

Wilderness House Literary Review 16/2

Joe Grantham
Sunflowers

Millie Verbeck stood in her house robe behind the screen door, hands on her hips watching her husband, Mack, roll the garbage barrel down the driveway to the street.

"Mac," she hollered through the screen, "you left the record on again!"

He either didn't hear her or ignored her; she was not sure. One thing Millie did know for sure was that in a few days she'd be out of town visiting her grandmother. She looked forward to getting a break from this racket.

Why he put this music on early in the morning was beyond her. She turned and went over to the stereo. She decided she'd take the record off herself, but she couldn't find the album jacket. Millie looked down at the record and tried to read the label as it spun around on the turntable. Her head went in circles as if she were following the flight of a drunk bumble bee. Who the hell is Puccini, she thought, and why does Mack like this stuff? She abandoned Puccini for the shower.

Mack Verbeck stood at the curb, his hand resting on his garbage barrel. The mid-July sun was just now rising above the city's skyline behind him. It was eighty-five degrees, humid, and getting hotter by the minute. Mack watched the truck chug up the hill making intermittent stops at every other house.

A man leapt off the back of the truck before it stopped in front of Mack's place. He walked toward Mack's barrel. The driver jammed the truck into park, climbed out of the cab, limped over to Mack's neighbors, the Bidnicks.

"Morning," Mack called out.

"Morning," the man said as he grabbed Mack's barrel.

Mack checked the name embroidered below the Deffenbaugh patch on the man's overalls.

"Gonna be another hot one," Mack said.

"You got that right, brother," the man said and rolled the barrel hand over hand away from the curb. At the back of the truck, he hoisted the barrel in one fluid motion, dumped its contents, then pulled a lever that crunched and chewed Mack's garbage like a grumbling mechanical dinosaur.

The man slammed the barrel down in the street with a boom, tilted it, rolled it one-handed on its bottom edge as if he were casually turning a steering wheel, and parked it at the curb next to Mack's feet.

"Say, Warren, what's your favorite beer?" Mack said.

The garbage man squinted against the sun behind Mack, shot a quick glance down at the name on his overalls. He gripped the barrel with both hands, leaned on it, and blew two cheeks of air past pursed lips.

"Well, let's see," he said. "Who's buying?"

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"That would be me," Mack said.

"In that case," the man said pulling a forearm across his sweaty brow, "I'm rather partial to Michelob.

"Michelob it is," Mack said.

"And so?"

"So, I got this project. Gonna be some extra material won't fit in there." Mack nodded at his barrel. "Case of Michelob if you can help me out."

The man sucked his teeth, turned his head and spat into the street. "Sure, we can help you out."

"Deal," Mack said and stuck out his hand.

"Deal."

The two men shook on it.

"Hey, Archie, let's get a move on. Got to be in Armourdale in an hour," the driver yelled as he climbed into the cab and put the truck into gear.

Mack gave Archie a quizzical look.

Archie grabbed a handle on the back of the truck as it pulled away and swung himself aboard. "Borrowed," he said.

Mack wondered why Archie hadn't corrected him earlier and yelled back, "Mack," as he thumbed himself in the chest.

"Michelob Mack," Archie hollered over his shoulder. He stuck a hand in the air as the truck crested the hill and continued its route.



A week later Mack and Bill Tomc sat at the Strawberry Hill Buffet which was not actually a buffet at all, but rather a makeshift tavern connected to the parish bowling alley in the basement of St. John's Catholic church. The Croatian parish spread atop the 4th Street hill overlooking the convergence of the Kansas and Missouri rivers.

"Let me get this straight," Tomc said. "You cut the whole thing up?"

"Everything but the drum," Mack said. "Top loader."

Tomc looked at his friend's reflection in the mirror behind the bar, searched his face for signs of bullshit. He was struck again by the size of Mack's forearms and biceps, his shoulders, the thickness of his wrists. Once in high school he witnessed Tomc climb two flights of stairs on his hands. If anybody could do it, it was Mack Verbeck. If anybody *would* do it, it was Mack Verbeck.

"Been promising Millie a new washer for weeks. Got her one on eBay. Frank Kaifes helped me install it. Of course, I had to get rid of the old one."

"So, you cut it into pieces?"

"That's what I been telling you. With these." Mack pulled a pair of stainless-steel snips from his back pocket and slapped them on the bar. "Cheaper than having it hauled off or taking it to the dump."

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Tomc leaned sideways, his elbow on the bar, and eyed his best friend since fourth grade at St. John's. "You been holding them snips all night," Tomc said and took a long pull on his beer.

Mack grinned. "Took me all day and a six pack of these." He picked at the label on his bottle. "And my Deffenbaugh guy hauled it away for a case of Michelob."

"He take the drum too?"

"No, goddamnit, not the drum. I told you. I'm saving that."

"Saving it? For what?"

"Making it planter for Millie. I already painted it. Royal blue."

"What are you going to put in it?"

"I don't know. Maybe flowers. Millie loves flowers."

"If she lets you keep that thing, I'll buy *you* a case of Michelob."

"You're on," Mack said. They clinked their bottles.

Just then a roar erupted from the bowling alley behind them. Mack and Tomc swiveled around on their bar stools, surveyed the commotion. A crowd had surrounded a bowler on lane five. They were slapping him on the back and mussing up his hair.

"Looks like Kaifes is at it again," Mack said.

"The Dogpatch Demon."

"Must've bowled another perfect game," Mack said.

"Sonofabitch should get on the tour."

"You need a sponsor to make any real money at that."

"Couldn't he get one?"

"Lacks desire. Besides, his uncle got him a sweet deal with the plumber's union."

"Here he comes," Tomc said.

