in the Maplehurst Complex, and get a steak quesadilla at Soccer Taco, my favorite restaurant. I use Mom’s credit card. The people in there know me. “*Hola, Brock!*” they say. I drink two or three Pacificos, sitting on their sunny patio, working away on my fiction, wearing Wayfarer sunglasses, eating tortilla chips, trying to generate some *repartee* with the cute Mexican server who barely speaks English – though sometimes I wonder if she’s only pretending not to know English.

I grew up privileged, and now, as an adult, I cannot take care of myself. That’s called Learned Helplessness – something like that. And believe you me it’s not exactly an aphrodisiac, not when you’re thirty-six, for God’s sake.

When I buy something, I don’t even look at the price tag.

I am, I assure you, *trying* to grow up. *I really am!* I cancelled my cell phone to save money. And, unemployed cinephile that I am, I borrow DVDs from the library instead of renting movies on YouTube at my mother’s expense.

I have no interest in cable TV.

I am trying to be better. I’m trying really hard to get better. For two months, I cancelled my Internet and just hung out at the library every day, using their Wi-Fi, saving my mother about seventy dollars a month. For God’s sake, don’t I deserve some credit for that? In the evenings, I came home and read a book, putting myself to sleep with a few glasses of Rex Goliath, plonk that I’d get at The Market for just a few dollars a bottle. And believe it or not, for a brief bit there, I was rather *enjoying* that monastic existence.

Other things I’ve cancelled as a result of my impecunity: Amazon

Prime; my subscription to the *New York Times* (which I do value, because if nothing else it provides healthy opposition); the five-dollar lemonades I used to get downtown (and sometimes still do) at a place called Coffee & Chocolate; expensive wine I used to get at Downtown Wine & Spirits; my baby wipes; my subscription to Brazzers...

My mother is my benefactor, my “patron of the arts” – my Peggy Guggenheim. *She must continue to fund my bohemian lifestyle, lest we deprive the world of some magnificent work! I must NOT be made to get a job! Not yet, mother! I need time! I must have time to focus on my writing!*

“A writer does his best work in his thirties,” I told the old Madre once, giving her a Shark Tank presentation. “*War and Peace! Pride and Prejudice!* Both the work of a thirty-something. *I must write, write, write!!!* ‘Noun up,’ to quote the legendary Snoop Dogg. *I have only four years left, Mother! I only have four years left! Four years before I turn forty and officially emerge from my thirties! I must be allowed to continue my work, Mother! Earn good money at some legitimate profession and carve out time for my writing as best as I can??? Out of the question, Mother! Absolutely out of the question!”*

Meanwhile, I haven’t been to the dentist in ages, and my teeth look like Kerrygold butter. The truth is I’m an unfuckable. I mean, physically. An absolute unfuckable.

I can never remember the name of the hotel I frequent. I have a bad habit of ignoring signs. Like, even after living in Knoxville for five years, I couldn’t tell you what any of the streets are called. I know there’s a Clinch and a Walnut and a Gay and a Hill, but I can never remember which is which. All I know is The French Market is that way and the Bijou Theater is up there, etc. Anyway, the hotel I frequent... They have this posh little coffee shop there in the lobby.

Sometimes, I go to the French Market, which I believe is on Church Street, and I sit outside, on their patio. I go to Stock & Barrel and sit on *their* patio. I go to a little coffee shop called Pearl, on Union Avenue, and sit on *their* patio. I ought to write a Guide Michelin.

Pearl is right next to the Union Avenue Bookstore, whom I alienated one day, asking one of their sales associates, “*Where’s all the healthy opposition gotten to???* Where, oh where, are the multiple perspectives, friend?”

“Multiple perspectives?” the man said, looking at me, bewilderedly. He had a professorial look – cardigan, spectacles.

“Well,” I said, looking around the bookstore. “These tables. They’re covered with woke novels, which is fine, but where’s all the anti-woke stuff, my guy? To counterbalance the woke stuff, friend?”

The man looked at me like I’d just stomped a baby kitten.

“Anti-woke?” he said, squinting at me. “Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. We don’t do *that*. We don’t carry *those* books. We certainly wouldn’t want *that* clientele. We certainly wouldn’t want...[gulp]... *Trump supporters* perusing our aisles. Heavens, could you imagine it? Could you imagine Trump supporters perusing our aisles?”

