

...and you say
'Oh my God, am
I here all alone?'...

*(a dialogue with Caleb J Ross
through the filter of
his short fiction collection Charactered Pieces)*

Pablo D'Stair: Interesting thing that happened while I was reading your collection was: I started flipping through pages, just letting my eyes fall here and there, and one of the places they wound up falling was on the sentence '*And then the beer commercial gun shot*'. I thought to myself it was a fucking brilliant sentence. The thing is, I'd not read the story, so just took the sentence as a sentence, interpreting it that you'd used 'beer commercial' as a descriptor for 'gunshot'—expressed the gunshot as a beer commercial, which I took to mean a gaudy, too noisy, jittering, pointless, obscene-in-it's-directness sort of thing—an insane and brilliant way to describe a gunshot.

Caleb J Ross: Can I claim purpose, there? Please. Though that reading would inform the narrator in a way that wasn't intended. The narration is fairly non-confrontational in this story, letting instead the characters themselves inform any opinion the reader may have. Still, though, if I were the narrator, 'beer commercial' would be a great descriptor of anything gaudy, noisy, and jittering.

PD: I suppose you can claim purpose, it would only be fair. But my plan was to steal the bit—we'll just have to race for it

CJR: This opens up to an entirely new discussion. An old one, but one I wouldn't mind having in-depth, here, or elsewhere: Is there a priority of intention over reception when it comes to literature? Does the work inform the audience, or does the audience inform the work? In our behind-the-scenes DVD-extras world, I think the audience is becoming increasingly important—no, perhaps, '*Accepted*' is a better term—as a declarer of artistic worth. Art is made with the audience in mind, as it always has been, but the audience is so much more fragmented that individual pieces can often be made for minute audiences. The influx of online viral videos (though the artistic merit of such...most I would call 'beer commercial' pieces) would be an example, wherein most videos are made for a truly small audience. Flash cartoons are perhaps a better example, spoofs and such, especially. With *Charactered Pieces*, I hope to reach a wide audience, but I don't feel as though I've compromised integrity do so. I guess I fit into the group that makes art and hopes people like it (the lazy camp, maybe) as opposed to those who have a group in mind and make art to fit their ideals (the somewhat more devoted camp). Though, would the latter group be making decoration, not art? A book I promote all I can, Denis Dutton's *The Art Instinct*, has some great things to say on this art vs. decoration (craft) issue, for those interested.

PD: Indeed a very vast subject, but one that certainly should be throttled around a bit, here—I'll do my best to keep some degree of focus, so bear with me. Your first camp—making art and hoping the

audience likes it—is what interests me. I earnestly think this is the way to do art, but through a slight slant. The only way an artist can respect an audience is to set down their work exactly as they see it, express what they want in the terms that occur to them, not concerning themselves with possible reactions from the audience, because these are infinite. The moment an artist considers some viewpoint beyond the end of their fingers is when things reach the danger of becoming as you put—and as I mostly agree with you on—decoration. ‘Hoping they like it’ is earnest, certainly, but only if it means hoping they liked something that was nothing to do with them, was not crafted to ‘be liked.’ With most of my favorite literature, ‘liked it’ is always an odd thing to say. Did I particularly like *Victoria* by Knut Hamsun? Yes. And emphatically ‘Dear Christ No’. Did I like *The Rules Of Attraction*? Same thing. This is, I suppose, just another way of getting at the difference between ‘like’ and ‘enjoy’ which is where I think your ‘decoration camp’ comes into it. For an artist to craft with a particular audience in mind—be it specific individuals, or a specific demographic, or anything more specific than ‘human’, really—is the first step in asking the work to be leveled off, defined, particularized, made absolute. Is this such a bad thing? I’m tempted to be politic and say ‘No’, but it actually is. Or it’s not literature, anyway. It falls, for me, into another category altogether—when an artist goes out of their way to set up a defensive wall of ‘Well, you’re not looking at it for what it is, so that’s maybe why you don’t like it’ or whatever, it’s a sad thing for me to witness. Because—and this comes into your point about audience-informing work or vice versa—it adds the unacceptable element of Author-as-entity, informing. An author and an author’s work are different things. Very different. Literature is between the Author and the Piece or is between the Reader and the Piece—not a threesome. Reader and Author can communicate, but not on any level that ‘has to do with anything’, they have to both be communicating as Readers, as equally uninformed. If Author cannot remove themselves from their work enough that they allow their opinion and point-of-view to be only as valid, absolutely equal to, the point-of-view of anyone else, this is not good, no earnest dialogue comes from it. Just because an artist says something, it has little to do with ‘what is in the work’. I’m not talking about plot points or such shit—though the statement is true about such matters—I’m talking about content, purpose, the realities a work touches on. An Author can only say what their work means to them, and this should be—while perhaps interesting, perhaps of note for a secondary purpose, a curiosity—meaningless to a reader. If I read story where the notion of Justice is being explored by an artist—just for a loose little example, here—and I react to it a certain way, then the author says ‘Well, you have to keep in mind that I think Justice is X or Y or Z defined by A and B and C’, while their statement might be interesting, it is definitive to nothing—they know nothing more of Justice than I do (of the abstraction, the actual, the ideal). Literature is not about ‘What the individual author thought of justice’ but about ‘What is Justice, what does anyone think of justice?’. The trend toward commentary—in cinema or literature or whatever art—is a wonderful thing if it opens a dialogue, but sadly I think it more serves to crystallize opinions, to divide people into Absolutes—when a reader lets the author’s point-of-view become dominant over their own, in even the slightest way, something unfortunate has happened. And likewise, the audience will never define one goddamned thing, except for themselves. Literature should shun definition wherever possible—it is not about closure, not about stopping, but about perpetual flux. One could say this is why time has no effect on it, why it is just as important to interpret and think about literature from ages past and customs dead and foreign climes and to always approach it head on, boldly, with earnest conviction—never looking to have it explained, just expressed and then explored.

CJR: I’ve got to touch on your comment about literature not being a threesome. Isn’t it important, though, that a writer acknowledge the inevitable reader in some way, even if subconsciously? When dealing with fiction, there are always three human elements involved: The Author, The Character, The Reader. And the Reader and Author are absolutely conscious of each other. So, I’m not sure that I can fully agree that a threesome is impossible. The simple act of writing implies and acknowledgement of a reader, so I think writing is always a result of three (or more) consciousnesses at work. Perhaps if I had thought more along those lines while writing the title piece of *Charactered Pieces*, I would not have been

tempted to derail this conversation. Sorry about that.

PD: It's nothing to be sorry about, derailing conversation is conversation. With the 'beer commercial' line, it turns out, of course, that you meant someone was shot with a gun during the filming of a beer commercial. Normally, this sort of thing would disappoint me, put me off, would lead me to find a muddiness, a dulled down quality to the work—but it did no such thing in the case of *Charactered Pieces*. As a matter of fact, something in that story I tell there is representative of what I think the strongest element of the collection is. It would be quite obvious, quite glaring and in your face—and appropriately to a certain extent—to construct your pieces with a whiz-bang element to them, with a flashiness that comes before anything substantive. After all, you have a peculiar (on the surface, at least) list of subject matters and characters. It would be almost expected that you would go for overly superficial gloss to justify yourself, but the opposite happens.

