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Cover Art: Denae Veselits "Eden tree"

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Robert Schnelle

PLAY-BY-PLAY

Play is youth's parade, adulthood's unlooked-for parole. Pursued by the middle-aged, it's like a love quickened when knowing the worst makes everyday affection dear. Grown-ups play, though we've learned we can't escape ourselves, because we feel the sparks of our first fires and we need to rekindle our hearts.

At least that's my alibi for a Saturday afternoon of not doing household maintenance. What I am doing is skating, carving Möbius loops in the ice of a pond among cattail hummocks where my boy, seven-year-old Erik, and his friend Chris, eight, are crouched in ambush. We're concealed from the neighborhood by shoreline willows, invisible to all but a hawk tilting overhead. I burn with animal heat as the boys come after me, rushing from cover at a dead run and giving tongue to war cries. In their moon boots Chris and Erik look like mammoth hunters, but on skates I feel I am airborne till my blades catch some debris and I go down like timber. Chris pins me to the ice with a cattail lance. Erik beats me on the head with burdocks. After I'm dead, they help me up.

How do we remember the free-form but scripted rituals of play? Question marks are patterned on the human ear, while the ear repeats primeval figures like that of the chambered nautilus. "Play with me?" might stand as the child's first question, to which play itself is the answer. Toddlers turn shoes into otters and learn to nestle peas in their noses. They take risks with gravity, surprising themselves into uncanny vanishings and thrilling to the range of the untethered voice. But play is not the child's prerogative—the world's a stage all over, which explains why actors are seldom tedious company and why, on the other hand, musicians can bore you speechless for all you care, so long as they're willing to play. Some of us create new shapes or flavors, describing elegance in a canapé or lofting colored kidneys like Alexander Calder. Jumping from high places into water may occupy an afternoon, but variation is the pith in play: hence the double flip, the jack-knife, and even the chunkster's cannonball. Pygmies are thought to use forty-two different words for "forest"; how many the French employ for

love-play is legend. Pizza, one might suppose, was invented by a Bolognese baker who ran away with the circus.

Kids are ravenous for play, adults, too, though often when it comes to fun we feel our limits. I admit as much whenever Erik asks to be told a story and I offer to read him a book. "No, make up a story," he says. Cornered in this way, I resort to basic patterns like *Microscopic Creatures*. *In the drainpipes of the city pool there lives a tribe of tiny people. When the pool shuts down they search the locker rooms for hairpins to crack the safe.* *Strange Mutations* is popular, too: *King Erik had crossed the divide leading down to the golden forest, when the oaks began uprooting themselves and spiraling into space. He felt goose bumps on his arms sprouting feather shafts, and he rode the wind beyond the circling trees, where the purple air tasted like coconuts . . .* Because the plots of these tales are negotiable, they call for audience response: *So what do you suppose they found when Chris and Erik uncorked the secret bottle?*

Adult play reaches beyond fantasy. Among the Mengbetu people of central Africa, custom forbids women to play music. They dance and sing the same songs as men, but instrumental prodigies, if they're female, have to be resourceful. Some play snail shells, spanking them against their bodies and making melodies with chambers of graduated size. Even more startling is their ability to play water. Laundry days, says the musicologist Jim Metzner, often find Mengbetu women drumming the surfaces of Congo tributaries with arm slaps and finger cups, a cheerful, splashy heartbeat.

Play becomes a matter of psychic survival for some. Ghetto diaries reveal that circle dances and soccer were common among the beleaguered Jews of Warsaw. When Nazi decrees forbade Hebrew schooling, lessons were camouflaged as games. Witnessing Hanukkah celebrations in 1940, Chaim Kaplan reported, "Every dance is a protest against our oppressors." A few months before the Germans finally erased them, the Warsaw Jews erected a children's playground. One of the most affecting images of the Holocaust is that of two little boys playing jacks in the shadow of the Auschwitz crematorium. As recalled by a survivor named Kitty Hart, they were so engrossed that when the order came to stand in line—to be gassed—the boys hardly noted the interruption, resuming their game on the threshold of death.

Of course, such amusements saved no lives in 1944. To speak of play in the same breath as murder is to risk perversity. Playful people may inspire their own momentum, but what if their enemies have secret police? Playfulness doesn't overcome evil. I'm

only pointing out that it survives, that somehow it lives within darkness.

Less infernal than Nazis, if almost as humorless, are the foes of fun we know from every day: autocrats of the holiday dinner table, talk-radio Malvolios, impassioned spokespersons for the doctrinally offended—these are the goats of silent, internal parody among audiences too polite to interrupt. Even deadlier is that great Mammon in clown make-up, the Entertainment Industry, spawner of annoying satellites that clutter the night sky, of empty communications and jackass narratives. But what's the point of trashing television? It won't go away.