“But, sir,” I began, “you can’t claim to be a critical thinker unless you’re willing to carry multiple perspectives.”

“Hey,” said the bespectacled bibliophile. “Did you know that Europeans got the whole idea of healthy opposition from the indigenous peoples of the Western hemisphere?”

“Christ, you don’t even have Cormac McCarthy,” I said. “And, for God’s sake, Cormac McCarthy is *from* Knoxville. He’s a Knoxville *native*.”

“McCarthy’s novels do not feature enough women,” the bibliophile explained.

The staff at Pearl like me even less. A barista once demanded I leave because I wouldn’t order anything. This, of course, was a pretext, a technicality.

“Excuse me, but do you have any idea what I’m working on?” I said to the barista, gesturing to the laptop on the little table in front of me.

“As a matter of fact, I do,” the girl said. “You come in here a lot. Once, when you went to the bathroom, my coworkers and I looked at your screen and saw what you were writing.”

“I’m currently working on a novel called *Banish Inquisition*,” I told the barista.

“We know,” the girl said.

She and her coworkers... A gaggle of giggling gum-cracking yentas.

“I’ve been thinking of calling it *The Importance of Being Woke*,” I said. “Anyway, it’s going to be huge. I’m going to put you guys on the map. One day, they’ll talk about Pearl the way they talk about The Elephant House, that cute little Edinburgh café, where a penniless writer named J.K. Rowling wrote a little book that did a little business.”

“J.K. Rowling?” the barista said. “Oh, God.”

The girl rolled her eyes.

“Uh huh, I think I’ve made my point,” I said, triumphantly. “Yes, I do believe I’ve made my point. Now kindly leave me to do my work.”

I was told to leave the coffee shop at once, or she would call the police.

My MFA was paid for, and yet somehow, I’ve a hundred grand in student loans. I’ve eleven-thousand dollars in credit card debt. I’m currently enrolled in a “hardship program” at Discover. Before that, I was paying a confiscatory twenty-two percent.

From an early age, I knew I would be poor. I simply *knew* I'd be a brokester. Even as a little boy. It was as if my life had happened a million times already and now here it was, starting over once again. I simply *knew* I would be poor.

"You told me you'd have a job by the end of the month," my mother says.

"Ah, but I didn't specify *which* month."

"Come on, Brock. What about all that schooling? All that education? Two master's degrees, one from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville – a good school, the last time I checked."

"Oh?" I laughed. "Don't be so sure it's such a good school, Mother."

"What was all that time for? Do you mind telling me? All that money? What was the point of all that schooling if you're not even going to search for jobs? What was the point of getting ten years of teaching experience? Birthday clown, Civil War re-enactor, mall Santa, Wal-Mart greeter... I'll take anything at this point, Broccoli. *Anything!* You know, very few people get to do what they love, Brock. Sorry you didn't get to be a fiction writer, for God's sake. I mean, cry me a river. For a time, my father shoveled driveways. Did you know that, Brock? Did you know that your grandfather, may he rest in peace, shoveled driveways for a stretch? And your father's father specialized in HVAC. You can't always get what you want, Broccoli. You can't always get what you want. Look at me, for God's sake. I had four boys."

"Why thank you, Mother."

"You're costing me money, Brock. About two-thousand dollars a month. With your apartment, your utilities, your Internet..."

"I guess this isn't the time to tell you about my Amazon wish list."

"Add to this that you're an alcoholic spending nearly two-hundred dollars a week on booze. *For God's sake, Son, get yourself to a meeting!*"

“Mother,” I say, with enormous seriousness, “if I have to get a job, I will kill myself.”

“Oh, for God’s sake, Broccoli.”

“I mean it, Mother. I will rent a car, drive to your house, and hang myself in your foyer.”

“Stop it, Brock!”

“Coming home one day, you’ll see my body swinging from the ceiling in the foyer. You’ll develop post-traumatic stress. You’ll have flashbacks every time you walk through the front door. *You’ll have to sell the house!* Don’t think I won’t do it, Mother. Don’t think I won’t do it.”

My older brothers are all wildly successful, a murderer’s row. Matthew designs airplane parts for a California aerospace company. Jonathan, meanwhile, is in advertising. And Joshua is a lawyer, like Dad.

Anyway, from time to time, Matthew, the aerospace engineer, calls me and tells me to get my shit together.