CJR: No compliment can be taken better than that one. Thank you. I deal with this conflict of expectations directly in the story *The Camp*, but the entire collection, perhaps all of my writing, is dependent on subversive motive. I enjoy the challenge of taking a *viscerally* stunning element and turning it into something *intellectually* stunning. In the hands of a commercial copy editor, the synopsis of the story *Charactered Pieces* would likely revolve around the fetus-in-fetu foot, the shocking. But the truth—I hope the truth—is that the visceral is simply a device to explore the intellectual. Most commercial fiction takes the opposite approach. I'm fine with reading that stuff, but not with writing it.

PD: A bit counter-intuitively—at least to my way of looking at things—what you're after is the far more difficult thing to get away with, this alchemy of 'visceral clattering' to 'intellectual hush' (but please read 'intellectual' as emotional, as well). There is certainly, as you say, a lot of work out there that becomes throttling with visceral, even violent stimuli. The odd thing is that to do that is—as a keen, creative audience would always get the sniff of it fairly quick—really quite tame, safe, it leaves itself the protective out that 'It's grotesque, in-your-face, shocking' and has always the ready-made argument that this affront is The Purpose.

CJR: I do feel though that The Grotesque Purpose is a valid purpose, but so much more difficult to pull off than other, perhaps more legitimized purposes. I think of Brian Evenson as one who can do this; never resorting to tired imagery to shock the reader, but instead leveraging his unique understanding of humanity (could I have used a more clichéd term?) to fish out new modes of horror and shock. We all know that we are supposed to react in horror to a missing eyeball (from his story *Eye*, in *Altmann's Tongue*), but the well-played Grotesque Purpose will teach us how to react differently to it, forcing us to consider ourselves before we consider the subject. *The Eye* does this by pairing the missing eyeball with a strangely detached sex scene.

PD: Grotesque is an unavoidable element, both in literature and in life. I think rendering it—however situational it may arise—needs to be done flatly and with all candor. It is, as you suggest, a question of wanting an exaggerated effect—which a great deal of Grotesque is going for, the image or whatever as its own thing, existing just to be viscerally reacted to—or wanting an inward, humanistic effect—say in the film *The Fly*, there is a difference between watching the transformation and simply reacting viscerally to the grotesque images and in stopping to consider the actuality of what is happening, the whole man it is happening to, the mind, the psychology, the entire notion of what such a transformation truly is. Horror pieces have this problem to confront in spades—it's easy to be horrific, to have that as a purpose, not so easy to use the horrific to converse about matters completely outside of the situation. The grotesque has the unfortunate tendency to make it all about the in-your-faceness of the moment—partly because this an interesting thing to render, in and of itself, and partly because there are fuckwits like George Romero out there (post *Day Of The Dead* Romero, not early Romero) who

utterly confuse the notion of ‘getting at something’ with ‘using things to literally represent specific situations and mindsets’. Nothing is worse than a grotesque work that has a clearly defined ‘message’ that tries to make itself directly representative, allegorical, as opposed to expressive, felt.

CJR: I’d say that about all story, whether grotesque, light-hearted, melodramatic, anything. I like symbols. I like literal representations less.

PD: Trying to find something from within such a set-up, however, to take something jarring and move the audience out of it—not timidly, but to a moment of contemplation—is a riskier thing in that if it goes wrong it just seems lousy, pussy, or, at the very worst, faux-intellectual. Not to mention there is, on the part of a great swath of people, a kind of cruel backlash against something that goes through dark ground with something other than absolute, violent nullification as its goal—it’s easy to say ‘Fuck everything’ at the end and sound like a hard man, it’s difficult and dangerous to say anything but that, but the cold shoulder that doing so dares on itself from the audience is the pulse where art should happen.

CJR: Exactly! If we grant the narrator (or the author) authority to say ‘Fuck everything’ and not deliver on the promise of giving reason to so much morbid imagery, then we don’t have a story, in the true sense of the word. Maybe we have a monologue or a diatribe or some such other form that too often feels more at home in the diary of a middle-class teenager than bound and shelved with literary greats. Resolution, for all the commercial connotation that may come along with the word, is important for a true story, and even more-so when asking the reader to indulge in viscera. Perhaps my resolution is that my characters seem to embrace their vulgarities and grotesqueries, whether visceral as in the case of the title story, or emotional as in the case of *My Family’s Rule*. They don’t simply announce their frustrations, they see them as a way to enhance their existence.

PD: I think so, and it is a thing of distinction in your work. Resolution is an all-over-the-place term of art, really. In your work, it is as you put it—these individual lives are not just presented as curiosities, as things to point at, but as genuine explorations of psyche, of emotional identity, of the thread that separates in one’s own mind the difference between being human and not being human. It’s one of the horrors and sadnesses that informs your work—because many people do write themselves off, take a step back from the world, readily accepting some Definition, some third-party Identity, rather than knuckle down and accept themselves as equal in consideration to another. It’s an intrinsic fear—not only ‘Am I not normal?’ but literally ‘Am I less than someone else?’ There is a strength in what you write—not that I view these stories as activism or anything, not that you have some literature-for-change attitude, because that is quite another matter and something of an absurdity we might talk about another time—in that the pieces refuse to admit to the idea of ‘lesser life’. Plato as Socrates so famously said something along the lines of ‘The unregarded life is not worth living’ and this is very often mistaken to mean that a life needs to be regarded by someone other than individual living, when it means quite the opposite. That is the tension in your story. The line is walked between a person regarding themselves—having a purpose to life—and giving up to being regard by everyone but themselves—having no purpose, a freak-show, something to be gawked at, inhuman.

CJR: Perfect. I can add nothing to that.

PD: The keen subtlety of the writing, the almost buried resonance works in concert with the more garish subject matter. There is a moment in *My Family Rule* where the father tells one son that during the demolition of a building he saw a workman still on the roof, saw the man obliterated, consumed by the felled building, and the son—after briefly verifying that the other son is not paying attention—asks the father ‘Why didn’t you tell me?’ the father using this moment to suggest he did it out of a kind of protectiveness, some duty, some sacrifice.

CJR: Interesting bit (maybe): that yellow hat image wasn't in the story until the final draft, just before the book went to print. Imagine how lackluster a story it would have been without that image. I'd be embarrassed. There is no story without the yellow hardhat. It makes me wonder how many stories I've let out that, should I read them again, would fail. That's why I (one) rarely read stories of mine that have already been published, and (two) don't let anything out of my hands that does not have my 99% confidence. Even the stories in *Charactered Pieces* that were previously published I went back and revised, sometimes dramatically, before collecting them.

PD: With my own writing, such changes often happen once the writing starts—I have it all mapped out, but that trick that happens once the first bit of prose is down, once the pace starts, once the language decides itself—regardless of what I had in mind before—makes it for fuck what I had mapped out. Often, a scene will be in my mind the point of which is to have a guy get a telephone call—that's the scene—but instead, the telephone call becomes some peripheral aspect, his peeking out the door becomes the larger thing, the central weight shifts to it—or something like that, the accent of the intention changes once the writing begins. But these changes never happen after, because for me nothing happens after, when a story is called finished, it's finished forever. I'm curious as to whether the addition of the scene was off-the-cuff—that is, you were revising, giving it a read over and the scene just announced itself, you had no idea the value it might have or not—or was it something more direct—you read your piece, felt something was missing, and with direct purpose crafted the scene?

