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# The Long Thoughts

Stuart Dybek

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# The Long Thoughts

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Stuart Dybek

All the while they argued the Vulcan continued to page through a beautiful, leather-bound volume of Goya's etchings he'd borrowed from the Art Institute library. The dim, dirty-shaded lamplight yellowed the pages. It yellowed their whole cramped living room, turning it brown in the corners. Between the peeling wallpaper chrysanthemums and worn florals of the carpet it was one of the most depressing rooms I knew. The blinds were always drawn.

"Christ!" Vulk said, "I'd give anything to draw like that." The etching showed a bunch of human parts hacked off and hanging from a tree.

"Quit dreaming," his mother said, "why don't you face the fact that you ain't even got the talent to pass half your regular subjects instead of trying to make your friends think you're some kind of genius. You think they believe that bullshit? They're laughing at you behind your back and getting ahead while you make a big, damn fool out of yourself."

Vulk's head fell to the side looking too big for his short body. He opened his mouth, let his jaw gape and his tongue loll out, shaking his hair down into his face, and rolling his eyes. "I am destroyed by your profundity," he said.

"I'd start to worry if I could look so convincingly retarded," his mother told him.

Vulk just sat there flipping pages and making lip farts. "You musta done something irregular when I was in the womb," he said.

"You didn't get your low IQ from me!"

"Low my ass," he said, "it's 140."

"How the hell would you know what it is?"

"Because I snuck in the office and looked up my file after you scared the shit out of me with that IQ bullshit. And I don't have a distended anus either, by the way." He turned to me, "You know she used to tell me my anus was distended from sitting on the toilet so much. You must be some fucken nurse," he said to her.

"Your son just said FUCK in here again," she yelled into the darkened dining room. "He's playing the big shot in front of his friends—as usual."

"Yaaah!" Vulk yelled at her, "Watch it! The Specter's looking up your dress."

His mother shot a glance over to where I sat on the floor, catching me hastily looking away as if I really had been looking up her dress. She glared at Vulk, her eyes magnified behind her white, cat-framed glasses like an attacking owl's. I rolled over on my side under the coffee table trying not to laugh, remembering how their fighting used to embarrass me—now it seemed so funny it ached.

"Shit-ass," she hissed at him. "Matt, are you deaf?" she hollered, "I said Robert's going too far in here again."

Through the legs of furniture I could see Vulk's father outlined against the space heater in the darkened dining room, watching the portable TV. The set spread its pale glow over the dirty supper dishes that surrounded it on the table. The blue flames of the space heater were reflected on the screen.

"Bob, how many times do I have to ask you not to talk to your mother like that?" His voice sounded even wearier than usual. "Take it easy on my ulcer, will you?"

Screams filtered through the hoofbeats and gunshots in the dining room. They weren't coming from the TV set. "Gerald and Bonnie are fighting in the kitchen again," Vulk's father groaned. "Oh Jesus Christ!"

"Goddammit!" his mother said and stormed out of the room in the direction of the screaming. It got worse. We could hear Vulk's father going ooh, oooohh in the dark.

"Come in here—you gotta hear this," Vulk said. We went into his room. It was right off the front door. It must have been an entrance closet at one time but Vulk had squeezed a mattress into it. It filled the entire room and curled up at the corners. One side of it was heaped with paperbacks that almost reached the ceiling. Most of them were on psychology but there was a lot of science fiction too. On the other side a row of shelves looked ready to pull out of the plaster and bury what remained of the mattress in an avalanche of flattened paint tubes, tempera bottles, brushes, crayons, an infinite variety of stuff. The walls looked like a palette splotted and smeared with swirling rainbows, half-observed slogans, unfinished sketches. On the ceiling he'd painted a hawk-like creature wearing long underwear and a cape with a huge V for Vulcan on his chest. We sat down on each side of the record player in the sunken middle of the mattress. "Listen to this," he said, "I got it out of the library today. Shit, I didn't even know they let you take out records."

"What've they got?"

"Mostly classical."

I gave him the finger. He was on this big classical music kick and I didn't like a lot of it.

"No, listen to this," he said, "you'll dig it."

"What is it?"

"Debussy. Piano music."

"As long as it isn't that fucken opera. At least turn it up."

