



THE  
HATCH

JOE FLETCHER

# THE HATCH

"The nightmare and the images enter the reader imperceptibly and lead our gaze toward a new form of attention, a dark cutting pain paired with a strangely wonderful sense of delight. *The Hatch* is another real world."

-Aase Berg

"Joe Fletcher casts gorgeous, vivid images in highly controlled, elegantly crafted sentences. His speakers move through menacing landscapes and weird tableaux, inviting comparisons to Jerzy Kosinski's beautifully nightmarish *The Painted Bird*; the tales of the Brothers Grimm; and even worlds conjured by such science fiction writers as James E. Gunn and Brian Aldiss. Fletcher moves from one intuition to the next with a confidence tempered by negative capability, creating constant surprise and its attendant pleasures. You should read this book."

-Geoffrey Nutter

"*The Hatch* is a wild read. The momentum of these poems feels like a voice on a journey, more like a mission, like a night expedition into the dark of poetry. There is an uneasiness of expression throughout. It is a brilliant and original first book."

-Peter Gizzi

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"I will do such things," King Lear shouts before the storm, "What they are, yet I know not: but they shall be / The terrors of the earth."

Drawing upon Edmund Burke's definition of the sublime—the odd beauty associated with fear and self-preservation; our astonished delight in what destroys, what overpowers and compels us toward darkness—these strange poems mine the sinister fault lines between weird fiction, expressionism, gothic horror, and notions of the absurd, cracking the mundane shell of our given metaphysical order. In the traditions of Nerval, Trakl, Schulz, Tadić, Poe, and contemporaries Aase Berg and Jeff Vandermeer, the wonderful disassociation brought to bear on the reader lies in the conjuring of unprecedented worlds, their myths and logics, their visions and transformations—worlds that resist interpretation almost successfully, and reveal to us the uncanny and nightmarish.



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*While sleeping, watch.*

-Heinrich Khunrath

# COASTAL HEALING

Why did god give us sexes  
if everything is to burn?  
I asked the failed suicide.

His jaw was shattered  
so he couldn't answer.  
He looked toward where  
I was through the cloud  
that draped his face. His one  
working nostril wheezing.

I cleated the jib line.  
The sun warmed my back.  
A cormorant flung itself  
with a healthy violence  
into a brown roller.

Out here you could believe  
that each thing nursed  
a seed of purpose swelling  
on the vine of correspondences.  
I ate a plum as plum-colored  
clouds fused above a piney isle.

Out here I could follow  
this fat, mute captain to any  
destruction of a destination.  
His scarred hand trembled  
gently on the tiller.

He knew this about me.  
In such a wind he for once  
did not want to be  
forgotten. Some tobacco  
juice dribbled down  
his ruined chin  
as he tacked us in-  
to the thunder.

# THE MATCH

Nothing in me wanted to wrestle my father.  
He'd been training his whole life.  
What advantage could I have had, my youth  
spent spindle-legged in meadows,  
swiping a butterfly net through sunbeams?  
My sisters delighted in pranking me,  
pretending to see something  
in the water off the end of the dock.  
When I scampered over and stooped to see,  
they pushed me in, laughing.

My father sprinted on his "walks."  
He worked in industry, surrounded by  
the gnashing teeth of power tools, howling saws,  
thick, throbbing machines I cowered from.  
As I shuffled to the bathroom after being  
put to bed, I heard the clanging barbells  
and grunts from the basement.

Was life reducible to power?  
I found out in the ring.  
I had no idea how old my father was.  
He looked vigorous in his shiny red trunks.  
I crossed my arms over the moles on my torso.  
My sisters pushed me toward him.  
All the books I had devoured and where  
was the change? We grappled.  
He clobbered my face. I bit his shoulder.

He panted threats in my ear,  
breath smelling of vinegar.  
We lowered ourselves to the mat.  
I chased away the serpent  
of surrender in me.

My mother clapped in his corner  
and would not make eye contact, even  
when I screamed her name  
as he kneed me in the groin.  
Then I looked at father. Really  
looked hard for the first time,  
entwined as we were:  
he was shriveled.  
He said "I love you,"  
or "surrender,"  
his voice faint  
as ash flakes  
from a cold cookfire  
left by a doomed army.

# KINDERGARTEN

You pull a child from the earth and stuff five autumns into her.  
A blue wind dries an eagle heart in canebrake.

She is not as you dreamt she would be.  
On your neck you feel the cool breath of a god.