CJR: Definitely the latter. The dozens of passes I took over the piece prior the final draft revealed no glaring absences. But for some reason—credit the moons, credit the gods (if they have nothing better to do than read my computer screen), credit the extra beer I drank the night before—but something made me see the weakness. I knew something had to elevate the father, the roles had to be reversed (which in this case, meant the roles actually aligned to traditional familial patterns; the story started off reversed). The specific image of a man failing to escape a building demolition, I don't know from where that came. But it came. And it fit the story perfectly. Perhaps I had it stored away, unconsciously. Though, if that's the case, I worry that I am not as in control of my stories as I would like. Leaving narrative up to the ether lessens the import of the writer, I think.

PD: Certainly leaving the matter entirely up to the ether—or to the bourbon or whatever—does lessen the writer a bit. I've always been of the mind that, to put things clumsily, a framework is set, a set of structural guidelines, a point in the distance is chosen, all manner of conscious considerations happen first and then the unconscious takes over, as much as is possible. There is much to be said for entirely freeform writing, to abandoning oneself to the whims of what cannot be controlled, but it is not literature, there is no struggle to it, no tension. Just the same can be said of, as you hinted at sometime earlier, pieces being done entirely for craft, entirely consciously manipulated. It's fine, it's just not of much value. Hard work, you know, is not the same as struggle, as difficulty, as the violence that needs to be embedded in an artwork. Hard work is just work, and entirely a choice. Literature, the struggle of it, is a bit more imperative than that.

CJR: 'But it is not literature, there is no struggle to it, no tension.' Beautifully stated, sir.

PD: In *My Family Rule*, the moment of the father revealing what he withheld rather nullifies the meaning he is hoping to convey—he doesn't want his sacrifice to be overlooked, and he wants it, though revealed, to be kind of treated as discovered. And a further thing is, with that piece, there is absolutely nothing melodramatic—even the fact that, for me, the father is lying, the son believes the father is lying, and so the exchange takes place as a tacit agreement to remain as distanced as they have been throughout their lives is quite poignant, but poignant in that blink-and-you-miss-it and I'm-not-really-sure-how-it-

makes-me-feel sort of way.

CJR: Melodrama has no place in my writing; it's a weakness when I see it in other's pieces. To rely so heavily on cultural cues, which is why melodrama works—maybe 'works' isn't the right word—takes too much responsibility away from the author. I want to own my story. I want to own the characters, the relationships, the emotions, the empathy. I want the credit. I want my own culture to inform the page. That being said, of course every story relies on some bit of social contract to work, that's what a story is, an exploration of culture, but there's a limit, a point where an author becomes a reporter rather than an artist. Melodrama is for reporters.

PD: We can swap, you can take the beer commercial line, I'll pawn off 'Melodrama is for reporters' as my own, even-Steven.

CJR: My story is your story.

PD: It's the suction of your work, really, this sense of hovering, of not tugging for meaning. It seems to me that you do what a truly engaging documentarian does—they show the moments, no talking heads commentating, no illustrative examples to suggest impact. By the very fact that something honest is being shown, the audience will respond with an individual gravity.

CJR: That's a great way of describing the effect.

PD: The other way of doing things is often ghastly—to temper a moment, filter it, try to reasonably make it so that a kind of General Understanding is reached, in a sense treating a thinking audience member as the anomaly and any individual perception that falls outside of the melodramatic aesthetic as an eccentric thing—it takes a toll on the humanity of a piece, if that makes sense.

CJR: It does.

PD: With the yellow hat moment, which could, if poorly rendered, have come off as a this-wraps-it-all-up sort of speech—such speeches and moments quite popular in a lot of writing—you give a bait, dangle the rest of the story, very subtly, back in front of the face of the reader, tempting them back into their felt perceptions of the moments they witnessed when first reading—the perspective of the sons watching the building, watching their father—with a new set of eyes, you set a kind of distrust of themselves on them.

CJR: To be honest, going for the General Understanding or Lowest Common Denominator, as would be the convenient wrap-up speech of the sort you mention, not only makes for a less intellectually engaging piece, but is also likely a more difficult thing for an author to do. I might get some heat for this opinion, but knowing enough of a culture to arrive at the Lowest Common Denominator might require more effort than instead allowing the audience to respond with 'individual gravity.' Now, don't mistake this for permission to shit on paper and let the audience determine worth, but in an elusive way, that's a version of what I do. I said earlier that the author should take responsibility for a piece. That responsibility is the difference between *letting* the audience determine worth and *guiding* the audience to worth. The Lowest Common Denominator approach *itself* determines worth. I don't want to claim to have no answers (re: shit on paper). Conversely, I don't want to claim to have all the answers (re: Lowest Common Denominator, plot-centric fiction). I want to guide the audience to understanding a piece, and in turn themselves.

PD: I'd say, a bit differently, that perhaps the author's goal—or whatever term, I'll just stick with

that—should be to get the audience to actively question the piece and in turn—or for the purpose of—get the audience to actively question themselves, to turn their question inward and then back outward, but in the direction of reality, to make the piece viable, living, not just a point of reference, not just artwork to be discussed as artwork. Not to just reiterate a lot of what I've blathered on about earlier, but it is sometimes, especially I think for the author, a struggle to remember that the idea of literature is to extend back into reality, not to bring more of reality to the page—the story or novel or painting should not be the vacuum sucking in attention, but a pistol being readied, bursting the audience/bullet it was loaded with back out at the surrounding world.

CJR: I wonder if it would be safe to say that literary fiction asks questions, while commercial fiction provides answers. Literary fiction, as you say, gets the audience to actively question themselves, while commercial fiction instead provides convenient answers to an established plotline. I'll have to think on this. I like it.

PD: I look at short fiction as the trickiest thing, really. There seems such a risk of it falling into meaninglessness, especially the risk of this happening by attempting to inject too much of a forced symbolism, or leitmotif, or structure, or niggling a reader toward a quiet little epiphany—the thing could be made irrelevant, made into a justified roll of the eye at any moment by saying what the purpose behind any stitch of it is—in fact, the necessity in short fiction for a nonchalance is paramount.

CJR: Absolutely. Short fiction allows the author to explore moments, loosely set along an arc. Flash fiction (or prose poetry or micro fiction or whatever other hip term people give it) furthers this tendency by focusing on the moment, without the arc context. Some people call this structure boring. Those people only read blockbusters. That's why short fiction doesn't sell well; it's rarely about quick pacing and momentum. It's the anti-capitalist medium. The form is an exploration, not a ride.

PD: Short fiction I think has the delicious ability to haunt, to actually unconsciously be approached by a reader the way literature ought to. It's built not to sell, certainly, but this is so much to its advantage and why it can be such an important poison. There is a trap in longer form work in that, no matter what, preconceived notions creep in when the cover is cracked—there is such an idea of The Novel that it is unlikely any reader will ever approach the read willing to go anywhere new, even if newness is being introduced, thoughts that it needs to be equated to norms will get in. So many conventions—and so many conventions so willfully, wholeheartedly clung to by so many authors—make it an ugly scene when someone tries to do something, to say something imperative—short fiction has a kind of grace, it can slip in and out, do its damage, no one thinks they need to defend themselves.

