NEWS FROM THE LAKE

Fifteen stories

By Gary Hines
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INTRODUCTION

Reading and writing are acts of isolation. Pull up your favorite chair and understand this.

You are probably alone. It is a cloudy day, a little warm. Open the window. The sounds you hear outside are part of this book.

Pick up the telephone. Call the person you would most like to call. The sound of his/her voice is the beginning of this book.
MICROPHONES

At first it was important to be in love with her. Our bed was always too small. I used to wake up in it early in the morning and watch her as it got lighter outside and her face got clearer and clearer. It was important to be in love.

I used to beg her to tell me another story when she woke up, a story about her childhood that I could wake up to.

I used to play my guitar next to her and sing into her ear as if it were a soft and fragrant microphone. It was important to be in love.

But lately she has been acting nervous around the house. Her eyes are far away and her kisses brush my lips like wet lettuce. At night her eyes search the ceiling when I go to the bathroom, and when I come back to bed she closes them and plays dead in my arms.

Then she falls asleep against me with one leg tucked over mine, her microphones pointed inside of her, toward the bed of her childhood.
DESIRES

I have recently met a guy who builds computers. He told me that he once built the smartest computer in the world. The computer was so smart that it could have been the most intelligent thinking thing in the world. The computer was so smart that the guy was afraid of it. The computer gave him the creeps; he kept altering it in accordance with its response to the question, "Do you like me?"

Eventually one version of the computer answered "AFFIRMATIVE." The guy thought a bit, then asked the computer a second question: "What sex are you?" The computer answered, "WHY DOES IT MATTER, THWEETY?" and that flipped the guy out. He liked this computer.

The next day the guy asked the question, "Do you like me?" one more time just to make sure. The computer answered, "YEAH, SURE," this time, instead of "AFFIRMATIVE." This caused the guy to have some second thoughts. But they were soon set aside the next few days because the computer and the guy lived together happily.

The guy and the computer used to have some pretty interesting conversations. "You're lucky," he used to say to the computer, "you don't have to do all of those boring 'human' things. Like pissing." And the computer would agree with him.

Sometimes the guy got drunk with the computer. The computer would mock his slurred speech. One time it told him how to get it drunk. It was a matter of crossing a few wires. "CROSS
THOSE WIRES," the computer said, "AND IT WILL FUCK ME ALL UP."

The computer was always in a good mood. It improved the
guy's chess game and told him anything he wanted to know. It
even gave him tips on how to pick up girls. They were the best
of friends. After about a week, though, the computer started
filling the guy's apartment with strange little noises. Like
the click of a spoon on a soup bowl. The computer was driving
the guy crazy. One day out of nowhere the computer demanded:
"FIND SOMETHING OUT THERE TO FUCK ME." Ever since that day the
guy has kept the computer locked up in a closet, and he glances
nervously out of the corner of his eye at the computer's plug.
FONDEST OF NIGHTMARES: A Recurrent Childhood Dream

The witch chased me screaming down the hall. I reached my room and slammed the door on the witch as fast as I could. If you can get to your room and close the door in time, you're usually pretty safe from witches who are chasing you.

I pushed against the door with my back to make sure that the witch couldn't get in. But it didn't work because I gradually became aware that the witch's icy fingers were running up and down my neck.

She was penetrating right through the door.

When I woke up I could still feel her hand on the back of my neck, and that's the scarey part.
THE BRAUTIGAN-TOLKIEN CONSPIRACY

I had picked up another perverted Brautigan novel and Part Three of Tolkien's trilogy in paperback. I was standing in line at one of the checkout lanes wondering why I never walk off with things without paying for them. Standing in line at big department stores does that to me.

The line gradually got smaller, like a caterpillar crawling out of sight under a monotonous leaf. The cashier, who had long since turned into a moth, almost grimaced with disgust as she rang up perverted Brautigan and good-for-nothing Tolkien.

That was my imagination, of course. She may not have grimaced at all. She looked tired and probably married. In what seemed like one motion she had taken my money/made change/put the books in a sack/stapled on the sales slip.

Without making eye contact, she said, "Thank you."

No, my beautiful cashier, you don't mean it and you won't let me see your eyes. I am only the middle of a stream of souls and there are many behind me and you are tired and you want to go home.

I thanked you back because I was grateful you took my money so I wouldn't walk away with the books.
MAY 25 AND COUNTING

A thousand butterflies fluttered up to your windows, each one a rainbow in brief, each one a spectrum in brevity. They collided against the windowpanes, jarring dust from the glass and letting sunlight refract through those weightless particles.

Somebody said God would be able to count them all. Somebody also said that one of the butterflies found an open window, flew up to your nose, smiled, and said, "May 25 and counting."
WHEN DOES THIS MOVIE END?

