

MICHAEL GARCIA BERTRAND

Leap of Faith

Woolgathering over Regina, Soren tumbled work boots over turnip head down the long, steep stairs and landed at the very bottom in the rubbery-raggedy thwap! of elongated arms and legs akimbo, his noggin unharmed because it was, after all, filled with straw.

He didn't hop up on the instant for he decided to contemplate the staircase now above him and fell to musing over life's veritable ups and downs. It was important to change one's vantage point occasionally, so he lay there for some time, his coarse fabric hands criss-crossed behind his daydreamy crown, his spindly ankles resting one over the other while the effects of his exhilarating fall lingered.

He realized he enjoyed traveling down as much as up—and sideways, too, if pressed to say—and wanted the thrill again, so he jumped to his feet as nimbly as a marionette, before remembering he shouldn't be late to work. Besides, he wasn't convinced he wouldn't fall up next time. Hegel? Hume? His H's were mixed up again.

Making chuckling sounds, he wiped his work pants and gathered whatever straw he could with his bumbling fingers to re-stuff inside his person, his brain frowning when speculating if, by this small action, he was proving, or disproving, some Sartrean truth.

He smoothed his work shirt with his ham-handed hands of hemp, adjusted his bright yellow clip-on, and collected his fedora, like from old movies. Some said he looked ridiculous wearing rakish hats and colorful ties in a profession of motor oil and grease, yet he thought himself distinguished even when, in his leisure, he wore his floppy farmer's hat with the high

point bent just so with a smart cravat. In any case, he'd learned to protect his sensitive noodle from getting too much sun, or his burlap skin would bleach most unattractively.

Before tucking his round nut snugly inside his hat, he used his phone's camera to flatten the wisps of thread sticking out of his otherwise smooth top and adjusted his glasses, which he wore out of vanity, little round ones loosely sewed above his ears, giving him the gravitas of the scholar. With his seamed hand, he wiped away the smudge on his cheek and tried to fix the creases and wrinkles around his eyes, nose, and mouth. What he wouldn't give for an iron right now!

His eyes were mismatched as usual, one drawn larger and more oval than the other, with eyelashes of varying lengths. His smile was broad and fixed as on the day he was first made, a heartbreak to wear sometimes for he tended to be melancholic by nature, and he envied those who could change their feelings by simply changing their expressions.

Outside his apartment building, he unlocked his bicycle, one of those old, safe, clunky ones, and pedaled to work, wheehee-ing and whoohoo-ing, sticking his feet out when the road dipped, his curious cheerfulness spilling out like seeds scooped from a pumpkin. In the basket tied to the handlebars, he carried Shakespeare, a novel or two, poetry and, of course, his new copy of Philosophy because the proximity of good books made him feel less alone.

At a light, his big awkward feet planted firmly, he overheard an old falling-in-love song, which suited his mood nicely, and on impulse waved at the woman singing along in her car, wisps of straw spiriting away from him, his dome at a tilt. She made a rude gesture.

Soren sighed. To be a deep-thinking creature was hard enough but to be a lonely deep-thinking creature weighed on him like a large bale of wet hay.

Steering through the intersection, he suffered the recurring image of himself tethered to a pole in the middle of a desolate field, arms extended to either side—pointing east and pointing west or pointing north and pointing south—nothing to do, no one to love.

He shook his head of that frightful notion and imagined walking through a field of flowers with Regina, holding hands and

Whooonk! A blaring horn tore his stargazing in two.

“Pay attention, cabbage head!” the driver’s voice boomed.

Soren waved apologetically, and the car sped on.

He locked his bicycle near the rear entrance of the dealership’s repair center which, today, was overburdened with many cars. The weekends were especially exhausting—that is, if he could feel exhaustion, which he couldn’t—yet he enjoyed manipulating delicate tools, specially made for his embroidered appendages, to help others get to where they needed to go.

He couldn’t recall how he learned his trade in the first place; on the other hand, he couldn’t remember ever knowing anything else. Who was the philosopher who said...? He shook his empty head. Soren was a student of philosophy, but, frankly, he couldn’t tell his Descartes from his Foucault!

