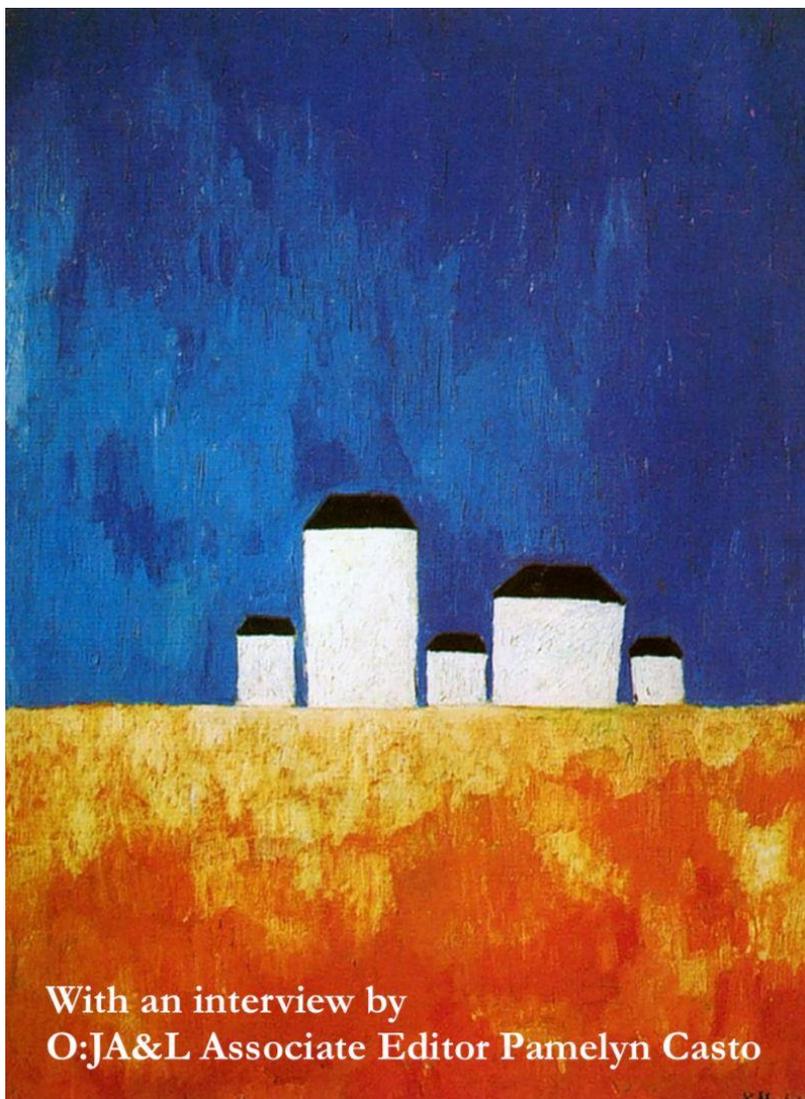


BUTTONHOOK PRESS 2022 CHAPBOOK SERIES

ZEN

AND THE ART OF HOUSE PAINTING

New and Selected Flash Fiction



WAYNE SCHEER

OPEN: JOURNAL OF ARTS & LETTERS (O:JA&L)

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With an Interview by Associate Editor Pamelyn Casto

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SELECTED WORK

ZEN AND THE ART OF HOUSE PAINTING

PART I: INTRODUCING DADE SMITH

"Will you teach me to paint a house?" I asked Dade Smith.

"Exterior or interior?"

I was young. All was possible. "Both," I said.

He fixed his eyes on mine, staring so intently I felt the urge to clothe my soul. Dade was tall and thin, even scrawny, in that Don't-Let-Your-Sons-Grow-Up-to-Be-Cowboys way. He wore pointed boots and tight jeans, a black T-shirt spackled with white and light blue paint, and a cap that advertised K-Mart. To the uninitiated, he was a thirty-something who never outgrew his adolescence. To me, he was a mentor, a teacher, and a guide.

"So you want to paint a house, huh? Why?"

I wasn't prepared for such a probing question. "I just do, I guess."

My mentor laughed through his nose, his nostrils twitching, while his expression remained as if etched in stone. His dark eyes continued their unnatural stare.

"Why do you look at me so?" I asked.

"I just do, I guess."

I knew I had much to learn.

PART II: THE LESSON BEGINS

"Well," he said. "You got your paint and your brushes. You dip your brush in the paint and you're ready to go."

"Oh," I said, feeling the chill of enlightenment. I put on a jacket.

He handed me a clean brush and a bucket of white paint. We were standing outside his ex-brother-in-law's house in Sarcoxie, Missouri. He had been divorced for years, but Dade kept in touch with the ex-brother-in-law. "You never know who's gonna give you work."

I made note of my mentor's practical wisdom. With the truly gifted, there is no divide between the mystical and the pragmatic. All is one; one is all; all is all. But one is never one.

