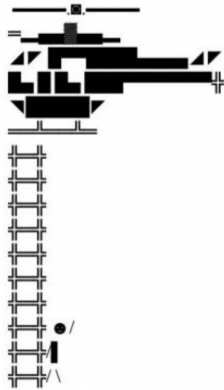
THE COLUMBIA REVIEW

Vol. 102 | Issue 2 | Spring 2021

Many thanks to Kate Zambreno and Asiya Wadud for judging this year's Prose and Poetry Prize Contests.

An Editors' Note



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That too is stealing

Timmy Straw

In the janitor closet of two alone
among the brooms
and chemicals
a bulb a mouse some vinegar
the little shelf and thee
was it waiting, I said, or stealing,
you said, the body is not the song
but the bearing of the song
and nothing,
nothing to tell of it. Took even the thought of it—
the cool at the bottom
of the psalm,
as praise is cold to touch, as heat
gone cold in utterance, the jealous king
who not yet king
one day sang to Saul
My lord is sweetest in the morning
Like him I wished to sing
in advance of feeling
but that too you said
that too is stealing—

Style

Spring 2021 Prose Prize Winner

Corey Sobel

35

The failed short story writer was raised in Fort Morgan, Colorado, a place he would decades later describe as existing a world apart from the "Colorado"—his scare quotes—that easterners imagine when they picture the state. Fort Morgan, he wrote, "is not purple mountains majesty; it is a brown blasted hellhole, nothing more than upturned crossbucks and hailstorms ripping leaves off the cottonwood trees."

34

The dream of becoming a famous author was birthed in this barrenness, and it drove the failed short story writer to excel in Fort Morgan's small, conservative high school, earning him a scholarship to the University of Northern Colorado. The scholarship wasn't necessary for him to attend college—his father owned a lucrative cattle ranch—but was regardless fashioned by the young man into a symbol of emancipation, providing as it did financial independence from the father whose "bullshit" the failed short story writer claimed stank worse than the literal stuff that coated the ranch's stockyards.

33

Senior year at UNC, the failed short story writer's mother—his "father's wife"—died of cervical cancer, an event he would never write about.

32

Following graduation, the failed short story writer moved to Washington D.C., where he worked odd jobs, ate one meal a day, and wrote whenever the mood struck—which was incessantly, the young man composing on park benches and Metrorail trains, on the grassy spring banks of the Potomac and in wintertime coffee shops where he crammed up against steam-streaked windows. The intensity

of his impulse alone seemed to earn him the right to be published, and one fateful Monday he skipped his daily meal so as to afford printing and mailing his work.

31

When the rejections arrived, the failed short story writer consoled himself by reading biographies of authors whose own early efforts had gone uncelebrated, people like Hawthorne and Bukowski. And once the initial flush of injured anger had passed, he could reread his submitted story with a cooler eye and recognize that it was indeed an apprentice work; it lacked the mature style that would have made the story's disparate elements cohere. That style, he was certain, would not be long in coming.

30

Still unpublished at 27, he fell in love, married, and watched a daughter enter the world, spurring him to trade the odd jobs for a grant-writing position at an international development NGO downtown. He had no expertise in this field, nor did he want it; he would have sooner reread a Cheever story than "scrape his pupils" against the day's newspaper. But what attracted him, apart from the steady income, were the position's fixed parameters—9 a.m.–5 p.m. Monday to Friday, an hour for lunch. He knew that the discipline instilled by this schedule would push him "over the hump" and allow him to discover his true style. He wrote during his lunch breaks every weekday, and for another 45 minutes before bed.

29

His 30s saw him take a more technical view of his craft; perhaps, he thought, it was the specific words a writer deployed—the "arsenal"—that fostered one's natural style. The conviction that specific words would emancipate his authentic voice led him to keep a running list of new words he came across in his increasingly esoteric reading. He would use those words every time he wrote, and the list grew so extensive that he could compose whole stories solely with selections from it. The failed short story writer looked back on his twenty-something self with benign bemusement, shaking his head at the belief that a real style could be fostered by unbounded freedom.

28

By the year he turned 45 the failed short story writer had tired of formalism, viewing his continued rejections as damning evidence against the method. Though he kept writing from 12 p.m. to 1 p.m. each weekday, and for another forty-five minutes before bed, his prose began to seem rudderless, and he found his stories were all sounding the same. Around this time, his international development organization became embroiled in a controversy over misallocated grants to Tajikistan, a scandal that resulted in the NGO's closure. Luckily, his wife earned enough money to patch the family over and, "God being good," their daughter took after her father and won a scholarship to college.