The other mechanics ridiculed him when he tried to engage them in philosophical discussions. Wistfully, Soren visualized bandying profound ideas in friendly camaraderie with his colleagues, debating Plato’s Superman, Spinoza’s Allegory of the Cave, Nietzsche’s Social Contract, or even Rousseau’s Ethics while rotating the tires of some sports car or fiddling with an SUV’s carburetor or cooling system.

Unfortunately, they found him boorish and pretentious, so they called him the Philosopher of Straw with sneers and sniggers, especially when he began to pontificate upon some esoteric point.

Blaze was the worst of them. Brawny and mean, he was nicknamed for his slicked-down red hair, even if everyone thought it was for the butane torch he carried in his pocket or, maybe, because his temper was like a match, instant and hot. He was the typical bully although some thought it was only after his wife died. Whatever the reason, the big man was relentless in his daily mission to make Soren wretched, and everyone else tended to follow his lead.

It began with a dead crow inside his locker if only for the irony, and they poured industry-grade glue into his spare work boots. They loosened the wheels under his rolling toolbox, which caused his arm to tear from its seams when he tried to keep the large, heavy thing from toppling.

They stole his books, too, and Blaze made a bonfire of them while the other mechanics held Soren by his gangly arms.

When Soren tried to use polite logic to get them to stop, Blaze pasted him to the wall using a pneumatic gun, punching nails into his hands, feet, and torso many times over only then to leave him there, suspended like a sacred relic. For three straight days, he hung there by the time clock, as if no more significant than the calendar hanging above the tire rack, until a couple of sympathetic mechanics took a good hour after work to remove the nails, careful not to widen Soren's puncture wounds any more than necessary.

Soren was helpless to defend himself, especially when reason didn't apply, and he couldn't cry tears because he was incapable, nor was there anyone to provide him solace; instead, he delved into his tome of Philosophy, convinced he was the only one of his kind.

That is, until Regina.

He was in the dealership's lounge, carefully pouring coffee into a styrofoam cup—he particularly loved the smell of freshly-brewed coffee—when he spotted her reading Camus. He'd never seen her before, the dealership being large with so many employees.

Pricked by some intuition whose essence he couldn't identify, Soren astonished himself when he asked her if she was enjoying the novel. He astonished himself again when he was sitting across from her a little later, conversing about Meursault's existential indifference.

From Camus, they spoke about other books they'd read in common and general things like home and career. They seemed to fall easily into conversation and enjoyed each other's erudition.

Reaching for a napkin, she knocked his brimmed cup into his lap, making him yip in surprise; when her black-button eyes widened in panic, he pointed to his painted grin, reassuring her, and she laughed a high giggle, like many birds chattering at once. They realized then they hadn't introduced themselves.

"I'm Regina," she said.

"Hello, Regina," he said, his disposition suddenly matching his expression. He sopped up along with her, from the table and his pants.

"What's yours?" she asked when he'd neglected to say.

"It's" He paused in mid-wipe when he realized the most astounding thing: he didn't know. Was it possible? For how long had he not known? He glimpsed his shirt and read Scarecrow in blue script, but the word didn't mean a thing.

She waited with expectant eyes; not wanting to disappoint her, he came up with one on the spot. He'd been reading about the strange little philosopher from Holland, so he said, "Soren,"

but, then, without intending to, he blurted, “Scarecrow,” because he thought he should have a last name.

“Oh,” she remarked. “Soaring Scarecrow?”

He glanced at her with confusion.

“Soren,” he said. “Soren, um, Scarecrow. S-O-R-E-N.”

“Ah!” she exclaimed. “That’s an unusual name. Are you from here?”

He was stumped again. He pushed his fedora high and scratched—unnecessarily—his forehead. Where had he hidden his childhood memories? When he thought about parents, two faceless images appeared. When he thought about siblings, empty bubbles distracted him. When he thought about home, lonely fields recurred. In profound contemplation, then, he remained—for he could stand for long stretches and think—until she interrupted his reverie.

“Well, never mind,” she said, with a small titter.

“Yes, it is,” he said.

“Excuse me?”

