

Minute Steak Gothic

Written by Eli Gottlieb for *Caliban* magazine, published in 1988

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The woman lived with the boy, who was Large. He had a big head, particularly. Also his face was of a peculiar whiteness, beyond pale, which summoned to the minds of onlookers an image akin to fever, or a certain cheese.

His mother loved him.

His mother, whose name was Naal, held him now in front of her and gazed into his face. What do you *want*? She said emphatically as a minute pandemonium erupted of doors flying open and feet tramping stairs while children left their schoolrooms and music lessons and thronged the absolutely level streets of the city heading home. In groups of three and four they moved without hesitation. Their clean foreheads reflected the fire of the sun. Their noses came out declaratively into the air. The way their hair started in fine arcs above their brows was reassuring of something, absolutely.

I wanna go out, Large said. But his mother merely held him firmly, frowning at him, even though he was a very big boy, and could conceivably have wrenched away.

You let me go out, he said, and reaching forward he silently grabbed a handful of his mother's loose cheek, twisting it until it came away from her face.

When she finally let go, Large ran grinning through the front door, stretched out flat on the grass of the lawn and lay in the sun. It was a spring day and the elevation of the lawn was mild. His brain moved slowly around his body. The house above him stood on the uppermost section of the single sustained hill of town, open utterly to the elements and particularly dramatic at such moments as when lightning dropped from the sky in brilliant parts, or a storm blew up with the big rippling tureen—shaped clouds which had always reminded the boy of a parade of some sort, even though he'd never seen one, nor even imagined it.

Large rolled heavily over on his stomach and put his face down among the spears, snuffing in the mash of roots and earth. He blew a variously toned noise from his mouth. Often the noise began as a kind of whistle before shading off to something more bodied and tonic, like a hum. Or it conflated violently from rushing air to a hiss. He plucked a grass blade and began flicking it with thumb and forefinger, making fast small lights in the sunshine in front of his face and smiling in the way of nearly a real smile for how far the skin rode back on his bones. When he jerked his head up suddenly, his body followed. He stood crouched, staring a moment into the next yard, making his noise, and it was only as he straightened up and began running that he slowly closed his eyes.

When Large a moment later smashed broadside into his Oriental neighbor it was the velocity of Mr. Wang's withdrawal in space that made everything in him come forward at speed: his mouth, his glasses and especially his arms which he held

imploringly in front of him a moment while he sat in the air and seemed to figure, seemed to look sadly at the boy from his height before falling down all at once and lying very still.

Large made a wheeing sound and bent over the prone body, watching as Mr. Wang began faintly to make noises, began effortfully to bubble and wheeze and swallow. His thick black glasses had flown from his face and lay in the grass nearby. Large bent over and picked them up. Both lenses were intact and slipping them on was like diving with your eyes open into a pool for the way they held a long curving vista along which houses and trees lay combed backwards like hair. Fancy words, as a result, were coming into Large's head for the first time in a long while when "You please help me!" said Mr. Wang, before turning his head slowly to one side and groaning. Large, looking, made a faint noise behind his nose and fled.

Later that evening he lay in the bathtub staring at the new bruise colors on his thigh while he listened to his mother's voice struggle up the stairs. The voice bore his name, he knew. It turned like a key in his ear to make his eyes open and his heart slam. He looked down at his body, at his big body lying sunk in the water. Instead of listening to the voice, Large bent closer to the bubbles where they grew upwards at the entry of the falling water into the calm. From up close, this water with its ropes of bubbles and noise could be all there was. It could make a circular sound in the middle of which he was a listener only. Also the water seemed to have something to say to his body.

His big, white, hairless body.

His mother's voice came again, came added to the sound of the tap to make a doubled roaring in his head. He played beneath the hot water bodily, dragging his whole heavy length below the surface.

Probably his mother's voice went on, coming up out of her body, in search of his.