

John P. Kristofco

Snow-covered and slippery,

ideas can be dangerous,
difficult to travel
with ice, hidden views,
spinning in one place,
sliding past the limits of the road;
they can throw you in the ditch of desperation
and defeat;
but when treated with the time that they deserve,
the focus and attention not to swerve,
they are beautiful, bountiful,
these vistas never seen
in the dry and ordered streets
of tranquil worlds

Tacos Too Late at Night

A dream

I watched them spray graffiti
on the wall that spanned the middle of the ship,
a catamaran,
raking through the angry ocean
as I wondered where I was
and why.

“You’re next,” they said
and handed me the cans
as a voice called out
from somewhere:

“captain, this thing might just
go over in this wind,”
and I felt the deck below me
throw me to the wall,
and all I prayed to do
was just wake up.
And so I did.

the pond at night

envy in the water
wary of the stars and their infinity,
 the endless ocean stretched above,
though sanguine in the ken of its own depth,
life that flits within, around
the limits of its universe,
not all those gods afloat above,
archer, eagle, ram,
contorted into entities,
these tortured constellations

The Old Man on the Bus

I watched him shuffle slowly to the bus, this bent old man in gray pants and a too-large beige cardigan. A woman waved at him as he went, but he didn't see, already nearing the open bus door. His face seemed sculpted by an angry wind, his skin more pushed than formed by caring hands.

I slid away from the window to the center of my seat. There were only four or five vacancies on the bus now, and I preferred to sit alone, and this was the last stop before I'd get home, ninety more miles.

There was a loud noise outside the bus, and we all turned to look. The dumpster behind the depot gave up a deep rattle as it was being emptied, a simple enough marvel to hold our attention for a moment. When it faded, the old man dropped onto the seat beside me.

I smelled him before I felt the vinyl yield, and I slid back toward the window. It was a dusty, dry smell soured by the yellow-gray of things that do not move much anymore, the scent of old boxes in a basement, books opened after a very long time.

He whistled when he breathed, and I imagined how long these ninety miles might be, a distance already stretched by the five months I had been away. I closed my eyes to conjure once again Jennifer's soft face and long, sandy-brown hair, the smile I had not seen since January.

The bus backed away slowly, noisily from its slot and straightened out onto the road. The woman stood there watching.

"She still wavin?" a gruff voice came from beside me.

I turned. The old man looked straight ahead.

"She still wavin?" the voice came again.

I looked out the window once more. She was.

“Uh, yeah,” I said quietly.

“Corse she is,” the old man muttered, still staring straight ahead. “Corse she is.”

I looked at the side of his desert of a face and saw the jagged line of an old scar beside his right eye like a tired river in its worn blue edges.

“Sets me out like a package in a mailbox and waves at me like it matters,” he said quietly, shaking his head.

I didn't know if he wanted me to say anything, so I slid even closer to the window and reached into the backpack at my feet. The first thing out was the textbook from my German class.

I should have sold this I thought as I flipped the pages. *What the hell will I do with this thing?*

Halfway through, I found the page where I had written ‘Jennifer macht den Sommer schon’ across the top. It was a cold day in February, and I had.....

“German?” the gruff voice came again.

The old man was looking at the open book.

“Ummm,.....yeah, I took a class.....”

“You a student?”

“Yeah,” I managed weekly.

He turned toward the front again, drew a deep breath.

“I was a student once,” he said as much to the aisle as to me, to some image in the air above the aisle. “I was a student once.”

The bus rolled west to the highway where it picked up speed and settled into its

squeaky ride. I had adjusted to the rhythm of the road again. It was almost seven; it would be nearly dark when I got home.

“So, who is Jennifer, and how does she make the summer beautiful?” the scratchy voice came.

All at once, the rhythm changed, like when you hear someone unexpected at your side door, voices in the backyard late at night. I turned slowly toward him.

He was very old, with a face like kneaded dough, lined, pocked, a wild hair here and there. His eyes were flat gray like a slate rock in a dry creek.

“You know German?” I said meekly.

“Nur ein bisschen,” he muttered as if he’d rather not said it.

I nodded, remembering that phrase from class.

“But I didn’t learn it in school,” he said.

I looked back down at the textbook as if I were reading. A moment passed.

“So, Jennifer?”

“Uh,” I breathed out. “Well,.....”