“My name,” he said. “It is unusual.”

They wanted to stay there the rest of the afternoon, talking, but she had to return to her cubicle inside the finance department and he had a sedan’s brakes to finish. Blaze turned the corner just as she was leaving. He said something to her, and she hurried away, eyebrows raised in alarm.

“You think she’s interested in you?” he brayed, slapping Soren across the back of the head. Soren didn’t feel it, busy with thoughts of Regina.

Regina had big eyes like his, except hers were perfectly symmetrical, with a pretty mole on her right cheek, and she had a jutting nose, which he envied, and her hair was straw-colored

and limp, drooping along the sides of her face, and he liked her tall, thin, stick-like figure. When she walked, her gaze was fixed to the floor as if counting tiles, and her shoulders stooped in hiding. Her feet pointed in with the injured gait of a large bird, and she smelled like the papery husks of corn.

She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen.

They often encountered each other around the lot after that, which they attributed to coincidence only, and they talked excitedly about everything. The more time he spent with her, the more absurd he began to feel, an odd combination of perplexity, silliness, and transcendence, and he couldn't concentrate on his reading or, more curious, his thinking. Soren had read much about love and, so, he began to nurse a suspicion.

He was usually all thumbs around women, tripping over words and his own feet, and some found the disembodied voice that seemed to come from someplace behind his right ear off-putting. His struggle to keep from shedding straw also made him self-conscious. He had to pick up after himself constantly to re-stuff. Literally, he had to work at not falling apart.

Regina, however, made him feel whole.

"Oh, that would be lovely," she said.

She repeated herself because he seemed not to understand. "Yes, I said!"

He wasn't sure how he'd stumbled into the words that got him this far.

"Saturday?" he asked numbly.

"Yes, perfect," she said. "Oh! And bring your pants."

"What?" He was suddenly unnerved.

She giggled. "The ones I stained. I'll have them cleaned for you."

He wore his floppy hat and emerald cravat with the yellow rectangles. She wore a nice blouse with rainbows. They called for a car and went to see a scary movie, and she was startled, so he placed his arm around her, making him feel brave and heroic, especially when she nuzzled closer.

At the restaurant, he ordered for her, a gesture he'd read women appreciated. For himself, he kindly asked for his steak to be cooked just so, with a touch of red in the center. After clinking champagne glasses, he sniffed the bubbly bouquet without drinking.

"Don't you like it?" she asked, then added quickly, "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable."

"No, no," he said. "It's all right. I don't drink, you see, or eat for that matter. My mouth is mostly ornamental, but my nose isn't. I like to smell food." His voice resembled stalks rustling in the wind.

"Why, isn't that inconvenient?"

"Not really," he said. "I've never known any other way."

"Oh," she remarked.

When the entrees arrived, he cut his meat at once and buttered his vegetables, a difficult process because of his lumbering hands. Then he carried a hot forkful to his painted nose and held it there for a few moments, before setting it back upon the plate.

He was afraid she'd find him too eccentric but, if she minded, she didn't show it. She ate her food with pleasure and smiled whenever they made eye contact. After dessert, she asked him why he wanted to be like everyone else.

This made him reflect, and he pushed on the bridge of his glasses. It was true that many of his habits were curious: for example, he lay in bed all night even though he didn't sleep, and he

had no need to breathe, yet he owned a humidifier; he replaced his toothbrush every month when he was sans teeth, and he'd make trips to the bathroom many times throughout the day although the urge was nonexistent. His refrigerator was fully stocked when food and drink were superfluous, and he only used the bathtub to wipe his burlap skin with special cleaning fluids despite keeping soap and shampoo in the shower caddy.

The words he spoke emerged when he thought himself speaking, but he didn't understand the process. Was it a kind of telepathy of which he was unaware, or was he the living proof of Platonic dualism? Or more to do with de Beauvoir's Categorical Imperative?

He could see, smell, hear—albeit, imperfectly—even though his eyes, nose, and ears were painted on by the same creator who realized his smile. Taste he couldn't possess, unless one counted what he imagined tasting when he sniffed food.

