The Great Recession

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Argotist Ebooks

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Inelegant

Her mind, she tells herself, is a Center
City mind. It's connected (somehow) to
the whole world. She still goes into Joan
Shepp on Walnut, even if she can't buy
anything. The fabrics, the cuts of the
dresses— this is who she is. Somewhere
in the back of her mind, she knows she's
been cut like a piece of fabric; & the hands
that cut her have made her inelegant.
To handle this cloth with dishrag
hands, is to wade into the knee-deep
sogginess of the 'burbs, & freeze like jell-o.

Abington Night

I keep imagining Abington at night.
The sense in the air is this: we can't
be as far down as we are. The guy
tending bar here (in this dreamed-
of place) is an old friend. His angle
on the world (he's been married and
divorced) is satire. But satire depends
on people being willing to laugh. And
if I still sit in my car in the parking
lot of Abington High leering
at girls, I can still laugh at that too.
The Dairy Queen on Limekiln Pike
remains the same. The girls still like
ice-cream in the summer-time, right?

Fellating the Pickle

Everyone knows she has about two years
to live. The blonde babe who runs shipments
sits smoking at the Esquire Bar with a guy
who still has the rat-tails he had at Cheltenham.
How do you behave when you have two
years to live? Well, you might try making
your body a weapon. You might bop around
shaking your hips so that no one might
touch. Or fellating the pickle which comes
with your sandwich. You might. But as you
dance on nothingness, someone watching
you is also watching his watch.

Greeks

"They pulled a gun on him at the diner
down the street. He was halfway through
his burger. The Greeks who own the place
didn't care. They got bought off a long
time ago. I eat there for free sometimes.
He probably eats there for free too. They
don't play sides, that family. So if you
want a place that's your place (as we
used to have), you better have more
money than the other guys, which we
don't anymore. And it'll take you a year to nail this guy too."

Sports-talk

This guy sticks to sports because the team
makes a game of kicking his ass, he said.
It's not like I didn't believe— but he only
sticks to sports (I thought) in the end because
the rules are right there in his head. And the
guy who lives out of his car and has the radio
set to "Sports-talk" all the time deserves to be
shot. So: there was more than one game we
were watching that night. This guy came in twice.
But if he won't play by league rules, he's out.

Church Road Pt.1

Her big thing these days is cars. She loves
to watch the bling ones (Mercedes, BMWs)
as she sits in the passenger seat. It always
happens, at least once a day on Church
Road, that she sees one she wants so much
she has to pinch herself to stop the ache.
In any case, her Mom tries to be forbearing,
but they always wind up fighting. Money
is just too tight, and it's running out. But
she's good at getting encouraging comments
on Facebook. And if she occasionally gets
one from someone with the right car, her night
is made. She can't feel the gears lock.

Church Road Pt. 2 (Krispy Kremes)

This man runs a high-level corporation,
he sidles down the street in a leisure suit,
I greet him and he greets me, does that
make me superior? Am I jealous? I ask
you this because I'm questioning things
I've never questioned before. You go
through life, go through certain motions
(never question things), then one day
find yourself belly-up, and wonder what
your life amounts to. I still have the
Mercedes, and as I glide down Church
Road the response is a platitude. I stop
for gas in Northeast Philly, Krispy Kremes— hip, right?

Walls and Ears

A period like this, he writes on his blog,
can make one question one's relationship
with language. There's only one word for
"bankrupt." "Insolvency," he supposes,
works, but it isn't drastic enough. What is
drastic enough is this— popcorn dinners in
here, this squat in Northern Delaware, nobody
watching, "I can't think therefore I am not,"
and a sinking sensation of how the human
ego shuts out all light. He was a professor,
he says, to no one in particular, with a teaching edge.

Fetching

Scabs, sores, pus— that's all she can think
about, as she walks around in circles. But
(of course) that's just my perspective. I gave
her what I could (what she needs is money).
So two bodies are cramped in a crowded movie
theater, watching a foreign film about the
lives of terrorists. They're both tuned out,
but have been told the film is excellent by
several reliable sources, who consider them
decent dogs— loyal, anxious, fetching.

Wet Dream

He walks around in a bilious, towering rage—
he can't even stand the teenager selling him
cigarettes. Nor can he stand the stacks of
newspapers, the freezers full of soda, the
rows of gum and mints. Everything here
was made in a factory, as was he, only to
find in the last epoch of his life he was
alone, the shelf he was on bare but for
him. The teenager behind the counter
laughs at this old grump, because his
father is even worse, who can't afford smokes.

