Mantis

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We cut our teeth on MAD magazine,
sharpened them up on Bullwinkle
J.
Moose,
until nothing happened except we had
well cut
and sharpened teeth
to smile at some harsh times with.
O Bullwinkle,
why hast thou forsaken us?
For sooth,
    to Bullwinkle or
    not
    to Bullwinkle?
(A horned dilemma is upon us)
Were you not the BIG answer?
Once, before the mantis came, my roommate had played a Jew’s harp with raw abandon, over and over, the same old tunes. “Old Black Joe”. And it staved off something—this Jew’s harp did—something that finally came in person—flew in—without knocking—and serene.

The guys next door played their records so loud that we swept our minds for a way to destroy them—utterly. Carthage. Sowing their burned out room with salt—selling their belongings to the Arabs who were drawn by the pillar of smoke that rose up out of the dormitory from where the room had once been. The songs were more about the smoke than anything else afterwards. We didn’t really do that of course—my roommate and I—were much too pacifistic to do anything more than spit on the doorknob—every time we walked by.

Later my roommate took to burning incense—different days of the week. He wasn’t doing drugs, just laughing to himself about people afraid of him now because his clothes and breath and eyes reeked of incense.

He had a large mirror above his bureau for combing hair and such, but he preferred to draw weather maps on it like the T.V. men do with arrows and fronts and highs and a low of —9 in Duluth today, folks. Every day the weather map changed, different lows and highs sweeping over the U.S., but I never once caught him changing it. I stayed up nights trying to catch him too.

Later I correlated the weather map to my roommate. I noticed the colder the weather the midwest was having according to the map the bluer his eyes were. If the map said sunny weather, his eyes seemed brown with flickering fading yellow behind. However, the weather map never made it with reality. If the map said cold for the midwest, it was invariably hot in the midwest and my roommate would be sporting Aqua-Velva blue eyes that were so cold they looked like they were fashioned of dry ice. Dry ice—so cold it burns, and my roommates eyes flickered around the room—resting on me when I didn’t know—and the mirror changed every day.

Once in the fall my roommate opened the door of our
room to the hallway and a praying mantis flew in, the stalker of flies, the long armed, the intelligent, the eater of its own flesh. Flew in from nowhere and landed on my roommate's bed and looked at him. Really looked at him. My roommate stood with one hand on the doorknob and a smile swept his mouth open and closed in a brief silent laugh like plagues of praying mantises blotting out the sun for a second as they fly over. He then shut the door and sat down in his chair and he looked at that crazy bug. He looked at that crazy bug. I had the distinct feeling that a battle of wills was going on and that somebody was trying to hypnotize somebody, and I grabbed my coat and ran out of the room to get drunk on beer with a friend of mine who said "fucking" with emphasis on the "ing" like the sound of ricocheting bullets in the Rocky Lane western and it always made me laugh and I didn't come back till late and drunk.

My roommate was still up when I came back. He was feeding the praying mantis flies. My roommate knocked the flies down with a rolled up piece of newspaper—his squat, stocky, muscular frame springing or stealthy—whatever the fly required—weaving a strange dance back and forth across the room. I sat on my bed with my back to the wall, feeling sick with beer, and I felt my roommate was trying to show me something with his dance. At the time I was almost scared. He took the flies he'd stunned, took their wings off, and set them in front of the mantis who moved oh so slowly up and ate them. After about 3 flies it quit eating, and he threw his newspaper into a trash can. "Aren't you going to paint scenes from your hunt on the wall?" I asked and my roommate smiled while his brown eyes flickered madly with fly specks of yellow, and he smiled as he crawled into bed without answering me.

Late in the nite I woke up and was sick, vomiting into a waste paper basket I kept near my bed for such occasions. After I was done I looked over at my roommate. He was lying on his back, and the mantis was sitting on his forehead. Somebody over on that side of the room was humming. It was Blue Danube, and tastefully done.

After awhile the three of us—myself, my roommate, and the mantis—got quite used to each other.
After supper in the dining hall we came back to the room and locked the door. We each lay on our own bed, the mantis sitting asleep on the window ledge. My roommate would study, while I watched the sun go down. He would smoke his $1.98 pipe serenely—his own personal mixture—a combination of three different brands and a drop of Pepsi for moisture. Sometimes he played his records. Sometimes he would make coffee in his never-washed-but-once-in 97-days-pot. And I would lie on my back—throw my high school ring up and catch it—throw my high school ring up and catch it—as I waited for the sun to die so that I could go to work too.

