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I Must Think of a Way

James Mechem

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longish short story), and *Della* (a short novella), were published by Winter House (1970), The Solo Press (1973), and The Fault Press (1976), respectively; and *Slices*, the small collection of poems written in collaboration with Ann Menebroker, was published by the Grande Ronde Press in 1972. We would like to thank all of these magazines and presses for having published Mechem's work in the first place, and for giving us the opportunity of reprinting some of it here.

Mechem, as is widely known, likes to collaborate on poems and short fictions with women, and in addition to the poems with Ann Menebroker, we include here story collaborations with Sydney Martin and Mardy Murphy. We also invited other writers to contribute anything to this feature which might relate to Mechem and his writing—fictions, criticism, poems, parodies, etc.—and four such responses are also included: imaginative essays by Ursule Molinaro and Carol Bergé, a short fiction by Sydney Martin, and an epistolary tale by Kent H. Dixon, as well as two new Molinaro and Bergé stories appropriate to the occasion. The brief italicized paragraphs which punctuate the feature are excerpts from Mechem's stories and letters to the editor, mostly about writers and writing.

I Must Think of a Way / James Mechem

She walked down the street and came to the corner and there was a man in a car passing by and the car slowed down to make the turn and stopped then in front of her and she looked at him and smiled and then screamed . . . She began running then to get away from the car which crawled on the curb and chased her and ended up smashed against an old-fashioned green lamppost . . . the man hanging from the driver's seat, the door opened, and such . . .

A body . . . in bracelets and things, a ribbon in her hair and shoes on her feet . . . then sunk . . . in her belly . . . shooting stars . . .

Disfigures . . . something that has happened and something more . . . until you name it . . .

Something plump and full about you on the sidewalk stopping traffic . . . there you are on the sidewalk stopping traffic in your suit . . . for swimming . . .

On the curb stopping traffic . . . everyone stops as in a dream . . . your dream, coal eyes, you sat up and looked around you and batted your coal

eyes at the spectators . . . Japanese girl . . . Brigitte and Shirley, and Vichitra and Undine and Trixie . . .

On the beach and on the sidewalk . . . Trixie and Undine, in your suits, while the traffic stalls around you, little darlings . . .

Shot down on the sidewalk while not far away on the beach Trixie and Undine take the sun, the sea salt spray . . . bang bang thunder and purple roiling.

My little girl is falling backward off the curb into the traffic, but no, she rights herself in time, Trixie pulls her back onto the sidewalk . . . and the traffic remains stopped . . .

Rain clouds appearing . . . shoes white on the beach, high heeled in the sand . . . walking from the soft surfridden shoreline, the breakers beating on the coast . . . the umbrellas purple, orange, brown, and you, coal eyes, in the blazing sun, beside Trixie, little Shirley and Undine . . .

Straps down just enough, Trixie, to uncover one shoulder to the sun . . . Moribund . . .

Shirley is walking through the sand in white pumps . . . sinking into the sand and losing one white slipper . . . Trixie and Shirley and Undine are searching for it.

Blue skies and smiles and coal eyes . . . sprinkling sand in the streets . . . little girls transported . . . as you wish, girls in your twenties . . . wising up to the ways of commerce, little women . . .

The rib cage full of song and birdseed . . . little girls . . . in your undies on the sidewalk scattered with blood and birdseed little girls pooled together, little girls . . . lying . . . little girls romping up and down the beach, little girls, I wish I were with you, little girls . . . on the beach barelegged little girls in the traffic with the lights flashing green and amber and red . . . yes in the starry night, little wild things . . . in your rib cages each of you . . .

Reach something, little Undine, reach something in the surf, strolling along the waves in nothing but the moonlight and dark eyes, and rib cage, and white ribbon and shoes, in blood on the sidewalk, while Undine walks along the beach . . . in happier times . . . the image still present, reader, Undine walking along the sidewalk, don't you see her lying on the sidewalk, walking through the surf . . . the rib cage still breathing, gently in and out, fiercely after running from the breaker up the beach, out of breath lying panting on the beach . . . little Vichitra darling . . . little In Sun darling . . . all of you slain in blood on the curb, little ones of lovely years wising to the ways of commerce and the like . . . this melee, what is it? Little ones in finery, rib cages smashed, I'm sorry to hear that . . . battered and bruised, beaten and blooded, raped for commerce, amber and red lights flashing,

green light stuck . . . green lights of the world growing brighter and brighter, that's the ticket, brighter and brighter, the green light that is stuck all over the world . . . wholesale slaughter.

In your fine rib cages . . . white ribbons pristine on the sidewalk, bracelets on your wrists, in your white shoes too . . . little ones dying, traffic lights throwing red and amber shadows over your pale faces . . .

All of you in the world who are so nice and sweet to hold and crush . . . your crushable little rib cages . . . yes . . . little darlings . . . raped by traffic downtown in full view on the sidewalk with your blood showing in the light of the amber and red . . . little darlings all of you at night running on the beach playing tag . . . your female world . . . running from the breakers and running from the waves, up the surf and down . . . and a cigarette glowing . . . something was up, darlings, sound the alarm, darlings, run for your life into the wilderness, darlings, into the land of amber and red flashing on and off, darlings, bright lit through the night, darlings, lying on the sidewalk, your legs drawn up, Trixie, your white shoes on the sidewalk beside you, Trixie, and your rib cage exposed, my darling . . .

Green light steady and bright . . .

Through the flashing red light of the patrol car cruising up with siren, stopping, the troops leaving the car, the movies are right, that's how they act, the darling minions, kneeling to look at the bracelets for signs of struggle, as though these wrought silver and thin priceless bands would identify their owners . . . the busted rib cage . . . and my crying, dropping tears into the wounds of the twins . . .