“Mother is tweaking,” he reports. “Mother is absolutely tweaking. She’s freaking the fuck out, Brock. She keeps calling me and asking me to smack some sense into you. The woman’s seventy years old, and she’s freaking the fuck out. These are her final years, Brock. Her final years on this planet. They’re supposed to be peaceful.”

“Oh, please,” I groan. “These are hardly her final years, Matthew. Mother could easily live another twenty years. Easily.”

BUT, EGAD, WHAT IF MATTHEW’S RIGHT????? WHAT IF MOTHER DIES TOMORROW AND THESE PROVE TO BE HER FINAL YEARS INDEED?

I’m not fortified for that. Jonathan and Joshua and Matthew have wives, children. I’ll have to go through that alone. The death of my mother.

How do people do that, anyway? Watch their mothers die. It is a wonder to me that anyone has ever survived such a thing.

For God's sake, how will I help pay for Mother's funeral? I'll have to get the money for Mother's funeral from Mother.

Incidentally, when my mother dies, these assholes will probably try to fuck me out of my inheritance, saying they have kids and I don't so I deserve less money, saying at the time of her death I owed Mother a bunch of money.

"Why *can't* you get a job, anyway?" Matthew inquires. "Why can't you be...like...a copywriter or something? A copywriter."

"I don't have any experience in copywriting," I tell my brother, irritably. "I've spent my adult years teaching, Matthew. I've spent my adult years teaching. I have ten years of teaching experience."

"Hey, what's that short story you wrote?" Matthew says.

"Which one?" I say. "I've written many short stories."

"The one that was published in that kind of big magazine a few years back."

"Ptolemaics Everywhere!" I remind him.

Matthew laughs.

"Yes, 'Ptolemaics Everywhere!'" he exclaims. "*That's brilliant, Brock!* 'Ptolemaics Everywhere!' A bit misanthropic, but funny. See, why can't you parlay that into a copywriting job or something?"

"I must have been Hitler in a previous life, Matthew."

"More like Marx," Matthew says. "Marx was a total ne'er-do-well."

"Yes," I say. "Yes, in all fairness, I suppose Marx would be a better analog."

“Lenin, too,” Matthew adds. “Lenin relied on his mother financially well into his forties.”

“Anyway,” I say, tiredly.

“Anyway, why can’t you get a teaching position, Brock? A teaching position. How much teaching experience do you have, anyway?”

“Almost ten years,” I tell him. “I just got through telling you that. You’re not listening.”

“Then what the fuck is the problem?” Matthew explodes. *“What could it be? Why can’t you get a teaching position, Brock? For God’s sake, why?”*

“Look, Matthew, everything will work out.”

“Mother is absolutely tweaking, Brock. The woman’s going nuts, and who could blame her?”

My brother, Joshua, calls me, too. Josh the Attorney.

“Brock, you’re such an asshole, dude. You’re such a shitty little asshole, man.”

“Is a man not allowed to struggle, Josh?”

“You’re a shitty asshole, Brock. A shitty asshole.”

“Like, in this country, any man who doesn’t make six figures is a loser. Is that it, Josh? Is that what I’m hearing?”

Joshua takes a deep breath.

“I suppose a man can struggle throughout his twenties,” he concedes. “But you’re thirty-six, Brock. *Thirty-six?*”

“Okay,” I say, at a loss. “What do you want me to say, Josh?”

“You’re such a little douche,” Joshua says, nauseously. “Black Sheep doesn’t even begin to describe someone like you. You’re an embarrassment, Brock. I hate to say it, but you’re kind of an

embarrassment.”

“Don’t hold back or anything, Josh.”

“You have a degree from the University of Tennessee, Brock. You have ten years of teaching experience. There’s no reason you should be struggling like this. You can hardly blame COVID. There’s no *reason* for all of this.”

“Birth order psychology, Josh?”

“We had every advantage growing up. Every advantage. We had a *Tabriz* in the foyer. Our house appeared in one issue of *Architecture Digest*. Father had a Testerossa.”

“You’re not listening, Josh.”

“You’re just not working hard enough, Brock. I guarantee you’re not working hard enough. Don’t even *try* to tell me you’re working hard, because I know you’re not working hard enough. You’d rather work on your fiction all day. Your stories. You’re a child, Brock. A little child. Thinking up stories all day. Daydreaming. For God’s sake, mother has shingles. The poor woman has shingles because of you.”