27

For two months the failed short story writer was confronted with whole days of free time, but he only allowed himself his usual writing segments, using the other hours to apply for jobs. He was eventually hired by a new international development organization founded by many of the same people who had run his previous NGO—entering a new office filled with familiar faces proved to be one of the more gutting experiences of his life.

26

The failed short story writer had seen neither Fort Morgan nor his father in over two decades, but he was forced to return to both when his father was diagnosed with dementia. Moving back into his boyhood bedroom, the failed short story writer commenced settling his father's accounts, not surprised in the least to discover that his name was missing from the old man's will. The father called the son he didn't recognize an "interloper," and among the old man's other strange habits was that of repeatedly removing antique lamps from the desks and bureaus and tables in the house and setting them onto the warped wooden floorboards. At first, the failed short story writer would restore the lamps to their rightful places; but after finding them back on the floors time and time again, he finally left them where they stood. At night, the lamps would light his steps.

25

The failed short story writer phoned his daughter frequently during his trips to Fort Morgan. He would end each conversation by saying, "I promise I won't put you through this," terrified he would one day develop his father's disease and treat his daughter in the same harsh manner. To this, the failed short story writer's daughter replied with two points: 1) As opposed to his childhood, hers had been a loving one, and she would adore him to the very end; and 2) If the failed short story writer was so afraid, why not write a letter that instructed himself not to duplicate his father's abuses? He could mail that letter to her, and by so doing provide insurance against any future cruelty.

24

She had been joking about the second point, but the failed short story writer didn't care and set out to do exactly as she suggested.

23

Sitting at the same rolltop desk where he had composed his earliest fiction, the failed short story writer listed every aggression his father had committed over the past weeks. This was acidic work, lacking adjectives, dialogue, and all his other usual compositional tools. But as the failed short story writer moved from the most recent indignities to the founding enormities of his childhood, the writing took on a momentum—the farther back the failed short story writer reached, the danker and richer his language became. As he would later on describe it, "that curt, crabbed list bloomed into sentences, sentences unfurled into paragraphs, paragraphs stacked into stories that pitched Dad against the younger Me."

22

Returning to Washington, the failed short story writer called his daughter and relished the surprise in her voice when she told him sure, she would keep her eye out for his letter.

21

The trip to Colorado was the longest break the failed short story writer had ever taken from fiction as an adult, and he returned to his stories "with rabidity." He began leaving his desk early for lunch and returned much later than usual, so enraptured by his writing that he lost all feeling for the passing—"the accumulation"—of time. He also wrote long past midnight in his apartment's study, bearing down on his legal pads, scribbling on their cardboard backs when he ran out of paper. His wife, meanwhile, tossed and turned in bed, unaccustomed to the extra roaming space.

20

The failed short story writer walked sobbing through his Northwest Washington neighborhood the day he received notice that *Harper's* had accepted his story for publication. Literary agents who had for years sent him generic rejections now wrote him by the dozen offering representation, and his debut book of stories was to be the first to receive the Pen/Faulkner, Pulitzer Prize, National Book Award, and National Book Critics Circle Award all in the same cycle.

19

Struggling to describe the style of this collection, reviewers fell back on calling the stories "morally serious."

18

His first author photograph—featured on the dust jacket of the collection, *Night's Owls*—showed the failed short story writer in profile, caught mid-laugh, showing off a mouth of straight, yellow teeth. Sitting at a fold-out table in a Dupont Circle bookstore and waiting for the first fans to approach, he looked at this photograph and felt stymied: Though he could remember the session with the photographer, he couldn't shake the feeling that his publisher had found a dead ringer to sit for this particular photo—someone who could smile a smile the failed short story writer himself was incapable of forming.

17

In the time between the publication of *Night's Owls* and his historic flush of awards, the failed short story writer continued his day job writing grant applications. When he finally gave his notice, a reporter for the *New York Times Magazine* received permission to follow him around on his last day of work. The profile—which itself went on to win a National Magazine Award—caught several notable moments, and crowning of these was the final scene in which the failed short story writer bought a beer for his supervisor in a Farragut neighborhood bar. Speaking into his bottle of Sam Adams, the boss muttered, "I didn't know you wrote." This quote hardened into myth overnight and led several critics to remark on the uncanny similarities—physical and otherwise—between the failed short story writer and Wallace Stevens.

16

Following the rave reception of his sophomore effort—*Swallow's Downs*—the failed short story writer was mounted in the august hall of Late Bloomers, alongside eminences such as Walker Percy, Norman Rush, and José Saramago.

