

July 2014

## Blindness

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### Recommended Citation

Withee, John (2014) "Blindness," *The Laureate*: Vol. 11 , Article 30.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/laureate/vol11/iss1/30>

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# BLINDNESS

*by John Withee*

"God doth not need  
Either man's work or his own gifts: who best  
Bear his mild yoke, they serve him best. His state  
Is kingly; thousands at his bidding speed  
And post o'er land and ocean without rest:  
They also serve who only stand and wait."

—John Milton, "On His Blindness"

People are always asking me how I like working night shifts. I used to have a back-pocket response like I do for my tattoos but like my tattoos those fade away, details of original intent lost to changing times and places and reasons. When I first started working at the laundromat it was freedom; it paid well, it fit my schedule, it allowed me time to appreciate those night thunderstorms that most miss and the conversations with goofballs that most people won't have the opportunity to experience.

When Deandre quit it was due to some family problems, but I had already seen the weariness the job had taken on him, complimented by long drives to Lansing for custody battles. I saw in my co-workers a vague despair; a desire to not wake up and go to work; that somewhere between their moaning about each other and the small side-work tasks they did or did not take care of, there was a preconceived notion regarding how people should act socially and how they actually did. A very processed, very typical form of metaphysical rebellion common in minimum-wage laborers.

And then, after only a few months of work and only six days off, my summer was gone and all I had to show for it was a large chunk of college debt paid off. I got a new phone with Internet access. I started thinking about buying a car for the winter. The aspiration I'd had to drop out, back when I had my head above the water and had tasted that salty air again, was now six feet above me and I was once again thrashing about in the

ocean of passive consumerism.

Then on a typical night of cleaning out the lint traps, when I stepped outside for a smoke, the blind man came back.

He was guided by a concerned-looking young kid who held the door open for him, a kid who was apparently eager to finish his civic duty and get on with his life. I tried to ask the kid some questions, but as soon as the blind man was in the door, his guide was gone, and it was up to me. I was nervous to look him in the face, since he still had one dark eye, and I didn't know if he would see me and think me rude. He was a burn victim, his face twisted and melted, along with parts of his arm. He wore black leggings under cut-off blue jeans and a full jacket with innumerable pockets.

"Can I help you, man?" I asked him loudly, taking him by the arm.

"How much for a warsh?" he forcefully mumbled through his deformed lips.

"One dollar and seventy-five cents," I said. I didn't know exactly how or when to help, when it would be appropriate, or what he might take offense to, so I was stand-offish.

"How much for bleach?" he asked.

"That's two-fifty for a bottle. I'll bring you up to the counter," I replied, and I brought him up there, his stick tapping away in front of him.

He paid with bills that he had stapled together in a pattern, a different pattern for different value amounts to keep them apart; I wondered whether this was necessary or not, appalled that someone might actually take advantage of his situation. But I guess it happens. You can never be too careful, no matter who you are.

I gave him the change and walked him over to the machine, where he washed his jean shorts and a few articles from his small backpack, and left him alone for a couple of hours, checking in on him every so often.

He spent a lot of time in the bathroom; he took an hour and a half to dry his clothes, mostly because I forgot to check up on him enough, and he had walked around the store to the dryers by clinging to the wall.

An elderly woman in the front had a concerned look on her face, the kind of expression you see when someone is thinking, "That man's entire life must be a tragic, awful story."

"Excuse me, young man," she said, beckoning, whispering.

"How can I help you?" I asked.

"Is that man a veteran?"

"I don't know who he is," I said, sitting next to her. "I've only seen him once before. I'm not sure why there's no one taking care of him." My thoughts started to spill out. Working at the library I'd learned to talk to myself, and I'd become that kind of person who speaks without much hesitation or restraint.

"I don't know why he's not being taken care of, or why he's not in a home where they'd look after him. I don't know if he has any family. He

must like his freedom, I guess.” It had just dribbled out, that phrase. As if freedom wasn’t exactly what I was looking for, too, during those moments up at East Hall in the morning sun when you realize there’s more to life than getting a job or a degree and you suddenly want to do things. Those moments when you’ve completely distinguished the difference between life and survival and find survival fairly trivial and unimportant when your ideals are like a hailstorm coming across a field over a tree line. With nowhere to hide, nowhere to hide, just you and your thoughts and your dreams and they’re so much more real in that moment than survival ever could be. A transcendental state of being. And you suddenly feel blind to whatever literal situation this world could offer, and you’re okay with that.

I have a friend whose grandpa died, a real firecracker sort of grandpa. When he was put in a home, slowly losing his mind to Alzheimer’s, he could barely remember some basic information about his family, but twice attempted to escape; he remembered enough about the lock codes on the doors, each time fighting back against the slavery of his own memory, of the wards, of anyone who held him back. Sometimes you weigh the joys of security and you weigh the hardships of freedom and in both cases you find that they’re not all that heavy.

The blind man wandered out front and found a seat and tried to sleep for a few hours, so I turned down the volume on the televisions to allow it. I was nervous my supervisors might come in and kick him out, but at six-thirty he started moving around, so I went back up to him.

“Where are you trying to go?” I asked him, loudly, politely.

“The bush stop,” he replied. My co-worker had just arrived and I asked her if I could clock out early and bring him there; she said this was fine. I took him by the arm and led him outside past the pizza joints and across the parking lot.

“So where are you from?” I asked.

“Grand Rapids.”

“Where are you trying to go? Do you have somebody waiting for you at home?”

“Well... I’m short of homelesh right now,” he drawled. “I’m going to the Mishion.”

He meant the Gospel Mission, the shelter downtown.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I said, “but I wish you the best...” So much more I wanted to know! Questions like, why are you still doing this? What is it about this you love? What is it about this life that makes it easier than just accepting help from a place that would take you in?

Nevertheless, I was proud of my society for a brief moment...that the goodness of people will help a person in need. That we wouldn’t just ‘put him away,’ that if he wanted freedom, he of all people deserved it, and we were willing to let him keep it, to have it tucked away somewhere in his chest in that world without light.

I waved down the bus and helped him get on. The bus driver looked a bit confused, but I, like the last person to pass him off, didn't say a word.

I went back to the Laundromat because I had forgotten some books and thought about the night Deandre had called me at three in the morning to cover his shift because his brother had died. I found him in the back that night, sweeping dryer sheets off the floor, mumbling that he had to call a superior to make sure it was okay to leave. I urged him out, saying that I would take care of it. I only thought of this because of the sign posted in the back, printed in three different colors as if to stand out, which read, "Sick, Dying, Dead or Just Plain Lazy, Your Shift is Your Responsibility, You Must Cover and Have Approved Any Changes!" It's another one of those moments when you look at yourself and your place in the machine and humanity's place in the machine and think that you've probably done the best you could and you've really tried to help the people around you, and you've done a lot of community service and you've had your scrapes with the law and you've struggled against everything just to get by and at the end of the day you're a lot like Deandre. And you're a lot like the blind man. And you're just passing through this place growing old and tired until you stop looking for anything and just accept the unfortunate turn of events that brought everyone down here, monotony beating the life out of you until you can only cling to survival. And when you live in that sort of place it all looks rather trivial and it puts a churn in your stomach that only an East Hall sunrise can cure.