“Shingles?” I say.

“The stress, Brock. She’s worried sick.”

“Oh, but she worries about everything,” I say, dismissively. “She thinks there’s hexavalent chromium in the water.”

“*There probably is!*” Joshua exclaims.

“Well, yes, there probably is,” I say. “Small traces of it, anyway.”

“*Please*, Brock. You’ve got to put your fiction on the backburner now. Put all your energy into finding a job, won’t you?”

“Okay, Josh.”

“Seriously, Brock.”

“It’s on my list, Josh.”

My brother sighs.

“Good to know it’s on your list, asshole. Ugh, what are we gonna do with you, Brock? I mean, really. What *are* we going to do with you?”

But my brother Jonathan is the meanest. My brother Jonathan is by *far* the cruelest.

“Short men like you are meant to just die,” he says, over the phone one day.

I can see Jonathan in his power suit, sitting at his desk in his postmodern office, a huge Lessitzky on the wall behind him.

Jonathan has always been a ladies’ man, a serial monogamist, going from one woman to the next, sometimes dating women fifteen years his junior.

I’ve met the most beautiful women through Jonathan – women who wouldn’t even look at me if it weren’t for the fact that I’m Jonathan’s little brother.

A few years back, Jonathan settled down. He got married in Hawaii. A destination wedding, a real pain in the ass. He has a little boy named Walter now, who is *also* a pain in the ass. I can never remember his wife’s name. Kehlani? Khalya? Kahlua?

“It’s Natural Selection,” Jonathan tells me. “Nature tells short men like you to just fuck off and take their bad genetic information with them.”

“Bad genetic information?” I say. “Don’t you and I have...like...the same genetic information?”

“I know it’s a bummer, bro, but that’s how evolution works. That’s

how we evolve into something more interesting. See what I mean?"

Jonathan has always been this way – cold as life, a dark triad, a C-suite type.

"It is the short man's duty, his responsibility, to just die."

"But you're not exactly a tall drink of water," I say.

"Not saying I am," Jonathan says. "But somehow I made it, Brock. I have a son. Anyway, it's the short man's role in life to just die, thereby improving the species."

"Nature's a eugenicist," I say. "Nature's a real Nazi, huh?"

I got rid of my car in 2016 when I first moved to Knoxville. I figured my apartment in the Maplehurst Complex was close enough to the UT campus, where I was a newly admitted graduate student studying creative writing. Plus, my apartment is right downtown. Everything I need is within walking distance. And I wanted to save money on car payments, insurance, parking, gas...

I'm currently on food stamps. Have been for some time now.

About once a week, I get on the free trolley and go to Publix for a few groceries – chicken breasts, romaine hearts, tomatoes and cucumbers, pineapple, bacon and eggs... *I eat well!* I lug it all home in my Fjallraven backpack.

Except sometimes it doesn't all fit, so I carry the rest of it home in one or two of those reusable, Publix, canvas bags, the ones they sell for a dollar apiece in the check-out aisles.

One day, sitting next to me on the free trolley, a homeless guy shit his pants.

One other time, I saw a man ripping newspapers apart. He just sat there, on the free trolley, ripping apart one newspaper after another.

Downtown Knoxville is about sixteen square blocks. I walk around downtown a lot. I steal rolls of toilet paper from the bathroom in the Hilton lobby. At the Hilton, I get the breakfast buffet for twenty bucks, eat as much as I can, then smuggle bagels and croissants and even bacon (folded up in a linen) out of the hotel in my Fjallraven backpack.

I go to The Market to get a twelve-pack of beer. There, at The Market, I steal mustard packets, napkins, plastic forks and knives...

I am trying to be a little less “swikey” these days. I’m really trying to be better. I’m trying not to be such a burden on my mother.

One day, I bumped into Guam Felix. Guam Felix, the wonder boy. Guam Felix, the literary colossus, whose University of Tennessee master’s thesis, *The Darien Gap*, has just been published to universal acclaim and is already being called the definitive immigration novel. I’m sure you’ve heard of Guam.

Now they’re exalting Guam, feting him, turning him into a hero, an important figure for the social justice movement. Guam isn’t an artist so much as an activist.

In all fairness, I suppose I’m an activist myself with all my *anti-*woke stuff. My novel, *Banish Inquisition*... That, too, is propaganda, is it not?

