

Winter 2017

Todd in the Garden

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Recommended Citation

Ellingson, Kyle (2017) "Todd in the Garden," *CutBank*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 86 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.umt.edu/cutbank/vol1/iss86/3>

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TODD IN THE GARDEN

Todd slumps in his pew, snuffling the many mucuses of his sorrow. He's never sat in a pew before. Today he sought a church, any church, on the business of poaching the composition of a eulogy. Any eulogy. He has some eulogizing to do.

But this church—maybe it's the wrong church. No corpse is on show. The closest thing to an urn is a vase of paper flowers (frayed). And the mic'd up, kimono'd dude pacing around the pulpit (pastor or shaman) is sermonizing not about the rising and setting of a human life (etc.) but about the admirable tenacity of a shoelace knot. *Gosh, think everyone: the tenacity of that knot*, he says (vigorous). *It holds the whole shoe shut*. This isn't even the knot of the laces on the shoes he's wearing—which are, Todd double-checks, slip-on wingtips—but of another (loungier) pair of shoes, presumably closeted (at present) in this dude's home.

All his youth Todd has misunderstood: not all church services are funerals.

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AFTER THE PASTOR'S parting blessing, congregants filed into the church cafeteria to enjoy the nonsacramental crunch of some cookies.

Anya (pregnant loner) looked on from her (loner) table as Todd bowed, shied, and let the whole congregation file ahead of him in the cookie line.

“Who *are* you, dude?” Anya waddled over to ask.

Todd (giant stranger) shied, bowing, and opened his hand for her to take his spot at the end of the line.

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“EAT IT, OWN it,” Anya instructed, holding a snickerdoodle up (high) to the beard of Todd.

Like a child receiving a thermometer, Todd shut his eyes and opened his mouth (*aaaabhhllll*)—a cavern parting his beard.

“Good, good,” Anya said, “mum-mum-yum. That’s *your* cookie—eat your cookie, dude.”

• • •

ANYA AND TODD strolled together in the garden of the church. The sun, above. The congregation of nodding hasta.

“*Stroll with,*” Anya specified, “not *linger petlike behind.* I want you up here, aligned with me.”

Todd blushed, feeling invited.

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TODD HAD TO halt the strolling, *had to*—was tearful and couldn't see, couldn't direct his steps over the cobblestones, could for a minute only stand swallowing and re-swallowing a spill of sad hisses.

"I'm not a member of your church," he said to Anya. He expected all futures of pleasant strolling with Anya to now . . . eclipse. He'd been on the outside of enough groups to know how this worked.

"But that's good!" said Anya. "Preferred! Did you not see me in there? *I was alone.*"

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ANYA ASKED TODD to please identify the rigid box flopping between her and him in the cargo pocket of his khakis.

"Oh," Todd said, "it's somebody's ashes."

"Interesting answer, dude!" Anya said.

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SEATED ON A garden bench, drooping her pregnancy forward (between knees), Anya pinky-traced eyes and a mouth into the ashes of the open mahogany box (rubber-lined, hermetic):

:(

She showed the face to Todd, who sat thumbing his thumbs in fret about the ashes tipping, spilling, or rising away on a gust of wind.

"That's my friend Phet," Todd said.

“Phet’s frowning because he died,” Anya riffed on the details of her ashen doodle. “Is that accurate of Phet and his feelings about his death? To be frowning?”

Todd shrugged like he didn’t know. “Whatever you think. It’s your art.”

Anya said, “But I can’t just *assume*.”

• • •

TODD STOOD CHIN-level with the high picket fence of the garden, reporting to Anya about life beyond it. He tries to keep his language compelling.

“There’s an upper-middle-class dog lying cheek-down in the middle of a neighborhood street. Further off, a Honda’s brake lights, um, erupt. The trunk pops open, clickered from inside, and a woman runs from the driver’s door and a woman runs from the passenger door. Now the women are, like, putting the dog to bed in the trunk.”

“Ug. What else is on?” Anya asked (yawn), fists quivering in time with her full-body, butt-clenching wake-up stretch.

• • •

TODD BEGGED ANYA’S pardon, sheepishly dropped to his knees, and poked around the soily webs of hasta root, dislodging nightcrawlers and detaining the drowsiest three or four in his second cargo pocket.

“So besides fishing off public docks, what else you got going on today?” Anya asked.

Todd eyed the morning sun like it was a one-word memo. He tiredly recited that he’d really love to learn to write and read before another day snuck past him.

He had, you know, some eulogizing to do.

“Oh gah,” Anya said, rolling her eyes in relief, “so you *are* a dude with important goals.”

