



On Earth As It Is

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Serve and Volley

Micah Riecker

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on earth as it is

prayer as story, story as prayer

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Serve and Volley

Micah Riecker

It's Sunday and You're inundated but I'm not asking for anything except a few moments of your time. Your eyes, Lord, and an ear, if I may.

A Sunday, so lots of foxhole prayers I imagine, mortgage prayers, people with their backs against pew walls at the Lutheran church down the hill, at the Catholic Church farther into town. Real problems. And I see the contrast, I realize I might not be at the front of the line; my back is against the back of a rocking chair, not humbled by a pew, but I want to let you know I might be happy in a way, that I thank you for it, that I feel I'm beginning to understand grief.

But who'd a thunk it, Lord, that this is grief? My father in the front yard, his feet stuffed into black and pink AquaSox that used to be mine. Spindly calves speckled with cut grass, those shorts that reach the paste of mid-thigh; my father in his Sunday best, doing everything in his power to lay waste to a frantic scattering of carpenter bees with my mother's old tennis racket.

Marching two footprints into mowed grass, at the edge of the tomato garden, the wall of cherry tomatoes my mother is cultivating for the Lycopenes, for the same reason my father is slashing at carpenter bees as the rest of the city prays: Uncle Phil is dead, his prostate having failed him three months ago. My mother, practically ramrodding tomatoes down my father's throat ever since, asking and asking after the ease of his morning pee, asking this man, this private man, who fans the smell of his post-dinner dump out the bathroom window with a newspaper for five minutes for fear she'll smell it.

One of your beautiful summer days; crepusculars stabbing through the shade oaks along the street, onto the sidewalk behind him and all over his back. Smell of cut grass, the wish-wish of cars headed to and from various church services and brunches and garage sales and the bum leg

of my rocking chair creaking. In his red golf shirt, panting, feinting, collar turned up to keep his neck from burning in the sun. Face in a furious rictus aimed at the eaves, his eaves, where the carpenter bees had the nerve to burrow. Their scraping sounds at night as they undermined the integrity of my father's house.

You and I both know that the bees—now five of them, now six, big as the tips of my thumbs—are the males and the males don't sting. I could say that and defuse this; I have the power to make it stop, to make a quick fool of him, his dodges, the lumpy veins in his overworked calves. No danger, dad, your angry jig is for naught. Yet we'll watch, won't we? The sweat arcing off his nose as he swings, the racket head sizzling over a tomato plant bent back toward Your earth it's so laden with the answers to the prayers my mother whispers at garden dirt. You have, Lord, blessed our tomatoes and Glory Be.

We can't bring him to grief, he's got to find his own way. Wearing my mother's old high school tennis wrist bands and head band, still shockingly white after four seasons of all-state, high school tennis because she never faced anyone who could make her sweat. My mother on the screened-in porch next to me, both of us hidden in the shade. Mom, holding a glass of lemonade beneath her nose. A bit of pulp on the glass lip that she licks off, chews between her two front teeth. "You've got to aim at where they'll *be*, Steven, not at where they *are*."

Without breaking stride, he aims the bobbing racket head at her, his paunch slapping his waistband. "I suppose *you* could come down here and show me? I suppose *you* think you've still got it?" A gust of cologne and sweat. He looks nothing like Uncle Phil—no jowls, a full head of hair, no dead tooth in the corner of his smile—and he loves that. For years, he was outlined and painted in by what Uncle Phil was and he was not and now, Uncle Phil's death has blurred his definition.

In those days, Uncle Phil's dying years, I'd come over on weekends to visit, to sit with my parents in the dark, each in their own recliner. COPS on the TV, my father's police scanner—the only good birthday gift Phil had ever given him—bumping over static in the other room. Drug busts and domestic violence, the feeling of something imminent, Uncle Phil's Saturday night call where my father walked into the kitchen and mumbled and Uncle Phil blew cigarette smoke at the receiver. My father, walking out of the kitchen a half hour later, heels pounding the floor, to fall back in his chair. His brother dying in Arizona. A husk of store-bought garlic bread hardening on a plate on an end table between them. A commercial break, my father's eyes narrowing as he leaned over in the dark to whisper at her ear, "You'll notice that they never tackle a *woman* over a dime bag."

