

# SOMEBODY NEEDS TO PLAY THE TUBA

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Behind the Bement public library three retarded boys are playing hacky-sack in the parking lot. I'm here to give a reading, to maybe four or five people -- an Asian woman, whose English is rare, a housewife, a man on crutches, a former student I nicknamed Carver, a passerby or two. I park at the curb and watch the boys keep the small ball aloft with their armorless smiles and awkward feet. It's almost seven and I've decided to read poems about myself, that is, ones about being a professor at a land grant university, where corn, algebra, and accountancy excel. I feel a little peculiar sitting in my truck watching the three boys trying for all they're worth to keep that leather ball in play. I'm reminded of Mrs. Doyle, the wrinkled music teacher in my elementary school, who one day brought a cart full of instruments into our classroom. A violin, maracas, a trombone, two trumpets, a gaggle of triangles, the tuba. She said it had to do with "inclination," I think, to see, if any of us were "inclined" to play an instrument, had some latent musical talent. Not even Tikki Brown could get much from the trumpet, except a stream of saliva, running like a faucet from the rim. And the violin could have been a cat fight in the alley, the triangle some small pitiful reprieve for the musically impaired. The whole class, an orchestra of the pathetic, making sounds that even the deaf couldn't shun. And then there was me, squat, stocky, lonely in my baby fat, who rose as if some distant call had been given, a muse, a call to dinner perhaps, rose to the front of the class and went for the large round embrace of brass. Mrs. Doyle lifted the tuba above my head, some shiny contortion of a halo, and when it came down onto my shoulder, sash-like but heavy, the class disappeared, fell away, into their meaningless laughter. Even if I didn't make a sound, it was the thing I wanted. All around me like hope, the bright, ebullient, resonance of my need. I met the mouth piece and made a small sound. A gaseousness, I suppose. And Mrs. Doyle lit up like a field of heather breaking from the fog, the whole class astounded by her smile. I wonder what makes me sit here now, watching these three smiling boys flail their feet at that small fist of a ball. Endurance, I am sure, means nothing to the perfect.

**THE PHONE RINGS AND,**

of course, it's not for me. It's my wife's editor wanting to discuss the marketing campaign for her new novel. The cover, too. A Chagall, she says. How nice. My teenage step-daughter wants the phone, she's anxious to talk to her friends about the new "Do It Doggy Style" rap tape she bought at the mall. I'm in some state of decline, or the world is, it's hard to tell the difference. I go outside and look for signs of the snow crocus that last week almost erupted through the crust of dirt collaring the sycamore on my front lawn. I nearly remember who I saw "Easy Rider" with, those seven times in the first month it was released. I rise from the front steps to the sound of squirrels bristling across the leaf guards of my rain gutters. There are sounds that make a dog's head cock. As I look higher, to the third story window sash my step-daughter tied some blankets to and tried to shimmy down from last week, I back up toward the hedges near the front lawn, the hedges behind which, two days ago, some urgent female jogger in purple spandex took a crap. Rapunzel, I think, lacked an air for adventure. There's a footprint in the mud near the mailbox. It's not mine. I'm beginning to envy everyone -- the white whimsical cows that could be circling my chimney, the Jewish peasant with his violin on my roof, the pastel imprint of my wife's name on her new book, or my step-daughter, who, in the recklessness of age, might lose her step coming down the stairs to answer the phone that isn't for me again, while some cardinal light-housing in the pine wears his song, his colour out against the sky.

## TODAY

No one wants to be mortal,  
it just happens. The sun  
comes up and one day you're  
there to see it. Some kid  
named, Tickie, is throwing  
a newspaper at your feet,  
and it lands on the door-  
mat your sister gave you,  
the one with the fly-fisher-  
man arcing a dry-fly  
toward some ungodly trout.  
In your pocket a knife  
is dulling in its rose-  
wood case, and your wife  
is calling you from the  
kitchen, there's a phone  
call, and how do you want  
your eggs. Sunny-side up  
comes to mind and you pick  
up what you think is the  
phone and your mother tells  
you your father died in his  
sleep last night. The paper  
drops from your hand, opens  
to the weather map, your kids  
jump down the stairs. They  
giggle at a cartoon on the  
TV, ignoring the meteorological  
hieroglyphs, the low and high  
pressure systems battling it  
out on the surface of the page.  
Your eggs are ready, the dog  
barks, the sun draws its bow  
in the pine tree and shoots  
light hard through the picture  
window.