CJR: Great points, all. Personally, I know that when I approach a work of short fiction, I actually anticipate just what you say, something unconventional. In fact, it's been weeks since I read a piece of short fiction that maintained the classic Aristotle arc while focusing on character development. Maybe this is because most of the short fiction I read is online, where the word count per piece is generally less than 1,000 or so, meaning there simply isn't room enough for such a structured story. Do you think that the expectations associated with The Novel are because the long form necessitates a strong core to keep a reader's attention? Therefore, the author is less able to write an engaging piece of that length?

PD: Now you're posing the tough questions, I see. And I don't have such a developed answer. The expectations of the novel—that a novel even need be long form—are very tough to get the pulse of. I would say, definitely, that the novel tends to get bloated because much ancillary material is accepted as 'part of it'. Sure, as you suggest, it could be because it is difficult to write a piece of substantial length on one idea, so a lot of smaller ideas, orbiting ideas, are brought in, so much so that now this is part of the definitive method, they are expected. I have had conversations with people who get upset when a novel

does not have a subplot, or multiple subplots—this might even have become a ‘necessary element’ of a novel for all I fucking know. From personal experience, I know that some people dislike a novel that stays completely focused on its central character, premise, situation, it becomes a drag to not be allowed to turn away, to have a distraction—a secondary story to follow, to allow for relief, for respite or something. All of these things, though, have more to do with momentary, visceral enjoyment when reading. A novel needs to have some balls—and by this I mean that the difference between long form and short form should not necessarily be that more happens, more events are explained, more points-of-view are gotten into, more of a surrounding world is explored, but that short form might give a glimpse of some life, might tell you in one sentence that a situation exists—whisper it, give you a jab of it—while long form is going to simply say ‘This is what reality is composed of, hour after hour after hour after hour after hour after hour after hour etc. Long form says ‘It’s not enough to just say it happens hour after hour etc. I’m going to show you those hours and all the ways the same thing happening happens, I’m actually going to explore the minutes that life is comprised of’, whereas short form sort of indexes them, in a way, or at least does not dwell on the reality of Time.

CJR: *The reality of Time*, I like that. Of course, by you saying that, I’ve got my mind whirring for an example that discredits your descriptions. But, I can’t think of one. Evenson, to bring him up again, has a starkness to his short form writing that often feels like a catalog of minutes, but I suppose if I were to examine a piece right now, I’d find that not the case. His scientific approach to story simply gives the impression of incremental time. Then, for a long form example, I think I would have to look into postmodern (RE: weird for the sake of weird) novels to find something with a hyper-abbreviated timeline. But I’m not confident enough to name one outright.

PD: I probably could name a few of each to help you discredit me, but I’ll just take that blow in my own mind, for the time being. Good points, though. Returning to what we were driving at, in a novel, for example, while this risk of excessive surrounding material is there, there can be an odd power struck by having some statement in the midst of the work that hits at everything—the very fact that it can be so flatly stated and then yet have the piece continue to swirl around it adds a daring, a reckless, almost arrogant kind of pertinence.

CJR: I credit the length for this. I wish I could offer some deeper, more intangible reason for the novel’s ability to be simultaneously blunt and elusive, but I can’t. So many pages forces a certain directness if the author hopes a reader to continue reading. Authors have to offer some positive reinforcement. 300 pages of dodging the issue doesn’t mesh with the human mind. 300 words of doing so, that our brains can handle.

PD: I think the length has a key part in it, provided that the novelist only makes the length what it needs to be. That is, there is a sort of dick-waggingness to many novelists, some obsession with word-count as defining aspect and many a novel that should have been done in thirty-thousand words pump themselves up to sixty or seventy to avoid the meaningless label of Novella, for example—there’s a kind of unfortunate acceptance of parallel-storyline, and lesser-storyline, and extraneous nonsense that sullies a lot of things.

CJR: Strange coincidence: a recent interview at The Rumpus discusses this very issue. Author David Shields, who I am not familiar with, has some very strong opinions about what a novel does and what it should do. The crux of his argument is that novels tend to, and forgive my porn-speak here, fluff themselves for no better reason than girth. He has some compelling points, especially when he says, regarding Louise Erdrich’s novel, *Shadow Tag*, that ‘...what I want from her is a searing excavation of the pain...not a story...not a novel, because a novel is basically a story telling mechanism that exists to hold the reader riveted...it’s there to sell a book.’ The argument to this is ‘Yes, the novel form is riveting.

'That's what many readers want.' Ultimately, I came away from the interview thinking of Shields as one more interested in dictating than exploring, but I think that was his intention.

PD: It reminds me of what I think was a point James Joyce made of literature—that it needs to be static, be something that is approached, not something that beckons. It is there, contains what it does, is interesting in that it exists, and there is no point trying to make it alluring—the allure is a deception, has nothing to do with what is expressed from a purely artistic stand point. Yes, Joyce—if he even said that—said it far better than I just did, I am well aware. Or, the White Stripes might say 'Her stare is louder than your voice, because truth doesn't make a noise'. I think what has come to be considered a novel rests so much on length it's idiotic. The fucking insistence on word-count to even 'bestow' the word—to make it not Novella or whatever—is a detriment to art, because it also posits that Novel, somehow, is where it's at, everything else is somehow more juvenile, more dilettante. And many modern novels are there to jerk themselves off and are about them jerking themselves off, I feel that same way. Someone writing what they see in the artistic voice they have will never stop to consider a hook-line, a superficial trick of arrangement to lure a reader along, they will trust that someone interested will continue because they are interested. It's a strange world to me, the idea of 'making someone interested' in a literature by something other than the contents.

CJR: Maybe it is just a word, a description of length, and should be treated as such. Think of the terms Novel, Novella, Novelette, Short Story, and Flash Fiction as synonymous with Long Story, Medium-Length Story, Short Story, Two-Page Story, and One-Page Story. Maybe the intellectualization of the terms is completely unwarranted. But I see your point, and with it that because the damage has been done, reestablishing the former terms not as designations of quality or respectability but as a vague indication of the number of hours the book may take to read, would be very difficult.

PD: Indeed, it would be difficult—worthwhile, I think. Certainly difficult. Now, a work done well can use the length to a great advantage, of course. You mentioned before, to re-reference the yellow hat moment, that this was an addition to your story and a large part of me wonders if the impulse on your part was to give a focus point to the audience so that the meaning of the rest of the story becomes the swirl a novel can get by force of length: that is, I disagree that there isn't a story to *My Family's Rule* without that moment, I think that moment is an index of the rest of the story, an indicator to turn and face it—the opposite of a novel, where the whirl emphasizes the subtle—here, and in much of your work, the hand clap is to get the attention, to momentarily steal the attention, but the power of the work comes in that when the attention is returned, so much more life or energy—sorry for the clichés—is palpable. The blunt moment changes the language of all the other words, while with a novel, as per our example here, all of the rest of the words define that instant.

CJR: Very interesting observation. Do you think that idea can be ascribed to novels vs. short fiction in general, that the novel builds to a moment, while the short fiction piece uses a moment to build the story?

