

## Heavier D 2012

The penultimate story in *Protracted Adolescence*, my first story collection (at this point it's something I can't seem to finish, think *Chinese Democracy*), "Heavy D Wants You Raw" is, like most of the other stories I've written for the collection, a Bildungsroman (is there anything more execrable than exegesis? Please forgive me).

*Protracted Adolescence* is a collection of stories about a young man, Judah Epstein (yes, a fictionalized version of the undersigned, I have no need to pretend otherwise), a document of his adventures aquatic and narcotic in Continental Europe and San Francisco during the first half of the 1990s.

It was 1992 through 1996, to be exact, and I think I was stomping about San Francisco at about the same time as Dave Eggers, but since then I've written far less than he has and earned far less money. Is there anything more painful to witness than the struggles of a poor Jew? I'm fine with it, but I do feel sorry for my long-suffering wife.

It's 1996 (it was sort of 1994, actually, but for the sake of a collection in which the stories progress in chronological order...), and young Judah Epstein (not to be confused with Judah Ben-Hur, his namesake and, to this author, the greatest of all fictional Jews – greater, even, than David Lee Roth) is working as a paralegal for a plaintiffs' attorney, chasing skirts (or at least fantasizing about the chase), smoking enough dope to have perhaps delayed the Persians at Thermopylae, and surfing Ocean Beach just below Golden Gate Park.

Yes, I was doing the same while living in an old building on the southeast corner of Irving and La Playa, one block north of the N Judah terminus and Java Beach, which was pretty much the only café in the Outer Sunset at the time. I was also attending the MA program at San Francisco State, later trading up and into the MFA program, but I decided, in "Heavy D Wants You Raw" and in every other story in *Protracted Adolescence*, to spare Judah (and you, Gentle Reader) that particular experience. It's not to bury any shame, it's just that I'm not that hot for writing about writing and writers. There are a few great things that tackle the subject, particularly *A Moveable Feast*, Fitzgerald's "Crazy Sunday" and a good bit of Frederick Exley's *A Fan's Notes*, but a creative writing program is, as the good people at Starbucks might put it, the delivery method and not the drug. In some circles it's shameful to even pursue an MA or MFA in creative writing, so to write fiction about attending creative writing classes? Nein. Verboten.

Judah meets a much larger Jew (think Liam Neeson), Boom, a fellow surfer and druggy bon vivant – if you want more surfing, pot-smoking Jews than this, your next stop will have to be Long Island, or Tel Aviv. Boom is also a scam artist and a petty criminal. If this were a Western, he'd be a cardsharp and a horse thief, but he wouldn't be a gunslinger; if this were a mob movie, he'd be stealing and fencing goods, maybe doing a bit of loan-sharking, but he wouldn't whack anybody...He's more raconteur than racketeer, more likely to surf with the fishes than sleep with them.

Boom is one of Judah's clients, the plaintiff in a rather specious slip and fall case. The two become friends, driven together in the howling wilderness of San Francisco by their many commonalities: surfing, lapsed Judaism and the metropolitan New York area which is the provenance of both.

Without giving away the ending, but desperate to demonstrate how terribly literate I am, I wrote Boom as Falstaff to Judah's Prince Hal. Like Judah, Boom is based on an actual person (did I just sort of describe myself as an actual person? My therapist will see this as real progress). What I remember about the real-life Boom and the time we spent together is how un-tethered I felt. To be 26, long-haired and drunk and high, surfing in the morning, partying deep into so many nights...it was the most freedom I'll ever know, and perhaps the hardest I'll ever laugh. I had neither a cell phone nor an email address. I went to record stores and bought records. I knew people who knew people who sold pot. For a few years back then, living across the street from Ocean Beach, sharing a small room with a surfboard and a lot of books and records, it seemed as if most of my odd and adolescent dreams had come true. It was bye-bye, New Jersey, we were airborne.

Another thing that strikes me about "Heavy D Wants You Raw" (for fuck's sake, I don't think Salinger ever said even half this much about *Nine Stories*) occurred to me soon after I met the girl who became my wife and we moved in together, way back in the autumn of 2000. Like another of the other longer stories in *Protracted Adolescence*, "An Australian Girl", "Heavy D Wants You Raw" is about an intense – albeit brief – male friendship, the type of friendship that seems to be one of the hallmarks of adolescence.

