ADD TONER

a COMETBUS collection

"LANKY" "BACK TO THE LAND," +MORE!
1. Two Stories

Mike and I were looting the leftovers at U.C. Berkeley one year and found a statue. Drunkenly, we carried it down Bancroft. A life-size bust, after two blocks it was more heavy than amusing. Mike walked into Cafe Milano, made his way through the crowd, then set it down right on top of a stranger’s table.

Ten years later, he went on a blind date. When she brought him home, Mike was met with knowing eyes, staring at him stonily from between ferns in her garden. Who would have known? All those years Mike and his date had been telling half of the same story.

Sali and I were walking along in the undergrowth alongside Interstate 580 by Lake Merritt. She tripped over something and reached down to pick it up. Anything else it would have been a rock or a hubcap, but true to form, this was Oakland. She pulled her hand up from the ivy and I ducked. Much to her surprise and mine, she was holding an Uzi.

A real Uzi. Nothing to do but try to wipe off her prints and bury it a little deeper.

And the bottle of gin I dumpstered? I can’t stand the stuff, so I gave it to Jess. Except, it was not gin after all. Jess proved my point, which is, everything that’s found was once lost, hidden, or thrown out. Maybe better not to know why. Better not to know where it came from or exactly what it is. Better sometimes not to ask for the rest of the story, better sometimes not to tell. But he asked, and I was only trying to be helpful.

“What’s the worst thing it could be?"
HE SAID. I PRODUCED A LIST FROM THE POISON
CONTROL CENTER, AND WAS ONLY HALFWAY DOWN
WHEN JESS TURNED GREEN AND WENT INTO THE
BUSHES TO PUKE.

ON A WHIM, AND SORT OF AN ACCIDENT, I
FOUND MYSELF IN VANCOUVER. I COULDN'T BELIEVE
MY LUCK: THE LEGENDARY CANADIAN SUBHUMANS
WERE DOING A REUNION SHOW THAT VERY NIGHT.
IT WAS ALREADY SOLD OUT WHEN I GOT THERE,
BUT THAT WAS ALRIGHT, EVEN SORT OF A RELIEF.
I THOUGHT OF ALL THE GREAT BANDS I'D GONE TO
SEE BUT FOR ONE REASON OR ANOTHER NEVER
LAID EYES ON. UNDERAGE, BROKE, SOLD OUT, OR
KICKED OUT, THOSE WERE THE BEST SHOWS OF ALL.
SITTING OUT FRONT WHERE THE SOUND OF THE
MUSIC BLENDED WITH THE STREET SCENE AND THE
ROAR OF PASSING CARS. AS IT WAS IN THE BEGINNING,
IS NOW, AND EVER SHALL BE, WORLD WITHOUT END.
AMEN. I SETTLED ONTO THE PAVEMENT WITH THE
OTHER PUNKS, MAKING NEW FRIENDS, TRADING
STORIES AND SCHEMES FOR SNEAKING IN.
“NO STAMP? TRY WALKING IN BACKWARDS”.
“DRESS UP AS THE BACK DOOR”.
“SAY SOMEONE ORDERED PIZZA”.
“AND ALL SIX OF US ARE HERE TO DELIVER IT?
I DON'T THINK SO”.
“WE'LL SAY WE'RE THE OPENING BAND.”
“FUCK IT, WE'LL BE THE OPENING BAND!”
“HEY LOSERS, THE FUCKING OPENING BAND
ALREADY PLAYED!”
SHE WAS RIGHT. YOU COULD HEAR THE
SUBHUMANS STARTING INSIDE.
OF ALL THE TRICKS, I'D FORGOTTEN THE OLDEST
IN THE BOOK. I WALKED UP THE STAIRS PAST THE
SUSPICIOUS GLARE OF A HERD OF NECKLESS BouncERS.
“GUEST LIST”, I SAID, AND AS THEY LOOKED UP THE
NAME I GAVE I CRANED MY HEAD AROUND LIKE A
LLAMA, LOOKING OVER THEIR SHOULDERS FOR A
BETTER ONE.
“NO SPIRO AGNEW ON THE LIST”; THEY YELLED.
“GET OUT!!”
THE HEAD BOUNCER SEIZED ME AND PICKED MY
FEET OFF THE GROUND, READY TO BOWL ME HEAD-
FIRST DOWN THE STAIRS AND OUT THE DOOR. I
QUICKLY PUT IN A POSTSCRIPT.
“PERHAPS THEY PUT ME DOWN UNDER MY
NICKNAME, 'POPO'”.
THAT DID THE TRICK. INSTEAD OF THROWING
ME OUT THE DOOR, THEY CROSSED POPO OFF THE LIST
AND THREW ME RIGHT INTO THE PIT.
I couldn’t believe it, the subhumans were so fucking good, really screaming and pumping and pounding it out, not just going through the motions. And there was Gerry Hannah, proudly playing his first show since being arrested as part of the Vancouver five more than ten years before.

I cheered, I danced, I sang along. But in all the sweat and passionate noise, there was a thorn in my side. A nagging guilty feeling I couldn’t get off my mind.

“Who is Popo?”, it asked. “Where is Popo? Did he show up after all, just a little late?”

My mom was on a date. Time: the early fifties. Place: Detroit. The icy rain is falling down and forming muddy puddles. Huge American cars roll down the road and people run crouched under umbrellas or wrapped up in raincoats. On the corner is a restaurant, fancy but not gaudy. Through the window you can see my mom and some dude, finishing their meal. No fool, my mom allows him to pay the bill. They stand up, retrieve their coats from the doorman, and walk happily together down the street.