• • •

ANYA PILOTED TODD’S big hand in the style of handlebars—her right hand gripping his pinky, left his thumb—and laid it onto a shifting bulge in a low quadrant of her belly.

“That’s my unborn child’s head,” she said. “It likes to use the curve of my colon as a pillow.

“Well not *it*,” she added, seeing Todd’s ill mope of surprise.

• • •

TODD STOOD TEETERING as he hyperventilated. He stuttered in lulls and spitty plosives—over his chin (beard) lay an ornately beaded net of slobber:

“And if I can’t write I can’t write a eulogy and if I can’t read I can’t read what I write and if I can’t write or read I’ll just have to memorize and

then I'll forget and won't say what I mean about Phet who was my only friend and dude who thought I could be smart if I wanted to—"

"You need to breathe into a paper bag!" Anya said in fright before sealing her mouth to Todd's and using her cheeks as inflatable chambers of deoxygenation.

• • •

"YOU DO SMELL," Anya said, sniffing Todd's beard.

She'd made out with Todd for as long as she calculated was proper and interesting at the present time. She'd left things at a kind of cliffhanger.

"Kind of," she said, "like an empty jar of unsalted dry roast peanuts."

Todd explained that all seven adults of his immediate family lived together in a one-bathroom apartment with a disreputable water heater above a taproom both soaked in and inducing sweat, where morning through midnight he wiped tables and politely bounced inebriates. "I try to stay clean between showers but it's like the world wants me not to."

"Well put," Anya said, patting his knee.

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"LICK THIS PEBBLE," Anya instructed, and Todd did so without complaint or facial expression.

“Do situps until I say stop,” Anya said, and Todd, without grunts or facial expressions, began to.

“Stop! Stop! You’re weird—this is *wrong*,” Anya said, tugging embarrassed at his sweater for him to stand.

• • •

FROM OUT OF a corner of fenceline, the one highest and dampest with unpruned hasta, Anya and Todd emerged, hunkered and blinking into daylight like awoken nocturnal primates. Anya retied the drawstring of her maternity capris.

“So if I wanted your help raising my kid, you’d do it like point blank wouldn’t you,” Anya said.

Todd shied his face aside, to blush in private. His tongue did its tic of wiggling a cracked upper canine, and his throat lost hold of a *hehehehe* in delighted staccato.

• • •

ANYA SAT ON Todd’s knee (girthy, arm-of-sofa-like) watching a bee impregnate a nearby hasta, the lolling of whose leaves and stalks recalled, to her, ditziness.

“Oh jeeze,” she said, “I can’t watch that shit.”

• • •

ANYA HELD UP the backs of her hands, for herself to view.

“I don’t wear rings anymore,” she said. “I used to wear tons—like five or six different ones per finger, two or three on thumbs. I always told people the rings were an adult thing, like a fashion decision; but really it was a child thing, like make-believe; I sort of semiconsciously understood that the rings gave me superpowers. It was the kind of thing where on the surface you’re *fully prepared to admit* it’s not possible, but deep down you’re like *Fuck that, shit’s mysterious, shit’s possible*. I would fondle these rings, even toe rings, super obsessively, contemplating their powers. I had a little wooden ring that made weeds thrive in manicured lawns. Another made people feel self-hate for quoting movies too much. A lot of ‘em had to do with my step-mom: one gave her yeast infections, one deepened her facial creases, one made her remember to sip her coffee only after it was cold. Then I had a big fake-opal ring on my middle right finger that was *supposed* to mandate sperm to keep out of my eggs. Then the month my period stopped I bought a ring that was *supposed* to attribute no-period to anemia or some other relatively-benign condition. Then after four months of, like, climactic delusion I walked out of my first ultrasound and dropped 76 rings, one by one, *clunk, clunk, clunky, clunk*, into the trashcan of the ladies’ room. Out in the lobby was my step-mom, happening that day to look young and yeast-free and be sipping steaming coffee. And in my head I broke the lobby silence with a SCREAM that nosedove into a really tense choking reaction, the kind that convinces people you’ve stopped breathing. And in my head I fell to all fours and shredded up the

carpet like a feral cat who wants OUT—OUT of all confining human spaces. But in real life I looked all mature and was like *Yo, back off, step-mom, I'm gonna be a real mom, which is cooler than what you are.*"

• • •

"HOW DID PHET die?" Anya asked in the blue cool shade of a spooky-big hasta, leaves like ironing boards gone limp.

"And how did Phet die?" she asked a moment later, in the sunlight that whitewashed the cobblestone footpath.

"Irg!" she said in the hot moist shade of the fenceline, where Todd had evasively lowered his face in the overdrama of an unnecessary worm hunt, "how how how how how did Phet die!"

Yet again Todd scuttled heavily away—back now to the (blinding) sunny end of the garden.

