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The Tall Uncut by Pete Fromm

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"The Date," a story in Pete Fromm's new book, *The Tall Uncut*, is one of the best stories I've read in a long time. It is not a surprising story. Fromm does not radically reinvent the American short story. He will not change the course of contemporary literature. He doesn't even try. Fromm's style is admirably old-fashioned. He avoids shock effects. He develops character through small and surprising detail, writing with a sincere generosity of spirit about people who may be inarticulate, but are not dumb. These characters may have limited vocabularies, but not limited emotions. Fromm doesn't set limits for emotions or perceptions. This may not seem surprising or innovative, but it feels refreshing. It's always nice to see an author treating his characters with respect.

In "The Date," Fromm creates Jonathan and Marjorie, and lets the reader follow them on the title event. Fromm develops the pair with patience, with grace. When Fromm uses a worn-out device, Jonathan describing himself in the mirror, he revives the device by taking it one step above the cliché. When Jonathan looks at himself, he offers a bit of self-analysis along with the physical detail:

He brushed at the thin, black strands that would not cover his forehead—enough forehead, he thought, to land a 747 on. [He] pulled some of his hair down over his forehead but that looked even more ridiculous. He had never tricked himself into believing he was handsome.

The passage works because Fromm allows physical detail to reveal Jonathan's awkward self-consciousness. The mirror device may be tired, but the moment is small, simple and real.

It is this skill, the ability to make the traditional fresh, that makes Fromm an interesting writer. Fromm uses two structural formulas in his stories. The first type has two main characters, a limited space,
and a source of unexplained tension that is revealed in the last page of the story. The second features a single character, consciously isolating him- or herself, thinking about the reasons for this isolation. Fromm’s strength is in an almost perfect accumulation of detail, sometimes physical (like the description of a shot turkey in “Spring”), sometimes emotional (a grandson realizing the reasons behind his grandmother’s lies in “The Tall Uncut”), sometimes both (a husband’s sense of wonder at his wife in the shower, facing the water instead of turning her back to it in “Breathing on the Third Stroke”). Fromm finds the heart of his stories in the details, not in plot.

When this style works, when Fromm hits the details dead right, the stories transcend their formula constructions. The stakes on this type of story are set almost impossibly high. A single misstep, a single missed detail, and an entire story collapses. The collection’s opener, “Mighty Mouse and Blue Cheese from the Moon,” works for eighteen of its twenty pages. The story is built around formula one, the tense situation followed by the revelation. Fromm’s misstep is using a predictable detail as an ending. He deflates an entire story in under two pages. Fromm should realize that sometimes it’s better to leave some questions unanswered than to answer them in the wrong way.

If Fromm falters occasionally, it can be forgiven. It seems selfish to ask him to make his stories more ambiguous. Fromm’s intentions are consistently noble. He wants to give every detail. His generosity compels him to try answering every possible question. The effect may not work all the time, but the spirit is true. Fromm’s best stories leave the reader with the feeling of having seen or felt something real. At worst, the feeling is only of wanting a little more, or wishing a little less had been offered.
Carl Beery is an 18-year-old Missoula artist. He has done extensive illustration and cartooning for the award-winning high school newspaper, the Sun Journal, and for other local publications.

Marnie Bullock received her M.F.A. from the University of Montana and teaches in the University of Wisconsin Center System. She has poems forthcoming in Prairie Schooner and the Laurel Review.

Nicholas Bonner’s work explores the connection between place, process, idea, and material. Most of his recent work is larger than human scale and meant to be interacted with physically to create the sense of environment or architectural space.

Russell Chatham lives in Livingston, Montana. Recently the Museum of the Rockies in Bozeman presented a retrospective of his work, the largest one-man exhibition ever in the state.


James Crumley lives and writes in Missoula, Montana. His most recent book is The Muddy Fork and Other Things (Clark City Press), collected short fiction and nonfiction.

Mary Ann Daly is working on a volume of poems based on souvenir postcards, a study of apparitions of the Virgin Mary in the United States, a historic rose garden, book reviews for Lambda Book Report, and a computer manual for her employer in Washington, D.C.

Tracy Daugherty is the author of a novel, Desire Provoked (Random House), and of stories in The New Yorker, Ontario Review, Southwest Review and other magazines.
Jon Davis is a graduate of the University of Montana’s M.F.A. program in creative writing. His first collection of poetry, *Dangerous Amusements*, was published by Ontario Review Press. He teaches at the Institute of American Indian Arts in Santa Fe.

Margaret S. Davis has exhibited work at Montana’s Hockaday Center for the Arts, Myrna Loy Center for the Performing Arts, Lewis and Clark County Library, and the Holter Museum of Art.

Monte Dolack’s lithograph, “No Room to Roam,” explores the decline of the earth’s open and wild spaces and the plight of the Yellowstone Park bison, both free and confined at the same time.

Nancy Erickson’s painted, quilted fabric works have been shown in the United States, Canada, Mexico, China, and Japan. She started a series of oil drawings of bears in 1991.

Joel Friederich is *CutBank’s* poetry editor and has poems forthcoming in *Cream City Review*, *The Seattle Review*, and *cold drill*.

James Galvin teaches at the University of Iowa Writers’ Workshop. His most recent work is a book of prose, *The Meadow* (Henry Holt).


