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On Ugliness (July 20, 2010. Issue 19.)

I am, at this writing, looking over a spider's corpse, the little thing having spooked me into murder. It hurried across my papers at an alarming speed for so small a creature and then halted suddenly when I flinched and pushed my chair back from the desk. At this the miniature monster reared himself aloft, his front legs and chelicerae raised and ready for attack, his size strangely exaggerated. "This is *ugly*," I gasped to no one in particular.

I've heard that spiders have thousands of eyes so it's no wonder that the thing supposed me threatening. Heck, I was threatening, whether I was one or a thousand. I reached for my newspaper and, foregoing reflection, swatted the brittle beast over and over until its yellow guts, an oozy snot-like substance, spattered all over an otherwise unblemished copy of Charles Frazier's *Cold Mountain*. "Ugh," I sighed, relieved and rubbing my sticky hands together, "*that was ugly*."



Sometimes I short-circuit reflection, especially when, as then, an unusual thing startles me or otherwise makes me want to *tell* somebody something. What do I mean? I'm not sure exactly. I think I mean to say I'm a talker. It's a terrible habit, this talking. And a nervous one too. Although Freud might disagree, today's psychologists suggest that babble is a sign of egomania or a warped sense of prerogative. Folks back home simply refer to this as "diarrhea of the mouth."

What a yucky, demented feeling I get when at dinner parties people glance around the room while I'm

talking to them. They're hoping, I know, that somebody will pass by and relieve them of their duties. "Oh, say, have you met Jonathan?" they'll interject, grabbing poor Jonathan by the arm and stationing him in front of me. "Jonathan also went to law school. Y'all have something in common."

I might have been relating the story of my religious conversion or of my struggle with cancer but my now-retreating listener wouldn't even know. Why? Because I've chattered him out of caring. Now I'm standing there staring at an obviously uncomfortable Jonathan whose eyes scan the room for the nearest and next substitute. He seems ugly to me, and I to him.

I used to enjoy social intercourse. Without much effort I could swap thoughts and information with people. At some point, though, I grew boring. My interests—literature, history, philosophy—didn't interest anyone else. I'm told that a good conversationalist seeks out mutual associations with others, balancing what he has to say with what others have to say. Having few things in common with others and even fewer reasons to bond, I tend to either criticize or gossip.

I'm loud and ugly, although not when I'm apart from humanity. I'm quiet then, and peaceful. Is it really so difficult to sit, silent, and to contemplate with lively joy the joys we cannot share? I've tried to train myself into silence. Often I've succeeded. But the minute a person materializes I'm like a hee-hawing donkey. I grow ugly—ugly looking and ugly acting. I speak and speak and cannot stop.

I'm different when I walk and wander and wonder in nature. I take to the woods and trails alone. Rather than speak I listen: to the loud, long rattles of the woodpecker—*chrr, chrr, chrr*—and to the nasal calls of the chickadee—*so-fee, so-fay, dee-day-dee*. I listen to the rush of water in the river and think of the salmon and trout and their endless struggle against the southward currents and also of the fly-fishermen, all very old now, who frequent these secluded spaces as would young boys.

Some fifteen minutes from my house the trails begin. Choked with dirt and dust, they wind northwest and terminate at a quiet cathedral of longleaf pines at the base of a small mountain, the name of which I've never bothered to learn. At this spot a prudent stroller would turn around, what with the dense foliage. But I always chance the elements for thirty-minutes or so, straying off course to where no one, save, perhaps, a ranger, could find me. I seem to remember coming here as a child, though I couldn't say why or with whom. I seem to remember a cemetery, too, with quaint wooden gravestones, but if such things existed they've rotted away, or else I've imagined them, perhaps in a dream. Not infrequently the trees in these parts begin to shudder as if annoyed or worried at my presence. On their branches some birds, watching me stumble through briars and brush, huddle in committee and chirp quietly among themselves. "Go, go, go," the wind seems to whisper or whistle. And sometimes I answer, "No, no, no."

Nature is that liminal space between heaven and here. Maybe it's reflection, maybe it's liberation, but something about a walk through these trails makes me feel beautiful.

What is reflection if not a welcome inconvenience? It forces you to stop when everything about America tells you to go. Lately I was driving to a job interview with a fancy Atlanta law firm, which I knew didn't want to hire me, when an unexpected breeze swept in with a familiar fragrance: not perfume but something like it—only better. The whiff of freshly cut grass. It's strange how smells allow you to traverse space and time. Me, I travel back to my university campus and more specifically to the quad, a green and gray geometry of benches and sidewalks bristling with students frittering away their afternoons with talk of fraternities and professors and recent sexual exploits. Or perhaps this exercise in transposition leads to my front lawn in Marietta, Georgia, where I'm young again and holding a baseball bat and taking pitches from my father, a man who never aged a day in his life and whose love for the outdoors somehow went away when the rich folks—Yankees mostly—migrated to town. These folks bought up all of the local farmland and little quaint stores, urged retail and restaurant chains upon us, and informed us, quite happily, that we were now better off.