However, it is not meant to be. A car races by and hits a huge puddle. Mom stays dry but the guy is splashed head to toe. He takes off his overcoat, now a soaked, ruined, muddy mess. What a thing to happen on a date with my mom! But, examining the damage, he suddenly lightens up.

“Why, this isn’t my coat at all”, he laughs. “The doorman must have given me the wrong one!”

They return to the restaurant and hand the dripping muddy bundle back to the horrified doorman. “There seems to have been a mistake”, they say. “You gave us the wrong coat.”

Indeed, the doorman checks the tags and apologizes, handing over a coat of a similar cut. Happy, warm, and dry, they stroll down the street again with a smile and a gem of wisdom to pass down to future generations. “That’s the difference between a shlemiel and a shlemazel,” mom tells me many years later.

“Any shlemiel can get their coat splashed in mud by a passing car. But to do it without even putting it on or going outside, that takes a shlemazel.”

Poor shlemazel. Him and all the other popos of this world, in their muddy overcoats.
Stuck in the other half of my family's stories. Probably seven feet tall, waiting outside the show, in the rain, with an axe to grind, literally.

Once I spent a month in Stockholm, Sweden. Until then, Sacramento was the furthest I'd ever been away from home and friends. It was exciting, but so lonely as to be almost unbearable. I just walked, day and night, mostly in the streets of the old town, Gamlstå, watching the street musicians play. No conversations with anyone, no human contact at all, just the songs and the sound of foreign words and people passing by.

I was whistling the other day while I flipped the eggs and poured the morning coffee. "What's that?", my roommate John asked, so I told him: A song a band of street musicians played one day in Gamlstå in the summer of '85. Still stuck in my head, goddammit.

"Yeah, that's funny", he said, matter-of-fact. "I thought I'd heard it before!"

My roommates kept pulling rabbits like that out of their hat. "Oh, I didn't mention I used to be a teacher at a girls' school in New Hampshire?", says the bearded sailor guy. "You didn't know I had a two foot mohawk and a fanzine?", says the hippie.

Now it was John's turn. "Stockholm? Summer of '85? Gamlstå? Yeah, I was there at the same time, doing research on the Swedish labor party."

My mouth dropped and instinctively began muttering, "Weird, weird, weird, weird", though, as Sluggo likes to remind me, it's actually not that weird. Our paths don't cross and intersect by chance, but by the choices that we've made.

I went downstairs and went digging through old issues until I found it, a photo of that wonderful band playing on the street. Two girls and two guys, decked out and dancing all around, singing and strumming acoustic instruments and radiating a rare warmth. A love for performing, for each other, and for life itself so strong it swept me out of my shell. In shy Stockholm, nothing else had come close to doing that.

John went upstairs and came back with a pile of cassettes. Captured on tape were those familiar old sounds: footsteps and foreign words, streetcars and falling rain.
Lonely and out of place like me, John had carried a tape recorder and captured the sounds of Stockholm as he walked through it every day. Observing people but never interacting with them, at least not successfully.

Then he found it, on a tape of street musicians. Sure enough, the song I never thought I'd hear again, better even than I remembered.

"But they weren't like the other street musicians," I protested. "I was in Gamla Stan every day and I swear they were only out once. Only for an hour, only playing to fifteen or twenty people at most."

John said, "I know. I was one of those fifteen or twenty people."

I imagined I could hear the sound of my own hands in the applause between songs. John thought he saw the corner of his coat in the corner of my photo. But who knows? We were probably standing shoulder to shoulder.

One day towards the end of my stay in Sweden, a guy chased me down and out of breath and in broken English, explained that he had been trying to catch up to me for three weeks, ever since the day I handed him a fanzine outside Central Station then grunted and ran away.

His name was Dee Dee. We sat eating together at a large lunch counter overlooking the station, keeping an eye out for Mongo, a skinhead who was looking to beat Dee Dee's brains in.

A nice boy, that Dee Dee. Out of a million people I'd passed hoping for a word, a gesture, or a chase, he was one in a million. Foolish not to realize that everyone else was waiting too, for someone else to make the move. To connect different lives and loose ends, and compare stories.

Dee Dee had tracked me down, asking everyone if they had seen the shy American fanzine editor. Finally one couple said they had. Evidently I passed by the licorice shop where they worked—not once but over and over, every day, in my endless trudge through old town.

My ears rang; I was so happy. To be seen by strangers, noticed by people without even knowing it, looked for and remembered.
SUDDENLY I FELT MUCH LESS ALONE. IT’S GOOD TO REMEMBER THAT NOW. HOW JUST PASSING BY, WE TOUCH LIVES THAT WE DON’T EVEN KNOW, AND BECOME PART OF STORIES TOLD BY PEOPLE WE DON’T EVEN KNOW EXIST. THE WAY MONGO IS PART OF MY STOCKHOLM STORY AND HE DOESN’T EVEN KNOW I EXIST. HOPEFULLY.
Add Toner: A Cometbus Collection
Aaron Cometbus

Cometbus magazine turns 30 this July. To coincide with the anniversary of Cometbus, Last Gasp will release Add Toner, a collection of the favorite stories, interviews, and artwork from long out-of-print Cometbus issues. A sequel to Despite Everything, Add Toner includes “Lanky” (a novella) “Back to the Land” (an oral history of the hippie homesteaders’ kids) plus more, including never-before-published material.

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