About one a.m. his father came to the door in his underwear and asked us to turn it down. Vulk insisted that it had to be played loud or we'd miss the dynamics so his father told us if we didn't like it to get the hell out of the house, which we did.

It was early in January and the street and trees were pale with snow. The cold seemed to intensify the quiet. Now and then a car would grind by, its snow chains jangling. We walked along past the button factory and then down the dark block past the church and grammar school we had both attended. The spire of the church threw a shadow over the street. The neighborhood didn't look so bad at night under the snow.

"Let's go see if Jim is still up," Vulk said.

We turned the corner walking down the street I lived on. Jim lived about fifteen blocks away. He had a car that sometimes worked. It was a long walk and my ears were already beginning to feel brittle.

"Did you tell them about what happened," I asked.

"Not yet," Vulk said, "I figure MacNamera will call them up."

It was snowing lightly again, almost like snow being blown off the roofs and trees as we walked underneath. It didn't seem as cold when it snowed.

"What are you gonna do?"

"Shit, I don't know," he said. "Keep going to the Institute at night. Just quit I guess, what the hell do I need a diploma for?"

We passed the apartment house I lived in. The lights were all out. "I guess Mick's sleeping," I said out loud. Mick was my younger brother; he was still in grade school.

"I could probably get back into Harrison and graduate from there," Vulk said. "They never *really* kicked me out of there. I just kinda stopped going, you know . . . shit, MacNamera still might call the cops."

"I don't think so," I said.

"You can't tell. Nobody thought they'd expel seniors either. He's crazy! When they had their Inquisition this afternoon he shows them all the shit he got out of my locker. First he holds up this book of nudes, so I mention I'm taking night classes at the Art Institute, then he shows them the pills, so I say they're for my old man's ulcers and must have got in there by mistake, then he starts reading passages out of some of the paperbacks in this weird tone of voice, like he's breathing real hard—it was unbelievable—I thought he was going to start beating off right there. Then he shows them this coke bottle with a kotex in it for a wick and I try and tell them it's an art object and Schmidt who's supposed to be defending me starts yelling he doesn't want it on his conscience that he defended such scum and they all agree I'm too warped to graduate from a Catholic school."

"Too warped! Jesus Christ!" I was laughing so hard I lurched over a snow-bank. "Too fucken warped!" Our laughter came echoing back down the corridor of buildings. We cut across a block of lots where they'd knocked the buildings down, crunching over ice and rubble, stamping through dead weeds behind billboards.

I was thinking about that morning with Vulk and I as usual starting the day by kneeling on the floor in detention. We'd been there so long that I'd come to accept the fact that school would always start at 7:30 for me. The room was full of guys slumped down sleeping, copying homework, passing around comic books, or matching for dimes. The group of us who were never able to get out of it had to kneel on the floor in front of MacNamera's desk. We had an *esprit de corps*—everybody had a special name. Bob's was the Vulcan; mine was the Specter.

MacNamera came in and sat behind his desk for a while staring at us. We all hung our heads, smirking into our collars and not looking him in the eye, which pissed him off. He got up from his desk and walked over to the edge of the platform it was set on, standing right before us. Then he kicked Vulk right in the stomach, his leg tossing up his cassock, his black shoe buried for a moment in Vulk's leather jacket. Vulk doubled over, then looked up and called him a son-of-a-bitch.

"You bum! I'm going to have your ass thrown out of here today, Vukovitch," MacNamera shouted at him. "We just searched your locker and found Drugs." Spit flew out of his lips when he talked. He looked all around the silent room then back at Vulk. "There's a meeting in the Rector's office at 1:00 regarding your expulsion. You have the right to bring a member of the faculty to defend you. Now get out."

After Vulk left MacNamera glared at the rest of us. "I hope you losers learn something from this," he said. "You think it's all a big joke, huh, that you're tough guys? That's how easy it is to eliminate the rotten apples. He ain't gonna find a decent job the rest of his life. He's got drugs on his record now and it'll follow him wherever he goes." He was so worked up his bald head had turned almost purple and the veins jutted out of his bulldog neck above his collar. "Some guys only learn the hard way!"

"I notice they didn't return the nudes they stole from me," Vulk said. "Maybe they're redecorating the bathroom in the monastery."

