

Yard Man

by Tantra Bensko

The leaves were already falling, brown and crisp, no colors at all due to the drought. The sadness of summer going away was not mitigated by reds and yellows. There was no pretending anything but winter, later, stark and cold.

A thin man with a tall, tall hat came to the door selling yard hats, and yard triangles, yard purses, yard sticks, and yard gnomes. He had them all with him in a bag he carried behind him on the ground, dragging it, and sweating, but keeping a bounce to his step, even small steps to move around in front of my door. "I notice your yard, Sir" he said, "needs something to make up for this brown, doesn't it? Something different to liven it up. Sell you any of these?"

And he took out one of each of what he carried, and arranged it on my porch, so quickly it seemed as if they were suddenly just all there, with no linearity or chronology at all. They were spread out on my porch, at nice angles to each other as if they fit together, with caulking in between gone invisible.

I had never thought much about any of these things before, much less how they went together to form a whole, how they fit with my yard, how my porch had developed a more recursive connection with my life, how yard triangles related to the color brown, or how I was supposed to react in a situation like this.

The man looked sort of bug-like, his mouth sunken in with a lot of wrinkled lines going to it, like arrows pointing to his mouth, saying--*food goes in here! Put more food here!* He opened his mouth to speak, and my attention was on what that did to the arrows. I had to think back on it and remember what he said.

“I'll give you a special deal if you buy one of each.” His mouth stopped talking. The arrows moved around, as he chewed a bit on subconscious anxiety, his jaw moving back and forth. He swallowed, awkwardly, and the arrows became more adamant about how they were talking about the Inside of his mouth. *Down in There!*

I waited to see what he would say next, as I wanted to see if I could see any teeth. Silence. I realized I should say something. ““Uh.”

“You'd be the first on in the area to have them all, and everyone is thinking about whether they should do it himself, imagining it, but maybe not able to afford it, or not bold enough, too shy for such a brilliant display in public. But you, you could be the one that really does it, and they'd look to you as a leader, the bold innovator ready to move with a new trend, however new and rare.”

No, no teeth at all. And, really, not much of a tongue either, or redness or wetness but a kind of emptiness instead. A darkness, dryness, unformedness. From which words erupted like lava, but without much explanation of how they could occur. It seemed there should be more tongue, so I stared more, getting closer, and disguising my interest as being personable and caring about the yard triangle.

“I once sold yards themselves, so people would trade yards with their neighbors, or build up second levels of their yards on stilts, or make yards on their roofs. When that business became too complicated for taxes and insurance, all that was left was this residue.” He looked down with a waft of forlornness.

I looked closer into his mouth, nothing. Nothing at all, really. I couldn't even see gums. It was like looking into dark matter, or the space between all the atoms. They say we are mostly made of space. Well, maybe he was really owning that.

I was feeling a little more space in my brain. A little more dark, and meditative. A little more complacent. A yard seemed like a very good thing to have two of.

“Did you ever do any triple deckers?”

He lit up. His eyes sparkled with glee. The arrows disappeared. “Yes! I worked on one for the mayor. You haven't lived here long, have you?”

“No, I just moved in recently.”

“Because, otherwise, you'd probably have heard about it. This was awhile back. He had parties regularly on the different levels, with themes for each one, used props, and great music that mixed together yard to yard, great winding stairways that connected the yards through their centers, and here and there in unexpected places, had servers on each level in different types of costumes, like different worlds.”

I expressed my utter astonishment and admiration. I truly wished I were at one of those parties. “I once was invited to one of his parties where everyone was dressed according to different countries. The top level was Turkey, the next level Hong Kong, and the lowest level Tibet. You would wear different layers of clothing and take them off or put them on according to which level you wanted to go to at the moment. Everyone looked fat except in Tibet.”

I felt myself losing my memory of what those places looked like, other than imagining them as yards. I felt myself losing a little memory of what I looked like, except in relationship to my yard. Browning, turning too crisp and dry, approaching winter. In need of a yard hat to keep the sun off to retain some youth.

He swallowed. He looked more fed. I got a little closer to the nothingness of his mouth, marveling over how there could be nothing inside of something without destroying it, pulling it in like a black hole. And then, the event horizon in which all the rules went wonky, and then, the singularity, the wormhole, and then the white hole on the other side, spewing everything out but different.

I forgot what we were talking about. I felt as if I were a yard, many levels high, with countries floating through me, different cuisines, which I wanted to offer this poor malnourished man. "Would you like something to eat?" I asked.

"No need, he said." He smiled, gratefully, kindly.

"Can you tell me more about the parties?"

"No, it's easier to show you." He started acting it out quite realistically, being all the characters, speaking for them, speaking with many voices at once, as you would hear at a party, mingling and schmoozing, bumping into each other after too many drinks, throwing up in the back, laughing too loudly, taking off clothes and putting them back on. Winking, everything but eating. I was astonished. I didn't remember seeing anything like that before. I didn't remember much at all about anything much right then.

"Yard triangle? Yard purse? Yard gnome?" The gnome looked like my ex wife. I stared at it. He took out another. It looked like my dead dog. He took out a third, smaller one, from his bag. It looked like my kindergarten teacher. I looked up.

The leaves in my yard were falling down at a faster rate, and becoming a brown layer on my once greenish grass. His clothes were brown. I was feeling brown. The yard stick and yard triangle were brown. I sat down. "Have a seat," I said, pointing to the other chair on my porch. He sat, very much like a little bird in a children's

story, straight backed, light, on the edge of the seat and bent a bit forward, making a clackety sound that may have been bones.

He acted out the party some more, with the sitting scenes. People sitting on each other's laps, nuzzling, everything but drinking the wine, the cocktails. He yawned. Big and wide and long. With that mouth of nothingness. I peered inside.

And I stared at the black hole, the singularity where the glottis should be. I sweated, as I became afraid. I felt the contagion of a yawn coming on. He looked startled, his eyes sharply focused, leaning back in his chair momentarily.

I felt something was wrong. Or very right. I felt winter coming on.

I yawned too. And went through the singularity in the center of the black hole, and out the other side. Everything was white, covered in snow. My yard hadn't been raked, and the snow made lumps and wind drifts over them, instead of the usual flat, civilized, fit -in- with -the -neighbors I'd expect to see. Gnomes were everywhere in my yard, looking like everything I had forgotten. But changed, somehow, and covered in white.

