

So If You See The Vulture Coming

by Michael Copperman

"So if you see the vulture coming
flying circles in your mind
remember there is no escaping
for he will follow close behind.
Only promise me a battle
Battle for your soul and mine."

---Gil Scott-Heron, "Me and the
Devil"

Dale was his name, a fellow I went to high school with who at thirty-one had still never held down a job, who lived on the couches of friends and sometimes at the Mission or in the summer, a sleeping bag at the park. Dale of the threadbare corduroy blazer and the same two plaid button-down shirts, of the unkempt beard and short-shorn hair and holed ears, the plugs overloose and then lost so that the effect was not a toughening edginess, but deformity, the same self-inflicted injury in the pursuit of happiness as everything else in his life. All summer long he came to the bar I often play pool at, and as regulars will do, we talked, two men who knew the same people in high school, had the same lexicon of names and faces and events, both of us sophomores the day Kip Kinkel took his rifle to the school across town and disabused us of the misconception that the world was just, juniors when Harley and Wil took shotguns to their heads, me there the day senior year that Dale himself put a bag over his head, stripped naked, and streaked the entire quarter-mile hall of our high school. Sometimes the bartenders would give Dale a mismade drink because he was so charming, and sometimes me or someone else would buy him one, though he never asked: he would not beg for what he wanted. He

had a great gap-toothed smile and loud, braying laugh, palms often pounding a table with mirth, and loved the that's-what-she-said pun and the off-color joke. When he shot pool, he took his time, was meticulous in lining up each shot, tongue edging from the side of his mouth, though he would nod if it went and shrug if it missed. His face lit up when he spoke of his baby girl and some small, beautiful thing she had done that delighted him—a miracle that she was, that she was of him, he once said, which I took to mean that nothing else he had ever been a part of had gone well. In late summer, I offered to get him a job working at my brother's restaurant, and he was excited about it, eager, and I told him I would get back to him soon; when I asked around I was advised he would only embarrass me and himself, that he would never show, or be late and fucked up, and so I never brought it up and he never asked.

I saw him that weeknight, the early evening heavy with the gloom of chill rain and low-hanging clouds, chatted with him at the bar a bit about the dreary weather that had us all down, the leaden sky bearing down with so much weight that it seemed possible to believe in the imminent rapture as declared by the Christian talk radio prophet.

“Can't come soon enough,” he said, and laughed and shook his head.

It was a quiet night in the bar, and no-one had turned on the music, and so each sound was amplified, the tap of the rain audible when the door swung open, voices from the other room suddenly loud and then receding to murmur as we stood and made the usual small talk of the streets of downtown at an hour too early for billiards, and after a time Dale left the front for a cigarette and never returned; perhaps he had been waiting for me to buy him a drink, but was too proud to ask when I didn't notice. He had seemed a bit overeager for conversation, hungry for it, and perhaps that was the shadow of what was coming. I would have thought nothing of it except that later that same night, Dale went into the Circle K and walked out with a gallon of flammable fluid. As the cashier called the police, Dale poured the bottle over his head and lit a match. He

died yesterday in a Portland hospital after four excruciating days of suffering.

My acquaintance was small compared to many, but I came on them last night, pool players and boozers and barbacks, people who take shelter at late-night establishments and who had provided a sanctuary for Dale with the little they themselves had to offer. A half-dozen men and women gathered beneath the constellation of backlit liquor bottles at ten o'clock on weeknight weeping openly. A man I know only passing well, a fellow in his forties, spectacled, a poor shot and stutterer who all but lived at the bar and who used to play cash games with Dale knowing he'd lose so as to offer Dale enough to buy a Pabst saw me standing there and wrapped me in a hug, and in his arms was the sort of strength that touch confers-- grief should seize and be seized, should be fought with numbers-- and so I held on because this man deserved comfort. Until the bar closed I watched others mourn the horror of what Dale had chosen, and in me was less sorrow than dread, because some nights too I can see the vultures circling, and would rather go up in a flare of heat and light than face so much solitary darkness.