The three of us were walking home from high school down an old road that led to the river. The road was made up of gravel and larger stones. Tough grass grew down the middle of it.

Tall grass flanked the road on both sides. We were reminded how much it looked like a road in World War II France. It was right out of the movies.

We were devoted peasants of the French Resistance, melodramatically destroying Boche bridges that would be replaced within a week. We were patriotic Frenchmen in a war that was an epic myth to our generation.

We were Frenchmen with berets and machine guns and we were right out of the movies. We were trite.

Even Jean-Paul Sartre, writing during that war, was sometimes trite. In *Les Jeux Sont Faits*, what do you think Pierre Dumain does when he gets mad at Eve's husband for questioning Dumain's right to take her away from him? Dumain grabs him by the lapels.

How many times have you seen somebody grab somebody by the lapels in the movies? Enough times to make you laugh whenever you see someone do it?

Grabbing someone by the lapels is trite. It can in no way be considered a serious act. It is trite and funny.

Even Jean-Paul Sartre was right out of the movies.

The road reached the river, and in the midst of the grass on
the right was a little open shack with paper or something on the floor. It could have been a torn-up telephone book.

I wanted to go in there, call them up, and ask them when do the movies end and real life begin?
THE ONE-WORD CHOIR

One of the graves had been recently filled in, perhaps even the day before. We were standing there looking at the fresh flowers on this stranger's grave.

They were a mute red choir, wailing with crimson arms outstretched. The outer rows of the choir were fanned out, touching the ground, prostrated in grief. The rest were bravely upright, wildly brilliant in the sun.

The anthem they sang was etched in the middle of them, a one-word despair lying limp on the loose dirt: MOTHER.
I've heard that the white race has killed a lot of American Indians, and that the glaze in their dead eyes was the kind you might find on your breakfast doughnuts.

Well, today, as usual, I'm looking at the world through a tunnel, and my view is a lengthwise one. A view as if I'm looking through a transparent loaf of bread. Existence is an infinity of parallel planes, and the slices of bread are falling over one by one.

It is from this perspective that I wonder about everything that happened when the Indians took over Wounded Knee. The way I see it, it's not so much that we stole all that land from the Indians. It's more a case of stealing their sky.
NEWS FROM THE LAKE

We had taken him up to the lake for his last piece of ass before being deposited forever in the bonds of holy matrimony. We had gotten drunk and ended up lost in Michigan. We had found his cousins' cottage and took two of them out drinking with us.

We took them swimming the next day and melted into the lake. He wanted to fuck one of them, but she had a boyfriend back in Toledo. We rode around in a shattered Impala for miles and miles because we were content to do that.

We drove home to our dreams and he to his future.
Typing against the Void I am, and typing against the Void I shall remain, whether I'm reflecting on how nice the world would be without mosquitoes or how good the music of the Beatles sounds to me right now.

I am somebody who writes prose the same way he writes poetry. When I'm feeling long-winded, I write a story rather than a poem. As you have probably guessed, I am feeling long-winded tonight, like the fan that is blowing in the living room or like the summer crickets that are chirping outside, the uneven grinding of some cosmic clock.

Typing against the Void I am, and typing against the Void I shall remain, despite the fact that my long-windedness is not coming up with a story this time, but with the plans for my next book. It will be called Ghost Stories. I am writing it because I read a story recently about this couple who moved into a haunted house. A ghost began shaking their bed at night and brushing his clammy hands against their faces. "They soon moved," the ghost story said.

You might think that it's impossible for me to build a book around a single sentence, They soon moved.
Walking to class, we passed a young lady we knew. A revolution was fought and won within me, a revolution I am sure none of my companions felt at the time. That is probably because I was walking around outside of myself.

Walking around outside of myself, I tend to see things differently, as they say. I tend to see the miracle within the action of greeting someone walking past and hearing her voice respond: portable islands we were, isolated and insulated, murmuring the code to one another.

It's magic. It's true, unabashed magic, what with all of us walking around with our heads so close to the ground and all.
After passing our young lady friend, we continued on to philosophy class, nearly getting lost as we wound our way through the building's corridors. We were going to be late.

One of these days, I thought, this professor is going to get suspicious of us walking into class a little late every day--it's always our little group that comes in late with our lungs exhaling sweet, pungent humors.

Having found the Right Room, we discovered that class had begun. Prof was hopping around the room in his own nervous fashion, scribbling illegibly on the blackboard at lightning speed as if he were the amphetamine god etching the writing on the wall. As I took my seat and glanced around at my surroundings, the Fear began to creep up on me. The Fear of Losing It in the classroom, guffawing or babbling nonsense, like the time a friend of mine tried to convince his music teacher that a classical piece they were listening to was really a song by the rock group Led Zeppelin. Uncomfortably, I started taking copious notes.