Ethan Gilsdorf is poetry editor for *New Delta Review* and is completing his M.F.A. in poetry at Louisiana State University. Born in New Hampshire, he has lived in Baton Rouge for the past two years.

Paul D. Guillemette's "Deviate Sexual Wallpaper: The Girls" is part of a series that deals with Montana Law 45-5-05: Deviate Sexual Conduct. This law essentially makes gay men and lesbians felons in Montana.

Bob Hackett is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana.

Peter Harris teaches at Colby College, writes the "Poetry Chronicle" for *The Virginia Quarterly Review*, and has recently published poems in *The Hiram Poetry Review* and *The Literary Review*.

Robert W. Harrison has exhibited widely throughout North America. His large-scale architectural works have been constructed both indoors and out, with the notion of "site" being paramount prior to conception.

Grayce Holzheimer is a native of Great Falls, Montana. She received a B.F.A. in drawing and sculpture from Southern Illinois University (Carbondale), and is currently employed as a goldsmith.

Janet Homer has published in *CutBank*, *Passages North*, *Five Cincinnati Poets*, and *Westering*. She received an M.A. from the University of Cincinnati in 1980 and an M.F.A. from the University of Montana in 1992. She is currently in Zen practice.
Rodney Jones teaches graduate creative writing at Southern Illinois University (Carbondale). His collections of poetry are *The Story They Told Us of Light*, *The Unborn*, and most recently, *Transparent Gestures*, winner of the National Book Critics Circle Award.

Daniel Lusk teaches poetry writing at the Art Institute of Boston. He has received fellowships from the Pennsylvania Arts Council, the MacDowell Colony, and Yaddo. His poems have appeared in the *North American Review*, *Laurel Review*, and other magazines.

Ed McDonald lives in Somers, Montana. He says the roar of a hot shop is a hopeless addiction: heat, movement, design, danger, commitment—the vessel is only the beginning.

Paul McRay has a chapbook entitled *As Though Traveling Backwards Were Natural*, just out from Windfall Prophets Press at the University of Wisconsin. His poems have appeared in many magazines, including *Poetry*, *Poetry Northwest*, and *The Antioch Review*.

Leslie Van Stavern Millar received a B.A. in studio art and biology at Mount Holyoke College. “A Mermaid Dreams of Montana” is part of a recent series.

Missy Marie Montgomery received an M.F.A. from the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, where she teaches writing, reading, and creative writing.

Mary Olsen lives with her husband, daughter, and son in Montana's Flathead Valley. Her photographs have won numerous competitions and have been exhibited at the Yellowstone Art Center in Billings.
John Patterson is a second-year law student at the University of Montana. His photographs have appeared at the Western Montana Fair for over twenty years.

Robert Pesich lives in Sunnyvale, California, and works as a research technician at Stanford University Medical Center. He studied under Sandra McPherson and Gary Snyder at University of California, Davis.

Larry Pirnie earned a B.F.A. degree at the Pratt Institute in New York City. His earliest memory of making a picture is drawing the Lone Ranger when he was six years old.

David Reimer lives in Walla Walla, Washington, though he learned to weld in Bozeman, Montana. He teaches writing and literature at Walla Walla College.

Lynn Rigney Schott is a high school English teacher in Kettle Falls, Washington. She is married to Stephen Schott, a beekeeper, and they have two daughters, Maggie and Hopi. Her poetry has appeared in *The New Yorker*, *Idaho English Journal*, *The Fireside Book of Baseball* (Simon & Schuster), *Artist Trust*, and several anthologies.

Roger Sheffer teaches English at Mankato State University, where he edits the *Mankato Poetry Review*. He has published two collections of short fiction. His poetry has been published or is forthcoming in *The Nebraska Review*, *The Laurel Review*, *Poet and Critic*, *Blueline*, and others.

David Shevin is Associate Professor of English at Tiffin University (Ohio). His books include *The Discovery of Fire* (1988) and *Growl* (1990).
Peter Soliunas is a graduate student in creative writing at the University of Montana.

Richard Swanson is a self-taught ceramic artist and sculptor. His work has been exhibited nationally and is included in the permanent collections of the Archie Bray Foundation and the Montana State Historical Society.

Susan Thomas received a B.F.A. from the San Francisco Art Institute. She lives in Missoula, Montana, and puts her degree to good use while making sandwiches at a local deli.

Patrick Todd lives with his wife Katie and three of his four children in Spokane, Washington, where he teaches creative writing at Gonzaga University. His most recent book is *A Fire by the Tracks* (Ohio University Press).

Doug Turman’s etchings are from the suite, “Sobering Moments in Montana History: Actual Events, Genuine Characters,” with text by poet Rick Newby. The entire project was shown at the Holter Museum in Helena, Montana, and published in *Kinesis*.

Almitra Von Willcox has spent the past seven years traveling. Her work has won numerous photo contests, including grand prize from *Islands International*.

René Westbrook is artist-in-residence for the Great Falls, Montana, public schools and the Montana Arts Council. Working primarily with found objects and drawing heavily from art history, she believes that everyday objects can express contemporary concerns.

The text of *CutBank* is set in ITC Berkeley Book, and the titles in Franklin Gothic Demi.