It had been about two years since I’d laid eyes on Guam, and now here he was, standing on Gay Street. He was wearing wireless headphones.

“Well, well, well,” Guam said, smiling, removing his earbuds. “How’s life, Brock? How’s life treating you, old friend?”

“Not so good, Guam.”

I told him about my problems – my debt, my impecunity, my “inability” to find work, my writing career, which of course is down for the ten-count.

“Woes innumerable, Guam. Woes innumerable.”

“Welp, ever thus to bigots,” Guam shrugged, sort of throwing his hands up and dropping them to his sides, helplessly. “Ever thus to bigots, Brock.”

This remark I simply ignored.

“What are you doing in Knoxville, Guam? Your novel’s a huge success, I hear. Goodness, you didn’t move back to *Knoxville*, did you?”

Guam laughed, mockingly.

“Oh, goodness, no,” he said. “Oh, no, no, no. Oh, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. I *do* live in New York City now, friend. Yes, yes, I *do* live in New York City now. Brooklyn, more specifically. Bushwick, to be even more specific.”

I noticed he was wearing Serengeti glasses. These sunglasses, I happened to know, cost hundreds of dollars. My brother Jonathan has a pair.

“I hear there’s a crime wave in New York presently,” I said.

Guam laughed again.

“Well, sure,” he said. “It’s a real shame, Brock. I’ve stopped taking the subway, I’ll tell you that much.”

“Oh?” I said.

“Only cabs for me. A few weeks ago, a man was pushed onto the subway tracks for no reason at all. A young woman was raped in the subway while tourists snapped pictures for their Insta accounts. Oh, yes, I’ve stopped taking the subway, Brock. Yes, yes, you better believe I’ve stopped taking the subway, friend.”

“I hear that happens all the time,” I said. “I hear New Yorkers get pushed onto subway tracks all the time.”

“It happens here and there.”

“Anyway, what *are* you doing in Knoxville, Guam?”

The literary behemoth cleared his throat.

“Well, Brock, I’m doing a fiction reading tonight. At the University of Tennessee, our old haunt. In the Lindsay Young Auditorium. Haven’t you seen it advertised around campus? Around town? Surely you remember the Lindsay Young Auditorium.”

“I didn’t know it was called that,” I said. “But, yes, I remember the auditorium.”

“Professor Macaulay thought it’d be nice if I did a reading, a few pages from *The Darien Gap*.”

“Ah, Professor Macaulay,” I said, nostalgically. “Tell him I said hello.”

“They thought it’d be nice if I also hosted a talk with the creative writing students,” Guam continued. “The new class, you know? The new wave. They thought it’d be nice if I talked to the creatives about publishing. I can give them insight. Into tha biz. What to expect when they finally scrape together a novel and start looking for agents. Know what I mean, Brock? I can help them, inspire them, etcetera and so forth.”

“They just better not write anything conservative,” I said. “Be sure to tell them that, Guam.” I couldn’t bite my tongue. “Nothing conservative gets published, isn’t that right? Christ, the conservative students at UT just about have to wear arm bands.”

“Nice to be back here,” Guam said, ignoring my bitter remarks, looking around at the small downtown buildings – small by comparison, of course. “I find myself full of nostalgia, Brock. Full of nostalgia.”

“*Audi Alteram Partem*,” I said. “Ever hear of that, Guam?”

Guam took a deep breath and said, “Well, Brock, I can see you haven’t changed a bit. Anyway, have you even been writing, friend?”

“Friend?” I said.

“Well,” Guam said. “Have you?”

“Yes, friend,” I said. “In fact, that’s the only good thing in my life presently. My writing is going quite well, I’ll have you know. I’ll have you know I’m working on a novel called *Banish Inquisition* and it’s nearly finished.”

“*Banish Inquisition*,” Guam said, squinting at me – I could see his eyes through his translucent Serengeti sunglasses.

“Anger is an energy, Guam. Anger *is* an energy.”

“Very interesting, Brock. Good luck with that.”

“It’s loosely based on my UT experience, Guam.”

“Right. I gathered as much, Brock.”

“My little...*contretemps*, if you know what I mean.”

“Got it, Brock.”

Exasperated, Guam rolled his eyes. Even though he was wearing Serengeti sunglasses, I could tell he was rolling his eyes.