He pointed to the garage, a slap-dash structure of peeling plywood and cinder block. "Why don't you start here?"

I approached the garage with trepidation, my heart pounding to an ancient, primeval rhythm. My journey as a house painter was about to begin.

"Not so fast," Dade said. "Scrape off the loose stuff first."

PART III: LAYING A FOUNDATION

"Scrape off the loose stuff first."

PART IV: LEARNING A LESSON

Wanting, nay, needing to impress my mentor I spent most of the next four hours laboring under the cruel Missouri sun scraping flecks of yellowing paint from the garage. My arm ached and my knees called out in pain from climbing the ladder to scraping under the eaves and from deep-knee bending to get the paint along the bottom of the garage. Even my toes ached. As tired as I was, I felt invigorated by the metaphor I was experiencing firsthand about the importance of preparation.

"What the hell?" my mentor shouted as he inspected my work. "Are you still scraping? I finished two bedrooms and a bathroom already."

Impressed as I was with his speed, I tried to explain my own slow, deliberate approach.

"Look. You do too good a job, we don't get to paint the house again in a couple years."

Once again, my guide's practical wisdom taught me an important life lesson: It takes too much time to do a job well.

"Break for lunch," he said. "When you get back, paint the hell out of this baby."

PART V: APPLYING PAINT

"The painting of a garage begins with a single stroke," I said, proud of my wit.

Again, I was humbled by the quick retort of my mentor. "Whatever." He shrugged his shoulders.

"Just start painting."

Feeling like Shakespeare dipping his quill into an inkwell as he began his Hamlet, I gently inserted the brush into the can of white paint marveling that such innocence can withstand the elements.

Dade, unimpressed, focused on the core of the undertaking.

"Paint already, for crying out loud."

And so I did. Touching my brush to the wall I instantly sensed the joy of creation as the weathered garage transformed into a gleaming white sanctuary for a Chevrolet.

Before returning to his own work inside the house, I had a question for my guide.

"Which way should I paint?" I asked. "Up and down or side to side?"

"I don't give a rat's ass! Just be finished in a couple of hours."

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I took that to mean it was up to me to find my own way within the parameters of the universe.

PART VI: WATCHING PAINT DRY

Although I would prefer to have spent an eternity caressing the walls with my gentle yet firm stroke, lovingly and adoringly watching the paint dry slowly and magically, I was on a deadline so I rushed the job. To my chagrin, the paint dried unevenly and the old paint began stubbornly showing through where I had applied the paint too thin. I was broken-hearted. I fought back bitter tears of disappointment.

"No problem," my mentor said. "You'll just throw on another coat tomorrow."

Another important life lesson: You can always cover up your mistakes.

PART VII: CONCLUDING THE LESSON

The day was long, my body ached, but my soul longed to absorb the day's lesson. So we headed to Murphy's for beer. It was there that I learned the essence of the house painter by asking one more question.

"When we began, you asked me why I want to paint houses. May I be so bold as to ask that question of you?"

"I like the smell of paint fumes" was his enigmatic but elegant reply.

A FAMILY PORTRAIT

"She's beautiful! She's beautiful!"

My son, Jess, normally as reserved as I, charged into the hospital waiting room, flapping his arms like a five-year-old running to the wrong base after hitting a T-ball.

His wife had just given birth to their first child. Our first grandchild.

"She's beautiful," he repeated, hugging his mother, then me. He waved for us to follow him to the room where Kellie lay exhausted and smiling. Our new granddaughter was being cleaned, weighed, and inspected like a pork roast at a butcher shop.

My wife showed no hesitation. She kissed Kellie, hugged our son, and almost grabbed the baby from the nurse before allowing the squirming infant to be with her mother. I stood back and watched, unsure of my new role. My wife switched naturally from mother to grandmother. Kellie held her daughter close, stroking the infant's fine light brown hair. Jess leaned over the bed, kissing his wife and their baby, his hand just below his daughter's bottom, poised to protect her.

I considered who I should go to first: my wife, who was already pulling out her cell phone over the protests of the nurses; Kellie, whom I still felt awkward around; my son, or the new baby. I knew instinctively I had to prioritize, although no one but I would notice.

I wanted to be a part of my son's new life, of course, but I didn't want to be in the way. I loved the idea of playing grandpa, but I knew it would entail as much restraint as involvement.

Typically, I was spending this intimate family moment inside my head.

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My wife felt no such dilemma. She already had the new parents shaking their heads and laughing as she cradled our granddaughter, deciding which family member she most closely resembled.

"If she looks like anyone," I pointed out, "she looks like Winston Churchill."

Finally, wrapping my arms around my wife, I eased her away from the new family after convincing her to return the baby to her rightful owners. We stood aside to observe, my wife in tears.

"Are you crying because you're happy," I asked, "or because the nurse made you put away your cell phone?" She laughed, and I realized that easing the tension with jokes would be one of my new responsibilities.