One day I noticed the mantis was gone.

That same day our record player, which was so old it played by itself, childishly, remembering the records of its past—broke.

Many times that winter we made each other very strong whiskey drinks, toasting with sadness the mantis that was gone from our lives. That whiskey was as good as any I have ever tasted—mantis whiskey in communion for our partner who was gone.

The whiskey we bought from a friend, a friend who always wore a large green overcoat that rained whiskey bottles on the bed—after the door behind him was closed. My roommate’s eyes would turn red and ripple from the center out, like someone had just dropped a pebble in a pool, whenever he took a drink.

Drinking beer out in the country one night, my roommate walked into a field to talk to some cows, dark shapes on the hillside. “You better not go,” I said, “what if the cow talks back.” My roommate turned to look at me—smiled—and fell over happy. When his head hit the ground his eyes threw off orange sparks.

On another night when we were drunk I asked him why his eyes kept changing colors. “A tragic birth defect,” he answered. “Queen Victoria had it too.”

“What about Bismarck?” I asked.

“No, no, not him,” he answered.

All that winter we seemed to be waiting to see, if by a cross-crazy miracle, the mantis would return in the spring.
Spring came mantis free and I did not understand my roommate's sense of loss until he began painting his mural, a great huge thing covering the wall above his bed. It depicted a huge praying mantis devouring a fly which had no wings. There was a tag around the fly's neck that said, 'From Dave'. It was a beautiful picture, the face of the insect had a Mona Lisa like look, which isn't an easy thing to capture in paint.

"It's a beautiful thing, Dave."
"Yes, I feel inspired."
"You'll have to pay damages to the school."
"Yes."

One night after four of us smoked some hash, we went to a restaurant and talked on and on about the establishment, the war, the draft, until we were all panting with our emotion, recounting injustice after injustice the PEOPLE had been forced to endure. I enjoyed it so much.

As we were crawling into our beds that night Dave said, "We will remember tonite as the time we hated best in our lives." Then he rolled over with his back to me. I sort of looked at the ceiling for awhile, then I found myself talking.

"Tonite when I got ripped I imagined all creation to be encompassed by a huge hollow iron ball, all creation was inside the ball and the ball was the limit of everything. Stamped on the inside of the ball are the words 'Made in Japan'."

Dave rolled over and propped himself up on an elbow, and his eyes were the same as clear water and I could look into his head. I looked away.

He said, "Such a simple irony brings you confusion. Look into my eyes and see the words stamped on the outside of the black iron ball." I didn't look, I couldn't. The room melted away before his power, then came together and he was laughing softly, lying on his back, his eyes normal, and I was saying well you son of a bitch not at all mad and we slept.

But before I fell asleep I heard him saying his prayers to the mantis who meant so much to him. And this time it only seemed natural that I should pray to the mantis too.
Every night after that we prayed to the mantis together. On our knees, a candle stuck in a wine bottle (Bali Hai) burning wickeredly on a chair in front of us, the holy man of the mantis and I praying to the new God, the new king of hosts. As we prayed the souls of lost mantises drifted down, hit our windows, and dissolved into nothing with a sound like prayers to the new mantis god hitting a candle’s wickeredly flame. Puffs of blue and red as each prayer hit, and the room stank of holy and the other boys in the dorm were afraid of our room.

The day Dave finally finished his mural (it grew and grew, enveloping the entire room) he went up to his mirror and erased the weather map with a wet cloth. Slowly then, he carefully painted on his forehead a life size praying mantis, very realistic. After he was done he mumbled, “A cult is born,” and stumbled out of the room laughing like a madman. I smiled because I understood. Not even very scared of living with a crazy person anymore. Dave taught me not to worry about things like that. It’s the little things that count.

We kept waiting for the mantis. It did not come. And the paint on Dave’s forehead washed totally off after awhile and we were out of candles and the whiskey thief quit school.

I did not pray to the mantis then, or anything. The last time I saw Dave his eyes were dull brown and teary and we shook hands.

I went back to the room, was picking up my luggage, when I saw something lying on my bureau. A dead mantis. A dead for a long time mantis. Lying in a shoe box that was lined with cotton, little chunks of red, green, and yellow incense burnt around the box, a candle burnt in a Budweiser bottle and as I watched the flame flickered and quit.

A note was there:

It died in late January Jeff.
I think it got a bad fly.
Dave

and it ended like that.