PD: Yes, but with one or two clarification. The 'build to' with a novel is not in the sense of making it 'end-heavy'. I'd say 'built around'—the moment, the point can fall anyplace, depending on how it's wanting expression. Short fiction is built from the moment—I'd say with short fiction, there is a little bit of tissue and a disease is inserted, recolors the tissue, alters it. A novel is a diseased body that has some point of infection that needs to be excised. Or I think I'd say that...yes, I'd say that.

CJR: I've been long hunting for a way to see books and disease in the same light. Thank you.

PD: Glad to be of help with that. *Camel of Morocco* spoke to me of the razor-walk with short fiction in

a few ways. First, to stick with what I've been driving at, there is this rising insistence toward either a perverse or somehow blistering conclusion, toward an overt ugliness, a macabre that seems to be lurking and that could perhaps be justified, but instead the writing shrugs all that away and becomes an inward, personal, whispered kind of redemption.

CJR: I'm blushing, truly. Jason Kane, from *Oxyfication.net*, had similar comments about my work. One person noting the effect could be a fluke. A second noting the effect means I'm connecting in some way.

PD: Well, it's certainly there, and I honestly think the true test of that is to keep some sort of ratio of for every one person who sees it, twenty-five to fifty will not. It's a troubling thing with writing actual felt literature that you have to be fearful of too many people liking it. Whether they say intelligent, honest things or not, a lot of the times I'm wary when people notice something I actually intended, I get nervous. But this is because for me, one of the main thrusts of a literature is to have an audience participate, set them careening on their own course, whether I know what they're saying or not.

CJR: I've always thought a story is the most literal and intimate form of art. Literal, because sentences cannot be misinterpreted quite the same way that paints or stanzas can. Intimate, because there is a true focused conversation taking place. So, understanding those boundaries, to remain controlled with your writing, while simultaneously intending the reader to careen, is quite a goal. You did that with *Kaspar Traulbaine, approximate*, definitely, practically daring the reader to settle into a planned groove.

PD: Cheers for that. More and more, in my observations, people squirm from the idea of a piece of writing being what it seems to be—the same with cinema. Literature—because some good tricks are possible, certainly—is treated like a sleight-of-hand, like a long set up of misdirection for some sublimating payoff. I don't really like that. I by no means want things to be predictable, but life is not predictable without having to resort to chicanery. However, that being said, it is a pleasant jolt like no other, someone giving something a read, saying X (in this equation X being something you like and honestly intended) and then having an entirely separate recurrence of this. Sure. The trick is to get that just enough that you don't get paranoid, start thinking you're just good at thinking what other people like to think.

CJR: My litmus test for a true ego-inflating comment is based on how well I know the reader. Though I do surround myself with capable, and more often, superb readers, they are friends above all. And I know that any comment from a friend, will be a nice one. Now, during the writing of a story, these friends can be necessary dicks, ripping apart my stories in effort to make them better. But once the story is published and presented, their comments are universal praise. That said, the post-publishing comments I take most to heart are those from readers I don't know. For better or worse.

PD: Yeah, that's the trick with friends. Because if they say something about your work that actually isn't nice, as if by magic they aren't your friend anymore. It's unavoidable. More seriously, though, the elusive remark from total stranger is the thing, always. I don't think that can be denied. It's a discipline to remind yourself that 'getting some strange', with regard to comments about work, is really no more or less valuable than bedding down at home. I love remarks from strangers—they're so sexy, no matter what, so loaded with the sense of true commentary, of the actual unknown.

CJR: It makes me wonder if this distance is one reason some take up a pen name. Of course there is the distance one wants to put between himself and his subject matter, but what about the distance between himself and his readers? As though it is important to avoid contagion, despite needing it in order to have your work validated. After all, an author wouldn't allow his work to be printed unless he wanted it to be read. I've never thought about a pen name. Though I suppose the J part of my name can

be considered such; I go by Caleb Ross normally, but there's a celebrity Caleb Ross already out there. I often get emails from his fans. The J is to separate us. Though, his fanbase and platform would be nice to have.

PD: I thought you were that Caleb Ross—it's the whole reason I'm even talking to you, bastard! In *Camel of Morocco*, the man drilling into the veins of the camel's face—this after a lead-in describing the bloats of animal carcasses, a lead-in that put the sour and salt taste of decomposition and the rank of nothing-to-move-forward-to so distinctly in the mind—and the man drinking the froth of blood does not relish in a garish kind of disgusting titillation, but instead the prose takes an unforced and untelegraphed (nearly unjustified) lift into a brief removal from clean, linear, logical pace to a not overpowering surrealistic choke—all of this is done with a reserve, like a man speaking quietly to a crowded room, making them fall hush, making them crane, realizing they want to listen.

CJR: Can I hire you as my self-esteem personified?

PD: Sure you can. You should wait until I mean to start flattering you, though, so far it's just calling it like I see it.

CJR: Well, thank you, sir.

PD: The second thing is the following: to my way of thinking a pitfall a lot of short fiction falls into is a reliance on—and sadly a tendency to become nothing more (and no, I see no value in being nothing more) than—superficial aspects, such as rhythm, recurrent phrase-work, faux musical pummeling that, while for a moment may be pleasant, evokes after say fifteen minutes of reflection, nothing more substantial than an interesting joke on the back of a cereal box you might tell to get a groan from a buddy.

CJR: Completely. There's a saying in short fiction, one I just made up: 'Clever in life is good; clever on the page is bad'. Nobody wants to read 2,000 words of text just to be blindsided by a joke. Also, I credit this ability to the form's length; a flash fiction piece can definitely get away with being clever. In fact, many of them are, and to brilliant effect. Two recent examples are Mel Bosworth's chapbook *When the Cats Razzed the Chickens & Other Stories* which is mostly flash fiction pieces and Kristin Fouquet's *Twenty Stories*, which has a nice mix of the clever flash pieces and the intellectually substantive story-stories.

PD: The best sayings are the ones we just make up, man. And I agree with the statement—however, while being blindsided by a joke is annoying, I'm going on the impression that you mean what I call a Punch Line Story, whether serious or what not, a story that leads you and leads you and then claps you with a sudden curtain line, like setting of a flashbulb in the dark—it's not as bad as when a story, however short, telegraphs it's damn little point so that when the bang comes the audience is left with the feeling that they Agree or Get-it, meaning that there is something there to get, when the truth is that it's all effect, you Agree only on the strength that the author pulled off their theatric. It's like when someone makes a bad pun and for a moment you feel you should call them clever. That's the worst. Because if you encourage them, they'll keep trying to make puns and you'll realize they're a fuckwit. That was a long walk to get to my point: that I certainly agree and find there is a great strength is the effect a short piece can have, and that there is a difference between bluntness and transparency. A story can be quite direct, gut-punch-to-the-point, but leave you lost in a state of dubious atmosphere—brilliant things can be accomplished with the short form in this way, especially as the length allows a reader to dive right back in, re-experience. The impact of such a moment should leave things ringing, resonating, give a sense of unending to what irrevocably just reached its finality.

CJR: Yes, yes, the Punch Line Story. The short telegraph version of this, I see it a lot with beginning writers. And often, the theatric lacks any even underlying substance. But I understand the need to get that sort of clever trickery out of one's system. I did it for years—in high school, of course, but even a little in college before I started truly exploring the medium. I wish I could dig up some of those old scraps. Scratch that; no I don't.