Rolling and Falling

He keeps up the pretense— we're rolling here.
Any press would have to be good press, just
because it's us. It's funny how, on rainy nights,
he feels a sense of degradation about the life
he leads; that there's nowhere to fall, but he
keeps jumping. He has dreams where he falls
forever. You can roll and fall at the same time,
a voice tells him. He hears voices which tell
him misty things. Especially in the middle of
the night, when scum glistens on the walls of the squat.

Peanut Butter and Rabies

The worn woman with glasses, doing charity
work, wants some charity herself. The nights
at this place have been long— the kids get
disgruntled, people aren't bringing in as much
food as they used to. If it's another peanut
butter and jelly night, she has to bear the brunt.
All the kids see is a half-empty plate. Her
husband won't come anymore— the atmosphere
is too strained. The kids, she thinks in spite of
herself, are like a bunch of dogs with rabies.
And, as she can't see, they think the same of her.

Shit-Face

Or maybe you'd like to condescend
to inform us of your whereabouts
the night she got mugged? Where
were you? If you could only see how
raising a child alone out here can
break you down, corrupt you, leave
you with nothing, you wouldn't have
taken the money and disappeared.
We have enough money left for a
year and then we hit the road in the
old car, looking for you. She'll be
done school by then and if she can
find a job when we settle, hallelujah.
If not, lawyer up, shit-face. You're ours.

Wine and Spirits Shop

I look out through the glass façade—
a parking lot, cars, the whole suburban
patina. It gives me the flu in my old
age: these people, almost all of them,
have more money than me. And less
to show for it (I see) inside. I've seen
them live and die for twenty years here.
It never gets any easier. But look at me:
I work at a wine and spirits shop on this
strip-mall, so I can keep my thoughts
in any order I want, no one's going to notice.
I notice. I count to me. I count myself.
I can count. That's a twenty and a one, sir.

Sports-Bar Crowd

Let's stay on the surface, please.
Let's make our lives as compact
and lemon-shaped as a football. As I
sit among the sports-bar crowd, I
feel compact and lemon-shaped. I
am, in fact, being squeezed into someone's
beer. The whole pulpy story he's telling—
the hook-up never happened. I know
it for a fact. I've got (as ever) the goods
myself, I just doesn't use them. That's the
big treat for me— not using them, busting
hooks-up; getting drunk and not fucking.

Chinese Water Torture

Chinese water torture: that's how it
is today with these girls, these schools,
the IRS, everyone. He thinks this on
his bike, as he swerves through the
city streets. Last year he got hit: broke
his shoulder. He was still insured then.
Now, he's forced to just risk it. Two
of the other messengers he "grew up"
with are now deceased. He scattered
one of their ashes into the Delaware
on Christmas night. Then, he had his turkey.

Under the Knife

A razor was placed on a table outside—
someone handed it in. From that moment
forward, everyone at this Starbucks (the
staff) were considered "under the knife."
They were all young enough to be my
kids, and they all got hit before we could
make any arrests. I still get my coffee there
every day— the replacements are (as usual)
the same kids all over again. The point (for
me) is that this is a far uglier world than most
people believe it to be. The older you get, the harder it is to take.

The Last Decoy

"After the last decoy, there is no other."
This is what he wants inscribed on his
head-stone; then he remembers; with the
life he's led, there won't be a head-stone.
He stands like an ass outside the Kimmel
Center, avoiding the rain beneath the
concrete awning, made up to look twenty
years younger than he is. It's a random
assignment, handed down from a random
place— but one (he assumes) above him.
Broad Street glitters in slickness as the day
wanes and streetlights switch on. He'll be
out here a long time in the rain.

Anchor Man

Every day it's the same routine—
a few of these, a few puffs on this
or that. He reads from the prompter,
high as a kite. Everything he reads is,
as he knows, pure nonsense and even
high, he can't get comfortable with the
situation. It's all too obvious— not
that anyone's out there to notice. The
perks of local fame aren't much anymore.
But they drop the pills and the pot into
his lap to arrange the emptiness and
deadness of things. He seems to see,
receding into a greasy gray sunset,
some notion of an ideal he once had,
at least sometimes. The smile freezes on.

