



Joseph Young

Forward?

I'm not against politics. I'm just against the idea that they are our only measure.

Look, things are wrong, things we need to make right. And so—politics. And so they are important—very.

It's that there are measures of our worth that are extra-political. We have the means to be non-transactional. As a spiritual animal, I think—hope—there are manners of thought that are beyond the binary.

But here we are—the election, the problems, the struggles for justice. I can't escape, don't

want to. I want to try to understand, politically, extra-politically.

Here's some stories.

Red

He wondered what it was like for sociopaths. They didn't have consciences, right? Did that mean they didn't vote?

He wandered up the street. The sidewalk seemed like it was full of voters. Hey, Paul, one of them said to him. Going to vote?

He'd voted once, and then he went and got drunk. That's when he lived in the bad neighborhood and he was afraid to walk to the polling place. Kids sold him drugs and beat him with a pipe, or rather they wanted to. Or rather he thought they wanted to. He was so shaken that afterwards he headed to the bar, just around the corner. It was a dangerous bar and that made little sense.

Voting made little sense. That's what he thought. He walked up the street and saw all the voters. It was a nice day out. The sun was making its yellow rounds and the birds were making their feathered way. What did they care?

Hey, Paul, said a passing voter. Going to vote?

At the bar in the bad neighborhood some guys wanted to know why he was there. He pointed to the I Voted! sticker on his shirt. They asked who he voted for and they seemed happy with his choice.

Hey, Paul, what's up? Going to vote?

The sun was hot in its rounds. He felt it on his arms and neck, burning its way upon his

skin—red, red. Was he going to vote? He hadn't yet decided. He was on his way, but he wasn't sure he'd get there.

He drank some sweet, cheap liqueur that the bartender recommended. It tasted like lemon and cherry, or was supposed to. He had three of them and then he felt like he dangled on his barstool. After three, he felt like he might not be afraid.

Hey, friend. Headed to the polls?

I guess so, he answered.

There they were—ahead—and it seemed like his feet were on their way.

Rainbow Joke

He was funny. But not funny enough. Clearly more funny than most but still, What's that in this world?

What's orange and red and blue all over? he asked.

They turned away. Don't even try, they said. Some of them even winced. A few of them were concerned for his reputation.

Oh, c'mon!

He stopped going out, stayed at home with the cats. He figured, the wind would blow the other direction soon enough. Then he'd be ok—again.

What's orange and red and blue all over? he asked his wife.

A sad rainbow?

Ha! he said, that's better than mine. It wasn't really but his wife tried so hard. She was less humorous than most.

He sat on the porch and watched the world go by. Such a big place, he said, such a funny world.

At the Closing of the Beach Estates

There at the protest they kissed for the very first time. Their lips were hot and covered in salt. No justice, no peace.

Deniers

I can see the water rising, she said, the wave-lets stroking the dock.

That's the tide, Maggie. You already know that.

She set her cold coffee down and went outside. The grass at the edge of the bay went white, like earthworms struggling to stay land-side in the mud.

She took off her shoes and socks, stepped in. Might as well, she told herself. It's coming.

The water was warm, a tiny red crab skittered across her foot. Mark? she called, to-

ward the house. Hey, love? But he'd retreated to the sun room, now to read the news.

To Rule

Raj wanted to be president. He hired a team, made the money, mapped out a strategy. Make sure I win, he said, That I win big.

He was a big eater, five meals a day. He ate tacos and hamburgers and steak and sushi, almost everything that came his way. He ate eggs and toast and ordered with aplomb.

At one of his speeches, Raj said the country was at war with its own success. We are on the battlefield, he said, and each if you is shot through the heart. Our rivers are purpled with your blood, the sky is smeared with gore.

Although he loved his wife, Raj had a lover.

He would meet her in a small house by the woods. These were the happiest times, sitting on the porch, talking to his love, now thinking about nothing at all.

Clarice, he told his wife, you are the largest lake in my heart.

He told his team they ran out of money. He could not pay them anymore. But he hoped that they would work for him, for the country they loved.

No, said some, it was greedy, unkind, but others stood with him. We will help you win for no money, for not even the shoes on our feet. We will wear out our shoes to their soles.