“Mine was Margaret,” he said softly in a tone that seemed to come from deep down somewhere, as if it hadn’t been called on very often, maybe never.

I looked back up and found his gaze going past me, out the window to someplace in the far off distance.

“Mine was Margaret,” he said again, as if in prayer.

I found it somehow easier to speak now, like a seal had been lifted.

“Jennifer’s back home,” I said. I haven’t seen her since Christmas.

“Five months, huh? That’s a long time when you’re.....what are you, twenty?”

“Nineteen.”

The old man nodded.

“I was twenty,” he said as if appealing to the air above the aisle. “I was only twenty.”

I was ready to ask him a question when he roled his head to the other side of windows.

The rhythm of the road picked up again, and we didn't speak. I flipped pages in the book but knew that the unwritten manuscript sitting beside me on the seat was the real text on that bus.

It was twenty minutes later when the old man sat up abruptly to look at something the bus passed. He labored to follow it all the way to the back, watching it fade into the horizon behind us.

“Just like that,” he muttered, slapping his veiny hand down onto his leg. “It looked just like that!”

He turned slowly toward the front.

“It looked just like that,” he said as if speaking to someone inside his head, a younger someone, perhaps, someone who should know and would remember.

“What looked like that?” I heard myself ask with words that seemed as much escaping from me as chosen.

The old man's gray eyes were deeper, as if washed new by the road. He squinted, assessing me. Then he spoke.

“That bridge back there, the one we just passed.”

I nodded, though I had not seen it.

“That bridge looked just like the one in.....,” the words he wanted to say were reluctant to come forward, resisting the conscription.

“That bridge looked just like the one back in France, outside Lyon where we.....”

He drew his left hand slowly across his face.

“Where we got caught in three days of hell with the Germans.”

I closed the book.

“1944, September.”

“You were.....?”

“I was twenty. Left school to do my duty.”

I couldn't construct the questions I wanted to ask, so I said only “Margaret?” It didn't seem right in my voice, and I felt as though I had profaned, but the old man only shook his head.

“Back home, waiting like all the others, waiting.”

“How long?”

“It was already a year since I had seen her, and then I got this.” He pointed to the long, jagged scar. “My memento from that god-forsaken bridge. I was laid up for a month. They thought I was going to die.”

The old man shook his head slowly and closed his eyes hard.

“By the time I got back home, well,.....you know.....things happen.”

I didn't know, but I think I understood him, and I had a sense for that fear.

“Things happen; things change, even for my Mar.....,” his voice faded and he turned slowly toward the aisle.

The bitter river of his scar glistened once again as he drew a heavy breath, and we both fell silent, the old man with his eyes closed and I watching out the window as twilight deepened around us.

It was perhaps forty minutes before we heard another voice, the driver announcing that we were arriving at the Springfield Station.

I slid the German book back into the backpack.

The old man sat up as straight as he could and watched as the station grew in the window.

There were two people standing outside the building.

“Oh there she is,” he said, shaking his head. “My brother’s other daughter, here to pick me up and take me back to that damn place where they keep me like a stuffed animal in an attic.”

I grinned at that, though he did not.

As the bus pulled closer, the woman leaned forward, scanning the windows for her only uncle’s face.

Beside her was a beautiful young girl with long sandy-brown hair that fell to her shoulders.

I felt the old man leaning toward me, pointing.

“That Jennifer?”

“Yeah, that’s her,” I couldn’t help but smile.

I felt a bony hand grab my left arm.

“She sure is pretty, son,” he smiled. “She sure is.”

With that, the old man drew himself up slowly, joining the other passengers making their way to the front. I stood to enter the line when he was already near the door.

Before he took the first step down from the bus, he turned and offered me a small wave.

“You give that pretty young lady a hug for me, okay?” he called in a scratchy voice.

“I will,” I nodded to him.

His old face wrinkled into a smile of a million lines.

“I most certainly will.”

John P.(Jack) Kristofco has published over six hundred poems and fifty short stories in about two hundred different publications, including: *Folio*, *Rattle*, *Bryant Literary Review*, *Cimarron Review*, *Fourth River*, *Stand*, *The MacGuffin*, *Sierra Nevada Review*, *Blueline*, *Slant*, and *Snowy Egret*. He has published three collections of poetry and is currently putting together a book of short stories. Jack has been nominated for the Pushcart Prize five times. He lives in Highland Heights, Ohio with his wife Kathy.