We turned down 26th St. walking past the boulevard, the stoplights looking pink behind the blowing snow. It was a business street and there were occasional cars passing slowly with fuzzy headlights. We passed the county jail with its dilapidated wall and blue-lit watch towers.

"Listen to that," I said. We stopped under a streetlight, snow floating down, and faced the jail. The voice came again from one of the barred buildings beyond the wall—"hey you guys," then something else we couldn't make out.

"Whataya waaaannnt?" We shouted together.

"Hey you guys," the voice came back, but we still couldn't catch the rest of it.

We gave up and walked on. "It sounded like 'mushrooms and sausage with anchovies' to me," I said.

"No, I think it was 'hey you guys, how about a little?'"

"It was goddamn spooky."

"Makes you feel really free just walkin the streets," Vulk said. He scooped a handful of snow off the windshield of a car. "Hey, it's good packin."

We walked the rest of the way to Jim's throwing snowballs into the streetlights.

There was nobody home. We lobbed snowballs at Jim's window for about 5 minutes and then climbed the rickety back stairs and shook the door. Nobody answered. We looked around outside to see if his car was there but it wasn't.

"He must have gone somewhere," Vulk said.

"No doubt about it." My gloves were soaked and my fingers frozen from throwing snowballs. My feet felt like blocks. We walked back to 26th. The stores were gated and dimmed for the night. An occasional neon sign blinked across the sidewalk snow.

"I'm hungry," Vulk said. "Let's go sit in a restaurant."

"You got any money?"

"No. How about you?"

"Fifteen cents."

"Fifteen cents! Petit bourgeois."

"Your mama, hose-nose."

He didn't say anything. I could see he was trying to think of a comeback. He was staring at the ground, his large eyes reminding me as always of a beagle's, brown and sad even when he laughed. His big nose and stocking cap made him look like one of the dwarves. I knew he was sensitive about his nose and felt a little guilty pimping him about it when there were just the two of us. I guess he'd gone through life never being able to find the right retort.

"Just remember Cyrano," he said.

"It's probably distended from too much picking."

"Here's something distended," he said grabbing his crotch.

"There's a meal for a working-class artist," I pointed to a grey crust of bread lying along the curb by a fire hydrant. It was surrounded by a suspicious yellow stain melted into the snow.

"You know I say disgusting things sometimes," Vulk said, "but *everything* you say is disgusting."

"You're just too warped to realize my profundity."

"No doubt about it."

We passed a laundromat, cleanly lit in white neon and empty.

"Let's sit in there a while before I die," I said.

We went in. There was a red-lettered sign by the door that warned NO LOITERING. Vulk shook his fist at it.

"Suppose the cops come," he said.

"We'll say we were doing our laundry. I got a dirty snotrag. How about you?"

"I use my sleeve. Maybe I can wash my sleeve."

I was testing the money changers. Nothing came out. I went over to the pay phone and opened the coin return slot. There was a dime in it.

"Eureka! Eureka!" I yelled, showing it to Vulk. He came over and examined it carefully, biting it a few times.

"Hmmm, you can always depend on the lumpen proletariat to sniff out the crumbs. Probably some blind old lady lost it."

"Maybe we can give it back." I dropped it in the phone. "Hello, hello opera-

tor? I'd like to report finding a dime in one of your phones down here on 26th St. I'd like to return it to the proper party."

"You want to return a dime?"

"No doubt about it."

"Just a minute," she said, "I'll connect you with the supervisor." There was a giggle in her voice and it gave me a warm flush. I stood there holding the receiver for about a minute.

"Maybe they're tracing the call," Vulk said.

"Hello," the supervisor said.

"Yes, hello, are you there?"

"Sorry to keep you waiting—you're trying to return a dime?"

"That's right but I don't want the Phone Company keeping it. It says *e pluribus unum* on it if that's any aid in identification."

"Alright, just hang up and we'll put it in our Lost and Found."

"Thank you." The connection was broken; the phone belched. I opened the return slot and there was the dime.

