

The Oval

Volume 4 | Issue 1

Article 4

2011

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Recommended Citation

Hassler, Matt (2011) "Ophus Bloom," *The Oval*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

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Matt Hassler

 Ophus Bloom 

When a girl named Caroline has her hands around your throat, you learn a little something about love. You learn about the fragility of an eleven year old throat, and how lilacs smell, even after they've been trampled by a hundred shrieking fifth graders. Lilacs are a member of the olive family, said my uncle Tommy. Why don't they smell like olives, I asked him, and he told me a family doesn't always mean much. I told him I know what he means.

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Caroline was a member of the Ophus family, who lived three houses down from us and whose children ran too much and ate grass, like horses, or something hungrier. Caroline was the type of girl that couldn't be hungry, and wouldn't be, and she walked in a certain way. It must've been a full time job walking like that.

It was April and a bull was loose in town because all the good cattle drivers were drunks, but if a drunk could bring the money in, there wasn't a penniless soul in the county going to tell him to bench the bottle. That being said, a bull loose on the playground was enough to cause an uproar. First recess began at ten in the morning, and because it started after grammar class, even preceding the crisis it was an especially savage recess.

We first saw the great huffing thing coming through the cemetery east of the playground. I was on the swing playing pilot and Jimmy Fisher (Fish, we called him, because of all the mischievous things we did, he was the one who never got caught) who was my best friend and my swinging co-pilot yelled, "Boys, look at that." We looked, and instantly lined up against the chain links, like eggs in a carton, all leaning in unison, heels up, junior militia, tottering on the balls of our feet.

"That's a fuckin' bull!" somebody yelled, and we locked our gaze harder, each wanting to be the first to confirm the anonymous hypothesis.

“That ain’t a bull, it’s probably just Gran Anderson’s mutt,” another onlooker refuted, a stupid mistake at such an early viewing of something so extraordinary.

“It’s a hundred times bigger than that fuckin’ mutt,” Jimmy said, more to gain some of his own rhetorical ground than to debase the boy whose imagination was dog-small so far.

“It’s a tractor tire or somethin’,” I piped in. This also was a mistake as the thing was clearly moving, a fact I was instantly bombarded with, but to admit that some nameless geek had been right in his bovine assumption on the first try would be simply ridiculous. As the thing moved at us, it morphed unquestionably from dog to tractor tire to bull, and a large bull at that, with a head like a bag of nickels and forward facing horns that when turned right at you were another set of cold, round eyes, and they were staring at each one of us as it began its charge at the fence and our hardly stable frontline.

We ran for cover, except for Fish, who assured us he could dodge it. As we charged for cover in the school, we pushed, as eleven year olds do. We pushed hard and I managed to stumble and strong-arm a girl, a pretty blonde, not onto the ground but straight into the arms of Donnie Kramlich, whose family bathed in the river, which was low this year and ungodly with fish rot. If there was something worse than being trampled by a herd of miniature savages or gored by a bull, it was being embraced by Donnie Kramlich. Consequently if there was one thing worse than being embraced by Donnie Kramlich, it was becoming an enemy of Caroline Ophus. Close friends with the blonde who was now stained forever with Kramlich stink, Caroline made it her sole objective, temporarily putting the stampeding bull out of mind, to pummel the offender, my sorry self, into the playground gravel.

Head bleeding into the dirt, I watched Caroline Ophus bloom. Violet clusters dropped and oozed perfume into my gushing nose each time Caroline’s fist retracted and caught the lilac bush. I sang to Caroline:

“This is education, and while I learn, my eyes track a mass of canvas shoes funneling into the schoolhouse. I see Jimmy Fisher

get trampled and gored, caught again, and I see the bull, the great tractor tire mutt, get shot in the gut by the janitor and whimper like something so strong should never do.”

Ten years later, on July 4th, I married Caroline Ophus. We made love like a war was coming for weeks and weeks, and weeks later when the war came, Fish and I joined the U.S. Navy to become submariners.

Fish and I stayed friends after high school. He couldn't walk right ever since the bull shattered his femur. He was at the doctor's office weekly and was very nearly a cripple through most of our secondary school years. So, while my father wrapped a plow around mine, Fish's head was buried in books because he couldn't do farm work. When we signed on to the navy, he scored high and landed a job as a medic. I scored just over farm scores and landed a job as a radio operator. A radio operator isn't a bad job in the Navy if you're on a boat, but on a submarine it's a joke, and Fish, in spite of all his personal downfalls, loved to laugh at my placement. Two weeks we were underwater and we knew which table to eat at, but Fish was a good friend and he kept close. It never took long, though, for Fisher to do what he knew so exclusively how to, and he got caught up bad this time.