The unbearable yellow spreads in the locust leaf.  
Into the old yellow forest you carry a candle.

In the wildwood you mistake a knot of branches for  
the skull of an elf king who haunted your childhood.

You never told her where you prowled, at the pregnant hour  
when the dew was forged, when the real's deep joints were carved.

A horse weeps. A black seed, your terror is now hers.  
What can your touch, your little nest of gravity, do?

Child, your father has been dragged through eleven cancers.  
You watch him eat cold soup before he leaves the earth.

You dig a small grave for a lizard in the side of a hill.  
Two stars whisper above. About you.

# UMBILICUS

Hunger swirls up in us  
like a savage vortex.  
Thus it is good to live  
in a city so generous  
with beefsteaks.

I wander  
through dripping forests  
of meat trees, branches  
hung with red marbled cuts.  
In my crisp linen suit  
I look like a fang.

You have to wait,  
a hot bundle of appetite,  
then speak into a speaker.  
For a few coins  
extends the branch  
to release into your hand  
the hot flesh fruit,  
swollen and oozing  
in its paper skin.

Evening: pork sizzles  
in a thousand flames.  
We pack our guts  
with slabs of goat  
in the meat district,  
which is everywhere.

Who says the glutton  
is wrong? Amidst a steak-  
eating contest, my friend  
cries out: "If you're going up  
to the bell, ring it!"  
The bell is a ribeye.  
We ring its bone with knives.

I'm linked to my loves  
by chains of meat, greasy ropes  
flossing my innards; I kick  
through fly-buzzing rib-racks  
and bone splinters cracked  
by ravenous jaws, grunting  
in delight. We find a rind  
of fat someone left behind.  
We suck it together, squatting  
on the moonlit cobbles.

During meals we discuss prior meals.

I wake, fumbling  
for the gravy-soaked loaf  
at my bedside. Its density  
comforts me like a planet.

# RUSTY SQUEEZEBOX

It would have been comical  
had not the obscene child in the clown  
wig drawn, from a single oboe note,  
such swarms of pain—such an immense  
birth in the viney shadows of the hills,  
such isolation that clamored in need  
of an utterly unfulfillable fulfillment.  
With the trowel of his chords he sought  
to pry some divine secret from the worm-  
chewed loam beneath the Viennese  
cobble, and the scandalized continent  
sought refuge in the frail light  
of its waning polestar. As the arias  
percolated up through his lusty  
powdered stem, a twin-faced specter  
drifted from the chilly mists to reclaim  
its errant spark while I and the others  
dumped his blighted body into the un-  
remembering grave where waited  
our sharp old god.

# ISAIAH

We found him kneeling  
by a stream in the forest,  
head submerged, naked ass  
to the air. We thought him  
praying, and quit our joking  
to approach soft and curious.  
Close enough to cast a stone  
at him when he pulled his head  
from the current and whipped it  
round to face us, beads of water  
flung from his braids. He was  
on us, laughing and flicking  
our throats. He said he cared not  
for consequences, heard the voice  
of god like a roach buzzing  
in his ear. "You people," he said,  
gesturing as to encompass  
our entire being, "You worship  
blocks of wood!" And dissolved  
again into laughter, stretching  
the lines of the rhombus tattooed  
on his face. He sprung at a pile  
of our freshly chopped cedar  
and screamed "Save me!" forty-four  
times, his contorted lips grazing  
the hewn wood. Then raised up,  
turned toward us, spat some ash  
into his palm and dissolved  
into a cloud of words.  
I looked down at the thing  
appeared in my right hand.  
The lie.

# NORTHWEST PASSAGE

There was a street in Oregon I was walking down. A thick gray sky saturated my thoughts. I heard a motor increasing. A thick gray van approached. It stopped beside me. Someone had spray-painted a crude neon chickadee on its scraped and battered side.

The driver lowered the tinted window. I saw his thick gray face haphazardly spread with stubble. The window shielded his lips. With his head he gestured me to come closer. I did.

“Can you help me with my baby?” he asked. “Your baby?” I said. “My baby,” he said, “Listen.” I listened. From within the van, I heard the sound of a baby crying. Shrieking, really, as if it was lying naked and alone on a rain-soaked piece of plywood in the wind-ravaged heights of the Cascade Mountains. It sounded like something was biting it.