Raj stood proudly in the sun. He looked as

if from a great height on his people. He will win, he said of himself. He will water the land with its love.

Square

He threw the potato across the square. It took a high arc over the thin crowd and hit a boy in the head.

Shit, said the boy and held a red blotch on his brow.

His father turned to reprimand him, hand up, though without real violence. Oh, he answered, when he saw the mark. What's that?

Another man and his daughter pointed to the potato that had ricocheted off the boy. It was clearly a cooked potato in that it had split and steam rose from its insides.

It's a tomato, said the boy, peering into the

short distance. I mean, potato. He looked to his dad for confirmation.

The man neither confirmed nor denied. Shit, he said. At that, a woman turned about, a stern then softening look on her lips when she took in the scenario.

Potato? she said.

Somebody threw it, said her husband. I saw it sail through the sky.

The eight people looked up. The sky was pale and blue. That hurt, said the boy.

A small commotion had begun about the man who threw the potato. An older man was raising his hand at him, with a degree of violence.

What was that for? he asked the thrower.

The thrower's face and hair were red. He looked like he were sunburnt, or perhaps embarrassed.

It was hot, said the thrower.

What? said the older man. What was hot? He looked at the sky. It was stupid was what it was.

By now the boy and his father, as well as the father with his little girl, had made their way over.

Is this yours? said the father. He held half the potato in his fist. He didn't know it, but he moved it in an arc against the sky. At the end of its arc, he didn't realize he waved it in

the thrower's face.

No, said the thrower. It isn't mine.

At this, the older woman laughed, her own cheeks red and fair. No it isn't? It isn't yours?

Power Plays

She didn't like her husband, that was the thing. Oh, you're just where you are because of him, they said. That didn't bother her as much as he did.

For instance, she went to the store. Yes, Mrs. Johnson, said the butcher, right away. The butcher, of course, was scared of her husband. On the other hand, she had to buy him his goddamned pastrami.

In any case, she went to her board meetings—she was president on six of them. She liked that. Don't pay him any mind, she told the members. He doesn't know money from his asshole.

Agency

He was a secret agent, had a badge, though he was never supposed to carry it. Secret, and he hid it in his drawer at home.

He was the kind that liked kids but never wanted one. He'd sit in the park and keep an eye out that nobody would hurt them. He was especially vigilant in all aspects—like kids.

He was watching five kids play Frisbee. Ahoy! one kid would shout and jump and throw the Frisbee. Aye, matey, would say the catcher.

They were small, those five, and then a big kid came and wanted to play as well. His

hair was bushy and like gold and the kid had wide, fat shoulders. His face was wide and fat as well.

We don't want you, landlubber, the little ones said. You don't smell good.

The big kid started to cry and he hauled off and hit one of the small ones—very hard. The small one staggered and tripped, fell on his side, holding a bloody face. He tried very hard to catch a breath.

The agent was on his feet. You little shit, he said, and the little ones looked at him. Not you, he said, big smelly.

The big kid was still crying and trying to see the kid he'd punched through the tears. He wouldn't wipe them away, kept blinking. His

hands were at his sides and they shook and flexed.

Now was when the agent lost something. He lost something deep from the past. He strode to the big kid, put his hand at the back of his neck, and squeezed. He squeezed until the big kid yelled in pain and fell to his stomach.

You shit, he said again, and his knee was at the big kid's back. He shook and he thought about how he'd be fired from the agency, how as he pressed deep with his knee the agency was gone. He felt flames burn his past into ash.

The little kids gathered around him then. They kicked at him, scratched at his face and ears.

Let him go, they said, and he didn't. Let him go, they cried, and there was no way he could.

In Your Service

The bank had foreclosed, took her house away. Hers and three others on the block. They planned to rip them all down, to which she said, I'm leaving this holy mess.

She walked in the park where the ducks floated across weeds so green it hurt the eye. She believed they looked like diminutive funeral barques, four aflame in gold.

With no money for bread, least of all a house, it didn't stop her now. Here, she called, and the sacred ships turned fastly toward her.



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