We sat down in the shining plastic contour chairs along the wall. It was a few minutes before two by the Coca Cola clock. The laundromat smelled of soap and bleach like a chlorinated swimming pool. The lines of washing machines gleamed. The driers, set in the opposite wall, looked like a row of looted safes. It was nice and warm, my feet thawed and began to burn, I unzipped my jacket.

"Boy, this is the life."

"No doubt about it," Vulk said. He got up and wrung his gloves out on the floor. "Loan me your dime." He walked over to one of the driers, stuck his gloves in, and turned it on. "A little entertainment on a frosty night."

We both sat there watching the drier spinning around and around. I lit a cigarette. It was quiet enough to hear the wind outside through the drier's hum, and the tiny creaks that rooms make. I put my head on my arm and closed my eyes. The heat was making me groggy. I started thinking about the homework I hadn't done. It seemed I had spent my whole life worrying about assignments I hadn't done. Suddenly more than anything I just wanted to be in bed. To get there we'd have to walk out again through the cold. It seemed stupid just sitting here; why had I let Vulk talk me into going to Jim's? Then I thought of the two of us walking down the street and him telling me that everything I said was disgusting in his most affected voice. I started laughing.

"What's so funny," he kept asking.

I tried to tell him but every time I began the image of the dirty crust in the snow rose up and made me laugh harder. It really was disgusting. Finally I managed to get it all out.

"What the hell's funny about that," he coughed out. We were both holding our stomachs and crying we were laughing so hard. "We need a fix," he said. He took out a little box of No-Doz and offered it to me. "First one's free, kid."

"If you hadn't squandered my dime we could get a couple cups of coffee."

I inserted my last dime in the coffee machine which we kicked and beat, but

still only got one cup out of it. The coffee was almost tasteless and hot. We sat there passing the steaming paper cup back and forth and popping No-Doz. I lit another cigaret. The first one was decomposing in the smeary puddles by our feet.

“Did you ever read anything by Shelley,” I asked. We’d read *Adonais* the day before in Lit. class.

“I read something about his life,” Bob said. “He was pretty cool for his time, really into screwing, didn’t give a shit about what the bourgeois thought.”

“Like Ginsberg,” I said, “no shit, when I read that poem it make me think of *Howl*.”

“Yeah, but I don’t think he was a homo. Ginsberg’s all around crazier. You ever read anything about Van Gogh’s life?”

“I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness,” I was reciting, listening to the laundromat amplify it.

“That was Van Gogh all right. He really lived a weird life.”

“You know reading about artists is almost as depressing as reading *The Lives of the Saints*. They all end up starving or shooting themselves or cutting their ears off. Half of them couldn’t even screw without catching the sift and their dicks rotting off.” I started thinking about it, totaling them up: Poe drunk in the gutter, De Quincy hooked on opium, Keats with T.B., Charlie Parker, Van Gogh. The Vulcan. And me showing him my poems.

“Here we go,” he said. A cop walked in; his car’s blue light glancing across the plate glass window in the front.

“What are you guys doing here?”

“Just sittin’.”

“Can’t you read,” he said, gesturing toward the NO LOITERING sign. “Get your asses out of here.”

We stood up to leave trying to act superior. I looked at the flattened coffee cup and smashed cigaret butts lying in the puddle on the floor.

“Wait a minute,” he demanded, “how old are you guys?”

“Eighteen.”

“Let’s see some IDs.”

There was a curfew for people younger than eighteen and we both stood there searching through all our pockets like we’d lost our cards. Finally we handed them over. He stood there squinting at them trying to compute our ages.

“Hey, you’re seventeen. And you’re still sixteen,” he said to me. “You guys wanta wait at the station for your parents to come pick you up?”

We stood there looking belligerent, not saying anything.

“I could arrest you for loitering. What the hell are you doing here at quarter past two anyway?”

“Sitting.”

“Oh yeah?” He was still studying our names and convict-like photographs on our student rate bus cards. “If anything’s wrong we’ll know where to come looking for you. Now get home fast.”

We trudged outside.



"We showed him a thing or two," Vulk said.

"Yeah."

"Why didn't you tell him your old man was Mayor Daley?"

"The prick is following us," I said. The squad car was cruising slowly behind us, its headlights dimmed. "Let's turn down the next street."

Vulk had his chapstick out and was smearing it on his lips.

"Oh no," I said.

