

Ausschnitt aus **What I Leave Behind von Alison McGhee**

Aus dem Workshop

„In der Fremdsprache lesen – in der eigenen Sprache schreiben“ von Susanne Hornfeck

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You ever had real cornbread?

Like from a cast iron skillet stuck in the oven to preheat while you mix the batter? A hot, hot oven. So hot that before you open the door you have to put oven mitts on your hands.

And when you take the cast iron skillet out you pour in a little melted butter and it hisses, the skillet's that hot, and then you pour in the batter and it starts to brown and puff around the edges even before you put the skillet back in.

That kind of cornbread, that's the kind I mean.

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You got your various cornbreads, my dad used to say. You got your non-sweet Southern, your sweetish Northern. And then you got your dad's cornbread.

The way he said it was like he was speaking in boldface. You know?

Dad's Cornbread.

He used to put it together from a recipe in his head. Maybe I'll try to make it tonight. I do that sometimes, try to re-create the recipe. Try to make it come out the way his did.

I keep the cast iron skillet in my closet. Eggs in the fridge. Butter. No milk but that's okay. Water works.

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Sometimes you got to walk the day out of you. You know? Walk it right out through the soles of your feet.

Dollar Only's closed now, my shift is over, it's Tuesday night which means my mom's got the overnight shift and she's not going to notice if I'm not home.
The night and its sidewalks are right out that door.
Wring out the mop, empty the bucket, sign out. Say bye to Major Tom, waiting to lock up and exit out the back door to his car.
Major Tom, he's not a walker. Most people aren't. But I am.

四

Tonight the air itself is dark. That happens sometimes. It's not just the lack of sun, it's the presence of darkness.

If you're a walker, a real walker, your feet can figure out the right route. Sometimes the right route is one that goes past all the places you love, like the cathedral, like the park off Whittier, like the Grand Central Market and its stalls.

Sometimes the right route is the route *not* past other places, places you maybe love but can't walk by right now.

Like Playa's house.

Like the blessings store.

Like the river bridge over Fourth Street.

五

Let your feet find the way. You'll know it when they do. Then let the day drain out of you. Let whatever comes into your head just float around in there.

What's in there tonight? Cornbread. Black cast iron cornbread like my dad used to make.

And that raggy little blanket Playa used to carry to school in her backpack, back in elementary school.

And the case in the back of the blessings store, a hundred blessings all numbered in Chinese.

To unbreak your broken heart.

To make a cloud of safety around you.

To light at night for peace.

六

How I got the job at Dollar Only was I saw the ad posted in the corner of the window.
So why here?, said Major Tom. Why Dollar Only?
I need to start saving up. College.
And where did you see our ad?
Well I walk past here pretty much every day. On the way to school.
Ah, school. Where do you go?
Mountain High.
Oh yes? There's a song called Rocky Mountain High, you ever hear it?
Um, yeah. My mom likes that song.
Well, you tell your mom she's got good taste! Can you work nights and weekends?

七

This interview was in Major Tom's office, which is what he calls it even though it's a closet next to the employee bathroom that he shoved a desk and roller chair into.
There's a big cork board on the wall that he pins motivational quotes on.
If you can dream it, you can do it.
With the new day comes new strength and new thoughts.
A life lived without purpose is no life at all.
If at first you don't succeed, try, try again.
It's like he intentionally searched for the lamest quotes in the history of the world. You know?

八

Walk one day out and another day in: home, school, work.
At first I used to call Major Tom by his name, Mr. Montalvo.
But he doesn't want me to. "Call me Tom, Will!"
Which at first I interpret as him wanting to be called Tom Will, which is weird. But no. Will's *my* name and Tom's his name, the name he wants me to call him.
I'd been there a week at this point and already I knew that Dollar Only is pretty much his life.
Some people, they're like that. They smile in a kind of helpless way.

九

So I did what I do with people like Major Tom: jump in and start giving them shit. Then they feel included. Like they're part of the world, like they have actual friends. Like someone *sees* them.

Why I started calling him Major Tom?

Because he likes music, and he's about my mom's age, so I figure he must know that Bowie song, that "Space Oddity" one she loves. About Major Tom.

Bowie was old but cool. So a nickname like Major Tom would make Mr. Montalvo feel cool.

Which it does. Because how could it not? I mean, Bowie.

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Music is the refuge of the lonely, my dad used to say.

That, and Soldier on, my wayward son.

And Don't let the bastards get you down.

And a bunch of other things. But those are the ones I think about the most.

Music isn't only the refuge of the lonely, but still, I know what he meant. Like with Major Tom.

"Ground control to Major Tom," I say over the loudspeaker when I need Mr. Montalvo at the register.