After a few moments, I kissed Kellie on the cheek and squeezed my son's shoulder. "Dad, do you want to hold her?" Kellie asked. As I took this beautiful, innocent being into my arms, I felt my eyes fill up.

"Hey," I asked. "Is it possible for a grandfather to experience spontaneous lactation?"

A PORCUPINE WITHOUT QUILLS

Will Squires thought of himself as a man committed to words, but language betrayed him like a lump of coal in a stocking cap. Although he loved the electricity generated when words rubbed against one another like two boy scouts in the woods, Will was a singer without a pitchfork. He could hear the music but marched to a different drummer boy.

You see, language to Will was a slippery slope, a sloppy sloop, a silly slap, a salty soup. He just couldn't control himself; his linguistic urges were as powerful as superman's locomotive, able to leap tall buildings but bound to be little more than a bird in the sky.

He sat in front of his computer most every day trying to write simple sentences while telling a story clearly and directly. He admired Hemingway and Raymond Carver, but Tom Robbins inevitably slipped in a cowgirl with an enormous thumb or a talking fork. Like a chocolate bar melting in the hot sun, Will lost his linguistic grip as images popped out of his head and clashed like rice pudding with anchovies. Language, to Will, was like finding his girlfriend in bed with his wife. He was frightened, but the possibilities excited him.

Will tried writing a simple story about a man and a woman waking early one morning to an unknown sound. The plan was to have them search the house and, upon discovering nothing unusual, return to the comfort of each other's arms. He was determined to keep the story simple and straightforward to emphasize the security the couple felt with each other.

He thought he'd start his story with a simple sentence, but Simon's simplicity just wasn't in Will's house of cards.

He wrote:

"Morning dropped from the sky like a man parachuting from an airplane and

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*landing on a field not of dreams but of pebbles that crunched as his boots bounced with a thud and then skidded like a car on a dirt road."**

He tried again:

*"They woke with a start that had no beginning or end, just a middle, like the fat man who owned the dry cleaners across the street and made a constant, "tut," "tut" sound through his teeth as he rang up the charge for cleaning a cardigan sweater."**

Writing simple sentences was just not up Will's tin ear alley. He continued to meander his way through his story, playing with words like an alcoholic performing an appendectomy of the heart.

*"Ralph and Mary woke up early in the morning, still mummy wrapped in sleep, startled by a noise that may as well have been a spoken form of hieroglyphics because neither of them recognized the sounds although between them they spoke five languages, but not at the same time."**

Will pondered this last sentence like a Comparative Literature major examining a '57 Chevy with the transmission spread out in pieces in his father's garage. Will asked, "What would Kafka do?" and experienced an epiphany. His problem was that he was trying too hard to make sense. His brain was wired for 110 in a 220 world. Will saw reality as if he were looking through his bifocals with one of the lenses set backward.

So, like a chicken out of water, he accepted his vision and gave in to images of red-breasted Robin Givens. His commitment to language remained as steadfast as a redwood in the Yukon; coherence, he decided, was as overrated as a porcupine without quills.

A CAREFULLY PLANNED EVENING

When Karla arrived home the evening Ted died, the house seemed emptier than it had ever been.

She bolted the front door. Although she and Ted had lived in the house for over twenty years, this was the first time she listened to the bolt snap and spring into place.

For her, at this moment, the sound soothed her.

Kicking off her shoes, Karla thumbed through the mail. Mostly medical bills. She'd get to them when she could. She closed her eyes and let her bare feet sink into the carpet, feeling the fibers slip between her toes. For a moment she was a little girl playing in her backyard sandbox enjoying the tickle and scratch of the sand on her skin. She'd go there when her parents fought.

The shrill wail of the telephone pierced the profound silence of the house. Karla shook as if jolted out of a dream. The caller ID said it was her friend, Laura. She needed to speak with Laura, but not now. Karla turned off the volume and let the machine accept a message in silence.

A bottle of pinot rested on its side in the fridge. She had bought it on the way home from the hospital a week earlier in preparation for this evening. Taking it out, she wrapped both hands around the cold bottle until her palms ached.

She held back tears, determined to open the bottle and let it breathe while she changed into a loose sweatshirt and pants. Then she'd pour herself a drink, curl up into the overstuffed sofa, pull the afghan Ted had bought her over her legs, and cry like a baby.

AN OLD LADY IN A FLOPPY HAT

“I like your hat,” one of the children says as they ride by my house on their bikes.

I know they’re making fun of me. To them, I’m just an old lady in a floppy hat tending to her flowers.

But I bloomed once, like tulips in spring. I danced in the sun and played in summer showers. The young men once fancied after me like butterflies to violets.

Autumn offers one last burst of beauty before the long sleep of winter. I want to shout, like the Crepe Myrtle turning bright yellow in fall, “Look at me! Don’t forget me!”

But I’m just an old lady in a floppy hat tending to her flowers. My time has passed like the spent hydrangea blooms. Soon I’ll wither on the vine and be little more than a memory.