We ate our slop in the reactor airlock, where there was a footwide window, the only one on the whole can. Someone had taped a hammer and a bottle of cheap Scotch to the wall below it with a handwritten note: In Case of Cabin Fever, or a Nazi Pig Takeover.

“You're taking morphine, aren't you?” I asked him. He stared from the sand on his plate up to me, his eyes black and over-textured, like that bull's greasy horns. He smiled a purse lipped Fisher smile.

“You a fucking doctor now?” he said while he chewed.

“You're taking morphine, Fish. It's gonna get you mar-tialed.”

“That's doctor Fish,” he said, and he slid his fork around in his oatmeal, watching the four little plow lines close behind the prongs as he moved it.

“What happens if someone gets hurt and all our Mor-

phine is stuck in your veins?”

“People don’t get hurt on submarines,” he said, “we sink or we don’t sink, but people don’t get hurt.” He closed his eyes for a long time and I looked at the Scotch and hammer on the wall.

“We won’t sink,” I said, but he laughed and it was a wicked laugh and I’ll always remember it. I wrote to Caroline:

“Scotch and the hammer keep me feeling safe. I love you like sailors do, like carpenters and drinkers, but Jimmy’s laugh, like every creak in this great tin can makes me wary, and my love is a coward, a janitor with a shotgun.”

She wrote back that a laugh doesn’t always mean much, and I said I know what she means. The reason radio operators are a joke on submarines is because submarines in this particular war could only communicate with other submarines, something that was never useful when the only submarine close enough to communicate with us was always a U-boat. The problem, and the one simple fact that made my job useless, was that we couldn’t radio the planes. “Birds don’t talk to fish,” captain said, “birds fuck fish” and what he meant by this is that when a U.S. Air Force plane sees a submarine in the water and they can’t make out whether it’s a U-boat or a U.S. boat their orders are to bomb until the potential threat is neutralized or it dives. We called it “Bürgerkreis” which is Nazi for civil war.

Lucky for us, the U.S. Air Force is generally slower to hit their mark than their Navy is to dive out of range, but nevertheless, if we were on dry land and we met a pilot, decorated or not, it was standard procedure to swing at him until his face was Bürger or his vulture comrades took the swing out of us. Caroline wrote that she stopped inviting the Anderson’s over for church discussion group because their son was an Air Force pilot. I felt proud of her for that, and I hoped we had our own son someday, so he could read that letter and meet the Caroline that had her hands around my throat in fifth grade, and always.

A matter of time manifested itself sooner than later. Fish’s trouble surfaced in Italy, when a private in our tin can wanted to visit a whorehouse. A soldier can’t visit a whorehouse in Italy

if he's uncircumcised, and Doc Fish's hands shook like a mortar blast. Under the knife, where he shouldn't have been (and Fish knew this all the better than the rest of us) the private's penis was severed, he never made it to the whorehouse, and his pain was only hardly subdued by the curiously limited amount of morphine left in the medicinal supply. The man was in the sick bay for days, more likely from shock and dismay than from actual injury. It was the end of Fish the doctor and the aggravated continuation of Fish the morphine addict. We went to the window, Fish and I, we ripped the emergency pack from the wall, and drank the Scotch, every drop. He wrapped his quivering hands around the hammer and held it there, twitching, not ready to drop it, not ready to use it.

"We need to go home," Fish said. He chattered his teeth and each time his lower jaw ground on the upper, he tapped the hammer on the glass.

"We'll go home," I told him. "We haven't sunk yet." He didn't laugh this time. "But Jimmy," I told him, "if we go home, you need to get your head right."

"It's not my head," he said. "It's these goddamned hands." He dropped the hammer and went to his bunk. I heard him crying for the man in the sick bay.

In May, we got bombed by our own planes. Bürgerkrieg, and we screamed it as we dove deep and fast into the ocean. Whenever there was an attack, the alarms in the submarine would spin and flash red. A red light in a dark tube feels like the entrance into hell, and if you don't hang on to something, it very well could be. The sirens sounded like all those shrieking canvas shoed kids, like the bomb had already hit, but we held on, and gripped our fists around steaming pipes. The flashing red grew brighter as we dove and our heads adjusted to the pressure and our eyes pushed out from our skulls against the stale, betrayed air of our sinking bean can.