We sit and watch my father break. Uncle Phil went ahead and died before important things were said. He swipes a wrist band over his brow; he gnaws at his lower lip. My mother's lemonade long since gone, she fishes pulp out of the glass with a pink fingernail and sets the pulp on her tongue. Darkness beneath her eyes because he sleeps fitfully, all mumbling heels and elbows. But she won't leave him alone, not even for the fresh squeezed in a pitcher in the refrigerator.

After mowing the lawn, today was his day to clean the garage, to make mud of sweat and dust and purge something, to play Your game, to make Uncle Phil of the garage clutter. Fire up the Wet/Dry Vac and hit every corner where the Earwigs and lady bugs curl up to die in their drifts. Assault the mess, not organization but destruction.

As he cleaned, he found the old ammo box, my mother's tennis trophies, her racket and sweat bands and was inspired. Wear her equipment, kill the bees, get a rise out of my mother. In the back of his mind as he hefted the racket and pulled on the wrist bands, the bees and the grinding sound they made as they burrowed deeper into his eaves at night while he tried to read the paper and not think of Uncle Phil. Those bees. Their orange and yellow shit stains splashed on our front stoop and no, he'd no longer sit idly by. Here was some small history he could alter; here was a future that was his to craft.

But with tennis, I have no expertise; my father was a football place kicker at a division three school and I played adequate baseball. No

advice, nothing to offer except a filled seat, my eyes meeting his as he glares over the Great Wall of Tomatoes. His face red and seamed: *I had dreams, too. You think Phillip and I were born with swollen prostates?* All I can do is sit and watch and maybe, that's all he needs.

My mother, setting her empty glass on the floor, standing up, leaning forward, feet shoulder-width. "Hold the racket like a hammer. Snap through at the wrist." She holds an invisible racket to show him; she had a legendary forehand that the tennis coach, an unconfirmed pervert, still whispers about to the high school girls: *My dears, she could bury a base line volley in a coffee can at a full run.*

You watch, we watch. Tittering robins watch from oak branches as he pants harder, sweats more, blots of sweat on his chest and in his armpits. Tomatoes fatten in the sun, their roots winding deeper. People on their way to and from singing your praises see him, facing his porch, viciously slicing the air with an old metal racket. In town, church bells ring. I used to be able to name the hymns they played. Hundreds and hundreds of people down there, on their knees or sipping watery fellowship coffee but I'm not asking for anything. No sugar, no cream, no forgiveness. Understand that I see, now, how it works.

A bee thumps the side of his head. He curses, swats with his non-racket holding hand. A loop of angry snot from his nose to his upper lip. And then the day gathers behind him. One of Your simple, beautiful miracles. The street quiet. The breeze gone still in the trees. The coincidental grin as he nips his bottom lip with a canine, as he pulls the racket back, eyes gone wide, his whole body curling away from my mother, back to the place where he keeps his Uncle Phil hurt. Then rushing toward her again, the racket head whistling high over his head, toward the tomatoes, down, the sprong of a smacked bee, the muted thump of the bee's body against the house, rolling to rest over our tomato roots.

My mother claps. "*That's the way. That's the way you handle a racket.*"

He holds the racket up, seeing it for the first time, looks at the dark gob on the strings—a fractured bit of wing the color of oil slick dangling from the strings—and smiles, panting. One down. He wipes his nose with my mother's wrist band. "Like a hammer. Just like a hammer."

Then his face drains, Hallelujah. All that color, even the sun burn fades. The slow, inward crumple of his posture as he empties. He looks at the bee, crushed. At my mother and he's ashamed. "What am I supposed to do now?"

Had You held him up, even propped him, let him have his bee before it was time, Uncle Phil might have gorged like a tick on my father's heart. Years of COPS on his easy chair, growing old and smoldering like one of Uncle Phil's forgotten Pall Malls till he was husk, a hollow trail of ash pointed at my mother.

Instead, a life. Tomatoes for breakfast lunch and dinner. My mother smiles, sets her glass on the ground and lifts her arms and stretches. His slow turn away from us, the racket dropping from his fingers into the garden. Ice settling in my empty glass. The bees spiraling back to their dark holes in his eaves and Amen and thank you. He sits, falls back on the bottom step and holds his temples, his fingers pushing the sweat band up, up, till it's a kind of halo, sagged over his head.

Micah Riecker has an MFA from the University of Illinois and his work has appeared in *Lake Effect*, *The Mid American Review*, *The Cincinnati Review* and other places.

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