## RHINOCEROS LOVE

The devil plucked up the baobab,  
thrusts its branches into the earth,  
and left its roots in the air.

### An Arabian Legend

Yesterday, he picked up his bifocals. Today, he has an echo-cardiogram. He gets to lie on his side while the nurse lies next to him and rubs a Vaseline tipped microphone over his chest. He laughs to himself, thinking, I wouldn't miss it for a million dollars, listening to the washing machine sounds my leaky heart-valves make while the nurse pushes her right breast hard into my back. He says aloud to himself, "It's clear, I'm heading into the wrong end of my life."

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The other night, when he and his son were watching Channel 12, the educational station, he began to cry. He didn't think his son noticed because the boy was squirming, uncomfortable, he looked like his bones were pushing through his skin. His son wanted to watch something else but he wouldn't let him. It was Sunday night and Sunday nights are a kind of ritual for him. He used to lie on his parents' bed and watch Ed Sullivan with them -- Topo Gigo, The Beatles, Jackie Mason, the whole thing. He's a good parent, he thinks, and Ed Sullivan is dead, so they watch Channel 12 whether his son likes it or not.

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They were watching "nature," as usual. This particular show was about black rhinos in the Serengeti. His son was making a tent of his Aladdin blanket while he was drinking a Foster's Lager, thinking how strange it was to be watching, in the Midwest, some game-wardens in a Land Rover getting rammed by a large armadillo with horns. His son got straight-backed, alert, every time the bull rhino plowed into the side of the truck. He thought his son was thinking, Now that's funny. That's a cartoon.

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It's hard to say exactly why he started to cry, but before the narrator started talking about the rhinos he began to recall the show about spelunking they'd seen the week before. Some cave-diver was stuck in a cave in Kentucky, his heels were caught in a long narrow shaft that an artist drew a cross-section of. He thought, at first, it looked like a tapered cigar, then a V, then an ice cream cone. The cave-diver was caught at the bottom, at the narrowest point. He thought about that man for days. How he couldn't move. How they fed him, talked to him, tried to keep his spirits up. How the whole town came out, like it was a carnival. He

imagined people made bets, joked, even brought their girl-friends and spent the nights doing whatever comes naturally in the back of their pick-up trucks. He gave the man in the cave names. He called him Jason, then Hercules, then he settled on Alexander. He thought he'd write a children's story about Alexander, the man who was stuck in a cave. He imagined there were well-wishers there too, with prayers, candles, all the accouterments people need when they realize they're helpless. He wondered if Alexander could hear everything that was going on above him. Finally, Alexander died, and the whole thing seemed to him like some cruel experiment. He ripped up the notes he made for his story. His son fell asleep before they showed the body being pulled up. He remembered hearing someone say that only by being dead did Alexander's muscles relax enough so they could pull him up.

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He thought the crying had more to do with the rhinos. He thought it was about the time the narrator began to talk about mating habits and his son curled under the blanket. Yes, he thought, that's when I put down my pen and gave the show my full attention. Usually, he kept a pen and pad with him wherever he'd go. He calls it "sapping" like a tree, so he can get his thoughts down and keep them for a story or a poem. It was when the narrator began to talk about the mating habits of the rhinos and he saw the male taste the female's urine that he put down his pen. He sipped some beer. He started to laugh a little as he watched the male maneuver around the female, like a drunk, or a moth around a lightpost. It was like the rhino was blind, he thought, like he didn't know what to do, where the right spot was. He watched the bull mount the female broadside at least three times, while she, possessing a natural patience, looked straight ahead, as if she were waiting for a light to change. Finally, she trotted under the baobab to wait for the poor bull to get his bearings. Even the white egrets, and the ox-peckers that rode on the ridge of his spine flew off, like critics annoyed at a pathetic performance.