15

Much of the literary prize money was spent on flights to and from Colorado. The failed short story writer traveled alone; his wife offered to accompany him, but the father of the failed short story writer had a habit of welcoming visitors by staring suspiciously at them through the front screen door, an experience the failed short story writer was glad to spare his wife. His daughter also asked to come, but he was proud that she had never stepped foot on Coloradan soil. He told her to stay home, explaining that he wanted to keep her heart "unalloyed."

14

The father mistook his son for long-dead relatives—most often, he called him "Jerry," the name of the father's older brother. The failed short story writer's uncle and father had been orphaned at ages 17 and 10 in Kearney, Nebraska, and

Jerry had raised his little brother by himself. The men grew distant over the years for reasons neither had fully understood, and their estrangement grew so absolute that the failed short story writer's father only learned of his brother's suicide, at 51, from an old Kearney friend who called to deliver the news. The failed short story writer had watched his father avoid mention of his brother's death for the next 30 years, and it took the old man losing his mind to finally feel free to say, "I love you, Jer." The son did not correct his father's mistake.

13

One morning in February, the failed short story writer's father absconded with his live-in nurse's car keys and went for a long drive around eastern Colorado. He and the car were discovered at the base of the Great Sand Dunes, and from then on the nurse took special care to hide her keys. This only led the father, later that month, to make away with the ATV he had once used to motor around his ranch. As the sun set over stubbled wheat fields, he drove the vehicle onto the wrong side of Interstate 76 and sped straight for an oncoming minivan, causing the van to swerve and flip a full two rotations. The mother, father, and infant child inside miraculously survived the crash, and their lawsuit was settled out of court.

12

The father was moved permanently to a facility in Denver. When the failed short story writer visited, his father would call him by his own name, as if his son were a younger double. The failed short story writer's first biographer, a *New Yorker* staff writer, linked these experiences to the near-suffocating darkness of what would be commonly referred to as his "Middle Period" stories.

11

The failed short story writer asked his wife and daughter to stay put. He flew alone to Colorado, oversaw his father's cremation, and spread the remains onto his father's still-lucrative stockyard—the management of which was handled by a rancher the failed short story writer described, in an email home, as "an ash-gobbling frontiersman."

10

By 60, the failed short story writer had settled comfortably into the role of living legend, accepting invitations to give commencement speeches, smiling out benevolently on a Manhattan stage while a grizzled Hollywood star announced the bestowal of this year's Hadada Award to "the genius sitting to my left."

9

The daughter of the failed short story writer showed promise as an author in her own right. After sharing the manuscript of her first novel with her father's literary agent, she became embroiled in a bidding war over not only that book, but over her second, as-yet-unwritten novel. Her father seldom bore her ill will.

8

The wife of the failed short story writer never laid a fictional word to paper. Though they no longer needed the money, she continued to work as manager of a boutique Washington hotel, and she often believed her husband when he wrote, in every book dedication, a variation on, "I owe you more than can ever be counted." She pretended to humor her husband's surprise announcement that they would be relocating to the artistic haven of Marfa, and she skillfully quashed the idea by asking, one day over breakfast, if the failed short story writer had heard that a younger female protégé of his had recently been awarded a Lannan Writing Residency, which by coincidence would also lead her to relocate to Texas. The failed short story writer said he had not heard, and a few days later he told his wife that they were probably burning through their 70s quickly enough without the added stress of moving.

7

Like Dickens, the failed short story writer's pace of production slowed some in his last phase, but unlike Wordsworth, his late works were not mere self-congratulatory, self-parodying dross. As one critic noted, Philip Roth wasn't

a fitting analogue, either, since Roth's career was a study in great bookends. The failed short story writer had never faltered, not even when his short-term memory began to get shorter and his steady scholarly manner began flaking away, exposing an unexpected rawness underneath.

6

The failed short story writer tucked in his father for the night and returned to his boyhood bedroom. It was summertime and, just as he had as a child, he climbed through his window and sat on the front porch's flat roof, holding his knees to his chest as he listened to an unseen freight train moan. He was lulled into a kind of happiness, and he was nearly startled off the roof when he heard the sound of glass shattering inside. He climbed back into his room and rushed down the steps, needing to stop his father from destroying all the lamps—and when he reached the bottom landing, he looked up to find he was standing in the front hall closet of his Washington D.C. home. His wife held his hand, smiling through tears.