Two young lovers walk by, holding hands and sharing secrets. I snip a rose and offer it to the young woman. She accepts my gift graciously.

“Thank you,” she says. “It’s so beautiful.”

“Watch the thorns, dear,” I say, and I step aside.

A SUBURBAN SUNDAY

As Gil pushed his mower under his neighbors' bedroom window to cut the weeds that grew between his property and theirs, he got a quick glance of Nancy Stovall naked. Although he turned away, he knew Nancy had seen him.

Would she think him a Peeping Tom? Should he apologize or act as if nothing had happened? Another notion crept into his mind like crabgrass on his perfect lawn. She had to have heard his mower: Did she pose by the window intentionally?

He knew he was acting like a fool, a sixty-year-old man fantasizing that the attractive neighbor, half his age, wanted him.

He recalled how they had danced together at the neighborhood block party.

He imagined himself knocking on her door:

She answers stark naked, her breasts full and firm, her pubic hair shockingly dark against her chalk-white flesh. He reaches out to her, but she morphs into his third-grade teacher, Mrs. Gordon. Gil is reduced to a stammering eight-year-old boy named Gilbert, desperately trying not to wet himself.

Gil continued crew-cutting his lawn as Nancy walked out her front door wearing bright yellow shorts and a white top cut above her navel. Waving in his direction, she slipped into her car and drove away.

A moment later, Gil's wife called out to see if he was ready for lunch.

He maneuvered his mower around a bed of yellow daisies, smiled at his wife of thirty-one years, and said, "Yes! Famished."

IT'S NOT THAT FUNNY

I have this dream where Penelope Cruz is coming towards me totally naked, her arms outstretched, her pink tongue slowly circling dark, full lips.

I say, "No, no. I'm married," and she tells me how she doesn't care. She must have me now.

I grab her by her soft, sensual shoulders and explain that I'm a one-woman man. She breaks down sobbing, and I take her into my arms feeling the warmth of her breasts. I hold her as her tears dry, slipping my hand downward to pat her rear--I am only human, after all. She smiles bravely to show she'll be all right, and I peck her on the forehead in my best fatherly manner.

I open my eyes and stare at the ceiling, realizing I have an erection that would make a sixteen-year-old boy proud. Vickie is sleeping soundly on her side, her naked butt facing me. I pat it gently.

"Do you know your ass feels remarkably like Penelope Cruz's rear end?"

"Huh?"

I roll towards her and poke her.

"You have that dream again?" she asks.

"Uh-huh," I say as I snuggle as close as is possible.

"The one where...you imagine you have the erection of a teenager?"

"No! The one where..."

I hear Vickie snoring peacefully, and although I can't see her face, I know she's smiling.

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NEW WORK

BUILDING A WALL

"What are you doing?" Zelda asked her husband, Ralph.

"Building a wall."

"Why?"

"Protection."

"Protection from what?"

"The unknown," he said. "I want to make sure we're safe."

"We?" Zelda asked. "I wasn't sure you were including me inside your wall."

Ralph wrapped his arms around his wife. "Without you, there'd be no need for a wall."

"Can I build the wall with you?" Zelda asked.

"Of course. But it'll take a long time."

SPEED DIAL

Brad Snyder remained in bed after slapping the alarm silent. Rolling over, he put Penny's pillow between his legs and rocked slowly, trying to think of her naked body while replaying their last conversation instead.

"It's over, Brad. It's been over for months. You've just been too preoccupied to notice."

He watched her pack the last few things she still had in his apartment unable to think of anything to say. She was right. He was on a full-partner track and that meant seventy-hour weeks.

"I'm sorry," he muttered.

Brad rolled on his back, hoping it wasn't too late. He could call Penny and meet her for breakfast to show how he was trying to change.

He reached for the phone, feeling for the speed dial.

"Oh, Mrs. Lansing, I meant to call... Never mind. Would you tell Mr. Cobb I'll be there with the Bryant file first thing this morning?"

PLEASE HOLD

While her daughter napped peacefully in the upstairs bedroom, Kate sipped Merlot in her recently remodeled kitchen, the Italian marble countertop glistening in the sunlight. Did she have a right to feel sad?

She rang up her older sister, Karla. “You’re not happy?” Karla always sounded annoyed. “I’ll trade my bills for yours. I’ll even throw in my husband.”

She called her mother. “Mom, when did people stop calling me Kate?”

“Hi, Kathleen. How’s my granddaughter?”

Kate poured another glass of wine and dialed her husband’s office.

“Kathleen, please hold,” he said. “I have someone important on the other line.”

STILL DON'T KNOW WHAT WAS IN THAT DRINK

First time I seen her I knew she was the orneriest gal I was ever gonna meet. And, I tell you, I met me some humdingers in my day. Meaner than a hog what swallowed a bee, she was. Madder than a cat got its whiskers pulled. She was so nasty if you looked straight at her, you feared your eyebrows might fall out.