PD: Sure you do. There's a time and a place for them and they're wonderfully harmless to read back later—sometimes they're even quite good. I pleasantly remember when everything I would write or think to write was a tremendous build up to 'the moment'. I remember ideas that used to excite me for years, even, and I'd sometimes open my mouth to try to pawn them off as something new, only to discover I think they're dreadful, now. But, I don't have a go at myself for thinking them up at the time. I did like a convoluted 'laboratory murder' story, must've thought up ninety of those fuckers and I love finding them around—especially considering most of them are screenplays: nothing like a perfect-murder-thriller-screenplay written by a sixteen year old.

CJR: In high school I dabbled with writing, and even wrote a few horrid pieces. One, I remember, was about a man who dug up his dead wife so he could be with her forever. He had a tick, calling her 'Love' all the time, which, thinking back, was probably my first attempt to truly craft a character. I think I even showed that story to my then-girlfriend. I am sure she was unimpressed.

PD: With *Camel* there is a great deal of recurrence, a great deal of left-hand chord pattern striking that threatens to try to pass itself off a musical progression—the quiet insistence of the humanity beneath, however, has more of an effect of passing out of this pelting repetition, thereby giving it the actual meaning it contains, giving it an actual power, a pinpointed reason for being there rather than an empty and general effect, a might-as-well-be-in-any-other-story-as-well-as-this-one floppiness.

CJR: The repetition in this story is important considering the protagonist's mental condition. He's haunted by a single event, the collapse of a Mosque that he helped to construct. But ultimately, accessing the human obsession behind the instigating event is what is important. I, like so many others who were influenced by Chuck Palahniuk, played with the overt repetition, something Palahniuk calls the 'Chorus'. Ultimately, and I wish a lot of other young writers would realize this, I left the choruses to Palahniuk. He owns those. But what I discovered during those years of imitation is that repetition, surface rhythm, the musicality of the language, even if dissonant, can complement the right story. It's when these elements are the entire backbone of a story that it beings to create problems.

PD: I'm with you on the abandonment of chorus. Chorus is not the same as repetition—perhaps it might be better to say 'reiteration' than 'repetition', because it's a combination of bluntly repeating and reinforcing. Chorus-usage reinforces nothing, it's all surface level, a nudge toward nothing. In my thinking, about Palahniuk and that sort of thing in general, there is even a kind of irritating snobbery to it—a sense of 'Hey, tap tap, remember this line, here it is again, exactly the same, remember it from before, it's here again, isn't it interesting that it's here again, it's like I just stuck it in there again and you might remember I used it before somewhere (sorry, it bugs the piss out of me, frankly)—while repeating something, even with wording close to the same, as a reminder of an actual, emotionally persistent, undercurrent of meaning is honestly the same as saying something entirely new. Palahniuk's sort of chorus just gives me the vibe of some guy saying 'I love you' to his wife like ticking a box, like he's actually just saying the same thing again and again—the same on every level—while really it is through honest, felt repetition that a depth and permanence of humane gravity can be expressed—*Camel*, for example, does that.

CJR: My mistake. I understand the difference now. With Palahniuk, I feel his earlier work utilized the

chorus to great effect, as though the novels were written with that chorus device in mind. *Fight Club*'s protagonist has mental tics of a sort that play into the final revelation, for example. But later, that became his 'thing', so he used it instead as a stamp of authenticity.

PD: Because I can never resist having a remark or two about this guy—because *Fight Club* is alright, no harm in that book though I think it pitch-perfectly defines the difference between Book and Novel in my thinking—I only have a problem with such technique when the 'thing' becomes overtly conscious. If he just 'wrote that way' because he did, that's fine, that's wonderful. I just can't stand getting the feeling that he goes out of his way to write that way, it seems so ancillary, such a put on, all gloss, not driving at anything. I agree that the voice in *Fight Club* is more genuine, though—there is a clean resonance to it, it's fitting.

CJR: Too, I always feel the need to defend his work. He's one of the main reasons I got into reading, oddly enough. Some days I wish my seed would have been something hipper, maybe something canonical. Other days, I'm glad to be part of the pack.

PD: Any way in is fine, as long as you go somewhere from it—all roads lead to Rome provided you actually remember to walk. Furthering what I've been going on with regarding *Camel*, I find it troubling, in general, when an out-and-out insistence on something grotesque comes into a piece—grotesque or just obviously contrived to be shocking, controversial, off putting—and there are so many such winds blowing in contemporary fiction, so many phony uses of 'bleakness' and 'dark subject' that really it depresses me—not the subject matter, itself, the idea that it intrinsically is profound, an idea so many pieces smack of.

CJR: The morbid, the grotesque, has become quite popular lately, and has even become its own genre. Bizarro fiction, which is very hit-and-miss for me, embraces the weird-for-the-sake-of-weirdness that postmodernism tried to intellectualize. Bizarro instead says 'Fuck thinking, let's make some noise. Some bloody, bloody noise.' I'm not sure the genre will ever establish itself as anything more than a niche, but that's probably for the better, for both Bizarro readers and authors.

PD: Yeah, it's an intriguing kind of a shame to me, a lot of Bizarro, new Bizarro, anyway. Older work that could easily fall under the umbrella were it written today never seemed to have the 'I'm this for the sake of being this' but more a sense of 'This is strange, but I'm not meaning for it to be, it's just reality.' It's a tough line to tow, of course. It's more intuitive. Bizarro stuff that it seems the author thought about, really crafted, is usually bad news—it's when the uniqueness, the oddness or grotesqueness of expression seems to fall from the bone that it works. Conscious Bizarro is mostly bullshit and fan-boy jerk off lit.

CJR: That 'it's just reality' that you speak of could fall under the Magical Realism umbrella, Gabriel Garcia Marquez's *A Very Old Man With Enormous Wings*, some Borges, and even Octavio Paz's *The Blue Bouquet*, which is my favorite story of all time. If these were written today, I could see them being given the Bizarro tag. Though, it seems Bizarro has a rebellious nature to it that the Magical Realist authors weren't promoting. Additionally, I there's a sense of intellectual purpose with those three examples that I don't often find in Bizarro. Though, then there's obvious examples like Kafka's *The Metamorphosis*, that seem to evade the Magical Realist tag, perhaps only because it isn't Latin American. I'm not smart enough to know though, perhaps Magical Realism isn't affixed to the Latin American designation anymore.

PD: I'm not smart enough to know that either. I think you hit it, though, that a lot of Bizarro seems to be for-it's-own-sake, while Borges, Paz, Marquez, Kafka do not. Kafka, sometimes. But, it's not a

detraction, anyway, just a mode of expression. Kafka, for example, is very felt, almost surrealistically, except for the fact that much of his stuff is clearly referential to external logics. Bizarro is not even style-over-substance, it's style-as-substance, for however much that's worth.

CJR: According to Raw Dog Screaming Press, a noted publisher of Bizarro fiction, about \$24.95 for a new hardback.