Listening like this, my head absently pressed against the window, my mouth making a little oval of steam on the glass. With a gaudy pinky ring, the man tapped the window from his side, startling me out of my attention. “Can you help me with my baby?” he asked again. “It sounds a lot like a recording,” I said. The pattern of shrieks repeated every few seconds. His bloodshot eyes indicated that my speculation had offended him.

“Fine, I’ll check it out,” I said. I walked to the back of the van, opened the door, and climbed in. Someone shut the door behind me. It was dark. In here the crying was louder. There was a lot of it. I caressed the cold knobs and the blinking lights of the recording equipment, making shushing noises.

I thought of my friend, who was coming to visit me from some distance, who now would never find me, accelerating as I was in someone else’s direction.

# WAYNE

My neighbor, Wayne, found a dog lurking near the railroad tracks behind the Dexter Mill. Alternatively languid and frenzied, the dog had disemboweled a mourning dove, trotting into the woods as Wayne approached.

Wearing a sweatshirt emblazoned with the logo of the local university, Wayne tailed the dog through the winter evening. He squatted by a creek as an icy moon swung up over the Poconos. The dog lapped at the current twenty-nine yards downstream.

Just before dawn, the dog lay down in meadow indentations where deer had bedded the night before. Wayne, a big man—6'5" and over 300 pounds—belly-crawled through the snowy field and paused within eight feet of the hound.

Seventeen minutes passed, silent but for the occasional crack and creak in the depths of the winter forest. Constellations twisted in the cosmos. A plane bound for Omaha blinked silently as it split the sky. Wayne's exhalations melted a divot in the snow. The dog began to snore.

Wayne leapt. The dog, nearly crushed by his mass, yelped, squirmed, and gnashed in futility. Wayne's meaty hand clamped the dog's muzzle shut as he sent a series of harsh whispers into its ear. The dog's eyes rolled in terrified comprehension.

Wayne works as a produce supplier for several local grocery stores. In the spirit of holiday cheer, I invited him over a week ago. Though he lives next door, he arrived at my door, framed by the night, like an

Inuit chief journeyed down from the ice-clenched tundra. There was a dog pressed against his left shin.

Wayne is prone to big-bellied chuckles. He challenged the structural integrity of my furniture. He got some eggnog on his moustache. His wife died during a boating accident on Lake Erie in 1987. During his visit, he allowed me to take his coat and shoes, but he refused to remove his wool cap.

I played my violin for him, which he did not ask for. We opened a second bottle of cabernet.

After frowning at his watch several times late in the night, he declared that he had better get home. I nodded, dizzy. Embracing him was like being enveloped by a bear.

I was half-reading, half-drifting off when the dog emerged from the back room. Terrified, I dropped my book. The conversation began.

# MAZURKA

A child on a footbridge in Kansas drops an amulet into a stream. Years later the child is part of an ethnographic expedition in the jungles of Honduras. Forging a muddy stream he plunges his hand into the current and withdraws the same amulet. That night, while urinating beyond the circle of camplight, he is mistaken for a member of the resistance and shot.

A man happens upon his therapist in a grocery store. After calling a pleasant greeting to her, she flies into a rage, berating him for his “masochist passivity.”

Sunday afternoon outside Père Lachaise. My sister and I are approached by an elderly man in a maroon blazer. He is bald, sweating, and smells of wine. Seeing that we are studying a map, he offers us assistance, detailing numerous routes to our destination, reverently commenting on the landmarks we might pass. Then he bows deeply and enters the cemetery. We watch him clamber up the slope lined with sycamores, humming to himself like a spectral merry-maker hurrying to a shadow carnival.

Central Prison, Raleigh. Robert DuPree is escorted to the gas chamber. He breaks free and sprints down the corridor, throws the doors open, and leaps into the seat on which he will die, a grin splitting his face.

Two men disembark from a ferryboat in Freetown. As they saunter down the wharf, one man places the first two fingers of his right hand in the second man’s mouth. They continue until they reach a restaurant, where they are seated opposite each other at a table overlooking the port. They are served steamed clams. The waiter

grabs one and stuffs it into the second man's mouth. Tears stream down the second man's face.

In a chestnut grove a man slaps the face of a horse.

A retired professional football player is found dead in his apartment in Nashville. An officer mistakes a corner cabinet for the girl whose virginity he bragged he took before the war. Later, he tells his wife there are certain cities that are unlucky to see in a dream. Nashville is one.

