



Michael Downs

Creative Nonfiction

Michael Downs moved from Montana to Baltimore in 2007 to teach creative writing at Towson University, where he now directs the graduate program in professional writing. He has published three books, most recently a novel, *The Strange and True Tale of Horace Wells, Surgeon Dentist*. You can find him regularly at michael-downs.net or Fenwick's Bakery on Harford Road, buying a chocolate raised.

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Open House

What Sheri leaves open, her husband closes.

She walks away from an open fork-and-knife drawer. Michael shuts it before he stabs a hip on its corner. A room she left hours ago stays lit; he clicks the switch. She takes a glass from a cabinet; he bonks his head on the thrown-wide door, and it eases closed.

With spring's first dogwood blossom, she unlocks windows, welcomes breezes into the house. He sneezes (hay fever).

The throw blanket on the easy chair? Her napkin on the table? He folds them. More than once (just yesterday) he has reached to put away a mayonnaise jar she's left out, but the lid—resting there, not screwed into the threads—comes loose in his hand. The jar bounces across the counter.

The Sunpaper, when she's done, lies helter-skelter across couch cushions. *New Yorkers* lie folded back over the spine where she stopped reading. Her clothes, when she dresses, hang loose. Her T-shirt collars are all vees. She'll never wear a turtle neck.

Sheri opens, unfastens, switches on, loosens. Michael tightens, shuts, locks. He moves warily through the house. Danger, he knows, accompanies disorder.

She recalls their life in Montana where blue sky climbed up and always. Driving east out of the Rocky Mountains, she gasped at the unfolded plains, so vast and curving. Through a window over her kitchen sink she saw an uncontained mountain, an everyday invitation from geography and distance. Ascend, it said. Go.

Now: Baltimore with its constricted roads and looming buildings, its leaden sky crowded out by smokestacks and too many trees. On Sefton Avenue, houses sit not much more than a broomstick-length apart. Through a window over her kitchen sink, she sees a garage built of brick. And next door, another garage built of brick.

But nearby, the grocery store parking lot sits atop a small rise. Sometimes, there to get eggs or bananas, she watches an exuberant full moon climb the open sky above the tire shop.

Crossword Puzzles

The table lamp shines brightly enough, but Michael still squints to make out the tiny word, a clue that might open the upper left corner.

Twins?

He fingers his glasses, tugs them a skosh farther down his nose.

Twine.

Next: *Con game*. Then *Its symbol is an eye*.

Upstairs, Sheri sleeps, and he should be with her, dreaming away the wee hours on their Bed of Roses mattress. But he's lying on a short couch, neck at an unnatural angle and long legs scrunched, street light winking through the turned blinds, dogs curled on the living room rug. Though he's practiced every night for nearly fifty years, he's never gotten the hang of a good night's sleep. Awake on the couch as often as he gets through the night.

Sometimes he reads or eats a bowl of Cheerios. Or both. If there's a basketball re-broadcast, he'll watch that.

Mostly, he works crossword puzzles.

Spoil, as one's parade. Muddled mess. Hardens, perhaps. Shih _____ (lion dog).

A distant bark can get him out of bed. Or the two-a.m. purr of idling cars: another drug deal out front. Or police come to break up a row between drunk neighbors. Or he's got heartburn. Tonight—or this morning, whatever—Sheri nudged him, told him he was snoring and to roll over. Just a tap on the shoulder.

Tap.

Something wakes with him—or in him, he's never been able to explain. If there is light in the room, it winks out. The quilt gains weight and heat. The something asks questions he can't answer.

How will you pay to fix the roof leak? What about the car insurance? And you thought you could go out for dinner? You can't afford this. No raises. Furloughs. The real estate market crashed, and the house worth less than you paid for it. What happens when you run out of savings?

Familiar worries, old chums to those from his earliest years. Dad laid off again, macaroni and cheese from a box for dinner. Nights back then, he tamped his boyhood distress with a flashlight and a Captain America comic book. Now, it's a too-short couch and crossword puzzles.

Not, in Dogpatch. Bring to a boil? Reason to take bicarb. Wall St. type.

He fills in letters. Down and across, and down and across

and down and across

and down

“ These two pieces are part of a larger collection about the street and neighborhood where I live in Northeast Baltimore. Yes, I’m writing about myself in third person, and that’s because the full manuscript isn’t about me. It’s about the neighborhood, of which I’m grateful to be a part, and about my neighbors, whom I have come to love as family. ”