PD: Indeed. If it's D. Harlan Wilson's stuff, I'd pay that price, otherwise I'm not so sure. You're good at drifting me down a tangent, so returning to what I was saying: I'm in no way a happy guy, and intrinsically distrust sentimentality in art because I tend to think it's there to hide something, but your work seems to use little jabs of sentimentality to a most unsettling effect however, they kind of gut, remind one that there is an actual beauty that can be lost, that life can be something so devoid of nostalgia it becomes not even a horror, but an emotionless discard.

CJR: Nostalgia is something I've long distrusted, and even vilified in my fiction (the piece, *Norman Rockwell Nostalgia* at Full of Crow for example). It's the ego of every generation to believe that their time is one of change, and that times past were somehow superior. This notion points more to the failings of the present than the realities of the past. That sort of ego is dangerous and prematurely steers a society toward defeat. I'm not that cynical.

PD: I'd make a long speech about how much I agree and fill it with long winded examples, but I'll spare everyone and leave it with I absolutely agree, feel the same way.

CJR: I make an exception for when we inevitably have some drinks together. That will, from that time forward, be my one honest nostalgic referent.

PD: That's fair enough, sir. I'll try to curb my intake, to help preserve the Norman Rockwell quality, as well. Now, the title piece of your collection—as well as, perhaps even moreso *The Camp*—have to them such distress, are about individuals so caught up in their affectations and personal neurosis, personal loathings, fears, that to find anything disturbing at the forefront of the characters seems almost idiotic—to put it a better way, when the characters seem unhappy, fucked up, disquieted, etc. to believe they are because of anything superficial, even though it seems there would be good reason for it, seems a waste of time, like 'No shit, she has some unique deformity that brings her down' or 'Yeah, she was shot in the face, used to be pretty, obviously this makes her a mess now internally as well as externally' or 'Yes yes, there is a palpable void left by the unresolved death of her son, his brother'. However, to show that there is something so removed from all of the surface level horror-show driving them, something so childish it is almost tempting to tell them 'Christ, just forget about it, be a freak, be something different, live with it' only to in that moment reach the conclusion 'They already are living with it, they have accepted it, they're in a different orbit entirely—yet this familiar pain, this sentimental pain is a part of that other existence, the same as it is a part of mine'. The characters in your stories aren't trying to get someplace better, they aren't trying to transcend themselves, they're just trying to fucking say 'I'm sad' and be believed. It's a shaking thing to realize. Especially if the realization is not followed by the basic swell of sympathy that should come, the 'I'm sorry you're sad' or better, the inability to say anything, but to fundamentally empathize.

CJR: I think it's inborn to comfort, to resolve open wounds. Humans are social creatures, and part of maintaining a society is maintaining the individual components. Universal Health Care is humane. Denying health to an individual on the basis of bending to an unfair profit model is inhumane. So I, as an author, can leverage that nature (which is different than leveraging cultural cues discussed above) for the sake of exploring that grandiose literary destination: The Human Condition.

PD: Yeah. When you listen to *Ballad Of A Thin Man* and get to the point where you realize it's about you—you aren't Dylan singing, you aren't 'in the know', you are Mr. Jones and that is the thing of it—is where your writing seems to start. It's a good thing and no matter what you employ to emphasize it, if the knowledge of that is there, it works. The human condition is the second verse of that song and the second verse of that song would be a fitting epigraph to your collection.

CJR: I know I have that song around here somewhere. I'll give it a listen. A couple years ago, a friend burned ten or so Dylan albums for me, in exchange for my offering of an equal number of Tom Waits discs. I'm not as familiar with Dylan as I should be, I must confess. But I will be now.

PD: See to it, otherwise that nostalgic drink you were mentioning earlier will be soured by my cursing at you every time you don't know what I'm talking about when I drop some obscure Dylan reference. And don't just be one of those fuckers who listens to young Dylan—his last three albums, for example, are some of his best shit ever. The man isn't dead, and he's the epitome of what time does to someone who's honestly an artist—it makes them more an artist.

CJR: I will say that I fell right into *Modern Times*, quickly. For someone unfamiliar with Dylan's catalog, I really like that album.

PD: Well, good. *Ain't Talkin* is one of his masterworks, as far as I'm concerned. But again, you get me tangential. There is a risk in your collection, in the sort of writing you set down that mirrors the risk of these types of characters, so conscious of what they are viewed as, broaching some kind of actual intimacy. It should not be a fact of life that basic emotions come with stipulations, but you have framed a world in letters that illustrates, without being forceful, that they do. The pieces are about consciousness buried under particulars, people needing to have excuses for every sigh. It's startling, sometimes. And equally startling is that you go about it—perhaps part of the strength of the short form—without making me feel an utter piece of shit by the end—I don't feel comatose, like I've just had a litany off bullshit circumstances hammered at me. There's a deftness to the prose that I think accomplishes this.

CJR: Feeling like shit is still feeling, though. But I see your point, that sometimes a reader doesn't want to regret being human. They want to understand being human, even if at the expense of another person/character.

PD: It's another dangerous thing about honest literature—facing up to the fact that rhetoric can get anyone to the point where they regret being human, but that even if this regret is intense, it remains rhetorical. No one regrets being human, other than through some linguistic, semantic trick. Even suicides don't (to probably very insensitively generalize, here) because human suicide is so antithetical to regret. It is difficult to face down the barrel of what an individual is, let alone what an individual is, intrinsically, capable of being, but it's something, as you say, that one wants to explore. Keeping it from becoming moot brushes with word play is hard, especially considering there is an allure to making people feel hard emotions, in seeing them wrung down by verbiage. To not try, no matter what the end result, to trick anyone with a piece of writing is one of the most difficult things—to know the difference between honesty and effect.

CJR: Maybe it's inhuman to regret being human. How's that for clever, linguistic trickery? Now, if I can only get a pun in there, I will have hit all the important bits. In a strange way, this impossibility of regretting one's humanity reminds me of a hurdle I've tried to jump for a while. Maybe you can help. I'm not a religious person, nor spiritual, so I'm not prone to believe in an afterlife. But, the one nagging piece

of evidence for an afterlife is this: the human mind cannot comprehend nothingness. Therefore, we must become something entirely different in death. Any thoughts?

PD: Yes, though we'll see it I can render it at all sensibly. Anne Michaels wrote some line in some poem that I'm sure went 'Our blood is time'. I agree with this so much it hurts. To drift from the overpowering strength of the poetic to a more mundane thought process, the speed at which our blood moves has much to do with how we interpret passage of time—it speeds up and time rushes by, it slows down and time becomes a crawl, loses the cohesion of one tick to the next tock. I think that, as our blood stops flowing, the way an 'instant' would be interpreted by the mechanism of our brain might well have all the contents of an hour, a year, a lifetime. In the final five minutes of life—or in the last instant, perhaps—there may be such a detachment that eternity seems experienced. Someone brought back from death or near death may well experience some form of this loss of time. The closest I can personally attest to has to do with taking some cat tranquilizers, so I won't bore you with that story. I think of our mortality something like I think of Zeno's paradox of Achilles and the Tortoise, or mathematically as the sum of an infinite set. Maybe there always is that half-way mark that needs to be passed before the final distance can be achieved—nothing should be able to pass anything—and maybe as we disintegrate into death, we travel halfway, halfway, halfway halfway halfway until we are so reduced that certainly we have become something else, something utterly indivisible. As humans, we are incredibly divisible. But in every discipline imaginable there is that abstraction of indivisibility—if there is something there must be something absolute, some reduction, some piece that isn't a million other pieces, too. Maybe our life in all its intricacies is component of something altogether different, so much of it can be stripped away without it really mattering. Maybe if all that was left of us was one of the zillion little mites that live in our digestive tract—some unbelievably minute aspect of us—our consciousness will shunt into it, go on with being whatever consciousness is. Right now, it has us, we are our bodies and all, so we think if those go, we go. Maybe we are just wherever the highest concentration of consciousness is, so if my body was incinerated, the speck of me that exists as a discarded bit of hair or a crumb of blood digesting in a mosquito will 'wake up' will be consciously aware of being 'me'. Or already is. No, I have not rendered that sensibly.