I was driving my El Dorado through this little town in Colorader name of Parker when I stopped for whisky and a good time. That's where I seen her. She was standing at the bar, not sitting like the others. Standing, so she could look down at the poor boys trying they damnedest to impress her.

She was a sight, what with her black hair piled atop her head like a cowboy with a sore back sitting high on his horse. She wore her lipstick blood red and showed no fear of painting outta the lines.

Just one look at her skintight jeans made me thank the good Lord I had no interest in men.

"You look mighty pretty, Miss Annie," said one whippersnapper hardly old enough to ride his daddy's John Deere without it got training wheels. "You look so good I could make sweet love to you all night long." He looked up at her, flashing all five a his teeth.

"Elrod," she said, patting his head like he was a wet puppy dog. "Din't your daddy teach you, you gotta have a gun to go a'huntin'?"

Poor Elrod, he looked like he done wet hisself.

That's when I moseyed up to her and said, "I got me a big gun." And the place went as silent as church the night after payday.

She din't say nothing, just looked me up and looked me down and told the barkeep to mix me a love potion.

I don't know what the heck was in it. It looked pis yella and smelled like horse innards gone rotten in the desert sun.

“I ain't gonna drink this,” I said.

“You will if you're man enough for me.”

So I held my nose and drunk it down thinkin' I might die, but when I looked up at Miss Annie Cantrell I seen a lady so damn pretty she could's made God Almighty blush.

And that's how me and your grandmama met.

A DAY AT THE ZOO

Will spent the morning staring at his blank computer screen. He had been passing a good deal of time that way of late, and he began to wonder if there was a world outside of the virtual one he seemed to reside in.

He needed a break, a field trip. Something to recharge his batteries, rev his engine, spin his tires. Will knew his fuel tank was on empty and he was running on the fumes of stale clichés for far too long.

He decided to spend a day at the zoo in search of fresh metaphors.

He always enjoyed zoos, especially watching the people watching the animals. Or was it the way the animals watched the people that intrigued him? He imagined Robert Frost said, “Before I built a cage, I’d want to know who I was caging in and who I was caging out.”

The children were always fun to watch. As their parents recited the exact length of an adult male giraffe’s neck, they’d delight in a fly buzzing a lion’s ear or a bug crawling up the foot of an elephant. Frustrated, their parents would give up the recitation saying, “Sally’s still too young to enjoy the zoo.”

Will, of course, also watched the animals, wondering if they felt bored with their comfortable surroundings. Did they hold a primordial yearning for the wild? He imagined if they felt anything, it was probably closer to gratitude for not having to hunt for their next meal.

Will sighed, wondering if there might be a market for zoological meditations.

Soon he was back in his cell, shackled to his computer, typing furiously.

A SOUVENIR FROM HOME

Alec grabbed a brick from the construction site, jumped into his car, and floored it. In his rear-view mirror, he could see the rent-a-cop waving his arms.

Earlier that evening, he had met Phil Spano and talked about the old neighborhood.

“You know it’s being torn down, don’t you? The old apartment house.”

Alec’s first reaction was, “Good riddance!” Then he remembered making out with Mary Liska under the stairwell of the building.

A few beers later, Alec was in his Buick LeSabre determined to bring back a souvenir from home.

SPRINGTIME IN MISSISSIPPI

Spring finally found its way to Thornton, Mississippi. For Jimmy Rob, the season meant he had to get a new job and a new girlfriend.

He had been working at Holcomb Nurseries for a year, unloading trucks and setting up plants. Now, with pansies in full bloom, the nursery was getting in marigolds and other summer plants. He hated marigolds. The smell got under his fingernails.

Cherry, his former fiancé, thought he smelled like insecticide. "That ain't no flower smell. It's the stuff supposed to keep skeeters away, but don't."

They finally split. He blamed the marigolds as much as her new boyfriend.

There were a couple of girls during the fall and winter, but none lasted much longer than daylilies.

Now the marigolds were back. He had promised himself a new job, girlfriend, and a new life by Easter.

Jimmy Rob knew he didn't have much going for him, even without smelling like marigolds. With his stringy blond hair and bean pole body, an ex-girlfriend once said he looked like a mop with a dick.

Worse, at twenty-six, he still lived in his parents' home. He hoped to have had enough money to move into his own place, but it was hard saving anything from a \$12.50 an hour job. He had made good money as a welder out of high school, but the plant "downsized," a fancy word for sending most of the work to Mexico. Now his choice seemed to be working as a short-order cook at Bosco's Diner, and smelling like hamburger grease, or working at the nursery and stinking of marigold juice.

He needed to get away from Thornton.

He'd been to Memphis but couldn't imagine living in such a big town.

He liked Yazoo City well enough. He once had a friend there, but they had lost touch years ago.

Time was he thought about joining the army, he but didn't have the nerve. Besides, even his father, who'd been to Vietnam, said only a damn fool would volunteer for that nonsense.

