

Wilderness House Literary Review 6/4

Murray Dunlap

Calder's Big Sexy Fulcrum

Fulcrum:

1. the pivot about which a lever turns
2. something that supports or sustains; prop

This story must begin with I, myself that is, Murray Dunlap, the writer of these words -not to be confused with a metanarrative "I," which would signify another layer of the fiction, even if that writer names himself, first and last name, but intends no such reality other than an enhancement of his intellectual prose- and you, Michael Knight, the reader of these words -not to be confused with the "you" of second person metanarrative in which the writer intends to address an unspecified "you," an all encompassing "you," or even a "narratee," with the hope of drawing his reader into the prose and engage more deeply. No, in this story, "I" will be me, and "you" will be you.

And I, Murray Dunlap, will die at the hands of Cyrus Cotton, who is also me, but not yet I. You don't know Cyrus Cotton, and I don't know him either. Yet. But we, meaning I, the writer -Murray Dunlap, a young writer with less work to his name than he would like- and you, the reader -Michael Knight, my professor, as well as the famously innovative writer whose award winning work is actually published to great acclaim- will get to know him soon enough.

I see that I've lied. I do, in fact, know Cyrus Cotton, but only intuitively. His persona is still forming as we speak, so it isn't possible to "know" him in the traditional sense. Hence, my lie. Cyrus is a character. A Southern writer and artist who has made cameo appearances in my fiction. He has shown distaste for my work, and on occasion, remarked that the writer, his creator, me, is a gigantic fool, and, I should add, not the least bit sexy. Cyrus believes that it is disingenuous for me, the writer, to continue writing about places other than the Southeastern United States. Cyrus claims that I draw on false images when I render parts of the world other than those I have lived in. I have lived in Alabama, Tennessee, Georgia, and Virginia. I have spent a great deal of time in North and South Carolina, as well as Louisiana and Mississippi. As has Cyrus. Cyrus believes I should only write about these places, as he only writes about these places. We've both haunted the same ground.

In a recent story, I wrote Cyrus into Portland Oregon and have not reincarnated his character since. It is my suspicion that Cyrus is angry and resentful of this artistic license. I have spent only two weeks in Portland in my life. As has Cyrus. He tells me that my trees are all wrong, that my landscape is muddled with romanticized ideas about the Pacific Northwest. So I left him there. And I know he's madder than hell.

Lately I've been writing about Gray Noodle, as that is my current residence. Remember: I am Murray Dunlap, the creative writing student at the University of Theoretical Forms. I'm working on a big sexy terminal degree. You, Michael Knight, direct the program. So I've taken to stories about hiking Subconscious Canyon, road trips to Frontal Lobe, and bar hopping Repressed Points. I'm planning a trip to Split Personality, and I'll

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probably write about that too. All of this infuriates Cyrus, of course. He wants to live in the bowels of the humid, water-logged South. He's asked to be written into a story, a central character -no less, in which he will turn from writing to sculpture. He holds a grudge for my making him write. He claims to possess an artistic drive unachievable through the written word. Cyrus longs to sculpt. In the story, he wants imply metaphorical balance through his construction of mobiles. He will revere Alexander Calder. Cyrus will take lessons from a beautiful black woman named Toni Morrison (who will be played by Oprah in the movie) in the abandoned welding room at the Alabama Dry Docks. He says the story will be titled Calder's Big Sexy Fulcrum and that it will win a big sexy contest. At least, that's what Cyrus wants.

I tell you all this only because Cyrus has recently learned some new tricks. In the story in Portland, for instance, he changed his character's home town to Jackson Alabama. I tried to make it Knoxville as a nod to you, my innovative teacher, but somehow Cyrus jumped in between my brain and my fingers, and the letters J-a-c-k-s-o-n A-l-a-b-a-m-a appeared on the page. This very page, in fact. The one I am looking at right now. Although, you, Michael Knight, are reading these pages right now, your 'right now' and my 'right now' are off by many days.