American X

From inside the American art scene, he
used to think to himself (especially New
York), you can only take things so far if
you're not backed up; and (praise the Lord)
he was. But he only did the requisite
amount of dealing, and no more. He
actually cared, here and there, about
what he was creating. He was mordant
and morbid in the right way, the art-
press said. But the "X" someone
scrawled on a napkin and left on his
night-stand last night suggest something
mordant to his will. Isn't that funny?

Romance

She was standing, in the dream, at the
end of a landing strip which emptied
into an open field of grass in pitch-
black night; her baby-doll dress was
pitch-black too; and, as I approached
her, I saw her dyed-black hair was
cut into a fringe over her forehead. I
told her who she was for me and she
told me the same; and some light,
maybe the moon, shone down on us.
Was there life left to bring into the
world? Was that our light against the
pitch blackness? For better or worse,
it would have to be. Our arms were entwined.

Philadelphia Macabre

I saw it on the news— one of the trashy
tenements at 22nd and Market collapsed
last night, and it even made national
headlines. As far as I'm concerned,
everyone I've ever loved was in that
tenement, every dream I ever dreamt
was squashed in the falling concrete,
any future I might've had was dust
before the entire edifice had fallen—
now it's a hole in the ground, a hole
in the street, a hole in our heads. Now
I'm squashed myself into a suburb,
choked by claustrophobia, remembering
walking that block late at night, stoned,
everything concealed as a cut I couldn't notice.

Mouth Breathers

They keep you running in circles, these
hacks, and what they want to express (as
artists) is the nothingness of everything—
particularly, who we think we are. When
they see your games, what they Zen master is
your sense that you exist. But they don't
do it with any intelligence; they can't
take detail, complexity, nuance. As I'm
chained to decoying against these mouth-
breathers, I feel that gnawing sense of
nothingness and don't know what to do
with it, except to say something. My own
mouth-breathing superiors can't bust me
for doing so. Or, that's what I dare to hope.

From London with Love

The Internet guy from the United States
is one she likes. Her and her friends sit in
Hyde Park diddling with their smart-phones,
and she always picks him to linger on. He
has a blog about international politics, and
one about culture. He's a Harvard guy, too.
The twist in the tale, for her, is that he's
actually decent to look at. She plucks the
banjo to his Google image search. But she's
a right ugly slag, and who she's got isn't
much. If he discovered what she was up to,
he'd beat her senseless, then hop a plane to
Boston to top him. Her secret is, she likes Americans
better. At least when they lie, they do it with teeth.

Ideals

The guys in the Harvard administration buildings
have had enough. Where's the old good guy system,
folks? Despite our Ivy League pedigree, the system
used to be simple: you scratch my back, etc. Not
all of us have touch-the-ceiling IQs. We represent
Harvard where it counts— where the money is.
You want genius beyond that, screw you, buddy.
The problem is that tax-guys, parents, everyone's
starting to ask more questions. Even the guys
who get cuts want more information. What we're
under orders not to reveal never changes much.
Now they want us to live up to our "ideals." Ideals?

Space

On his daily walk down Fayette Street,
he senses something he's never sensed
before— space. With everyone cleared
out (into death, probably), he owns the
ground he treads on, and the space he
takes up is his own. That's his compensation,
as an older man, for the misery and
deprivations of the Great Recession—
space. He feels the cosmos, how vast it
is, and as he stands in a short line at CVS
to pick up his prescriptions, the cosmos
has in it something eternal, which will
continue with or without him, or us.
Emptiness is what you make it.

She Drives a Ford

She sees no reason not to flaunt what
she's got. The way her mind plays around
with the idea of dying is that it doesn't.
She just assumes that if she is going to
die this summer, obsessing about it won't
help. She's more obsessed with the new
pills they've been throwing at her. As for
her dude, forget it. He doesn't have much
left. When she pulls into the Whitemarsh
Shopping Center, the sunlight still feels
fresh on her face. She can still afford a
macchiato. It's true, everyone notices:
she still looks good. And the full tank in her Ford is her ass backed.

A Dog's Life

They're letting him write something which
he knows can't be published. They're also
watching him (literally) as he writes. When
the family you come from is not a family
but a FAMILY, he writes, and then loses
heart. The quarantine's gone on for three
weeks. They feed him pot and pills, but no
girls. They've mastered his eyes, which he
thought might be tricky for them. His eyes
are a dog's eyes, which yearn to be put down,
and to sleep. He's never got used to thinking
differently, and if he can't write he might as
well be dead. But he sits and waits for someone to shoot him.