Jimmy Rob hated his life but felt trapped, too scared to break out.

He even thought of killing himself with the shotgun in the hall closet, but he knew he didn't have the nerve for that.

Instead, he got ready for work.

"Jimmy," his father said, "why'nt you bring home some marigolds for the front of the house?"

"Sure thing," Jimmy Rob said.

SWEET CHERRY

When Jimmy Rob heard that Cherry Jackson, now Cherry Banks, was back in town and asking about him, he thought an old dream was coming true.

“What exactly did she say?” he asked his buddy, Grover.

“She asked if you was still in town.”

“You didn’t say I was staying with my parents, did you?”

“No, but I told her where you was working. She said she wanted to see you again.”

Cherry was Jimmy’s high school girlfriend. More than that. They had talked about marriage. They even had names picked out for their children.

Of course, that was before she hooked up with Cyrus Banks.

Cyrus’s daddy owned Banks Construction, the biggest construction company in Holmes County and the surrounding area. He even renamed the company Banks and Son Construction when Cyrus married Cherry and built a big house on a hill in Goodman. Worse, Jimmy would see Cyrus on TV advertising the company. His father would say, “Need a new roof or an addition to your house? We’ll do the job right.” And then Cyrus and his daddy would say, “You can Banks on it.”

Now Cherry wanted to see him. Was she and Cyrus having trouble? Did she just want a quickie for old-time’s sake? Jimmy showered and put on a clean Holcomb Brothers Nursery t-shirt and jeans. He even scrubbed his fingernails in case she showed up at the nursery.

And she did. She looked a little heavier and wore more make-up, especially eye-liner. Her blond hair was cut short, which was too bad.

He remembered how she'd tickle his naked body with her hair in the back of his Ford. Jimmy remembered a lot of other things, especially how it hurt when she told him she was breaking up with him and marrying Cyrus. Jimmy didn't even know she knew Cyrus.

But she still looked good to Jimmy.

She smiled when she saw him arranging a table of marigolds and asked how he was doing.

“Fine. You look like you’re doing good, too.”

“I’m all right. But I miss the old days. I miss the good times we had.” She reached out for both his hands.

Jimmy saw the sparkling diamond on her ring finger. It reminded him of too much. “Good seeing you, too, but I gotta get back to work.”

It felt so good seeing her face drop, he almost forgot how depressed he was.

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Zen and the Art of House Painting: New and Selected Flash Fiction

INTERVIEW

ASSOCIATE EDITOR PAMELYN CASTO

INTERVIEW WITH WAYNE SCHEER

“Flash Fiction: Literary? Or Mainstream?”

PAMELYN CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Wayne, we go back several years and I’ve always enjoyed working with you and reading your stories. I’m most familiar with your prolific flash fiction writing. I was delighted to learn you’ve been nominated for four **Pushcart Prizes**. That is wonderful news! Have all the nominations been for flash fiction? Is flash fiction your primary focus or do you also write other things?

WAYNE SCHEER: Pam, I’ve admired your work, especially your scholarship helping readers to see the artistry of good flash.

First thing you get to know about me is I’m not the most organized person in the world. To be honest, I’m not sure if I’ve been nominated for four or five **Pushcarts**, never yet which stories were selected. However, I know one was for a flash non-fiction and I believe one was for a longer story, or maybe that was for a **Best of the Net**? The others were for flash. I write primarily because it’s fun. The accolades are nice, but if I take them too seriously, I’m afraid I’d start thinking of myself as an artist, and never in-joy writing again. That or I have a deep-set fear of success and need serious therapy.

I follow two pieces of writing advice. One is from Jack Kerouac in his novel *Big Sur*. “Always pull back—and see how silly we look to God.” The other is from a lecture by Kurt Vonnegut I once heard. I paraphrase—You know the adage about an infinite number of monkeys on an infinite number of typewriters creating something beautiful? “Well,” Vonnegut said after a long pause, “the internet disproves that.”

I need to begin what will likely be a serious interview with those parameters in mind.

To get back to your question, most of the writing I've been doing lately—the past ten years or so—has been flash fiction and poetry. I like thinking in terms of specific details that tell a story or elicit emotion rather than an extended narrative. I like thinking in terms of what I can leave out of a story rather than what I need to add. I also enjoy editing for the same reason—to see what I can edit out of a sentence. So my work has gotten shorter and shorter and it seemed natural for me to try poetry. At first, my poems were long-winded because it's easier to say a lot than a little. I'm working on cutting them to haiku size.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I think I read this week that you've recently won a fifth Pushcart nomination. That's terrific news. (I'll get you organized yet!) I also read online that you've spent twenty-five years teaching creative writing at the college level. What do you think is the most important thing a creative writing teacher can teach aspiring writers? Can students be taught how to write or is it more a matter of prodding, nudging, and encouraging those who already have writing talent? What genre of writing (short story, poetry, essay) resulted in the best pieces from your students?

