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SPUTNIK ON THE DANCE FLOOR LEARNS OF
LOBSTERBOY'S DEMISE
Marvin Shackelford

He is reddish and thick-lipped and the way he moves so gangly and dark is hilarious. Somehow the call goes out as “Look at the Sputnik on the dance floor!”, and this is how his exploits travel. When we arrive fresh from spiking the punch and feeling up our tenth-grade dates in the hallway where we press them against the lockers, on-the-spot inspections for health and safety, he’s in full swing and jive and never again will he be the Russian exchange student. He is dancing with a fat girl and is only, always, Sputnik.

This is a man, we say, who surely knows about the punch.

But we can only go so far with sophomore girls, so when they herd to the bathroom to reshift makeup and undergarments into place, we’re up for making a circle to join Sputnik in the jig. It’s the happy akimbo of arms and legs and bobbing head that tells us what to do. We flail ourselves mad, lock arms, and spin a tornado-eye about him, his fat math-club girl. We insist the dance is communal and make her a part, but she cries and dishevels against our tuxedo bodies and has to dip away, runs to shelve herself together again. Sputnik, he gets it, we are making something out of all this.

In the parking lot there is only spike, no punch, and the girls are all gone, still waiting. There is the matter of teachers—Ling will marry the gym coach, but she isn’t wearing a bra. Scioscia wants to scare us off breasts altogether. Gerard, he knows. He knows. We want to know of Sputnik, what of the ice and snow? The things that fall from Heaven to level a forest? The bears? How do the women make it up in the morning? Is capitalism damned, too? He will tell us only, “The penis; we say ‘khui’ instead.”

Sputnik, you fucker.

In the gymnasium, word is spreading: The boy with no fingers hasn’t made it. We are ambivalent, we are broken. He had come so close. The sophomore girls are destroyed and will

forget the lessons learned freshman year, how far to let us go. They have to be comforted, the way he had only doctor-cut flaps of webby palms to grasp things with, how nothing in his body would work right anyway. He pinched at things and soon, soon, we'll be standing there to make him lower in the ground a falling, flinging, swinging down man from space. He was like another Sputnik.

But no, Sputnik, he knows again. His elbows and knees are shouting, and his voice is something without form and so full it's a void in the silence before the next song starts. We begin to think Sputnik always knows. The mourning is in his party face and his moves all beat on without thinking, without waiting. He is interested only in shooting upwards—he leaves us to process the deformities of life, to see if they must add up to something less than the wonder of it all.