He was filling his mouth up with lighter fluid. The squad car came up even with us, the cop glaring through a half-opened window. We could hear the police calls. We stepped off the curb into the intersection. Vulk had his Zippo lighter out. He stopped in the middle of the street, turned to the squad car and lit his lighter, spitting out an enormous yellow flame.

We took off down the side street, both yelling FUCK YOU at the top of our voices. I looked over my shoulder to see if the cop had turned yet. He wasn't there.

"He might be coming around the block," Vulk said, "we better turn in."

We cut down an alley, jogging through the ruts the garbage trucks had made in the snow, our breaths panting out before us. The snow was piled high against the garbage cans.

"It was funnier when I did it in Martin's class," Vulk said.

"You're really an asshole. I could see my old man getting a call at work to come get me out of jail."

The alley kept going, broken by streets. It looked like a crooked blue tunnel under the streetlights. We plodded for a while without saying anything.

"The Specter and the Vulcan floating through the night," he said.

"I'm freezing my ass off."

"Offer it up."

He stopped and I kept walking. "Wait up," he called. He was tugging a Christmas tree out of a hill of old snow, cardboard boxes full of frozen trash, and garbage bags filmed with newfallen snow. It was a scraggly tree. Shreds of tinsel still dangled from its broken branches. We continued down the alley, Vulk dragging the tree by its tip, sweeping it behind him in the snow.

"We can warm up here," he said, "make a campfire to keep the wolves off." He lifted the tree into a trash can. We dug around and found some newspapers and garbage bags and brushed the snow off. Vulk squirted lighter fluid over everything. But even the fluid couldn't get it going. It would flare up and then be flattened by a gust of wind. The inside pages of the newspaper burned for a minute or so, but the tree wouldn't catch. We watched the paper cinders waft glowing orange out of the garbage can, black flakes with sparks at their edges flying away into the snow and dying out. Vulk was spreading his hands over the top of the can.

"Ah! nothing like a roaring hearth. Want to set a garage on fire?"

"Not tonight," I said.

After the paper burned away we gave up. The alleys seemed very dark after staring at the flames.

"I forgot my gloves at the laundromat," Vulk said.

"You wanta go back?"

"Hell with 'em."

We turned off down a side street. A dog barked at us from between the slats of a fence, his mouth steaming, making the silence ring. It had never seemed as quiet—no traffic, or stalled cars groaning, or snow shovels scraping for blocks around. We came out on the boulevard and left two rows of footprints across it. Our shadows passed through the shadows of trees etched in the snow by the moonlight.

"It doesn't look too bad," I said.

"I wish I was good enough to paint it the way it is."

We came to the turn off for my street; Vulk lived further down.

"You going home," he asked.

"Yeah, I guess so. You get the long thoughts tonight."

"You planned this," he said. We always calculated who'd have the longer walk home, alone with his thoughts.

"I'm really going to be beat tomorrow. I think I'll sleep during Pig's class." I didn't remember till I said it that Vulk had been expelled. "Well, I guess you get to sleep late tomorrow."

"Yeah, I guess so. I don't know. Maybe I might go down with you and just hang around, sit in Walgreen's or something."

"Okay, meet you at the bus stop."

"Yeah, so long." He turned and walked away into his thoughts.

I had the short thoughts. It was only a two-block walk past Luther St. and Washtenaw; time to wonder if Vulk was having his daydream of walking down a street in Paris and to worry again about the homework I hadn't done. Then I was before the apartment building where I lived with its dark hallway I'd been afraid of ever since I was a kid, feeling the wind blow through me, sifting up little funnels of snow off the ridges of drifts, flakes twirling in the streetlight. The street looked gentle, its soft brown slush matted white. I could feel the No-Doz making my heart pound. I could feel the spray of snow hit my face and hair, every particle, every second. I lit a cigaret, remembering the Debussy spinning over and over in Vulk's room and the two of us sitting there like madmen hunched above the record player, our eyes squeezed shut. I recalled it so clearly that for a moment I started to shake, then it slipped away leaving me with a chill and the cigaret tasting like burnt newspaper in the raw air, so I went in. My father was still working the double holiday shift at the P.O. and I had to clear the supper dishes from the table and wash them before going to sleep.