CJR: All of that, I like it. Perhaps consciousness follows the path of least resistance, and the human makeup is simply the most accommodating vehicle for consciousness. Though, that idea has a circular logic quality to it that renders it moot before it's even left my lips. So, ignore that. But 'our blood is time,' very interesting. But consider unconsciousness, where time feels like an instant, but the blood is flowing slower. Or does blood flow slower during sleep? I'm not sure. Either way, the hours I could spend considering this topic...

PD: Getting back to my misinterpreted read of your 'beer commercial' sentence, the actual prose in the piece never goes for such ostentatious thunder—really, I got the feeling that you don't particularly care if you find the 'right word' or the 'exact melody' to some passage—which I mean as about as complimentary a thing as I can think of, though I imagine a lot of writers might wonder about it.

CJR: I do have a love of language, the melody of it, and often I try to maintain a musicality, but it's definitely not at the top of my list. Poetry is about the line, short fiction is about the scene. I'll paint the scene with beautiful colors if it doesn't detract from the heart.

PD: Good thing about prose is that it almost has to be equivalent to honest blues guitar to work—it has to be a bit dingy, it has to be a bit dirty, uneven, scratching, because to clean it up destroys what it's trying to express to begin with. Short fiction can do this so nicely, I think. You can write a piece about someone doing the nicest thing but subtextually set it to the strains of a murder ballad clapped out of a tinny piano in a concrete hollow room. Un-thought, uncorrected words have more heart than the most

melodious prose—not that there aren't some nice crafters of melody, but I think Consideration should never be mistaken for Intention, or as you phrase it Heart.

CJR: But why let the piano deteriorate to tinny? Or why put the piano in a concrete room? Isn't doing these things a way to craft the work for a specific effect?

PD: I don't think the tinny quality is a deterioration, but yes I agree that it might be a consciously considered thing as much as a nice clean studio. That's true. There is an argument here that I have with myself a lot. I love listening to a certain recording of Horowitz playing an encore of Rachmaninoff, particularly because it is live and all of the slips of his fingers, the keys played that shouldn't be played according to the written piece of music are there. I like this more than the recording of Horowitz playing the same piece in studio, because I know some chicanery happened, it was made so clean, different takes spliced together with great ingenuity and craft, you know? I suppose I just like tinny things, things that admit they won't be rendered perfectly, and that if they have an appearance of 'perfection' it is false, this perfection happened outside of the 'creation', is a secondary thing put on to the work. Prose should be like live performance, maybe is what I really want to drive at. As much as possible, anyway.

CJR: I'm with you entirely. Live—or at least, recorded live—music has an organic quality that I think humans naturally connect with more-so than the finely crafted counterpart. Yet, there's a justified respect that comes with a musician's ability to render a piece without 'flaws' of any kind. It seems we want to attain that perfection; we want to connect with something outside our nature. We want to be mathematical, not organic. I remember back when I played guitar, I had a series of tablature books, one of which was for the Nirvana *Unplugged* album. The recording is full of these types of flaws that we are discussing, and the tablature transcription of the songs includes each of these missteps, as though the learning guitarist must master the 'flawed' version to be perfect.

PD: I think that a surety in purpose has so much more value than word-smithing, than tinkering around with something that, in the end, is nothing to do with you. I used to argue all the time that it's a fine poet who writes of love meaning to express something they think, something that happened to them etc. but it's a complete motherfucker poet who write a love poem thinking he's saying anything about love. You don't strike me as a motherfucker poet, to select solely from those two identities, which is I think a rare condition in writers, and in my experience as a reader, especially with writers of short fiction. Now, I don't know if the tendency to pin something down to the point it's despicably lifeless is an accidental evil of short form—perhaps because there is a sense of conciseness, of brevity, an artist thinks that so much more weight is upon each word, each phrase, so a much more tricky or conscious thought has to be given, everything measured and remeasured—they think, perhaps, it's better to write like carpenters making sure the shelves lay straight. I've never gelled with that, though.

CJR: This once was me. When I first got into writing, my freshmen year of college, I was obsessed with the word. Every line carried more weight than, I later learned, it should. The simple lesson that broke me of this is when my professor, Amy Sage Webb, told me quite simply, the story is six pages long; nobody is going to remember every word. My argument was that stories can be about the journey, not the overall lesson, which I still feel is true to some extent (Steve Erickson and Stephen Graham Jones, two authors whose work is all about the journey. I've read multiple books from each, and couldn't tell you much of what happened, but I can say that I loved getting there) but I've also learned that the narrative should be most important. Look at anything by Scott McClanahan and you'll see what I mean. That guy couldn't care less about rhythm. He's a story teller. He said once in an interview at *Orange.Alert.net*, I'll never forget this, that 'the worst thing a storyteller can do is start thinking like an intellectual.' I don't agree entirely, but the statement does do a lot to reiterate what is really important

when storytelling.

PD: It's well said, and I don't want to step on it too much. I'll just say that a good bit of storytelling is the best delivery for the poison. A lot of the times when writing I will say to myself 'Alright, this is a story about hatred and remorse and disquiet'. That's what it's about. Now, let me try to think of a story someone will like to read—doesn't matter the content, doesn't matter anything, let me think of a series of scenes and moments, whatever their superficial detail (be it pleasant, ghastly, humorous, whatever) and when I write it I'll just keep muttering 'Hatred, remorse, disquiet' to myself—it gets in there somewhere, the less it's noticed, probably the better. This seems somewhat similar to what you're remarking.

CJR: Yeah. Start with the theme, though that advice is usually a killer for writers, from my experience. The general teaching is to write a story first, and only then see what sort of theme developed. Then, go back and enhance that theme. Though, I guess you are probably talking more about tone and mood, maybe? Either way, yes, knowing your intended effect can help the story progress rather naturally, never giving the weeds a chance to grow. That's one way to write a story.

PD: A writer is a haphazard little cobbler—you say it as well as you say it, but once you've said it, it's done. Your fiction reads to me that way, has that unconscious and unselfconscious hit to it that is so necessary—when I read through the collection, I don't get the feeling I'm reading sentences that were written fifteen times, don't get the feeling I'm reading a doodle etched in stone. Writing can become like that, can be lost to a kind of sick fascination with absolute or permanence—it's a mistake though, when a writer confuses using ink for a tattoo with using words as something indelible precisely because they, themselves, vanish even as the eye passes over them, lose individuation for something more nameless, outside, and forever.