It happened in 2019, before the pandemic. Our cohort had disbanded. I don’t remember what Guam’s plans were at the time, but the other fiction writers had gotten plum teaching appointments at schools like Vanderbilt and UNC. They had all been very emotional in those final weeks, packing up their APTs, renting U-Hauls, settling up with their landlords, saying farewell to our professors, saying their goodbyes to our beloved Knoxville. Meanwhile, I stayed behind, having been hired as an adjunct at the University of Tennessee, teaching First-Year Composition. Anyway, one night, alone in my Maplehurst apartment, after I’d

had too much plonk, I looked at the *Knoxville Sentinel* and saw that a gay man had been beaten almost unrecognizable in Mechanicsville, an historic Knoxville district that was known for being quite dangerous. I posted the news article to my Facebook page and captioned it, "*Ecce homo!*" I was being cheeky, irreverent. Just a bit of gallows humor, for God's sake. What *was* the big deal? Like, where had all the punk rock gotten to??? I was just being cheeky. What matters, ultimately, is I have no hostility *whatsoever* toward the 2SLGBTQIA+ community, or whatever the fuck they're now insisting we call them.

Guam and I were still standing on Gay Street. Guam was absolutely *sarling* now. Absolutely *fulminating*, folding his arms at his chest.

"Brock, you made a homophobic remark on Facebook. *Of course you were 'banished'! Of course you were fucking banished, asshole! What the fuck did you think was going to happen? You said something overtly homophobic on Facebook, Brock!*"

"Right," I said. "And my short story, 'Ptolemaics Everywhere!' was cancelled as a result. Someone took a screenshot of my Facebook post and sent it to the editor, remember? The story was taken down *tout suite*."

"Ever thus to homophobes," Guam said, again throwing his hands up and dropping them to his sides.

"Gee, Guam, I was really excited about that publication. I know it's pathetic, but I'd told my mom." I laughed. "It's hard publishing anything these days, Guam."

"It was a small magazine, Brock."

"*Actually, it wasn't!*" I exclaimed. "*It really wasn't!*"

"You got cancelled, Brock. Not cancer."

"Ah, so you do admit that I was cancelled," I said, smiling, seizing on that. "Like, you concede there's such a thing as Cancel Culture."

“Brock.”

“Guam,” I interrupted. “I have nothing. No job, no girlfriend, and certainly no writing career. I have nothing.”

Guam sighed.

“What can I say, Brock? Actions have consequences, friend.”

“Don’t I know it, friend. Now my old UT professors – Professor Macaulay, for instance – won’t even recommend me for a teaching position.”

“Boo hoo, Brock. Boo fucking hoo.”

“After all the good work I did at UT, Guam, I can’t even use my professors as character references. My life is ruined, Guam. My life is ruined.”

“Do you think you’re being a little dramatic, Brock?”

“Guam, how do you get a teaching position without letters of recommendation? *You tell me that?*”

“I’m sure you can get a job somewhere else, Brock.”

“Never drunk Facebook, Guam. It should be etched onto my tombstone. HERE LIES BROCK, A HOMOPHOBIC PIECE OF SHIT WHO DRUNK FACEBOOKED AND DESERVEDLY LIVED A LIFE OF MISERY THEREAFTER.”

It was then that Guam became very serious and intense.

“Brock, a man was beaten almost to death right here in Knoxville.”

“Nothing funny about that,” I said, putting my hands up. “Oh, no, nothing funny about that at all. You’ll get no argument from me there, Guam.”

“And you chose that moment to call the man a homo.”

“Not my finest moment, Guam. Not my finest moment.”

“Look, Brock, I gotta run.” He was getting emotional. He popped his earbuds back into his ears. “Better get back to the hotel and, you know, start prepping for my reading tonight. Take care of yourself, Brock. *Really!* No hard feelings, okay?” He looked me up and down. “Seriously, do take care of yourself, guy. I do hope it all works out for you, old friend.”

He started walking north up Gay Street.

“I love the gays, Guam?” I called after him. *“I do love the gays!”*

Of course, everything went to hell when the pandy came along. *And we’re still in hell!* There’s garbage all over Maplehurst. There are rats all over the complex, too. One night, walking around downtown, I saw a man of about forty crying hysterically, absolutely blubbering, saying, *“Please, won’t somebody help me? I just want something to eat. I haven’t eaten in days, and I’m hungry.”* The man kept looking around, at the passersby on the cobblestone sidewalk, his hand outstretched, his palm upward. *“Won’t somebody help me? Won’t somebody help me? I just want something to eat, a few dollars. I’m so hungry. Please, somebody help me. Won’t somebody help me?”*

One afternoon, I saw a homeless man exposing himself on the corner of Gay and Union.