SCHEER: I wish I had spent twenty-five years teaching creative writing. I spent most of that time teaching the dreaded English 101—the academic essay—and English 102—the research paper. But I also taught American Literature and World Literature, so I read a lot of good writing and tried to “prod” my students to articulate what they enjoyed and didn't enjoy. I think students who read a variety of works can be “nudged” into writing well.

Mainly, I worked with students who were afraid to write, afraid that they didn't know where to put commas and they'd be chastised for a run-on sentence. Although I had to ultimately “correct” their grammar, I tried to stress writing as talking on paper. Talk first, then work on the niceties of the language. It didn't always work, but those students who were readers understood.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Do you consider your work to be mainstream or literary? Do you think there is a difference between the two types of writing? How might you identify each type? Do you think there is a

need for both?

SCHEER: Of course, there is a need for both mainstream and literary writing, just as there is a need for a couch and a chair. They serve different purposes. Although I dislike labels, and really don't know if my work is literary or mainstream, I think we can agree on a basic distinction, such as literary works pay more attention to the beauty and vitality of the language to keep readers engaged while mainstream writers focus on the details of the plot to keep the reader entertained.

But a good “literary” artist has to put her characters through hell and maybe get them back just as a mainstream writer does. And a good writer of detective novels—Robert Parker comes to mind—has to be as much of a stylist as Hemingway.

As to my work, I'm a little of both. It depends upon my mood. Perhaps I don't understand my work well enough to say more than that.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I like the way you describe the distinctions. As you know, I'm an admirer of your piece that was turned into film, *“Zen and the Art of House Painting.”* Readers can see it at I've viewed the film several times and found it delightful every time. The characters are so great for the parts. It's also so funny. How did that film come about?

SCHEER: That's one of the few questions I can answer with clarity. I published the original story/essay-- “Zen and the Art of House Painting” --in a print anthology and the editor thought it would sell better if he could include a couple of CDs of short films made from some of the stories. A director friend of his chose my story for the anthology. He revised the story for film and did a fantastic job of filming it. He made significant changes in my original story, and I now understand why literary writers and screenwriters don't always see eye to eye, but the screenwriter/director did a fine job. I watched the film the other day and was impressed with it. Of course, what impressed me the most was how he managed to retain my funniest lines.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I read how the people behind the film used a fundraiser for the production of the project. I thought that was clever

in that it helped fund the project and helped call attention to their worthy effort. Which, of course, is your project. Did you get to experience any of the behind-the-scenes-goings-on? Did you decline their request to be the star painter? (I'm glad you don't act.) Did you participate in any way in the filming of the project? I love how so many flash fiction pieces, from so many talented writers, are being turned into short-short films. It's an area I enjoy exploring. So much creativity is shown in that area, too.

SCHEER: No one ever asked me to star in the film. Which is a good thing. Incidentally, I love the actor who plays the house painter. The look on his face is perfect. The child actor is very good too, but in my version, he was a not-so-bright young man who narrated the story. I had nothing to do with the film and have never spoken with the director.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I'd guess you've written hundreds of short-short pieces. You've gathered some of them in *Revealing Moments*, a collection of flash stories. I enjoyed reading the interview John Haggerty did with you at *The Forge Literary Magazine* and was quite moved by "A Quiet Man." I thought that piece was intensely interesting. I see too that it's the story that won you a Best of the Net nomination. (See? I'm helping you get organized!) Do you plan to publish more collections? Which piece is your favorite in *Revealing Moments*? I also like your idea of keeping the past in a box in the back of a closet. I never quite know what to do about the past and mostly subscribe to Nicolai Berdyaev's notion of "the isness of the was"—it's always there in whatever I try to do.

SCHEER: As you know, I'm in a group (Internet Writing Workshop — IWW— that requires me to write a 400-word flash each week. I've been in the group for about ten years now. I'm also in a poetry group that used to require a poem a day and has only recently relaxed its requirements. I've been in that one for over five years. So, yes, I've written a lot of short-short stories and a lot of poems. Some are even good.

Which ones do I like best? It's like choosing a favorite child, as many novelists have said of their books. Is it enough to say I like best the

story or poem I'm working on at the moment? Probably not. Although it's somewhat true, often enough I develop a story or poem just for the exercise and forget it almost immediately after it's written. So I would say the stories I like best are the ones I remember.

That said, "Blind Date," "Morning" and "A Lonely Choice" come to mind from *Revealing Moments*. I also like the story from the point of view of a boy up in a tree escaping his father's wrath and the one about the female strippers preparing to go on stage. The "Old Lady in a Faded Dress" includes one of my favorite endings. (See what you're doing to me by making me choose?)