The point is, I've become worried about the power Cyrus holds in my physical being. I am real and he is not. Correct? It is my understanding that only non-fiction characters are real, but even those are only as real as the conjured image. They are mirrors and windows. They are not the essence of the person. They do not live and breathe. But then, I, right now, am printed words on a page, which you, Michael, read as we speak. And if I am printed words on a page, then what makes me, Murray Dunlap, any more real than him, Cyrus Cotton? I see now that I have one more letter in my name. Does that help?

J-a-c-k-s-o-n A-l-a-b-a-m-a.

Perhaps not.

I can feel him in me. Moving around and tingling in my fingertips. He'll win out, of course, as I stated on the first page. No need for that sort of drama. The drama in this kind of story lies not in the 'what' of what will happen, but in the 'how.' It's a good question. How will Cyrus kill me if he is nothing more than a fiction in my head? Does he already know what he'll do? I will kill you soon enough. Ah, he (Cyrus Cotton) has done it (infiltrated my fingers) again. Now here, the words in italics reveal a second, competing narrator. The 'I' in that sentence is Cyrus, who is fictional, as opposed to the 'I' who is me, Murray Dunlap. And the 'you' who had previously been you, Michael Knight, is now suddenly me, the writer, the narrator, the one about to die. Shit.

I will take your gray matter into my hands and sculpt you out. Here again, the 'I' refers to Cyrus and the 'you' refers to me. Frightening, isn't it? The implied 'you' in the last sentence once again refers to you, Michael, and not me, as it had in the italicized sentence which began the paragraph.

Now, it seems that Cyrus has wiggled his way out of Portland and into the present action of my mind. I considered calling it rhyming action, but that might imply a quality of prose I can only aspire to. Clearly, this

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prose does not merit such a description. My prose will not only merit the phrase, but ascend to the magical form attained by you, Michael Knight. My books will also be published and win prestigious awards.

Holy crap. This is spectacularly interesting for two reasons. Not only has Cyrus indicated that he will function outside his role as a fictional character -he states here that he will move into the role of an actual writer of fiction as opposed to a character who writes fiction which doesn't exist- but he has also instigated a dialogue with you, Michael, which is distinctly separate from the dialogue we -meaning I, Murray Dunlap, and you, Michael Knight- are engaged in right now. Furthermore, look at the confident tone of his prose. It's interesting that a character within my own psyche could attain such confidence, when I, the real writer here, can barely muster the ego to type these words. Not sexy. But Cyrus, he doesn't just think he'll rub me out, he knows it.

Damn straight.

Shit.

That said, the issue of how he intends to kill me is still up for grabs. Will he fix me up with a pair of concrete galoshes? Will he give me a Mexican necktie? These clichéd scenarios seem impossible due to logistics. Cyrus has no physical form. He lives in my imagination. Let's "close read" his dialogue for clues: "I will take your gray matter into my hands and sculpt you out." Here, the use of "gray matter" implies a psychological killing. The clever use of the verb "sculpt" compounds the meaning. Cyrus seems to say that he, a character in my fiction, will somehow hijack my brain and maintain control of me -the writer, the very creator, the god of Cyrus- and my physical being for the remainder of my life. If so, will I, Murray Dunlap, then become a character in the prose of Cyrus Cotton? Will you, Michael, one day read a short story in *The Oxford American* wherein I, Murray Dunlap, will puppet across the page, held aloft and made to dance by the strings of Cyrus Cotton? You will dance for me then as I have danced for you. But you will dance at a level of grace I never achieved. Richard, you will delight in the artful movements of Murray Dunlap as he becomes as real to you on the page as he once appeared in life.

Incredible. Even as my very soul is stolen away, I can't help but marvel at the rich complexity of our situation. Cyrus has learned to interrupt my thoughts, pull my levers, and speak, with confidence, directly to you, Michael, the reader of this story. In doing this, Cyrus has already achieved his goal of becoming the actual writer. He hasn't secured permanence, but he has found a window in. Worse still, he has plans for the future. Plans that only include me, the writer, as a bit-part character in his own fiction. A character he might be inclined to punish. This does not bode well.