We liked Prof because he knew what he was talking about. But talking is only one form of enlightenment. I had one professor who, one day, kept losing it when he walked up to the blackboard to write something. It was uncanny, he said, really strange. He kept walking up to the blackboard and it was like walking up to a mirror, so he couldn't write very easily. Truly illuminating,
when one thinks about it. There was another teacher who, when lecturing, would put his hands on the lectern as if it were the flap of an airplane wing and he was hanging on for dear life. Sometimes, sitting there with my mind turning into candy, I would almost expect him to fly away.

But this is all neither here nor there and has very little to do with this book. The point is that not a few of my teachers gained my respect in ways they never knew of, and, indeed, would probably disapprove of. The book will continue in a minute, for I am coming to realize that it's very hard for me to put across the feeling that sitting in a classroom stoned arouses in me. Sitting in a classroom listening to professors with chalk on their fingers, white like death, talking about important things and knowing that they will die and I will die and that probably most of what they are saying will not change THE WORLD—but at least knowing. At least knowing.
CALLING LONG DISTANCE

I picked up the telephone as if I were beginning a quotation, for we all know how it is possible for a person to call long distance when he is calling a person who only lives down the street from him. And we all know how the number we dial has been memorized, like the idiot savant who memorized the weather of every date in history, or like someone citing a source in a closed room.

The person I was calling happened to be, yes, a very beautiful girl who, yes again, had become caught somewhere between a lover and a friend and who now, of course, couldn't be either one. The dial tone was machine-gunned against my ear as the number rang in. Comma.

She was a very beautiful girl who once ran in a beauty contest at college. She lost, and now eight months later the ringing of her telephone shot play bullets into my head. Semicolon.

She answered the phone, and I found that we couldn't talk. I tried to tell her about one of my solutions to love's problems, but all that seemed to come back through my receiver were the echoes of ricocheted machine gun bullets.

I tried to tell her that if only, by some strange reordering of the universe, it were possible that two people who were fighting could hear each other's secret tears, the problem would be solved. If they were really in love (and of course they would
be, else why would they be fighting?), hearing tears they weren't meant to hear would stop their hurting each other. The girl didn't have much to say about my theory. Maybe she felt it could not take place in a logically possible universe. Colon.

We said all the things that people usually say in such circumstances, and just as the echoes of the play bullets were fading away, her hand began hanging up her phone. Period. Quotation marks.

"But I voted for you," I said to mid-air.
BREAKING THE DISHES

I'm going to tell you about the person I work with in a rather large college dormitory dining service. Our job is to take things from the conveyor as they move out of the dishwasher. We're called unrackers. We unrack the dishes as they come out, marching like white armies.

The person I work with is an overweight, short-haired, physically active senior who wants to be an elementary school teacher. She plays badminton and designs short plays for first grade actors. She has worked at the dining service for four years and gets along well with the supervisors. Talking in nearly a monotonic staccato, she's cordial.

And she knows what's going on. She's a senior, and one gets the impression that she fought her way through all four years with badminton racket in one hand and businesslike cordiality in the other. As I already have mentioned, she has worked four years in the dining service. She worked three full years sorting silverware for two hours each day. One might say only a robot could do that. But somebody has to do it. She did it.

She has only just started working as an unracker. Any gorilla can learn how to unrack, but to be fast one has to have a little experience. Most every day the person I work with does a very irritating thing. She tries to do all the work herself. She tries to work both sides of our area herself, literally grabbing
the dishes out of my hands as I lay hold on them. Needless to say, the job is boring enough without someone doing all the work for you.

And today she was in her best style, grabbing away. But she was also trying to be fast. She was breaking the dishes, which shouldn't make any difference, except that people have been breaking the dishes all over the world.
THE LANGUAGE LAB AS AN AQUARIUM

Sometimes it's nice to perform aquatic experiments in the language lab. I was sitting in a booth, wearing headphones and playing a tape recorded by a Spanish student the day before. At the same time I was doing this, a French dialogue was being played through the headphones by my high school French teacher.

It was as if both languages were answering each other in the pauses provided, neither one really intelligible to the other.

The two tongues seemed to come out of separate speakers, babbling away at each other, bubbling a symphony of languages. I was sitting there immersed, somewhere between Andalusia and the Cote d'Azure.

The torrents of verbs and nouns were crisp and gurgling waterfalls, murmuring as they poured over the edge into my ears that softest of words in stereo, "caribou, caribou, caribou..."