Before I met my wife, soon after I turned 32 and got sober (Yawn! Again!), my male friendships were the center of my life. They were partnerships, brotherhoods, buddy movies...I don't know about other marriages, but I know mine is rather hectic (especially now that its frenetic little world spins on that most beautiful of axes, my son, Leontios) and doesn't leave much space for the type of friendships I cultivated, that I lived in, when I was younger. In this regard, "Heavy D Wants You Raw" is an elegy for the particular friendship the story fictionalizes, and for the friendships I was lucky enough to live in throughout my youth and young adulthood.

As an elegy, "Heavy D Wants You Raw" will ultimately reside in a collection I envisage as a series of elegies for a failed first love and for the youth in which it blossomed and, thanks to my touch, withered and died. I carried its dried bits of petal with me, its dust and its scent, for a long time (and still do). "Heavy D Wants You Raw" is the only piece in *Protracted Adolescence* that wasn't dipped in this tincture, and maybe the only one that's any raucous fun.

"Heavy D Wants You Raw" is, so far, my most successful attempt at what I've termed the "epic short story". Sometime after I moved to San Francisco, in the summer of 1992, I purchased a used copy of Edmund Wilson's *Memoirs of Hecate County*; I only knew of it because of the second of Frederick Exley's three novels, *Pages from a Cold Island*, which mentions Wilson and this particular book, Wilson's favorite of his oeuvre. It's an unjustly unheralded collection of six interrelated stories told in chronological order by the same narrator, who is also the protagonist. With a story or two in excess of 100 pages, it's tempting to say, "this is a novella"

or “this one’s a novel”, but they aren’t – they’re stories, and epic stories at that. And yes, a big wave or an astonishingly good day of surfing are often described as “epic”, so I’m sure you can see how this essay takes shape here, sculpted by its collision with the mighty sandbar of Edmund Wilson, and I imagine you’ll make it to the beach before I do.

The “most epic” story in *Memoirs of Hecate County* is the exquisite, devastating “The Princess With the Golden Hair”, one of the most beautiful, fearless, precise and powerful pieces of American fiction ever written – call it a short story, call it a novella, call it a novel, it doesn’t matter. Clocking in at about 205 pages, it says more about class, gender and sex than just about anything I’ve ever read, with the exception of the novels of the mighty Jean Rhys, and Wilson, for “The Princess With the Golden Hair” alone, stands upon a marble pedestal in my pantheon, a mighty edifice that includes J.P. Donleavy, Frederick Exley, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Ernest Hemingway, Jean Rhys, Philip Roth and J.D. Salinger. My wife, an interior designer, would describe my predilection for these authors, with the exception of Fitzgerald and Rhys, as mid-century modern.

Like most people, I tend to read like a chicken pecking for bits of feed here and there about the yard. Over the past few years I’ve fallen in love with Junot Diaz’s *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao*, which was a revelation, stunning and genius and so assured it read as if it had been chiseled on a stone tablet and handed to Moses, and with *Slaughterhouse 5*, which I found compact, hilarious and perfect. I also read *1984*, which I sort of dallied with in high school (if you can dally with such a book). At the time I was zipping around one of New Jersey’s posher suburbs in my mother’s t-roof Lancia Zagato (a Fiat product), as if I were starring in my own John Hughes movie, and I was of course immature and emotionally and intellectually walled-off from the kind of suffering and despair Orwell packed into every page of *1984*. Other recent literary pleasures include *Catch-22* (again, given short shrift in high school), Joan Didion’s *Play It as It Lays* and Rick Moody’s debut, *Garden State*.

These brief affairs aside, I find when I’m writing that I return to “The Princess With the Golden Hair”, Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and “Winter Dreams”, pretty much everything Salinger wrote (although I confess I usually paddle around or over *Raise High the Roof Beam, Carpenters* and *Seymour: An Introduction*) and Donleavy’s *The Beastly Beatitudes of Balthazar B* which, while not as seamless a novel as *The Ginger Man*, is just as funny, twice as sad and equal to it – perhaps even surpassing it – in the pound-for-pound beauty of its prose.

