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Winesburg, Indiana: Found in The Placebo - The Yearbook of Emile Durkheim High School

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Abstract
Carl Frankenstein, Custodian

I am a big man, a big man with an unfortunate name. The embroidery on my uniform stretches way beyond the pocket, over sews the placket. An ugly man who lives alone. A man who will not unlist his home phone number. A man who answers every phone call each night. "Frankenstein," I answer. I hear the murmuring laughs.

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Cover Page Footnote
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I am a big man, a big man with an unfortunate name. The embroidery on my uniform stretches way beyond the pocket, over sews the placket. An ugly man who lives alone. A man who will not unlist his home phone number. A man who answers every phone call each night. “Frankenstein,” I answer. I hear the murmuring laughs. At halftime of the basketball games, I lumber onto the hardwood with my wide furry mop, up and down the court. The students mob the stands, heave trash into my path. I circle, shaking my fists at the throng in the shadows of the bleachers, the monster that I am. Their monster. After the game, I walk home. I want to mop up the puddles of light cast by the streetlights, sop up the shadows the moon spills in the gutters. At home, I listen to WOWO radio. There are all the scores of all the basketball games in the state that night. I read the phonebook by the fire, chanting those numbers. And before I go to bed, I rip out the stitches of my name from my uniform. Every last thread. I open that old incision over my heart.

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Carol App, Truancy Secretary
All day, I make the calls. I check on absences. The rolls come in from the homerooms right after the first bell, collected by dedicated student-aids, circulating through the contagious corridors and hallways. The stairwell sings and sewers. Names of the absent. The never-made-it-ins. I contact the contact numbers. I push the number buttons with the eraser on my pencil. No one is home. No one is ever home. Or, no, I imagine them at home in bed, the situation dire. So sick, so stricken that no one can reach the jangling phone on the table next to the sick bed. It rings and rings. Sometime there are ghostly recordings, ghosts in the machine. “We can’t make it to the phone right now…” I see them wasting away, sweaty in soiled sheets. The stench. The pestilence. Chronic illness is chronic. I put a check mark next to the names, a vector indicating that I will call them back. I call them back. I call them back. Receive the stutter of the persistent ring. Percussive pertussis. A buzz like a biting sting. Allergic to my ear. I am, sad to say, the only one who will receive, in the next hopeful spring, a certificate, one I will make myself, recognizing perfect perfect attendance.

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Leslie Sanguine, Cafeteria Cashier

I believe everyone in the school, including the teachers, receives a free or reduced lunch. I am for show, running the old mechanical NCR register, registering the chits ringing up the dimes. Afterwards, I wipe the tables down, restore the order to the condiments, turning the catsup bottles into hourglasses, dripping what’s left of one bottle into the leavings of the other. Gravity works, okay? I sweep up the litter of each day’s notes that the kids’ moms have packed with their cold lunches, little scraps of paper with messages, instructions, prayers. Half-baked home-baked sentiments, fortune cookie scribbles slipped in the pails and sacks. “Try to have a good enough day, Tim!” “Don’t fret too much!” “Hope you do a better job in math.” “Don’t embarrass yourself or us!!!” Or sometimes just a penciled face. One big O with three little o’s inside. Oh, oh, oh, oh. My other job—we all work other jobs—is restocking the greeting cards concessions in town. The rack at Blister’s Pharmacy downtown. Rumi’s Cigar Store. Rupp and Otting’s Market, the Five and Dime, the news stand in the courthouse run by the blind. I’ve noticed that the birthday cards, the ones for weddings, new births, anniversaries languish while the get-well ones and the cards of sympathy and bereavement fly out the doors. I work on commission. Pennies a card. After hours, on my hands and knees, I count out from the cartons the somber cards and their dour envelopes and count them into their predetermined slots of the racks. It is like another cafeteria line. Here you go. All the grief you can eat. One more fresh smorgasbord of sad sadnesses.

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Howard Junker, Facilities Engineer
My friends call me “How.” “How, how you do this?” I get asked all the time. I always know how. How to tape and mud the drywall. How to build a header and shim a door frame. How to wire and plumb. How to snap a plumb line. How to fire the boilers, move the steam. How to make the clocks run on time. My workshop is a shack I built on the roof I roofed. There on my workbench all the guts of the appliances are spread out on the Masonite table I built from scratch. My tools, a silver Milky Way on pegboard. Coffee cans of fasteners. Tupperware tubs of fuses, switches, drawer pulls. I know how to maintain. I know how to maintain. Look! Do you hear that? This mechanical calculator I salvaged from Mr. Rice’s physics lab thirty years ago is still running. Big as a breadbox, studded and stuttering with gears and ratchets and armatures and levers, it has been sawing away all that time. Long ago, I told the machine to perform an impossible task. I divided a whole number by 0 and the contraption’s workings have been searching all this time (in the toothed flanges, greased widgets, stripped screws) for the mechanical expression of infinity. The machine makes a racket as it calibrates, clucking and clunking, at any moment on the edge of entropy, unengineering itself, a twitching pile of junk. But it goes on and on. How does it do it? I maintain it. I tend to it. It will keep looking for infinity forever. Forever forever. It is a little engine that asks how how how how. How’s time machine telling time.

Michael Martone was born in Fort Wayne, Indiana. Now, 58 years later, he lives in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, where he teaches writing at the university there. He writes himself as well, mostly about himself, Indiana, and being born there, and about writing and writing about writing.