Instead we can take comfort in knowing that for the rest of the animal kingdom, agility in play corresponds to the measure of the brainpan. Dolphins riding offshore swells or a kamikaze raven in freefall, not to mention old backyard Bowser worrying a stick, make clear that while birds may do it, bees and even educated fleas don't play. I like to imagine a time when humans held more interest for other creatures, song and dance being pastimes of any culture deserving the name, so that four-footed listeners approached the campfire the way that weekend mystics, headed in the opposite direction, now turn to nature for a dip in wood thrush melody.

The race may not be to the swift, yet playfulness generally is. Putting it otherwise, though not all smart people are funny, it is safe to say that all funny people are smart. The only exception that comes to mind is a helplessly anthropomorphous porcupine who lives near my home. Most bristle pigs are seen resting quietly in their conifer penthouses, gnawing on bark, but this one waddled impishly onto the hiking path just a few steps ahead of me. After failing to engage its brake lights, it halted, sitting perfectly still and showing me its business end before easing down the trail once more, as unhurried as an RV on the Trans-Canada Highway. Thicketts of vine maple kept me from scooting around the animal. When I closed in, it crawled, but if I stopped, it picked up the pace. This went on for several minutes while I collected my wits, by which time the porker had lost interest and climbed a tree.

We should recall and memorialize the playful, no matter what their station in the world. Mr. Pennypacker, for instance, who sounds like he might be a usurer in a Dickens novel, was actually my own amusing grandfather—a charming, yarn-spinning and feckless ne'er-do-well. He liked to fish and flaunt his tattoos. He picked out ragtime on the parlor upright. But for the luck of inher-

iting money, Tom Pennypacker might have ended his days in a trailer park. Love of novelty left him no room for a work ethic.

Grandpa did time in the Great War, retiring from action when wounds left him in the care of an ardent field nurse. Grandmother changed his catheter and his plans, though once married, the two were at drawn daggers. Picture a fun-loving, downwardly mobile patrician yoked beside a bossy, social-climbing immigrant—a comical scenario, provided you're outside the fray. Before running away to sea for fifteen years, Grandpa left his daughters an oral legacy of sorts. In one anecdote, the younger Tom is musing over his tomato vines when Grandmother orders him to go inside and put the veal roast in the oven. She speaks with a German-Swiss accent as thick as paint and, who knows, maybe she's got clothespins in her mouth. Seeming to oblige her, Tom detours to the tool shed, where he finds an old cartwheel lying in a heap of junk. This he seizes, carries into the kitchen, and—after hooking the oven door handle with his foot—slings onto a hot bread rack. Then he crosses to the window and calls to his wife, "Da weal's in da oven, okay?"

Robert Frost spoke of poetry as "a momentary stay against confusion," yet the same perk follows other forms of play. Though open-ended, misbehavior like Tom Pennypacker's is seldom completely random. Play is ordered anarchy in flight from pain and emptiness. It makes geography in a vacuum, rocks boredom rhythmically to sleep. Fanciful, subversive, and free ranging, it always invents, never stands aloof. Like unseen rivals in a game of Capture the Flag, players call to the world, "Here I am! Where are you?"

Play directs us outward, and in this way, it sponsors life. A twenty-two-year-old student of mine has passed through purgatorial fires lately: the death of a beloved grandparent, her father's cancer diagnosis, a boyfriend's rejection. (Med-school bound and no longer needing her tutorial services, "he raped my brain," she says). Most recently, her sister attempted suicide. Feeling the griefs compound, my young friend imagines taking her own life. "I won't do it, though," she says. "It isn't in me." She permits herself a grin of surprise when she tells me this, as if by shrugging off tragic ennoblement she knows she keeps the human comedy's ball-bounce intact.

Long live the ball-bouncers among us, I think to myself, as I pause to tighten my skate laces at the shore of the pond. Likewise the spirits of daisy-chainers, animal-tamers, and tea-partiers in puddle mud who manage to spite the wearings of experience. Our

skating game resumes with a bull caribou^{caribou} harnessed to a plastic sled and tasked with hauling his captors across the Canadian taiga. Shouts of good-natured derision and my own pumping arms move the load; before long we're gliding freely. Sunlight planes our faces and our mouths leave vapor trails in the cold. Skating harder I'm a thing of amphetamine properties, but when osiers loom at the far end of the pond, I jump harness, crossing left and turning to watch the boys crash headlong in a thicket. There is no glee on earth, no hilarity to top this: they sprawl like harpooned seals and laugh past the competence of breath.

No one's keeping score out here. The sun slips down over Manastash Ridge, and shadows of trees dapple the steely oval of the pond. When the boys start flagging—it won't be long, now—I will load them onto the sled for the short walk home. Chris and Erik are bound to know trouble in their time, maybe the kind that cripples whole lives. Playfulness grants no immunity to fate or karma. While I circle the pond for another pass I can hear them stalking me, and their voices echo younglings from time out of mind.