

**D A T E S  
W O R S E  
T H A N  
F A T E**

*Dale Beran*

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*To Pindar,  
Whose beautiful Odes  
I never finished*



Quod licet Iovi  
Non licet bovi.

—MY FATHER



DATES WORSE THAN FATE





## Dates Worse Than Fate

*September 7, 2012*

I felt like a coil of useful energy had just been wound to its limit inside me and today I was going to get a lot of things done which I had intended to accomplish. I saw Mira walking her shepherd dog on the track, following the shadow of the schoolyard fence, a row of shuffling pines rising to her left, thin now, bony, blond. I imagined following her into her home and that, like a great alchemist given the right materials, I was able to make myself invisible. The recipe included everything we passed: lime green drapes, an idling land rover, a clean kitchen. Finally on the steps to her back porch I vanish entirely. The wind is a little musical. It bellows on the lawn. Shepherded into an intimate moment, somehow, we're waiting for me to leave. She is bemused but, it occurs to me, quietly accepting. The view we share is more beautiful than both of us, the surroundings, more warm. I take her hand, and it feels like glass, but I know this in an effect of the spell, a date worse than fate.

## Meet Me at the Kaleidoscope

*March 3, 2010*

I had come to Bushwick to see a friend play. There was not a lot of interest in his work. I knew he would never be famous; he wasn't calculating enough. Likewise, he couldn't go on like this, playing to empty rooms. It was a problem, but not mine, so I didn't think too deeply about it.

On the way over, I passed my old apartment. For an instant I was just below the window, but I averted my eyes.

The little club was hot. The floor was made of polished plywood and the walls were covered with junk. Now and again the junk converged to form a small bar, tables and chairs, and, at the very back, a modest stage.

I ordered an ice water. Nothing was happening. No one was on stage. The bartender returned looking slightly annoyed that I wasn't drinking and playing along with whatever was going on there. A gentle breeze came in from the street and the chandeliers, all three of them—but just glass, not crystal—tinkled. Slowly, called by the chime, the room began to fill up with young and beautiful girls.

They were all dolls, or rather, dressed like dolls. They wore bangs, or thick black glasses, or tattoos of vines that crawled along their arms up through their sleeves and—I could only assume—over their hearts to take root in their breasts. The stitching on their costumes was over-sized

and handmade, the seams enormous and sloppy, and the buttons too large, like the clothes on a toy. They powdered their faces. Their sheer volume put me ill at ease. What was this strange place with its stacks of junk and books? With its kudzu-choked girls with flowers on their chalky lapels? Was I in the doll's house? *The Valley of the Dolls*? The uncanny valley? Or high up on the remote hills of artistic indulgence?

One of them came up to me. She wore torn black stockings and looked like a miniature Farah Fawcett. She asked if I wanted to buy some hash. When I declined, she explained that she was from California and that it seemed like I was from California too and so appreciated good hash.

"You look like a miniature Farah Fawcett," I said.

She scrunched up her face with displeasure.

"Who's that?" she asked, as innocent as a doe, then, without giving me a chance to respond, disappeared into the forest of bookshelves, looking, probably, for other people who looked very much like they were from California.

The music had started now—a low hum that ebbed and flowed. The lights went out on the silver stage. A big shining plate, emblazoned with old world charm, provided the only illumination.

I looked around at the audience and focused in on a girl at the table across from me. It was crowded with her friends who, judging from the way they moved to arrange her hair or squeeze her shoulder affectionately, like you would a little girl, seemed to be enjoying her company. She wore a full-body jumpsuit made out of the drapes that

hung above the crib in my earliest childhood memory. On her feet were white Reeboks which she kicked gaily into the air each time someone said something clever.

It didn't seem odd to me at all that she was wearing the drapes from my earliest childhood memory. The entire place was an anachronistic mix of trash and odd, vaguely familiar whimsy, a mistake that happened between the past and the future, or rather what people discarded from their experience. What seemed odd was that I recognized her face. It was a face on which I had planted numerous kisses, none of which, apparently, had ever taken root. It was Mira's face.

I thought she had moved to L.A. to become a filmmaker. How could I broach this subject gently, seeing that she was here, now, among us, the lowest of the low, with all her beauty and talent and merciless ambition?

It was then that I saw how her elaborate manner of dress wasn't her usual going-out clothes (this would have hinted at some uncharacteristic insecurity). Rather, it was her stage costume. Already the band was warming up. She rose up like a column of smoke from a great disaster—if smoke could ever be decorated in damask—and looked at me proudly. Her lips were parched, her mouth and eyes drained of restraint. She mounted the stage taking her rightful place as lead singer.