Homeless men are always approaching me downtown and asking for money. One time, I gave a bedraggled homeless guy a few bucks and moments later saw him buying alcohol at The Market, just like me, except he was buying Liebfraumilch and I was buying my beloved Yuengling.

Incidentally, I suppose I could buy Liebfraumilch myself and save Mother a few bucks – a few bucks per swipe, that is. That would mean a lot to my mother. Especially since I buy alcohol at least four times a week. *That shit adds up!*

Oh, but I do love my Yuengling. In fact, I once got into a heated exchange with the bartender at Casual Pint (or “Knox Brew Hub,”

as it's now being called), arguing that Yuengling is the best beer of all time, no asterisk. "The taste, the price, even the handsome bottle," I said. "All things considered, Yuengling is the best beer of all time, bar none." The man opened his mouth to retort, and I said, "*PERIOD! NO ASTERISK! LIKE, WE'RE JUST NOT GOING TO ARGUE ABOUT IT, SIR! YUENGLING IS THE EMPEROR OF ALL BEERS! THE EMPEROR OF ALL BEERS, SIR!*"

These days, I tell homeless people I don't *have* any money. I tell homeless men I live off my mother's credit card, which is true.

"*I'M THIRTY-SIX!*" I exclaim, throwing my hands up. "*THIRTY-SIX AND STILL LIVING OFF MY MOTHER'S CREDIT CARD! DO YOU KNOW HOW HUMILLATING IT IS TO BE THIRTY-SIX AND STILL LIVING OFF YOUR MOTHER'S CREDIT CARD? DO YOU KNOW HOW HUMILLATING THAT IS?*"

Passersby see me on the sidewalk berating homeless people.

"*I'M THREE MONTHS BEHIND ON MY RENT, YOU ASSHOLE! I'M THREE MONTHS BEHIND ON MY RENT! I'M GOING TO BE EVICTED ANY DAY NOW! I'LL HAVE AN EVICTION ON MY RECORD! AN EVICTION! MEANING I'LL NEVER BE ABLE TO RENT AGAIN! I'M JUST LIKE YOU, MAN! I'M JUST LIKE YOU!* Well, a few notches up, anyway – I suppose I could go live with my mother, or one of my rich brothers. *AND YET YOU HAVE THE EFFRONTERY TO ASK ME FOR MONEY???* Now tell me: Where *are* the best places to sleep downtown? Park benches? Vestibules? How does it all work? Initiate me, friend. Where *are* the best places to sleep at night? A window well, perhaps? Yes, yes, a window well!"

My father emailed me during that period when I was trying to save money and my cell phone was disconnected and I was *incommunicado*. In his email, he wrote, "Constantly thinking of you, Brock. And how difficult it is to talk with you now that your cell phone is disconnected. I've just realized I forgot to call you on

your birthday. But then, it occurred to me you wouldn't have received the call anyway. Because your phone is disconnected. And for a while there you didn't have the Internet, either, meaning I couldn't even email. You are lost to me, Brock. The youngest of four, the caboose... Your brothers are doing fine, but *you*... You have always struggled. Why, I wonder. Why has it always been so hard for you? I suppose you just chose a difficult field. Anyway, I am not worried, Brock. I have faith you'll straighten your life out. Though sometimes I do have my doubts."

That makes two of us. Yes, yes, I too have doubts. I too have doubts.

Like, what if I turn out to be a homeless drunk, a homeless drunk drinking a bottle of Liebfraumilch every day, glug glugging my way through life, living on the streets, shitting in spackle buckets I find on construction sites, utterly defeated, down in the doldrums, sad and angry and bitter, *burning* with resentment, profoundly disappointed in myself, calling myself a worthless loser every day, a complete zero, an unfuckable with no redeeming qualities, nothing to offer anyone, nothing to look forward to, no one to share my life with, the idea of love laughable now, *absolutely laughable*, will-o-the-wisps!, pie in the sky?

