

# Prickly

Poems by

Mather Schneider

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## THE SAINT

I once knew a man  
who told me he would be willing  
to die for me

and when I called him a liar  
he punched me in the face.

## SEIZURES

On the sandstone patio outside the neuro clinic  
there he is  
with his shaggy black dog  
both of them patient as refugees.  
I ease up to the curb  
and he climbs into the cab and smiles,  
says, "Come on Pete."  
I don't even complain anymore about dogs,  
just let them hop on in.  
He tells me where to go,  
says he's lucky to remember where he lives  
after the doctors cut the top of his head off  
and took out the plum-  
sized tumor,  
then put it back on  
like the lid of a pumpkin.

"It didn't grow back right, and so now  
there's this place where it's just skin  
over my brain, you can feel it  
but you wouldn't want to.  
I was in the hospital for a year and a half, lost  
everything, my house, my job, even  
my wife, she took all my money, but we're  
still friends, I don't  
blame her. Large chunks  
of my memory are gone and she deserves  
better.  
Of course I can't drive now, I'd probably  
kill somebody,  
and I don't want to do that.  
There are seizures, too,  
and all kinds of shit  
and now the doctors tell me they've got to  
go back in again.  
I can't ask the taxpayers to pay anymore

for me, it's not their fault,  
it's no one's fault, sometimes there's  
no one to blame."

We pull up to a vacant lot  
carpeted with dead grass and broken glass  
in the desert sun.

He tells me he lives in the corrugated  
tin shed back there in the corner.  
"It'll be ok until whoever owns the place  
finds out," he says. "Don't get sick  
brother, whatever you do."

He doesn't want to get out  
of the air conditioned cab, so I don't  
say anything.

"Look at this dog," he says scratching  
its ears. "He's  
so quiet you probably forgot he was here  
didn't you? He's a good boy. I found him  
when he was a pup, he just  
showed up one day, poor little  
fella."

In fact I did forget the dog was there. I've  
never seen a dog so quiet.  
I raise my head to the rearview mirror  
and the dog seizes me  
with his brown moon eyes  
sitting on the seat like a child  
who has matured beyond his years,  
so well-behaved and tranquil  
you think he must have come  
from another world altogether,  
tilting the gift of his head  
into the man's fingers.

## MISTER BUBBLES

Each afternoon at the end  
of my shift driving the taxi  
I get the vehicle washed.

I go to the drive-thru car wash  
where taxis get a  
discount:  
3 bucks.

I give the front-guy 3 bucks and drive  
around back  
and the Mexican guy waves me  
closer  
making sure I get my wheels in  
place  
always waving impatiently  
COME ON, COME ON, LITTLE MORE, MORE, MORE, then he  
puts his hand violently in the air  
for me to STOP, NOT AN INCH  
FURTHER, as if I have narrowly  
avoided disaster.

Then he points to the sign which I know  
by heart:

WINDOWS UP  
CAR IN NEUTRAL  
HANDS OFF THE WHEEL  
FEET OFF THE BRAKES  
WINDSHIELD WIPERS OFF.

And they have the instructions in Spanish  
too.

Then the tracks grab my wheels and start  
moving me into

the dark tunnel  
with the yellow sudsy soap spraying all around  
and the big loud brushes crashing against the sides  
and the big heavy cloth flaps slapping down from above  
the cacophony in which I somehow relax  
and feel at peace  
usually for the first time all  
day.

Sometimes I do a bit of paperwork  
under the dome light  
adding up my numbers for the day  
during those 3 or 4 minutes I am  
in there  
but often I just lean back and close my eyes  
during that slow 50 meters where I am carried  
and have no control or responsibility  
and as the car is cleaned  
it is like I am cleaned, too.

And soon I can see the light  
at the end of the tunnel  
as the clear water rains down  
rinses off the grime  
and the roaring blowers blow me dry  
like jet engines  
and then it all goes quiet  
and I can see the Mexican kid standing there  
at the finish  
he rubs me down with his rag  
like a boxer  
his hands are fast and kind  
and he gets my rearview mirrors  
and some hard-to-reach places.

And when I'm finally birthed out

onto the pavement again  
into the afternoon sun  
he gives me a pat  
looks at me and gives me the thumbs-up  
which means I am free of the grip  
of the machine  
and I can get going

into the honking stinking mess  
of the city streets  
where the dust will settle  
over everything

but where for a few  
short miles  
I shine.

## BEAUTIFUL UP HERE

I pull up to Fry's in my cab  
tired from the sensory-overload  
of driving all day through this manic  
and murderous maze of a city.  
No cab driver likes grocery runs  
because they are hardly ever going far.  
People who take cabs to the grocery store  
are almost always poor  
and pissy because their ice cream  
is melting.

I call the fare but he doesn't answer  
and I get out and go grumbling  
into Fry's.

I almost bump into this HUGE young guy  
coming out  
as I holler:

“TAXI FOR LARRY!”

And he says,

“That's me, I'm Larry.”

He is at least 6 foot 8  
400 pounds  
could easily smash me  
like a bug.  
He's got a blind man's cane  
and a little bag of groceries  
and he's smiling.

“Oh,” I say, “Pardon. Can I take  
that sack?”

He gives it to me and I  
walk him to the cab.

“Watch the curb there.”

When he is in the cab he tells me where  
he lives and it is a little farther  
than the usual 5 dollar grocery  
run.

It is a nice sunny day and he has  
a blind man’s kind but twisted  
look on his round  
pale face as he sits in the back.

“Nice day,” I say.

“Yes.”

He tells me the directions to his  
house in a very precise manner  
that I appreciate  
because many people are vague in their  
expression and directions  
which make it easy to get lost  
or take a stupid route.

We go up a hill into the desert  
and the cactus are there and the ocotillo  
with their little orange flowers  
because it’s rained recently.

“Damn,” I say, “It sure is beautiful  
up here.”

I cringe after I say it  
thinking it uncouth to say that to a blind man

who has never had the pleasure  
of gazing at this desert loveliness  
or the view of Tucson below  
or the birds flying  
in the morning.

But he doesn't take offense.  
He just says,  
"Yes, it sure is beautiful."

At his house he says,  
"There's a palo verde tree there in front,  
do you see it?"

"Yes."

"Park there."

He pays with a 20 dollar bill which he fishes  
carefully out of his wallet  
and which is folded in such a way  
to let him know it's a 20  
and I give him change  
and he seems to trust me  
not to rip him off  
not to give him ones  
instead of fives.

Then he gets out, thanks me, and feels  
his way to his front door  
with his cane and his little sack  
and finds the doorway  
which he barely fits through  
and then shuts the door  
behind him.

I close my eyes.  
It is quiet sitting there in my cab  
under the palo verde tree  
on top of the hill.

Almost perfectly  
quiet.