He could think even though he didn't have a brain, and he felt even though he didn't have a heart, and he was inured to just about everything but fire and the rot that comes from staying wet too long, so even his own mortality was suspect.

There was still much to learn about himself.

“Do you find me bizarre?” he asked her, inhaling the hazelnut aroma of his coffee.

“Oh, no! You're intelligent and kind and, yes, different, but in wonderful ways,” she said.

“You're different, too,” he said, his chortle like brittle leaves swooshing inside a heavy breeze. Sounds just happened out of him.

“I've never been on a date,” he confessed.

“That's all right,” she said. “I've hardly been on dates myself. Men don't seem to be attracted to me.”

“I am,” he said, nervously.

“Well,” she said, smiling.

When he took her home, he pressed his face against hers, but his skin was like rubbing one’s face with sackcloth, and it left a red mark on her cheek.

She invited him inside, and they watched television for a while but, when she kissed and hugged him with sudden passion, he was at a loss what to do next. He knew what he was supposed to do, but he couldn’t . . . that is, there were things that

He was very intelligent about some things but not so much about others, so he said good night hastily and rushed out of her house as if on fire. In the pre-dawn hours, after much thinking, he reasoned he’d behaved badly, so he sent her lilies later. Her text surprised him: yellow faces with little red hearts.

They texted each other regularly after that: he, from the shop, dictating as furtively as possible because his artificial fingers were unsuited to work the screen, she, from her cubicle.

He invited her out again, and they made plans to go to a museum. She said she’d come by at the end of her day to say hello and bring his pants, clean and ironed, before going home. Soren was never gladder to be wearing his painted smile. Even the pranks and taunts of his fellow mechanics lost their sting.

“You’re hoping she’s going to hug the stuffing out of you?” Blaze mocked him. “What can you do for her, I wonder, you rancid, dried up bale of hay?”

This dampened his spirits for he understood the bully’s meaning; still, he was happy even if the realization filled him with dread, understanding full well the tenuous nature of happiness.

And, sure enough, happiness was an elusive bluebird.

Soren was working under a hybrid when he experienced the most dreadful sensation of being plucked apart, and he leaped from the roller to his springy legs. A commotion was taking

place, and Regina was involved, and so was Blaze, and he could hear the catcalls from the other mechanics.

Knobby knees bobbing like pistons, rubber arms swinging like hoses, Soren aimed his ungainly scamper toward the berating timbre of Blaze's words: "Where's your self-respect?"

He was glad he didn't have a heart, or the thumping in his chest would be unbearable.

The noise was coming from where he locked his bicycle, and he hoped another senseless trick was being perpetrated on only himself, until Regina screamed again.

He lanky-elbowed himself into the congestion, squeezing and scrunching his malleable body through their beefy ranks to get to the front. He lost his fedora in the mix.

He understood immediately what was happening: Blaze had taken Soren's laundered pants, and Regina was fighting to pull them back.

He was wiping his greasy hands on them, using his broad back to keep Regina from reaching around, while making mugging faces and rolling his eyes theatrically. When he'd had enough, he balled them up and threw them like a basketball into the filthy junk-heap of broken alternators, frayed belts, and rusted drive shafts.

He broke into a noisy, braying guffaw, inches from her face, which made her grimace as if his breath was brimstone. Some of the mechanics glanced away.

Blaze guffawed again, carelessly, and Regina caught him sharply across his ugly mug with the palm of her hand. It was a thunderous clap. Everyone froze, and all noise disintegrated.

At first, Blaze was dumbfounded, taken completely by surprise, and then his black eyes narrowed. He bared his teeth, punched himself in the temple twice with one fist, growled,

filling the vacuum with the vilest obscenities. His face changed into violent purples and reds. He was apoplectic and about to burst.

He snatched up a bucket containing dirty oil and, in one quick motion, threw the noxious liquid in Regina's face.

Her gurgled gasp woke Soren from his paralysis.

For once, he reacted without consulting reason or logic first, and he hurled himself like a large rubber ball into the husky form of Blaze, sending him crashing against a pegboard of tools on the wall. Blaze landed roundly on his massive rear where a hammer unceremoniously fell on his head, much to the quickly muffled delight of the mechanics.