Her music wasn't all that interesting, and while she sang I decided to relive the childhood memory which her outfit had evoked. In this, the first year of my life, I was staring up at the damask drapes when my mother came to take me out of my crib. We passed a mirror in which I saw my reflection and then she put me into the sink to take a

bath. I had decided this was my earliest memory because I fit so easily into the sink. And indeed this was what I was thinking in the memory: “How neatly,” I admired, “I fit into this sink.” Soap bubbles drifted up from the right and left. Each contained the mysterious blue sky from the window behind me, the dark drapes, and a hazy oil slick of color, yellow, green and blue. Source: undetermined.

When Mira finished her set I went up and spoke with her. She was sitting with the guitarist in the band—someone who was obviously her boyfriend. A wilting scar split his lower lip, deflating his face. His gentle, adolescent mouth, divided by that vulnerable scar, told me she was still taking in strays.

After a few minutes of conversation, I admitted I was in grad school. Her eyes softened with great compassion. They were surrounded by dark makeup so that she looked a little like a jack-o'-lantern. “Oh, Arthur,” she replied, taken by the pity she reserved for artists, “I’m so sorry.” The boy with the scar nodded his head in agreement.

She offered me some advice: “You must concentrate on putting everything in a bubble.” I was taken aback by this reference. Were we speaking in code?

“And letting your worries surround it?” I blurted out, trying to derail the whole conversation.

“No, having it surround your worries. Then you must watch them float away and pop.”

I still don’t know what made her say it. Her voice was sugary and sweet. I suppose I just wore it plainly on my face. She looked at me squarely and asked, “Do you need a place to stay?”

In fact, I did. My lease was up in less than a week and

I hadn't made any arrangements to go elsewhere. I had a small amount of money, but not enough to continue paying the amount for where I was.

She took me by the wrist behind the stage and through an oak paneled door. We rose up a narrow set of stairs to the second then the third floor. "Some one was staying here for a while who looked just like you," she explained. "So, in a way, we always expected you to arrive next."

The room was cluttered but I didn't know with what because it was dark. We stood facing one another in the darkness for a moment, not knowing what to say. I sat down in a chair beside the window.

Then, as I looked outside I was surprised to feel her squeezing my shoulder, milking it of all its tension. I knew a prerequisite to this squeeze was that I was not to turn around even as she exited the room. But I wanted to stay forever in this interesting cloud of possibility. To focus my attention elsewhere, I watched two cars roll to a gracious stop. They were nudging each other like curious dogs, urging one another along in the lamplight. I made myself think about these cars. Where were they going? Who were their occupants? But I couldn't help it; I turned around. She was stuck halfway between the door and the hall, trapped in a little lie that had passed between us.

"Where did you get that bolt of cloth?" I asked, nodding at the absolute center of her body, somewhere near the navel, but she knew I meant the suit.

"Oh, I dug it out of your basement, years ago. Do you recognize it?"

"No." I replied.

The room was quiet and gentle once she had gone. The

air was inexplicably fresh. I took everything out of my pockets, took off my shirt and pants, and lay in the bed in my underwear, still looking out the window.

All of my failures were coming to the fore. Suddenly, the room shifted. A heavy glass wall suspended itself in midair, and shadows were borne out of the corners of the room. I should have seen the train rattle by, the filthy, weary J. But we were too high, or low. Then it came, a little too late for my interest, threading its way through the half-eaten bruise-colored purplish buildings, that big ugly grease-soaked fossil, throwing off blue and yellow sparks.

The rock music below was low and distant, more like a rumbling in one's body or the far-off horizon. I wanted then, like all men wanted, some illusion of control.

A figure appeared in the window across from my window, where the train had been. She wasn't looking out the window, too, just using it as a mirror to fix herself. Warded off by what, I couldn't say, I started toward her, then stopped. Half of her moved, and half stayed still. Half of the room's view had disappeared as well. And though it had been replaced by a different place entirely, all the edges lined up, like a mix-and-match game, like exquisite corpse.

I saw my friend in the window. I had entirely forgotten about him. He was playing on stage. The rumbling music was his rumbling music. The edges of his amps fit with the edges of the tall buildings. "Friend," I said, "you've drawn me into a strange whirlpool." "It looks stranger from the stage," he replied, then vanished. Next I saw Mira. She appeared as she was—once so sweet and beautiful, now twice as sweet and beautiful. Then the girl in the torn stockings came by, too, the miniature Farah Fawcett.

Great art encompasses everything, I figured. It's come to your window just like it's come to a thousand other windows in the past.

Suddenly a large translucent bubble surrounded me. Glass-like, futuristic, gleaming and kaleidoscopic, it foundered momentarily on the shoals of both Mira's worries and my own. Then I drifted off, consumed by its all-consuming brahmanic nature, waiting for sweet probabilistic release, half-concerned about where I was going and half-interested in what I was leaving, half-contained in where I was. That's three halves, I thought. Yes, well, I said to myself, one and a half. Up until this point you've always been given a little something extra.