Fucking Guam. Fucking New York literaries with their vegan pizzas and their squeezed goji berry juice and their bowls of fucking persimmons. Fucking gatekeepers gavotting in the ballroom, congratulating each other on the publication of yet ANOTHER woke "masterpiece."

I know I'm privileged. I am, I recognize, quite privileged and all that, but what will become of me? *WHAT WILL BECOME OF ME???* I suppose I should stop telling myself stories and get a goddamn job already. Set the bar a little lower, perhaps? Stop applying for teaching positions, since I don't have any recommendation letters or character references or anything like that, much less publications with well-known journals or magazines. Get a job at the library, a coffee shop, Amazon... Be of use. Volunteer at the church. Never mind that I have an MFA. Never mind that I went to the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. I'll get a job at Pet Smart. Work hard, get promoted, climb the ladder, going from associate manager to assistant manager – or is it

the other way around?

Incidentally, you could do a lot worse than Pet Smart. In fact, an old friend, who I keep track of on Facebook, makes 70K managing a Pet Smart.

I mean, of course you could do worse than Pet Smart! Of course you could! People in communist China ate tree bark, for God's sake. They ate tree bark! They ate mud. They ate their children in some cases.

Yes, yes, people in communist China resorted to cannibalism. They ate their children. *THEY ATE THEIR FUCKING CHILDREN!!!* You could do a lot worse than manage a Pet Smart, then. Handling snakes, watching them eat mice all day, which of course would be mesmerizing, very entertaining.

If I worked at Pet Smart, all my mice would be named after people I know. I'll go down the line of terraria, stopping at each one like Santa Claus, dropping a little "present" down the "chimney" and into the snake's lair, where of course it won't be long for the world.

"So long, little Jonathan," I'll say, standing there, watching the mouse move slowly through the reptile's digestive tract. "So long, little Joshua. So long, little Matthew. So long, Guam."

I suppose we are *all* moving through a digestive tract. Yes, yes, we are *all* moving through a digestive tract. One big digestive tract.

About the writer:

MICK MCGRATH has an MFA from the University of Tennessee. His writing has appeared in *Terror House Magazine*, *The Thieving Magpie*, and elsewhere. His novel *The Deplorable* was serialized in 2023. McGrath is the cofounder of the journal *Index Librorum Prohibitorum* debuting in 2023 as one of the few online resources that welcomes anti-woke content.

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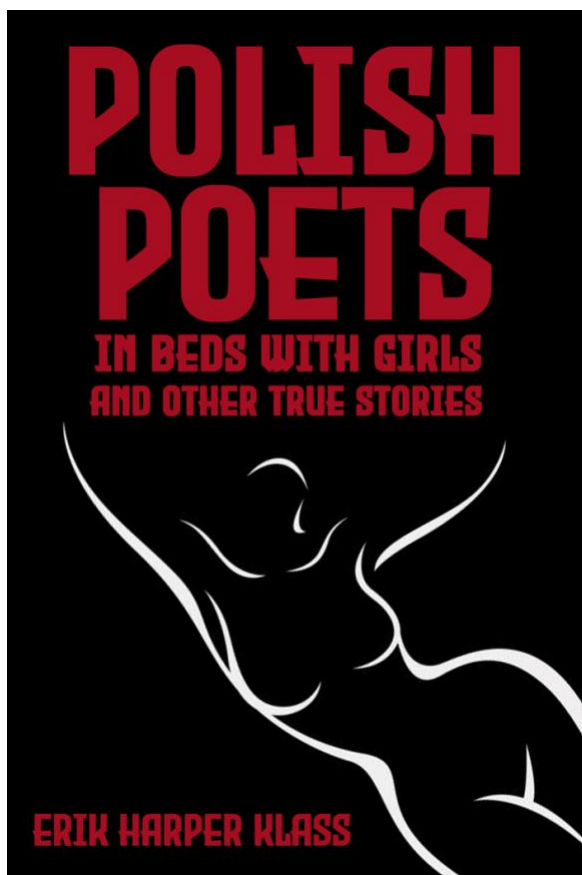
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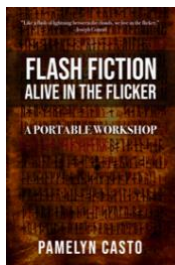
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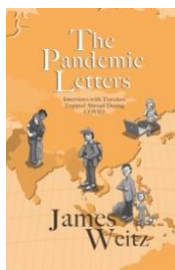
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