• • •

"LET'S SIT AGAIN," Anya said. "I'm into seats."

"Oop, no go," Todd said. Occupying the only garden bench was a sparrow, dozing in fondness of the sun.

"Whatevs dude," Anya said. She pattered to the bench in her sandals, flapping hands. But suddenly Todd had tangled her up from behind in a painless full-nelson. It was his soft (considerate) dexterity that distinguished him as a bouncer.

“I do this for a living,” he said. “Sparrow was there first.”

“I know,” she said.

• • •

TODD AND ANYA shook hands with entrepreneurial firmness. Anya used two hands to encompass Todd’s one.

“I hereby swear to teach you literacy so that you can properly eulogize your friend and encourager whose death you won’t describe to me,” Anya said. “And you?”

“I swear to, um, surprise your step-mom with vague, um, guarantees of—”

“Of barbarity—”

“—guarantees of barbarity if she gets too, uh—”

“If she in any way belittles or infantilizes me—”

“—in any way beladles or infrontilizes you when you have your baby and are a mom.”

“Close enough,” said Anya, giving his hand one last promisorial squeeze.

• • •

“HOW LONG’S IT BEEN since we met?” Todd said, gauging the solar angles in the garden.

“Don’t eyeball the sun,” Anya said. “That’s how eye-patched

pirates melted their retinas.”

Anya checked the clock on her phone, pulled from a roomy capri pocket. “Our moment of first sight was 11 minutes, 37 seconds ago as of . . . now. When I meet someone, I always remember to start a stopwatch.”

• • •

“HEY,” TODD SAID. “Hey.”

“What?” Anya said.

“Well you, *we*—we’re just, kind of quiet.”

“Yeah I can’t decide what happened.”

• • •

TODD ALMOST CLEARED a leg over the fence, but Anya had hooked several fingers through his belt loops and was playing pregnant anchor to his escape.

“Silence isn’t *bad*,” Anya said. “Certainly not something to *ruin*.”

His jailbreak had brought an end to their silence—pleased, he dismounted the fence.

• • •

TODD CIRCLED ANYA, hoping to glimpse her face as she turned and turned away.

“Where do you live?” Todd said.

“Boring. Too particular, cramping, identifying. Tedious, colorless.”

“Your phone number?”

“Numbers? Way worse.”

“Name?”

Anya, spinning, began (demonstrative) to snore.

“Can I tell you mine?” said Todd.

“If you want to make me vanish under the weight of my boredom—sure.”

“It’s just that if I tell you where I live and my name and everything about me, it sucks the *difficulty* out of everything,” Anya said. “Locating each other gets easier, and easier gestures mean less. I demand epic struggle. Epic coincidence or bust. It’s romantic.”

• • •

ANYA DROPPED A thick brass toe ring into Todd’s palm.

“A superpower ring,” she said. “I know I said I threw them all out and stopped believing in them but that was, like, just part of the story. I think the ring might work quicker than me teaching you to read and write. I mean that could take a long time—like several months. And what if it’s a while til we find each other again? I mean, I *will* wander the streets as much as I can in search of you—but there’s no guarantee.”

“Mkay,” said Todd (monkish). “But what if I just come by this church next Sunday?”

“No. That would be lame. Too easy, dude.”

“Oh yeah.”

“But for now just wear the ring and it’ll, like, grant you the power of poignant eulogy.”

Anya issued a solemn swoop of her forefinger, wandlike, to bewitch the ring.

“Here,” Todd said, “you take this.” He plucked a napping nightcrawler from his cargo. “Use it to, you know, scare your step-mom. Until it out works for me to.”

“Good deal,” said Anya.

• • •

TODD, AT ONE end of the garden, stomped a loose cobblestone back into its socket in the dirt. It was a tenet for Todd, to leave a place cleaner than he’d found it.

Anya sat at the other end, pinching crunchable brown leaves from the sprouts of a newborn hasta.

“Before you,” she said to Todd, “it was a habit of mine to leave a place dirtier than I found it, as punishment for people not making me feel happier.”

• • •

ANYA, CLAPPING HER hands clean, rained upon the newborn hasta a

confetti of its own dead leaves, said to Todd, “Gotta go, dude, seeya.”

Her father and step-mom were pressing regions of their formalwear against the interiors of a sunlit church window, knocking on the glass as if to be shown through.

“Seeya,” Todd said, hiding under the lolling mass of the garden’s largest hasta—the church’s monument (placarded) to what, for plant life, is possible.

The ring Anya gave him only fit the very tip of his pinky. It gleamed there, a crown. He tapped the ring on the lid of Phet’s ash box—which made the pinky look like a little king, banging his head.