But I'll focus on the first three stories to come to mind. I like "Blind Date" because it's me having fun with my younger self and I like "Morning" because it's about the possible loneliness of my future self. So maybe what I like best are stories that fictionalize my own life. I hadn't thought about it like that before. "A Lonely Choice," which is written from the point of view of a divorced woman whose mother is dying is also, come to think of it, somewhat about me because I recall driving about 600 miles to see my mother in a hospital bed with the Do Not Resuscitate sign over her bed. Like the other two stories, most of the plot isn't really from my life, just bits and pieces, but the main character is more like me than I care to admit, at least on some deeper level than the one I normally exist on.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Your stories so often have a delicious and delicate wry sense of humor working in them. Do you think humor works best in shorter pieces? Why might that be?

SCHEER: You say I have a "delicious and delicate wry sense of humor." (I'm repeating that in quotes to make sure my wife reads it. God knows she wouldn't use those words...) At any rate, I like humor. I normally go for a "heh-heh" rather than a belly laugh, so sometimes my jokes can be more arid than dry, more sarcastic than wry, but I think humor is an effective tool for a writer. My favorite moment in "A Lonely Choice," for instance, is when the woman listening to the doctor telling her how near-death her mother is, sneaks a peek to see if he's wearing a wedding ring. It's obviously not funny, but it momentarily relieves the tension and it deepens the character's

loneliness. I think it's also intensely human, a moment readers can identify with. Whether humor works better in flash or longer stories, I can't say. A well-placed humorous comment or slip-on-a-banana-peel vaudeville shtick can work anywhere if the timing is right. I like Steven Wright and old Monty Python equally.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Who are some of your favorite flash fiction writers? Can you name some of your favorite stories? Who are some of the writers who have most influenced your own writing?

SCHEER: I think Woody Allen and Tom Robbins have influenced my writing as have J.D. Salinger and Jack Kerouac. I enjoy reading Lydia Davis's short pieces as I do Hemingway and Raymond Carver. Will you let me get away with saying whomever I am reading and enjoying at the moment is my favorite?

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Yes, I can let you get away with that since I tend to read "favorites" on an almost daily basis myself. I'm also a fan of Lydia Davis' work. And admit I love Russell Edson's work too. Speaking of Davis and Edson, do you have strong opinions on the differences between flash fiction and prose poetry? Have you written pieces you'd call prose poetry?

SCHEER: Strong opinion, no? As a reader and writer I'm pro-choice. Have I written prose poetry? I think if you look up the meaning of prosaic in the dictionary, you'll see my picture. Honestly, I think my stories are more "poetic," in that they may contain moments that take you out of yourself and place you in a world of raw emotion, than most of my poems. But that's because as a poet, I'm still a storyteller.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I think flash literature has managed to escape literary radar for years. But now that the radar has picked up on it, I think it's here to stay. Do you think the popularity of flash is a temporary fad or do you think it's now a solid literary genre? I think that as people become overwhelmed with information, the need for short pieces of human wisdom will be more and more necessary and appreciated. What do you think?

SCHEER: I agree with you. I'd also add that our attention spans are

shortening. I can't imagine myself sitting in a rocking chair by a fire reading Middlemarch or Moby Dick, not if I have access to a tv or a computer. (If any of my former literature students are reading this, I deny saying what I just said.)

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: Wayne, as always I've enjoyed your company. I've noticed over the years that editors who choose for their readers enjoy and appreciate the many "revealing moments" you have had to offer. It's likely you'll have many more to offer in the coming years. Thank you for telling us a bit about your world of creativity. Now, please do get busy putting together a new collection for us to admire. Thank you, Wayne.

SCHEER: I've enjoyed this interview with you as well. I'm flattered by your compliments on my work. About another collection—if there's an editor out there wanting to work with me on putting together a collection of my work, I'm open to the challenge. Without a good editor, I have no idea how to put a book together and, honestly, I have no interest in putting together Wayne Scheer's Greatest Hits just for my own ego. I am not adverse, however, to creating such a collection with the hope of earning enough money to pay for printing ink.

CASTO FOR O:JA&L: I'm betting the possibility will come along. Best to you, Wayne.

WAYNE SCHEER

Zen and the Art of House Painting: New and Selected Flash Fiction

ABOUT THE WRITER:

Wayne Scheer lives with his wife in Atlanta. After twenty-five years of teaching writing and literature in college, he is trying to follow his own advice and write. Several times a Pushcart Prize nominee, his stories have appeared in such varied publications as *The Christian Science Monitor*, *Sex and Laughter*, *The Pedestal*, *Flash Me Magazine*, *Cezanne's Carrot*, *The Binnacle* and *The Better Drink*.

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“A Family Portrait” appeared in *Thereby Hangs a Tale* (Summer 2007, Issue 2).

“A Porcupine Without Quills” was released by *Ox Family Literary Magazine* (July 2009).

“A Carefully Planned Evening” was published in *Revealing Moments*, Thumbscrew Press, 2009.

“An Old Lady in a Floppy Hat” was released by *Rose and Thorn Journal* (2008).

“A Suburban Sunday” appeared in *Apollo's Lyre* (October 2006).

“It’s Not That Funny” was published in *Camroc Press Review* (January 2009).

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