Bode well? What sort of a hack writer are you? These clichés are simply intolerable. Write with clarity and grace. You'd do well to learn from Michael.

Michael, you write with the hands of an artist. Murray Dunlap writes with the hands of a corpse. I'd ask you to bludgeon the fool with a pick ax if I didn't need his body. I'll admit, it's a strong body. A functional vessel. Did you know he once won the open 400 meter? Alabama State

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Champion. Not that he used it for anything. Never made a dime. Not even a scholarship. He turned them down to avoid the pressure. Sissy. Always running, though. Running from everything. Moves from town to town, moaning about this and that, throwing money away on therapy and booze, and all the while dragging me with him. The trip to Portland, Oregon was bad enough. Two weeks of worry over forest fires. But now this. Gray Noodle? My god this state is insufferable. It has absolutely no character of its own. But the South. Now the South has character. I will move back there soon. I will lock Murray Dunlap into a rusty dog pen behind the barn and throw rocks at him between beatings. You're welcome to come along if you like, you big sexy fiction writer.

Look at this! Cyrus maintained control for an entire thought. Two paragraphs! Well, one and a half. Nonetheless, he stayed in the moment, spoke directly to me, Murray, and you, Richard, and during the latter, managed to fling insults at my personal identity. And hit on you, Michael, but that's his business. Cyrus breeched my memories and used his own interpretation to comment on my choices in life. In the past, he's only been able to criticize my writing ability, as, of course, he lived inside the prose. But this is incredible. Cyrus now wanders my brain as if it were a library. And the hatred! My own creation, Cyrus, hates me, the writer, with the furious passion of a woman scorned. He...

Woman scorned? That's it. You're finished, Murray. I can't let another line of clichéd garbage touch the page. I've learned to stay in the moment, maintain control, and you, Murray Dunlap, I pronounce dead.

Fascinating. Cyrus has killed me. He has taken the nonmimetic concept of character and...

Seriously, you're dead.

But I'd like to comment on the literary implications of...

Nope. It's over.

But a sexy authorial commentary might...

Dead.

At last. Perfect control. I, Cyrus Cotton, Southern sculptor and sometimes writer, fictional character turned living man, own this vehicle – mind and body.

First thing, I'll move to Alabama. I'll use this tired face to convince the Dunlap family I'm in desperate need. I'll weasel my way in the door with a pitiful smile. I'll play along with old conversations. I'll laugh on cue. But soon enough, I'll take the family's house, ship them off to nursing care from an excess of 'love' in my heart. I'll raise dogs and buy a fishing boat. I'll convert the abandoned cottage into my studio. I'll write and sculpt. I'll tell the Dunlap's that Cotton is my pen name. I'll create a world of my own.

My stories will find homes in The New Yorker and The Oxford American and my sculptures will hang by thin wires from the ceilings of the MOMA and Tate. But I, Cyrus Cotton, will remain reclusive in the South. I'll encircle the property in barbed wire. I'll nail Keep Out! signs to the dock. Mastiffs and Boxers will lumber across the lawn, growling in deep-

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throated rumbles. Security cameras will monitor the grounds day and night. From a windowless room, I'll eye video screens cutting from doors to gates, from the road to the water. I'll know you're coming before you know you've arrived. I'll ship out my work by paid messenger at night. My public will wonder if I am real, if I exist. They will wonder if I am Thomas Pynchon, or if Pynchon is me. They'll wonder if you, Michael Knight, penned Pynchon until bored, then invented Cotton as reprieve. I'll be investigated and scrutinized, I'll be mythologized into a god.

I am a god, of course. I created this world, did I not? I am creating even as we speak. I create a version of you, Michael, as I invent this dialogue. Your persona within these pages is a sexy invention of my own. And just as I've created you, I'll create the devil, Murray Dunlap, locked in a cage. Rise from the dead, Murray. Your peace unsettles me. I command you to awaken and feel my wrath.