The dazed bully wiped blood away with his thick hand. He stood up, shakily, to his full span, with murder in his eyes.

Even so, the Philosopher of Straw's smile never wavered.

Regina said, "It's okay, Soren. I'm all right," but Soren lunged at Blaze just the same, his hands shooting out like ravenous birds, and his sounds were like angry winds let loose, but Blaze used Soren's momentum to throw him to the ground like a rag doll, and the butane torch was suddenly between them, quickly lit with one push of the igniter.

"I've had enough of your useless existence," Blaze spat. "What do you say, boys? Let's burn up this hollow man once and for all. It's not against the law to fire up a mannequin, is it?"

Soren closed his eyes until he remembered he couldn't.

The bully's flame burned a hole through Soren's gunny cheek, and a wounded keening erupted from him as if from a frightened animal. He knew Regina and the mechanics could hear his sounds. He was ashamed and embarrassed, but he couldn't help what came out of him. Blaze grinned with wicked malice.

“So, that’s it,” he said, mischievously. “On top of everything else, you’re a coward, too.”

“Stop it!” Regina shrieked, pummeling the bully’s backside with her hands.

“That’s enough, Blaze,” one of the mechanics cried.

“Leave him alone,” said another.

Blaze threw them all menacing looks, but he extinguished the flame only after they put their hands on him.

“Fine!” he barked and stuffed the torch back in his pocket.

He went to turn away when a steely glint from the pegboard made him waver and, in a flash, he’d seized the long, sharp-edged screwdriver hanging there. Sooner than anyone could interfere, he was upon Soren again, savagely cutting his burlap front and plunging his thick hand inside his chest.

Soren writhed for many agonizing moments, even if physical pain was impossible for him, while Blaze widened the wound with his searching hand.

“There it is, boys!” he bellowed, pulling out a closed fist and holding it aloft for everyone to see. “His heart!”

The bully opened his hand, warily, as if he’d caught an exotic insect and moved purposefully from one mechanic to the other. He forced them to look, including Regina, whose oil-stained face was marked with sliding tears.

A compact gobbet of golden-yellow straw sat in the center of his thick palm, stems and wisps slipping and seeping through his blunt fingers.

“You see!” he cried. “What did I tell you? Nothing but straw!”

Blaze stood over the prostrate form of Soren, who was bleeding chaff from between his padded fingers, and said, “Why should you have life? Why should you, when my wife . . . ?”

His voice broke for the briefest of moments. “When are you going to accept you’re nothing but a scarecrow? Go hang yourself!”

The burly mechanic snorted, before heaving Soren’s heart high in the air. It broke apart into tiny fragments and scattered above them like golden rye. Blaze turned away then, hiding his face with his hand.

Soren lifted himself gingerly, trying to cinch together his torn chest with his coarse hands. He edged forward on wobbly legs while the mechanics stepped clumsily aside to give him passage. He wasn’t sure where he was going.

Regina said, “Please, Soren,” her hand on his arm.

“Let him go,” Blaze said. “You’re better off without him.”

“You’re better off without me,” Soren heard himself say mechanically. He stumbled toward his bicycle and managed to unlock it, then clambered upon its threadbare seat. Without even a backward glance, he pedaled away in his clumsy, long-legged way, a trail of straw behind him. Regina ran after him, but Soren didn’t notice. He was in that desolate field, tied to the unforgiving pole.

How silly he’d been to think he could be anything other than what he was.

Wasn’t that the truth he’d always hidden from himself? That he was nothing more than a scarecrow?

He needed to find a cornfield someplace and forget he ever wanted to be like the rest of the world.

Regina was better off without him. He couldn’t love her. He couldn’t return her kisses . . . and, then . . . why, he couldn’t . . . he couldn’t even

He was the outsider, and philosophy was never going to change that.

In his distraction, his bicycle wobbled uncertainly to his apartment, and he forgot to signal with his rubbery arm, turning down his street.

A car clipped his back wheel, and Soren went flying in the air, inside a cloud of yellow straw and favorite books, and landed in a bundle near a lamppost.