"Commencing countdown! Engines on!" is what he usually says. Right back over the loudspeaker. And then he hurries right over.

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Sometimes he sings part of the song, the line about the spaceship knowing which way to go, and another one about how much he loves his wife.

Mr. Montalvo doesn't have a spaceship and he doesn't have a wife. But he loves it when I call him Major Tom.

Things aren't easy for Major Tom. Social skills kinds of things, you know?

Some things aren't easy for me either, but that's not one of them. I know how to give people shit, when to step forward, when to pull back. It's like a dance where you're born knowing the steps.

十二

Not Major Tom, though.

Sometimes, when I'm closing, I see him sitting there in his closet-slash-office. Going over the schedule. Writing emails. And every time he thinks he hears someone coming, he swivels around, with that awkward-person smile.

Once, it's really late because some kid spilled an entire bottle of detergent in Aisle 9, I see him close his eyes, jab his finger on one of his motivational quotes, then open his eyes and read it out loud. And nod. Like it's going to change his socially-awkward life.

And honestly, I can hardly stand it. That little nod. You know?

十三

Remember that cornbread your dad used to make?

That's what Playa said to me at that party.

It's been a long time since Mountain Elementary. Years since we used to play at each other's houses, back before the girls and boys split into separate factions. But me and Playa, we'll always be friends. You can't forget the elementary years.

"Will? Remember?"

She'd stuck a Bugle on each fingertip like we used to do when we were kids. She waved them in my face, like, remember this too? She was talking loud over the music.

Shouting, almost.

Yeah, Playa. I remember.

十四

Walk and walk and walk the day out. It's like a mantra.

Like Major Tom with his *If at first you don't succeed*, and like my dad with his *Don't let the bastards get you down*, and like Dear Mrs. Lin, which is what my dad called the lady at the blessings store, with her *Help you?*

Okay, maybe not like her. Been a long time since I was in the blessings store. A long time. Maybe Dear Mrs. Lin's not even there anymore.

I'm almost home. Maybe I'll get out the skillet. Make my offering to the cornbread ghosts.

十五

The hundred blessings display is at the back of the voodoo store. Each numbered with a Chinese number.

It's been a long time since I was in there, spying on Dear Mrs. Lin when she was arranging them. Weird shit. Weird to my dad and me anyway. Like a ceramic hand or a bunch of dried-up herbs. Each with a specific purpose.

Blessing for the dead.

Blessing for the afraid.

Blessing for the lost.

Why those blessings just popped into my head, who knows. *The mind, she works in mysterious ways.* Or so our third-grade art teacher used to say.

十六

Cornbread fail. Too much cornmeal, not enough flour. Not enough butter, too much baking powder.

Shit, I don't know. I'm not the one who had the recipe in his head. I wrap it up in wax paper and walk to Dollar Only next day by way of First so I can give it to Superman. Today Superman's sitting against the brick wall of the alley between City of Angels Guitar and Payday Loans.

"You hungry, Superman?"

He nods, bows his head, and I set it into his outstretched palms.

"Carry on, my wayward son," I say, and I keep moving.

十七

There's this kid who lives over on State. I see him outside sometimes, if I'm walking by before a nightshift. Scrubby little backyard with a couple random hibiscus stuck in it.

Black hair, brown skin, brown eyes. Skinny. Little smiley dude, is how I think of him. He's like six, maybe seven.

He's out there today. Alone. I figure I'll check on him.

"Hey little dude, what's up?"

"Mister, come here!"

I'm sixteen, right? First time anyone's ever called me mister.

"I'm waiting for the butterflies," he says. "Five butterflies land on the garage wall every day at 5:20."

十八

I figure the little dude's maybe a tiny bit off, you know? But whatever. He's waiting for me to walk over to the chain link fence he's standing by. So over I go.

"Watch, mister," he says. "They'll come."

I wait with him. Why not? I don't have to be at Dollar Only until 5:30. And hell if five butterflies don't appear right when the little dude said they would. I check my phone: 5:20.

"Whoa! You weren't shittin me, little dude."

Kid doesn't blink an eye. He just nods. Stares at the butterflies and smiles.

"Nope," he says. "I wasn't."

十九

How weird is that? Five butterflies every day, and the little dude waiting for them. Like a miniature butterfly scientist or something. How did he even figure it out?

So we get this shipment of plastic binoculars the next day.

"Where do you want these, Major Tom? Toys or Tools?"

"Your call, Dollar Will," he says, with this huge smile. So proud he came up with that nickname. I picture him in his office-slash-closet, thinking it up.

I smile and shake my head like I'm blown away by his creativity, to make him happy. Which it does.

On to Toys.