5

Protective of his legacy, the failed short story writer enlisted his wife and daughter to help hide his degeneration. Ceremonies for honorary doctorates and lifetime achievement awards were graciously declined. Fan letters went unanswered, and his long-time editor and agent were instructed to contact his daughter for all discussions of royalties, permissions, anniversary editions. Even his oldest friends failed to have their calls returned, and little was done to discourage rumors that he'd become a second Pynchon. His wife moved them to Poolesville, Maryland, where they took over an old farmhouse and a half-dozen acres out back. On their daily dawn walks along the fallow furrows, the failed short story writer would sometimes make light-hearted jokes about his decline, and other times accused his wife of not taking his suffering seriously. She held her tongue, by and large.

4

The failed short story writer's daughter regularly rode the Amtrak from Manhattan to Maryland to help care for him, scribbling detailed notes during these visits that her lucid father would have encouraged her to be "ruthless" with.

3

Rumors notwithstanding, the public had no reason to suspect the failed short story writer's maddening. He was still publishing regularly, and the stories were agreed to be the best of his career—written in a style that was somehow both fresh and completely in keeping with the man's earlier work. What the agent who placed these stories didn't know was that they were written as many as 50 years earlier, fiction no publication had been willing to publish and that the failed short story writer had meticulously filed away. To avoid suspicion, the daughter would re-type a yellowed story on her laptop before forwarding it to the agent.

2

The earliest tales of the failed short story writer—produced, rejected, and filed when he was in his 20s—made up his final collection, *Ocelot's Eyes*. The book's publication, and the author's death two weeks after, led critics to call it his *Brothers Karamazov.* The failed short story writer was buried in a Poolesville cemetery.

1

The notes taken by the daughter were eventually turned into a bestselling memoir, one that divided critics—some claimed she had surpassed her father's brilliance, while others viewed it as a study in opportunism. And yet there was consensus about the book's single most memorable moment: the scene in which the failed short story writer, screaming through his final days, accused his wife and daughter of "impostering." His daughter rushed back to her bedroom to retrieve the letter he wrote himself decades before, which she had brought to Poolesville on the suspicion that she would need it. After reading the letter, the failed short story writer threw it to the floor, sneered at his family, and haughtily informed them: "That's not my style."

Accident in the Mountain West

Cady Favazzo

Provo, UT, 1988

too much thin, cold air the skin
of sky a strained blue
stretched taut across the desert lit
with winter sun behind the shadow
of a bucket truck parked on soil
that can't grow shit--no tomatoes, no marigolds
but someone planted a powerline six feet deep
and the boom ladder knocked 7200 volts
into an old body and a young one
and another, grabbing the ankles of the first
and another, grabbing the wrists of the third
then, staggering onto the open wire
four wet bags scattered, conducting heat
the soil flickering with heavy metal

one of the top poetry books of 2017 by the Chicago Review of Books. Co-founder and poetry editor of The Account, her poems and translations have appeared widely in journals, including the *Kenyon Review Online, The Georgia Review, Prairie Schooner, Crazyhorse*, and *Waxwing*. She lives in Los Angeles.

Edward Salem is a Palestinian writer and artist from Detroit. He was chosen by Ottessa Moshfegh as the winner of BOMB's 2021 Fiction Contest, and by Louise Glück as a finalist for the 2021 Bergman Prize. He is the founder and co-director of City of Asylum/Detroit, a nonprofit that provides long-term residencies for writers who are in exile under threat of persecution. His work has been published or is forthcoming in *Cosmonauts Avenue, Matter, Eclectica Magazine,* and elsewhere. His artwork has been exhibited internationally, including at The Hangar in Beirut, the Khalil Sakakini Cultural Center in Ramallah, and Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía in Madrid. He holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. A deep commitment to the right of peoples to return to their lawful land propels his work.

Corey Sobel is the author of *The Redshirt*, a finalist for the Center for Fiction's First Novel Prize and one of NPR's Favorite Books of 2020.

Timmy Straw is a writer, musician, and translator (Russian), MFA in poetry forthcoming from the Iowa Writers' Workshop, and a recent Fulbright fellow to Moscow. They are also the co-editor of the Iowa Prison Writing Project, which publishes the work of incarcerated writers and poets. Their poems and essays have appeared in *Jacket2, Tin House, Volta* and elsewhere.

Owen Park (he/him) is a junior at Columbia University studying creative writing.

Philip Alexander Mills is a Greek-American poet, comedic journalist, and scientific researcher. He writes for *The Slant*, and his various works have been featured in *The Vanderbilt Review* and *Polymers*. He currently studies English and mechanical engineering as a sophomore at Vanderbilt University.

M.P. Powers lives with one foot in Berlin, Germany, and the other in South Florida, where he rents out construction equipment. He is the editor of 11 Mag Berlin, and has been published in Red Fez, Chiron Review, Slipstream, Rosebud and many others. His blog can be found here: https://mppowers.wordpress.com/.

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