Lightning Storm

He has his car parked where they can't
see him. Though the angle is strange, he
can see the two kids, about thirteen, a
boy and a girl, in the dug-out holding
hands. He's here for a reason other than
them. But something about the vista of the
two kids in the dug-out brings tears to his
eyes. I'm human, he thinks to himself, I'm
a human being. Do I belong to the human
race? It's begun to thunder and lightning—
the three of them are all trapped (he thinks) differently.
For once, he likes something past himself.

Mini-Mart

What happens in the Mini-Mart stays in
the Mini-Mart. When they get the call from
the guys at Weis, and one shift takes over
for another, everything which needs to move
moves. They have once-a-week regular
customers who want in on the action. This
summer its really starting to swing. The
problem is that the cops have figured out
the whole game. Off-duty cops will fill up
their tanks here just to watch these amateurs.
The D.A. guys are watching the cops watch,
and, for the moment, everyone's happy.
The head manager used to be a professional,
knows the whole game too, but he's just there for the paycheck.

Ridge Pike

To someone stationed in the parking lot of
the Whitemarsh Shopping Center, it's shocking
how light the traffic is on Ridge Pike on a
Saturday morning. He's got his coffee and the
radio's on. It's crisp and sharp— soon to be
a hot day. But he was depending on seeing
three of what he'll now only see one of. His
mind wanders— this place didn't look that
different twenty years ago. His routines haven't
changed. If things go faster now, it's just because
he's older. And there's not a cloud in the sky.

Morning Train

Standing outside the Conshohocken Station
on a summer morning, having spent $10.50
on a round-trip ticket to Market East as she's
been forced to do twice a week, she gets
nervous about having to shit or piss on the
train (she's got coffee), and if she shits her
panties they will very much notice, but nothing
can be done— a gig is a gig. The photo shoots
make her wonder who's left to jerk off to her
feisty little parts, what fourteen-year-old
intercepts the catalogues in the mail to lock
himself in the bathroom. Turns out, she
boards the train and does have to shit.
Welcome to half an hour in Hades. Thanks, Mom.

Yellow Cab Company

His own language has no words for some of
these things Americans talk about. He doesn't
bother to talk to his passengers anymore. Nor
does he e-mail his family back home. He only
thinks how to up the ante at playing the video
games he likes. The games allow him to express
how he feels— here's who he shoots, here's
who he spares. He connects to others with the
game, too. His supervisor thinks of him as
mid-level; not one of the best or worst. He
eats modestly and sensibly. One day, he might
be able to afford bigger speakers, and a real bed, if he scrounges.

Crumpet with Teeth

Someone actually bothered to ask him this:
why does the media like fake people better?
The answer, as he knows, is simple: because
they're easier to control. In truth, he said
nothing in reply, just left. He was trying to
pick her up: crumpet, they call it in England.
Since when is there crumpet with teeth? He
browses the mags where he is: the piss-on-mes,
the shit-on-mes. He does feel shit on. Conquest
has never been easy for him (though God
knows he's been called "striking"), and now
his position is a disreputable one. He'll take
the black-with-big-tits one, please.

Acknowledgments

As/Is— "Space"

The Four Quarters— "Church Road Pt. 1," "Rolling and Falling," "Shit-Face," "Wine and Spirits Shop"

On Barcelona— "Chinese Water Torture," "Fetching," "Fellating the Pickle," "Peanut Butter and Rabies"

Otoliths— "American X," "Anchor Man," "Wet Dream," "Limekiln Pike," "Abington Night"

Red Room— "The Last Decoy"

About the Author

Adam Fieled is a poet based in Philadelphia. His books and e-books include *Opera Bufa* (Otoliths, 2007), *Beams* (Blazevox, 2007), *When You Bit...* (Otoliths, 2008), *Apparition Poems* (Blazevox, 2010), *Equations* (Blue & Yellow Dog *Press*, 2011), *Cheltenham* (Blazevox, 2012), *The Posit Trilogy* (Argotist Ebooks, 2017), and *The White Album* (Ungovernable Press 2009/Eratio Editions 2018), and he has work in *Jacket*, *Cordite*, *Great Works*, *Tears in the Fence*, *Poetry Salzburg Review*, the *fourW Anthology* from Charles Sturt University, and the *&Now Awards Anthology* from Lake Forest College Press. A magna cum laude graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, he also holds an MFA from New England College and an MA from Temple University.