

THE POET WITH THE CRAZY EYES

By Lev Raphael

I'd often been to poetry readings where the poets adopt a kind of hypnotic singsong that makes you lose sense of where you are in the poem or even what it's about because you feel like you're on a weird, slow, forced march:

"I *walk* into the *room* and *see*. . ."

A few lines of that plodding rhythm and I know I'm in for trouble and do my best not to zone out.

But I'd never seen a poet accompany this rhythm with scratching. And swaying!

Under the obscenely-bright fluorescent lights of our English department's little "studio," which would have been great for interrogating a spy or tormenting a terrorist, Jordan Longfellow, my preppy new officemate of only a few weeks, was scratching first the left side of his neck, then the right, always with the same middle and index fingers of his left hand.

Stranger than that, he swayed side to side as he read, looking like a squat human metronome. He was a chunky 5' 7" topped by a triangular head made pointier by the way he'd gelled his haunted house black hair to a peak. It looked sharp enough to cut you deeply.

There wasn't much of a crowd: a dozen or so dazed-looking students angling for a better grade perhaps, half of them texting half-surreptitiously; a cluster of over-worked adjuncts who, like me, thought showing up gave us a chance of being re-hired for the next semester; and one lone tenured creative writing professor, Betty Besser, the mousy, bitter-mouthed "nature poet" who was widely hated by her students. Or so I heard: she apparently made them cry and called their work

"shit," which she got away with because back in her youth she had won a Guggenheim Fellowship and acted like it gave her license to be cruel. Complaints about her mistreatment of students had gone nowhere. That Guggenheim made her untouchable.

Professor Besser was the discarded lover of a more famous essayist who decided that even a flourishing city in Michigan with a renowned art museum was just too grim and boring and had moved on to some ritzy private college in Florida with a gigantic endowment from the Koch brothers.

Every conversation with Besser felt like an imposition and you could sense her meter running. Sad to say, she was my boss as the associate chair and had once even bullied me into not failing a student who wasn't doing his assignments. Why? Because his parents were alumni donors with a whole building named for them.

But I was grateful when Besser stopped Jordan in mid-poem and announced: "We're running out of time—are there questions for Jordan?" There weren't any, and the audience decamped as quickly as if they'd heard a fire alarm.

Jordan glared at her, then stomped out after the students as if he intended to drag someone, anyone, back in. In a department swamped by rumors, it was said that Besser loathed his poetry even though she was on his doctoral committee.

The studio "space" he'd just flopped in doubled as a break room and usually stank of something that had been microwaved or left to rot in the ancient refrigerator that hummed out of tune, low enough to almost not be heard, but loud enough to make you want to take a sledge hammer to it at times like this. The gigantic posters of Willa

Cather, James Baldwin, and Faulkner made the room seem smaller along with everyone in it.

Do I sound bitter?

You would, too, if you were teaching more students than tenured faculty at barely a third of their salary. And had to show up at all the department events, whether you were interested or not, because you needed to appear "collegial." Which was a crock of shit, given that the backbiting, backstabbing, and bad-mouthing in the department were so intense that one outside reviewer had actually said that, given the chance, the tenured faculty would have blinded their rivals, sewn them up in a sack, and tossed them into any body of water like the Byzantine emperors they thought they were.

The creative writing faculty was the worst since they had been ensconced in academia forever without any sense of what the rapidly changing publishing world was like. They were the kind of folks who used air quotes around "social media" and thought that they were being clever.

But I digress. Back to Jordan, who had what you could only call crazy eyes. They were ice-blue, blank, dead—made worse by his barely-ever blinking and his looking off to the side when he spoke to you. Was he on the autism spectrum somewhere or did he have something to hide?

We shared an office that was the size of a walk-in closet with his desk against the wall and mine perpendicular to it, in front of the grimy window but commanding what little open floor space there was. If you didn't know we were equals in pay, you might assume he was only a graduate student, given how close his desk was to the door.

I'd been there for a year so I had the "better desk," but both of them were gunmetal gray rejects from some other better-funded department that had been refurbished. That was the look of everything on our bleak floor, where English had been moved after the Humanities at our college had been savaged in favor of the almighty STEM program.

The building we'd shared with History and Philosophy had been demolished for a parking structure, its faculty scattered across campus.