Other than its length, “Heavy D Wants You Raw” takes little, if anything, from “The Princess with the Golden Hair” and, other than the friendship between two boys at its core and my effort to craft the loveliest prose of which I’m capable, not much from Donleavy. In assaying a description of the bullfight of surfing, particularly as it felt, for me, in the cold and overpowering surf of Ocean Beach, much of “Heavy D Wants You Raw” is a Hemingway reference. I imagine, had he been so inclined, Hemingway would have made significant and lasting contributions to the literature of surfing.

Ah, the literature of surfing. This was what I was thinking when I wrote “Heavy D Wants You Raw” and “Roadside Death Marker”, the story that closes *Protracted Adolescence* – I wanted to

write “literary fiction” (Heaven forfend!) about surfing. I wanted to write about how it feels to surf, and to surf Ocean Beach, the oceanic equivalent of running with the bulls. I wanted to describe as viscerally and as joyfully as I could what surfing felt like for me, the terror and the ecstasy. What it felt to be drugged with it, to be drenched.

I write this now as a retired surfer. I haven’t surfed Ocean Beach since 1999 and, except for a few lovely afternoons in Bradley Beach and Long Beach Island, New Jersey, one of the great loves of my life now dwells deep in the suburbs of my affections. Thinking back on how much I loved it, how much I craved it (it seemed like an addiction at the time, and I’m sure any surfer worth his salt will concur), I can’t believe I’m not living across the street from Waikiki or on a beach somewhere in the Caribbean or Morocco. These days I reside in Nicosia, Cyprus, in the Eastern Mediterranean, 30 minutes from the beach – the nearest decent wave is probably Tel Aviv. What’re you gonna do? *Omnia mutantur, nos et mutamur in illis* (all things are changing, and we are changing with them).

Nothing else feels like surfing. Nothing. There’s no sexual experience I can equate with it, no drug that can duplicate it. It feels like flying, like superhero, best-dream-you’ve-ever-had flying, with the additional, sublime joy of being soaked through with seawater (I still can’t stay out of the water, even here in Cyprus, where the sea is usually as flat as a bedspread). Writing, once in a while, feels a bit like surfing, in that the best moments I have, when I’m writing, feel like flight.

I’m sure there are people who will tell you they disappear when they write. They slip out of time, become someone else, paper imaginary walls...it’s different for me. When I write, it’s as if I reappear. It’s when I remember myself. Vaporous, I become solid again, purposeful. My scattered stars form distinct constellations and, for however long I’m bent over my journal or seated at my desk, they hold their place in the sky. I want to say that when I write I’m at the height of my powers, but it’s a cliché and a lie in my case, since writing is my only power – I’m a decent photographer and a passable surfer, but only when I’m writing do I feel like I can levitate, bend metal with my mind, see through women’s clothing...I can cook, but it’s mostly dad foods – omelets, big bowls of pasta, soups, French toast and pancakes...come by anytime. I’m usually home, especially in the mornings before we leave for daycare, and at bath time, which is almost always 8:00 pm.

Since the birth of my beloved Leontios I’ve mostly been a stay-at-home dad and a hausfrau, and lately I write about as often as I surf. I change a lot of diapers, I make a lot of formula. I bite and kiss Leo (a lot), and I tell him things like “No cat food. We’ve already had this conversation”. Before he falls asleep in my arms I tell him, “we love you so much. You are our little miracle. You are our joy”. Life’s been worse.

Did I leave anything out? How about the night Heavy D supposedly picked up two prostitutes and some crack and holed up in a motel room somewhere in the Mission? Sometime late that evening he sent his companions out to buy more crack – a bit short of cash, he gave them his ATM card and his pin code. Would you believe they never came back? I’m sure they were pretty disappointed, though, once they accessed his account and saw what his balance must have been at the time.

You have to leave some things on the cutting room floor, don't you? Like I said, I doubt I'll ever laugh that hard again, but omnia mutantur. Lately I feel like we're failing as a civilization and as a species, and I'm sitting in the stands, waiting for the hot dog guy. It's 2012, I'm 43, and I haven't even started to save the world. When?

I haven't seen "Boom" in about 15 years. He's probably in Florida, but who knows? Could I find him again? In an age of Facebook and Google, it probably wouldn't be too hard, but why rouse him from the depths of youth – his and mine? I'll leave him there, young and handsome and just a bit dangerous, reckless and unabashed, and I'll leave him there with his boots on. There's no such thing as an elegy for the resurrected. Why exhume him from the sweet earth of myth?