I open my mouth, the nightmare cuts short, and I regain my voice. The dim light of a desk lamp pools at my hand. The cursor blinks on the computer screen in rhythm with my heart. I sit upright, lift my arms above my head and shake loose the ache from my bones. I type out a few last pages. The words materialize one by one, stretching into sentences. The lines speak to you, Michael, and attempt to speak for themselves. The writer no longer comments on the voice. The metafiction slinks into the background. The story takes on simple, straightforward prose.

Toni Morrison works out of the old welding room at the abandoned dry docks. She bought tanks of gas for the oxy-acetylene torch and scavenges scrap metal from the yard. The welding room is the size of a gymnasium. Years ago, the room would have been filled with men on task. But now, pipes, sheet metal, and trash rise up in stacks twenty feet high. A propeller the size of a Ferris wheel leans against the east wall. Toni has cleared narrow pathways through the scrap, not unlike aisles in a library. All paths lead to the center of the room. Blue light and white sparks shimmer and pulse. Toni arches over her work, practiced and meticulous, with white, black, and gunmetal gray hair pulled back in dreadlocks behind the welder's faceshield. She melts a filler rod into one side of a corner joint, forming a pool of searing liquid. With leather gloves, she presses the second half of the joint into molten steel. Sparks bounce from her leather apron. She works the new metal into the old, mixing elements, swirling molecules into woven bonds. The joint glows red, then orange, then gray. The seam cools and hardens. The two scraps of metal have become one—perhaps an elbow or knee cap—in a fashion as natural as ice freezing between blades of grass.

Cyrus Cotton steps into the welding room and stops. He rubs his eyes, unable to see, and drops his book-bag to the ground. He smells chemicals and electrical burn. Three columns of light fall from holes in the ceiling.

No. No, I don't. This isn't the way it goes.

A clang of metal on metal reports from the center of the room, and Cyrus begins to pick his way along the path. Mice and lizards dart out of sight. Cockroaches rustle unseen. As he nears the center of the room, Cyrus pulls a twenty-dollar bill from his wallet and rolls it into the palm of his hand.

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"Toni Morrison?" he asks. "Ms. Morrison?"

Don't put words in my mouth.

"Of course." Toni lifts her facemask. Her hyper-articulate voice commands attention.

"I've come for a lesson. Murray Dunlap sent me."

Please stop.

"Dunlap. All right then." She cuts off the gas to the torch. "Do you have money?"

"Twenty."

"It's twenty-five now."

Cyrus draws another bill from his wallet. He folds it against the twenty and places both on the table.

"What brings you, child?" she asks.

This is not sexy.

"I'd like to learn to sculpt."

"Be specific."

"I'd like to build a mobile," Cyrus says. "Like Calder."

I would never say that.

"Hmmm." Toni takes the welding mask off her head and sets it on the table. She removes the leather gloves.

"Do you know Calder?" he asks.

"Boy." Toni stares down the length of her father's beautiful nose. Alexander Calder, a welder himself, taught Toni the strength of a perfectly welded seam. "I know Calder."

"Sorry," he says.

Damn you! Stop putting words in my mouth.

"The question is, do you know Calder," she says. "And I don't want to hear a single word of what you read in some coffee table art book."

"Well." Cyrus picks at the edge of the table. The tip of his index finger turns black with soot.

"Let me put it this way. When I ask do you know Calder, what I'm really asking is do you know balance?"

"I think, I mean. Balance. Yes. Well, I know both sides of a thing need equal weight in order to balance. Or if you mean a painting, I think it means the way the components work together."

Shit. What have you done to me?

"Dear Lord." Toni dips her hand into the bib of her overalls for a gray metal sparker. "Dunlap sent you? Really?"

She puts on her gloves. She twists on the gas.

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"Yes maam."

"What I do here is more than sculpture. I'm trying to look at something without blinking, to see what it was like, or it could have been like, and how that had something to do with the way we live now. I step outside myself to familiarize the strange and mystify the familiar. At times, I become another person."

Toni Morrison pulls the welding mask back down over her face and squeezes the sparker with one quick motion. She ignites the torch.

"Does this interest you?"

Very, very much.

"All right then," Toni says, easing the flame against metal. "Let's get started."

Who's sexy now?