And they were right: we *were* better off. Things were cheaper. Faster. More convenient. But there was an ancient suspicion, still with us at that time and place, that money was the root of all evil, as the Good Book says, and that humans were depraved by nature and not to be trusted with riches or power or even fast-food. Our capital was mostly emotional and intellectual because we didn't have cash or luxury. Cash and luxury came later—when I was a teenager—and then went away fast.

Teenagers are ugly. They'll never be more beautiful than they are at present, and therefore they are ugly.



Their bodies, once beyond that pubescent stage, are firmer and faster than ever. You'll hear people say it all the time: "He's becoming a man." And this is supposed to be a good thing? Do they mean that he, whoever he is, is growing a pot-belly and gray hair and having back aches? Of course not. So why do they say "he's becoming a man" when really they mean "he's a healthy young boy and I hope he stays that way for a long time." Very rarely do they mean "he's becoming one of us," unless, of course, the boy is already so ugly that his only chance, for want of a better word, is in adulthood. No, what they mean is that they're sad and envious: they can't be young again, can't enjoy the body in its fullest, freshest capacity.

When I say teenagers are ugly, I don't mean this boy who is becoming one of us, who already is, more or less, one of us. I mean ugly in a broader sense. I mean mood-swingin', attitude-gettin', middle-finger-flippin' ugliness. Here I must mention the teenager I saw last month. He was crossing a swell of grassy ground en route, I suppose, to the local high school, when he looked at me and began laughing. I hadn't provoked this outburst, so I didn't (and don't) know what he was laughing at. His jeans hung so low on his waist—or, rather, his legs—that I myself had a laugh at the sideways smile of his rear-end. Sadly, though, he'll be on a "who's who" list in the coming weeks and I'll be on a "who's that?" list, if I'm on a list at all.

At any rate, this teenager was probably laughing at my Roman nose. I used to joke about my nose until one spring, while vacationing in Mexico and wading in the wet bar waters, when a squawking bird swooped down from a palm tree, clamping my nose in his claws, apparently mistaking his target for a loaf of bread. After this I decided my nose wasn't funny so much as grotesque. It's possible that this bird wanted to perch there, on the tip of my protuberance, to survey other tables for abandoned cheeseburgers and nachos. His purpose notwithstanding, I felt rather silly when my nose began to bleed. "Don't get blood in the pool," was all that the man sitting next to me said before walking away. He, too, was embarrassed—and for himself, not me.

Even after that experience I didn't realize how ugly I'd become. It took a restroom mishap for me to truly understand. I had what in polite parlance is called an "emergency" at the Atlanta airport. Pushing through crowds and skipping over lines I made it just in time. I settled into a handicap unit because all of the "regular" units were taken. Then, suddenly, the door, unlocked, somehow floated open—slowly—and I sat there staring at a room full of strangers who stared back at me. When you're installed in a handicap unit, which is much bigger than other units, you can't reach the door handle, no matter the length of your arm. So, panicked, and with people looking on, I stood up, waddled to the door, and closed it with a loud thud. In my hurry I neglected to pull up my jeans and boxers, still loosed around my ankles. Everyone saw, well, too much. And all of this after one guy—perhaps sympathizing with me or perhaps just disgusted—offered to shut the door *for* me. When I got to the loading ramp to board the plane, I slipped and fell on the wet floor. It had rained all night before and apparently nobody bothered to dry the area. I heard someone behind me whisper, "That's the guy from the bathroom." And I knew then that I was *very* ugly.

After the encounter with this vile and nasty spider, now a corpse rotting on my desk, something doesn't seem right. I feel guilty. As if I've done something wrong. I had never, not even for a moment, intended to take a life, but merely to rid myself of an awful visitor. This spider, pitiful sight, as the minutes since his murder pass, becomes to me more like a monument than a mush-pile. For in his final moments he managed to arrange himself into a claw-like position, palm up to the sky. He looks like the statue of a hand. You should see him. He's beautiful. And because of my ugliness. Maybe we should all go out like this spider: quickly and without knowing it. No more ugliness or constant chatter. Just sudden peace and silence. How very, very beautiful. Imagine: somewhere, underground, we'll be like the statue of a hand, palm up to the sky—then after a few years, nothing at all.

The Legendary