“What’s the matter with you?! You got straw for brains or something?!”

He crawled on his hands and knees, leaving pieces of himself and his mangled bicycle behind. Braving his unsteady feet, he stumbled the rest of his way, falling often as if he were carrying a great weight upon his shoulders, his padded hands girding his front, trying to keep more of himself from being lost.

He took the elevator to his floor. In the mirrored plate where the buttons were, he witnessed his degradation; he was made to look alive, not be alive.

His heart hurt and then he remembered he didn’t have one. Or brain. Or guts. Or bones. Or anything at all but existence. He was hollow, and a small whimper bubbled out.

Down his hallway, he ignored his apartment door and exited into the stairwell. A vague idea had come to him.

Inching his bulky shoes up against the edge of the first tread, his poor eyes looked out at the landing far below, and he wondered what dying felt like. Can something without life even die? He needed to find out.

“It’s finished,” he thought.

He raised his arms on either side and tried to imagine whiling away the rest of his days nailed to a post.

At least he'd finally have purpose; dreary and insignificant as a scarecrow's existence might be, it was still meaning, his dependable companions the sun and the creatures flying overhead or running underfoot. But, no, that wasn't what he wanted.

He braced himself for one last leap.

Then took it.

He soared into the air, spread-eagled like a giant bird, and, only when he was away from the earth's pull for that briefest of moments, did Soren dare to hope for a new beginning.

Then came the fall.

He plunged and tumbled down the long, steep flight, and he felt every blow, every knock, every jolt. Every impossible injury, contusion, cut of skin, break of bone. Every inch of agony was his to feel as he bounced and thumped along the hard steps, his hollowness leaking out of him as if he'd been cut open.

He fell, limbs over limbs, while the mushrooming possibility of death made him lightheaded with promise. He saw a flash of red and became convinced he was bleeding, but he needed veins and coursing blood for that. He thought he lost consciousness, but that was impossible, too, because he needed a brain to slosh about unencumbered, and he couldn't be crying real tears, no, but why did his face feel wet?

I feel pain! I feel hurt! I'm real! I'm real! I'm REAL!

Down he went, closer and closer to the end of everything, to his final resting spot, until his feet became entangled between the slats of the railing, and the weight of his momentum—as light as his body was, the laws of physics were not—ripped his bottom half away from the rest of him while his head and torso continued their sharp descent. Hideous noises of agony loosened from him like the cacophony of crows taking flight in sudden fright.

He landed face down with a thudding thwap!

Bemused, he raised his round nut delicately and clutched at his fragments scattered about. He was, literally, all over the place.

After considering the arc of his life, he heaved himself over, and decided to reevaluate things from a new viewpoint, his eyes following the remnants of himself up the steps, like sawdust, to the spot where his work boots were wedged between the slats, legs eking out of them like deflated balloons.

His phone was ringing musical sounds, someplace. It could only be Regina.

Even if he could somehow crawl toward the rest of himself, there was nothing he could do about fixing the ripped seams. An amazing thing that would be: if he could put himself together just like that.

His torment was gone, and he wondered if he'd felt anything at all. Maybe he imagined the whole thing. He tried to sit up but, without a waist, he was destined to lie at the bottom of the stairwell for a very long time. He considered calling for help but to what end?

His reason was intact, so he could think, which meant he existed. Still.

Wasn't it Voltaire who said, I think, therefore I am? Yes, it was Voltaire.

He can wait. Somebody will happen by. It may take a long time, but he was going to keep things in perspective. He was the Philosopher of Straw, after all.

Maybe the mail carrier, his load light and his step brisk, decides to forgo the elevator, or one of the maintenance crew, with a whistle and a song, will trudge up or down at some point today or tomorrow.

Things were never as dire as they seemed. Besides, if he had to, he could outlast forever.

He'd been reading Hobbes and his theory of reality. Or was it Berkeley? Tillich? Strawson?

Where was his head these days?

Does straw age? he pondered, suddenly. It didn't matter.

Maybe Regina will save him.

At least he won't grow hungry.

He didn't think so, anyway.