The lights stopped flashing and despite the seaquake of some close calls, everyone seemed to be intact. But Fish was in the sick bay where a buzzard bomb went off, not violently enough to crack the hull, but Fish went deaf in his left ear. It would ring forever and hurt longer. When we got back to dry land they gave

him morphine for it. When we surfaced, we got purple hearts and I sealed mine in an envelope and I sent it to Caroline:

“I fear that everything I see now, everything dry and beautiful and covered with leaves will soon be underwater, like my love is underwater. But I’m coming home because things underwater can remain intact, like my love is. Jimmy is deaf, and he’s sick with that junk he feeds himself, but these trees do him good. His hands shake less.”

They welcomed us home with cold beer and fireworks and tender barbecued things, and I embraced Caroline and smelled rich lilac. Her eyes were sweet green, like anything but the ocean, and we kissed. I sat at a table with Caroline and Fish and later I drank with my uncle Tommy and told him what I learned about families. He met an olive and a lilac, and he said he knew what I meant.

From across the room, we saw a radiant thing walk in. A flowing brunette with a dress as red as her hair made my face feel.

“Fish, look at that,” I said. He didn’t hear me. I was talking into his left ear. I stretched my head around his shoulder like a hungry calf and repeated myself. He was silent for a moment, and I worried he was deaf in both ears.

“I’ve never seen anything like it,” he finally whispered. “How do you even approach a thing like that?”

“Carefully,” we both thought, “like a bull on a playground.”

He pushed in his chair slowly, never removing his grainy eyes from that red dress, and that hair. He circled toward her, drawing a periphery, a bullpen. I saw him adjust his purple heart and snag two glasses of champagne from a waiter. For the first time since my farm score radio placement, I felt jealous.

I pulled Caroline in towards me by the waist, my hands around her this time, and she began to kiss me. She kissed me on the neck and I shivered. She placed a hand on my jawline, where the ridge meets my ear, and again I trembled like the doctor’s hands, wanting something I knew I couldn’t have.

Fish moved in and handed the red dress a glass of champagne. I tried to watch his mouth to make out the words he said, but he had to lean his right side toward her to hear her properly, putting his head at an angle facing just slightly away from me. I imagined what he'd say to her. What I'd sing to this red brunette Caroline:

“How the sight of you, flashing spinning red, pierces my ears and I need your tenderness. You are the high end, and the reason things can drop so low, submarines and Donnie Kramlichs. Put your hands around my neck and we'll dance until the lights stops spinning or this hull cracks, and my love floods in.”

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I squeezed Caroline's hand too tightly and watched the portion of her finger above her wedding band swell and turn flashing red out of the corner of my eye. Fish was sliding his hand across the woman's waist. It was shaking just enough to invoke pity and doting questions of heroism and fear that always lead to soft sex. Just then, three decorated U.S. Air Force pilots lined up before him. The first kissed the lady's hand and extended his to Fish. As Fish took the hand in his own, I nearly fainted, until I saw the maneuver. He pulled the man in to his body by his gesture of gratitude and smashed his forehead against the man's prominent nose, crushing it into his close shave.

“You cowards. You fucking cowards!” I heard him yell, and before I felt my legs move I was by his side, swinging drunkenly at the bombers. The red dress was gone, and that brunette with it, but the flashing lights were made present again, spinning before my eyes as I felt the bones in my hand break over the high cheekbone of a Captain. I put my fingers around his neck and watched the black liquid trickle from his face like a breach in the hull, just waiting for something else to burst. As it ran down and blanketed my hands, warm and tender, I watched it stain this buzzard's starched white military jacket a deep merlot, and I was thirsty. The third man hit a home run through my collar bone and I was on the floor, staring into Fish's painless, swooning eyes. I watched a polished black shoe charge into his head, pull back, huff and paw its hoof, then charge again, knocking Fish's jaw out

of place. Just before my head was bombed by our own, I heard a wicked, wicked voice singing through the room:

“In case of cabin fever, or a red dress, wrapped around that sugary brunette, use your trembling fists. This love is sinking. This love is gutshot, or something hungrier.”

Awake in a hospital bed, I mumbled through the dark “Caroline” and she was there at my side. I could only just make out her silhouette, but I knew it was her when she ran that cold hand over my forehead and I smelled her scent.

“Where’s Fish?” I asked her.

“Jimmy’s sleeping, sweetheart. He’s hurt pretty bad.” She kissed my cheek and drifted out of the room. I remember thinking, it must be a full time job walking like that.

Morphine swam through me, diving and diving, and I lay on my side to look at Fish. Caught again. I couldn’t see how swollen his face was because of all the tubes running into it. Jimmy was in a coma, and was going to die. “Goodnight, Dr. Fisher,” I whispered, and as I slipped into fever I heard the machines towering over us whimper like something so near to me should never do.

I lived, then, in a four bedroom house, with pictures on the wall, and a bowl of water on the kitchen table, feeding lilacs.

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