"It would be foolish not to acknowledge the sexual act implied by a city's towers penetrating the sky," says the theorist. "And we should pay attention to new cities with their ascending architectures, for here we have a virginal act. One can sense the tentative negotiations between tower and sky; the yielding; often entire tracts of sky are revealed in the process, offering their glistening contours to the perspective of the citizen, unleashing rivulets of silence upon the avenues. Depending on the character of the city's architects, who are only ever unwittingly channeling the animus of extension energy at that particular locale, the process can be more violent. Pockets of sky can sometimes be ripped into being prematurely, and if this happens at night, one can be subject to harsh lances of sudden starlight. This happened to me in Dubai..." He continued to speak. I was in the back row, holding a sleeping child. I suddenly had the sensation that the child was not mine.

A woman in the Philippines receives news of the death of American entertainer Michael Jackson moments before she is to see a film. In the dimness of the theater she unleashes sobs into her hands throughout the romantic comedy. Upon exiting, she notices several other people with reddened eyes.

Dusk in Toledo. A man approaches me on the sidewalk. He drains the contents of a can in a paper sack and tosses the empty into the brush beside him. I veer into a parking lot where my car is, anticipating that he will call to me. He calls to me: "Hey buddy." "Sorry, man, I gotta go," I say, removing my keys. "I just want a motherfucking cigarette," he says. "I don't want any money." I am, after all, smoking a cigarette. I give him one. "I know how it is," he says, as if absolving me of my wretchedness. But he cannot.

# JACK MIKE

I'd operated on him the night  
before, after two too many brandies,  
in a tent behind the dancehall  
under a bulb swinging in the fake  
breeze of an oscillating fan,  
his wife holding his bare scabbed  
ankles, eyes shut to his moans.  
We all looked up when the storm  
started pelting our makeshift station.  
I held aloft the dripping stitching needle.

"Not too bad," I whispered  
as the drugs pulled him unresisting  
from the raft of consciousness.  
His wife and I walked  
into the thunder-riven night.

Early that morning we dressed  
him in his torn pilot's garb  
and moved him before he woke  
to a hammock beneath an elm.

Later he sat up with a shout and bounded  
into the dewy meadow. Chickens  
grunted in the dirt outside the barn,  
and we watched him try to get there.  
Some flicker in his head drove him askew.  
He stumbled in a furrow and ended up  
on his side, his legs still acting  
like they were walking.

How could he have seen—  
with the skin sewn over what were  
his eyes—the sow come staggering?  
We watched its hooves crush his abdomen.

He kind of lived for a while,  
harnessed to motorized pumps.  
Until one of his daughters,  
sleepwalking, tripped over the cord.

# THE ORDER

Because I have a fear  
of hunchbacks, a hunchback  
was my waiter. He sat across  
the table from me, his chin  
resting on his hands. No menu.  
After watching me for minutes,  
he said: "I'll have the viper heart  
stew and a glass of five penis wine."  
I said: "I'll have the viper heart  
stew and a glass of five penis wine."  
"Yes sir!" he said, smiling and  
bowing. He shuffled to the kitchen  
through a beaded curtain. I swooned.  
A tap on the shoulder woke me.  
My waiter handed me a cloth sack.  
"Go get them yourself!" he said.  
"But—" I began. "Go get them  
yourself!" he said, pointing to a  
side door. I exited with the sack  
into a dirt yard with a flowering  
tree in its center. In the yard: a dog,  
a sheep, a deer, and a bull; two  
vipers were twined in the tree  
branches. The four mammals  
were easy—I slid underneath each  
and gave a little tug. They winced,  
but did not struggle, perhaps  
relieved to be relieved  
of the burden of their virility.  
I stuffed their members in the sack.

How do you find a snake penis?  
You let the snake coil around  
your head and press its sex  
to your eye. I did this. There was  
a pair of tweezers in the sack,  
which I employed. I felt stronger.  
I sang in the ear of the viper.  
It jerked three times, its jaw  
opened and its heart popped  
into my open palm, like a frog  
leaping from a cave opening.  
Into the sack it went.  
Into the restaurant I went. Into  
the waiter's hand went the sack.  
Into the kitchen went the waiter.  
I heard sizzling through the curtain,  
which parted as my meal was  
delivered. My mouth parted as  
I devoured it, sending the spoon  
clattering in the empty bowl.  
I kissed my waiter in gratitude.  
I tipped him and departed,  
parting the teeming throng  
like the prow of a ship  
carrying a newborn caliph.

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