

A Tender Button

by John Olson

He looked at a man in a straw hat on YouTube and thought “that could've been me, if I'd learned to play the guitar.” He savored the wistfulness of the moment. The pluperfect always made him sad. But the conditional was almost too much to bear. Octopi were a charming puzzle. How did they slither around like that? No bones to impede their progress. The buoyancy of water. He could see a rattlesnake playing a guitar. That'd make a righteous tattoo. A creature with no arms wrapped around a Fender Strat with a maple fingerboard on his right arm. Or left. The left would be good. The arm he liked to use to roll a window down. Reach for a TV remote. Press a flyer to a telephone pole while stapling it with his right. There's nothing that a thought cannot do. Of course, thoughts don't really do anything. They create moods. Problems. Dramas. Resentments. Coordinates for travel. Wool caps for the head. Philosophical arguments to keep the brain warm. There's a million things that a thought cannot undo. Undoing is harder than doing. No thought can unmake a past mistake. It can just grill it. Listen to it sizzle. The meat of another remorseful morsel turning red over the coals of a glowing rumination.

When, exactly, did we lose the world, he thought. This was a big but empty thought. It was largely rhetorical. It had no answer. The story of Adam and Eve was compelling, but ultimately unbelievable. Unless taken in its truer sense, as a metaphor. Did we lose the world when science separated our minds from our bodies, or when topiary emerged in the gardens of Versailles? Were ExxonMobil and Coca Cola the ultimate seals of our division from all that was holy and sublime?

His parents had named him Wisconsin. He didn't know why. They'd never been to Wisconsin. They lived in Vermont. He slept in a room with curtains displaying nineteenth century men and women collecting sap from trees. The story went that he was conceived when his parents were high on LSD. He could see no relation

between LSD and Wisconsin. What's in a name? Syllables. Sounds. Cows and cheese.

He lived in Anchorage and sold buttons. Glitter buttons, printed buttons, novelty buttons, holiday buttons, golf ball buttons, money buttons, tender buttons, angel buttons, skull buttons, Mona Lisa buttons, sheet music buttons, airplane buttons, butterfly buttons, scrimshaw buttons, two-hole polka-dotted striped buttons.

He liked the obscurity of the coffeehouse next door. He liked being lazy. He liked selling buttons. He liked staring into aquariums, sunlight diffusing in the transparency of a fin. Dreamy. He held the cry within. It wanted to come out. All the time. This cry. This shout. This plea for mercy. This limestone bee opening its memory of flowers in his mind. A button. A simple button. A world in ivory. Fishing nets in the mist. Wisconsin. Maybe one day he'd go to Wisconsin. A place of hills and lakes. Peaceful. Like a button. A tender button.