"Let's buy him a beer."

"Like he needs one."



Mack, Tomc, and Kaifes sat in Mack's backyard in aluminum lawn chairs with frayed webbing. The cicada song was winding down as lightning bugs came out. They drank from bottles of Busch and stared at Mack's blue washing machine drum.

"How'd Millie take to the planter idea," Tomc said.

Mack gave the drum a forlorn look and said, "Told me it better be gone by the time she gets back."

"Where'd she go?" Kaifes said.

"Down to La Cygne to see her grandmother," Mack sighed.

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"You paint those sunflowers yourself, Mack?" Tomc asked marveling at the detail of each flower as they made a band around the center of the drum.

"Thought she'd like them. Took me longer to paint them flowers than it did to cut up the whole washing machine."

"You did a fine job. I had no idea you had artistic talent," Tomc said.

"A lot of things you don't know about me."

"Really? Such as?" Tomc said.

"Well," Mack reflected on the question. He thought about aspects of his life he had kept secret. How he always wanted to open his own bar-beque joint. How he was terrified of flying. How skeptical he was of bringing children into the world. Then it occurred to Mack that there were probably things he didn't know about Tomc or Kaifes either. "Such as, I enjoy listening to opera."

"Opera?" Tomc wondered.

"It's an acquired taste."

"Name one opera singer," Tomc said.

"Pavarotti."

"Shit, everybody knows Pavarotti. Name a composer."

"Beethoven," Kaifes said pushing himself out of the creaky lawn chair. He walked over to the freshly painted drum for a closer look.

"I wasn't asking you," Tomc said.

"Actually, I think Beethoven only wrote one opera," Mack said. "How about Tchaikovsky, Verde, Puccini."

Tomc stared at Mack, shook his head. "When did you ..."

"Bought a box of records at a garage sale recently. You can borrow them if you like."

"No thanks. Who the hell even has a turntable anymore?"

"La donnè mobile, qual piuma al vento, muta d'accento, e di pensiero," Kaifes crooned in his modest tenor voice.

Tomc's head turned slowly, like an owl and gawked at Kaifes. Mack smiled.

"What?" Kaifes shrugged his shoulders. "Mack lent some records."

"Jesus, you think you know a person," Tomc said.

"People can surprise you sometimes," Mack said.

"I guess so. Millie like opera?" Tomc wondered.

"Hates it," Mack sighed. "She says the music is too sad. I can't play the records when she's in the house."

"Bet you could grow tomatoes in here," Kaifes said looking down into the drum.

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"That's what I told him," Tomc said.

"I thought maybe flowers, but that ain't happening now."

"You could have your Deffenbaugh guy take it," Tomc suggested.

"Don't want to hit him up a second time so soon."

"Let's put it in your truck, haul it down to the river, and dump it," Kaifes offered. "I know a good place."

"Tomatoes *would* look pretty good growing out of it," Tomc said and ran a hand through his thinning hair.

Mack eyed Tomc out of the corner of his eye, got an idea.

"Too late to plant now," Mack said.

"Always next year," Tomc said.

"You're right," Mack said. "Always next year."

The men were quiet for a while. Kaifes lit a smoke, snapped his lighter shut. The lighting bugs had multiplied. A dog barked a couple of blocks away responding to the explosion of leftover fireworks.



The following Sunday Mack answered his phone. Bill Tomc was on the other end.

"Mack?"

"Bill, what's up?"

"Mack, I am looking out at my driveway."

"You are?"

"Yes. Guess what I see."

"I have no idea."

"Take a wild guess."

"It's not blue is it?"

"Hell, yes, it's blue."

"Got sunflowers on it?"

"You know damn well it does."

"I give up, Bill. What're you looking at?"

"Goddamnit, Mack! Get over here and get this thing."

"What about them tomatoes?"

"Them what?"

"Tomatoes."

The word froze Tomc for a second. He loved tomatoes, his favorite vegetable. Or were they a fruit? He could never remember. At this moment a '66 Valiant rolled to a stop in front of Tomc's house. "Mack, I gotta go. Kaifes just pulled up. I'll be here all afternoon. See you later." They hung up.

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Tomc opened his front door just as Kaifes was about knock.

"Morning, Bill."

"Morning, Frank."

"I was driving by when I saw the drum. When did you get it?"

"Good question. Funny thing is, it wasn't there last night when I got home from the Buffet. At least I didn't see it then."

"You keeping it?" Kaifes wondered.

"Keeping it?" Tomc looked past Kaifes' shoulder at the blue drum with its pretty sunflowers.

"I was thinking if you didn't want it, I'd take it," Kaifes said.

The word tomatoes came back to Tomc. He pictured Beef steaks, Brandywines, or Early Girls sprouting out of the blue drum.

"Yeah, I'm keeping it." Tomc relaxed, leaned against the door jamb. "Figure I'll plant tomatoes in it next spring."

"Good idea." Kaifes nodded. "That's what I would do."

"Nothing like home grown tomatoes," Tomc said.

"Nothing better," Kaifes said.

"That Verbeck is a sneaky one."

"Indeed, he is. Got warm povitica from Yurchak's," Kaifes held up a bag.

"Yurchak's?"

"Only the best," Kaifes said.

"How long was the line?"

"I replaced old man Yurchak's garbage disposal and toilet last winter. Haven't waited in line since."

"Come in, Frank. I'll make us some coffee." Tomc held open the door for Kaifes.



A few blocks away, Mack lifted the dust cover to his turntable. His slid a record from its jacket, placed it on the turntable, and carefully set the needle down onto *La Bohème*. He stood for a moment with his eyes closed and listened. Millie wouldn't be home until later that afternoon. The phone rang. Mack smiled and ignored it.