

Smittie's Flight

I can't tell you what Smittie was drinking the day he found he could fly. Usually, he put away ten to twelve beers by that hour--it was sunset, and the horizon glowed a viscous, incandescent orange. It was beautiful. Smittie showed no effects whatsoever, not even his idiosyncratic clumsiness, by which he often pocketed expensive, non-digital wristwatches of chattering passers-by, and claimed surprise at their eventual discovery, disgust if they were digital. But not that day.

In all appearances, he was a sober Smittie, if a drunken someone else. For days he had been hashing out abstruse theories about identity, claiming to know who he was so deeply as to lose all intelligent analytical powers about the matter. For which nimble act of escape, I awarded him an honorary Nobel Prize, begging for a speech about sophistry. He waved his arm at me. That's the whole thing began. Because soon, in direct contradiction of the current laws of physics and the common sense of my skeptical visual powers, he waved hard enough to perch delicately on only the ball of his opposite foot, the rest of him airborne.

He balanced on the foot, staring blankly at the lower sky, his attention still focused on the same inexpressible mystery for which he was waving at me in the first place.

I'm not taking credit, you understand, but there I was, distracting the baby bird. I could see that his chin was jutting slightly, as if testing the wind. So too his nostrils flared for deep inhalations. I remember noting, it's the truth, how delicate his bones appeared to me. In fact, his ribs poked through his tight, stained pocket t-shirt terribly, like dark fingers, or fossils in slate.

But that day yielded nothing more. It was hardly a preview, as no one thought to think anything, except maybe that Smittie needed more drink and a possible lobotomy. I handed him a beer and he giggled at the offer, accepting it with a clear disengagement from his abstract thoughts, even drooling and giggling, as if in both his mind and the world a door was now open, but open on the restriction that he pass through it some other time. He sat beside me on the steps and chirped after burping.

That other time for passing through the open door arrived the next night, while Lester and I were playing cards with a deck so old the wrinkles could not be ignored for easy cheating. I was dropping the queen of hearts when Smittie glided up, bowing serenely at the knees and maintaining a powerful eye contact. Eventually he glanced at the cards. . .