Little deer antelope little darling . . . running little darling down the beach . . . little antelope little deer . . . running along the wet surf sand little darling, little footprints in blood little darling I cry for you . . . real tears, salty, down your cheek, your coal eye filling, shoulder strap slipping . . . little darling . . .

Whoever you are and wherever you are, little darling, in your topless suit sparkling in the stars and sun . . . you are precious, little one . . . you make me cry, little darling, make me cry with your loveliness . . . lying beside you at night on the soft surfside, whispering, murmuring on the beach next to me, the picture on the sidewalk, little darling, sleep easy, little darling, don't think, little darling, just sleep easy, little darling, all is well, all is well, all is well, little darling, go to sleep . . .

Little deer running on the beach, little fallen girl, little axed girl . . . my little oxen-eyed sweetheart, deer running in the surf, dear little girl, coal-eyed and black-haired my Trixie darling, Undine dear . . . your selves here and there, my darlings damaged.

Again and again, little girl, again and again little girl again and again,

darling little helpmate again and again . . . speaking softly to you again and again . . .

Final sands, little blessed girl, final sands in your armpits, on your back, on your belly, between your legs, I brush you, your ankles and knees . . .

The sand is at the corners of your coal eyes, little twins . . .

I keep wanting to say this is the end, reader, this is the end the end the end . . . like that . . . reader lobster dear . . .

Trixie and Undine's family . . . all their brothers and sisters and parents and uncles and aunts and cousins and all of them were gathered around at picnic time and Undine told them what had been happening to her, she did not tell them that she was stripping in a night club, except her father, she told him, that's all she told, not her mother or her sisters or her aunts or her cousins or her uncles or her nephews and not her nieces . . . none of them . . .

Not them she told . . . the twins did not open their mouths one word about stripping, but only about TV . . . the programs . . . TV . . . and where they worked as waitresses, which they didn't, but they said they did . . .

Their father took them aside and asked them if they needed money and if they were in trouble with the police and told them to wire him at the bank if they ever needed any money, or were in any kind of trouble, or anything like that, the sirens sounding and the police pouring out of the squad cars downtown, their red lights flashing, and the amber green and red reflecting on the scene at night . . . where they lay . . . sitting on the sidewalk.

I'm just about to end it, reader . . . I'm threatening . . .

Two fawns at play. Their father took them aside, girls will be girls . . . girls will be girls, he said.

I don't know where I am, reader, I really don't know where I am. Girls will be girls. I must think of a way.

I'm lost . . .

An ambulance comes for the girls . . . not a hearse . . . an ambulance . . . they always go to the hospital first . . . these accidents . . . as soon as possible . . . there's always a chance . . . reader, have hope . . . have hope, reader, such beautiful girls on the beach, it's only been a second or two, things **went very quickly**, really, the police arrived and a split-second later the ambulance stopped and the back doors were opened . . . and they were putting the girls in . . .

And the siren is screaming again . . .

The girls lie in the ambulance underneath the sky . . . have hope, reader . . . we can bring them back you and I so they can lie where they belong on the beach. Reader, is this too much to ask? Reader! Reader! Reader!

I must think of a way. HALP HALP! . . . it's no use . . .

We must think of a way . . . a self fighting . . . a shoulder exposed and

bleeding . . . smashed-in rib cage, darlings don't cry . . . can you hear me . . . Undine . . . Trixie . . . can . . . oh what's the use? . . . what's the use in any of it . . . lobster dear, if I could be serious I'd be it . . . HALP HALP . . . wailing, crying, all the pity gushing out of me . . .

Say something . . .

The beach brown and soft and wet . . . incessant lapping . . . sucking . . . ebbing . . . flowing . . . residue of foam, flotsam and shells . . .

Splashing and running, cries lost on the air, fires burning down, songs held in memory . . . naughty little girls . . .

Gray wet leaves . . . foggy misty day, darlings . . .

I hate to think, darlings . . . gobbling monsters of the deep in the recesses of burial at sea . . .

Little one dear to me . . . little ones . . .

Dark and grainy, waves green and under . . .

Eventide has come . . . my coffin floating from sight . . . a dark speck on the breast . . . farther and farther, the end of the world . . .

Strippers parade . . . stepping high . . . kicking out at me . . . once again there we go . . . does my sinking heart good . . .

I have a sneaking suspicion I have ruined everything . . . I must have faith . . . a bad rehearsal . . . a nightmare on the dark sea . . .

Trixie is sitting on the sidewalk again stopping traffic. . . The traffic light blinks green and amber and red in succession, from that angle . . . now from this, green . . . red, and amber, green . . . blue lights around . . . and my weariness . . .

I can't figure it all out . . . it's nothing but a story . . . a traffic accident, nothing . . . in on the kill . . . reader, we didn't kill those girls . . . not us . . .

Pretty girls, so happy on the beach . . . at night . . .

No blood on your hands . . . in your eyes, reader lobster dear . . . no blood . . . turn them over . . . innocent . . . paring your nails . . . scrubbing them with lye . . . no blood there . . . mud in your eye . . .

It's a pity, isn't it?

Shoot the works . . . fireballs . . . it's all over now . . . downtown . . . downtown . . . downtown . . .

*I started out in life as an ugly monster lacking coordination—a brute face, animal mouth, inhuman speech. I determined as my first ambition, which lasted almost through my teens, to be a wild animal tracker. But all that was changed for me by my father who pumped me full of ideas to be a great writer—like Tolstoy and Somerset Maugham . . . (from “An Interview with James Mechem” in *A Diary of Women*)*