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For a little while he felt guilty. He thought perhaps he didn't have the right to be looking in. But soon the male got on course, did it, and swaggered off like he was Caesar and the grand green lawn of nature was his Rome. It was then, after all the fuss, the errors, the laughable mystique, that he felt the first inkling of a tear. He thought of how his Catholic wife, so deep in her devotions, fondles her beads. He thought of how disconnected they are. How even, in day-dreams, when she comes back from the homeless shelter, and she accedes to sex, he has to imagine she's Indian, unwrapping a sari, as he jumps, like an armadillo hit by headlights, to close the curtains, take off his clothes. And even then in the bend and curve of them, he hears his mother whispering above him, "Why did you marry a Hindu?" His mother flies away, and soon, it seems to him, the whole event becomes a diving meet, a long table of judges with no lips and numbered cards. Even his father, always inept with the mechanical, is in the corner of the bedroom fumbling in the darkness, pulling the lens of his old Polaroid down its track. He thinks his

wife should complain but she doesn't, she's a good Catholic or Hindu, she's trained to carry things around in her head. He gives her a name, he calls her Deepa. He sees her parents trying to rub the crimson caste mark from her brow. He sees his house decorated with pictures of Vishnu or Brahma, their ungodly arms, crosses falling like spider monkeys from a tree. He tells himself she needs him to concentrate, even in the day-dream, to be present. But he is not.

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His son is sound asleep on the floor, he closes his eyes as if he could be in the day-dream again. And he is. He's in Florida, Kissimmee, 1971, and he's taking his parents fishing on Butler Lake, and they're cruising along its weeded banks, thick bronze cattails mulling over the lilies, redwings poised on their tips. He wants to write it down, but he stays in the dream. And there, out of the heaviest part of cover, a V breaks in the grass, like the branching of a tree, or its roots, or a flock of geese, or what it really is, a gator, maybe eight, ten, twelve feet long coursing toward the boat. His tail is enough to turn a house, and still, his mother lounges like Cleopatra, he thinks, on the bow, turns her head, as if danger were merely a distraction from splitting pistachios on her bed, as if his father, by accident, had just switched from "The Wheel Of Fortune," to, "Mutual Of Omaha's Wild Kingdom" as if she were safe, he thinks, in the ground, in the clouds, unstained by her red thumbs, or, as if, the gator's clock of teeth were under glass. His father reacts to it at least, drops his bird-nested reel, winks and goes for his trusty Polaroid and misses the gator by a mile.

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His son is unsure of time. He is groggy, crawling from under his sleep while he says he wants to watch "The Road Runner" as the old rhinos are lumbering toward a lake unlit with gazelle. He lifts the boy. His son's head tilts to meet his shoulder, and his wife comes in. She says, "I'll take him, I'll take him to his bed."

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In that, in that taking of his son to bed, in her taking their son from his arms to hers, he sees everything in slow motion. Her cross pendulous on her chest, the small mole on her brow, the way his son lays open his small hands and pats her on the back, the way he himself becomes empty, his own arm conceding to his side. That is when he cried, when he turned his head, went back to his bed, ignored the TV, and imagined the small picture above his son's bed was not a picture of Butler Lake, or the Taj Mahal, or Medjugorje, but it was the baobab tree, growing in all its confusion, Medusa-like, above and below.

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He waited for his wife. And as he did, he wrote something down, something now, a week later, he has in his pocket, next to his knife, his keys. It was something that he folded up, like it needed protection. And even as he unfolds it now, days after that Sunday night, its squares of parquetry like the grid of a playing-field, or the ancient armor of some rhino, the paper looks hard with the words. He maneuvers toward his study, turns on the light, sits next to the typewriter he has called Augustus, and reads the words until they are audible, until he can fill himself with whatever they mean, again and again, he recites, "The bone is pushing through."