I say that we shared an office, but we were never there at the same time for office hours, which was standard operating procedure for anyone who had an officemate. I'd never noticed his swaying and scratching before, but then I hadn't been around him long enough. As he droned on during his reading, I'd had plenty of time to study Jordan and I wondered was all this weirdness nerves, shyness, or the tell-tale signs of a serial killer?

And how had such an indifferent poet made it through the creative writing program at Columbia University?

The next day when I opened my office to sit and wait for students who would never show up, I found a note on my desk that read simply, "Thanks for coming to the reading." Unsigned, it was on greasy paper and I smelled something oily around where I was sitting. I sniffed, searched, and found some half-chewed French fries under my desk. They looked like McDonalds and were slathered with ketchup. They made me think of bloody worms or alien viscera.

I rushed to the studio-cum-kitchen for paper towels and a sponge, scuttled back to my office, grabbed them and went back to the olive green plastic trash can next to the fridge and dumped them in, then washed my hands in the moist and smelly men's room next door. That evening I emailed Jordan as politely as possible, pointing out that we each had our own desks, after all, and could he please not use mine and leave food there.

No reply.

The next day when I stopped by to get some notes for my personal essay writing class, I found a half-eaten burger on my desk and the room stank of fast food. I stared at it as if it were an apparition, scooped the mess into my trash bin,

Calliope

carried that to the same trash can I'd visited the day before and emptied it. I wished I had a room deodorizer to take the smell out of the office but that would have to wait.

Nobody showed up for my second weekly day of office hours that week until Jordan loomed in the doorway, well, as loom-y as you can be at his height.

He was in his regular button-down blue Oxford shirt and chinos, but his eyes weren't focused away. He was glaring at me as he advanced towards my desk. No scratching, no swaying. And his eyes weren't just crazy now—they actually glowed bright red.

So softly that nobody out in the hallway could have possibly heard him, he said, "I'm going to sit wherever the fuck I want to and eat whatever I want to, you piss-ant little creep and, if I want to bring in a whole pizza here and leave it overnight to attract rats and roaches, you are not going to say a word to anyone or I will fucking *gut* you and lick the blood off my knife like it was butter."

There were flecks of foam at the corners of his mouth and I thought *He's a rabid dog*.

But the butter image was so preposterous I was about to laugh until he pulled what looked like a closed switchblade out of his right pants pocket and set it down on the desk, his hands suddenly looking like claws. My vision started to blur as if I were on the edge of a migraine.

"You know what this is?"

I nodded, trying not to push back from the desk, even though it wouldn't have made me any safer in that tiny room. He had me trapped.

Jordan grinned like The Joker, so widely that I could see his unusually sharp canines. "You know what I can do to you?" he asked. "Even without a knife?"

I didn't, not really, but I nodded again, pinned by those blazing eyes, by his inhuman hands, by those freakish teeth, feeling the sweat pool in my butt crack.

"Both these desks are mine now. *This whole office is mine.*"

I voiced no objection because I was afraid he was about to say that I was his too, and that I could end up like those mangled French fries.

And then he smiled, which made him seem more uncanny than ever. "You don't appear to be a very spiritual or religious person." He nodded as if I'd agreed. "So you probably don't believe in the Devil, or any devils." He shrugged. "Oh well, ignorance is bliss, I suppose."

His feral eyes glowed even more intensely than before and I grabbed my backpack, scuttled from my desk to the doorway and out, trying to keep as much distance between us as possible in that tiny space.

In my next classes, I told my students that I would be meeting them in the library for office hours from now on. It didn't matter. They wouldn't come there either, and I hoped Jordan wouldn't follow me.

Just in case, I made sure to sit near as many people as possible.

And a week after Jordan's abortive, boring reading, when Besser was found in a park just north of campus, her body torn apart as if she'd been attacked by a pit bull, I kept my thoughts to myself.

However, I Googled Catholic churches in town. I hadn't been to Mass in years, but I was sure it was time. ††

About The Author

Lev Raphael is the author of twenty-seven books in genres from memoir to mystery. His work has appeared in fifteen languages and he's done hundreds of invited talks and readings in nine different countries. Raphael has seen his fiction and nonfiction appear on university syllabi--which means that he's become homework.