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Submissions

Current and recent General Studies students—including nondegree students and students in other branches of Columbia University who are taking Writing Program courses—are encouraged to submit to *Quarto*.

We welcome poetry, fiction, nonfiction, translations, and plays, including excerpts from longer works.

Each submission should be accompanied by a self-addressed, stamped envelope. Please include your name, address, and phone number (optional) on your manuscript.

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WALTER B. LEVIS

An excerpt from
The View from Above

TIME: THE MID-1980S.

Setting: An apartment on Chicago's North Side, sparsely furnished in the manner of graduate students. A few potted plants and a long row of bookshelves line one wall. The shelves are crude, made of bricks and wooden planks.

Characters:

JOEY—an aspiring writer, twenty-nine years old; a “seeker” and student of New Age religions.

MARLA—JOEY's lover, also twenty-nine years old. A broadcast journalist.

SAUL—JOEY's brother, slightly older. A radical activist who's been living in Nicaragua.

Synopsis: Two brothers are in love with the same woman. The younger brother is a student of yoga and Jungian psychology. When the older brother is injured in a bomb blast at a radio station in Nicaragua he returns home to Chicago, where he must face his brother living with the woman he still loves.

As she struggles to reconcile her feelings about the two men, the two brothers struggle to reconcile themselves to their own conflicting conceptions of the meaning of masculinity.

SAUL. I say it's been a hell of a long time.

JOEY. What are you talking about?

SAUL. Can I be crude?

JOEY. (*Ambivalent.*) Sure.

SAUL. I say it's been a hell of a long time since I've gotten laid. That's what I'm saying.

JOEY. (*Shaken.*) I see.

SAUL. I mean, I'll live. Sex isn't like food and water, but—

(*Saul massages his neck.*)

JOEY. Right.

(*Saul continues to rub his head and massage his neck.*)

JOEY. Saul, you OK?

SAUL. Just these goddamn headaches.

JOEY. You want some aspirin?

SAUL. (*Still rubbing.*) No, the problem is they didn't get it all out.

JOEY. What?

SAUL. The shrapnel, tiny slivers—they couldn't get it all.

JOEY. What does that mean?

SAUL. I need more surgery.

(*He points to his head.*)

JOEY. The shrapnel is just lodged in there?

SAUL. Not exactly lodged—these tiny slivers sort of float around the blood vessels in my skull.

JOEY. Sounds terrible.

SAUL. Headaches, that's all. They didn't have enough technology down there—just a fluoroscope. The slivers are barely visible.

JOEY. When are you supposed to have this surgery?

SAUL. As soon as possible, they said. But I can live with the headaches. (*He raises his whiskey and takes a swallow.*) Who doesn't have headaches?

JOEY. What about your leg?

SAUL. Oh, this is already much better. Just a hairline fracture.

JOEY. How did it happen, Saul?

SAUL. A bomb at a radio station—they're frequent targets. I was getting ready to go on the air—did I tell you I've been doing some reporting down there?

JOEY. Yes.

SAUL. Anyway, all of a sudden, Whammo! Just like the cartoons, I saw stars—flashes of different colors. Nobody knows—even now—whose bomb it was. I had to piece the story together from what other people told me. All I know is that one minute I was fiddling with my microphone, and the next minute—Kaboom. It's unbelievable down there, Joey, really unbelievable. You ought to check it out. Would open your eyes to some things.

JOEY. (*Stung.*) Thanks, Saul, but I like to think that my eyes are already open.

SAUL. I didn't mean it like that.

JOEY. Sure you did, just like that crack about not being on the political map.

SAUL. Don't be so sensitive, Joey.

JOEY. Am I overreacting? Temperamental, oversensitive, gifted Joey?

SAUL. All I meant is that the politics down there are fascinating. That's where the future of Marxism lies.

JOEY. Really? Great! If I see Marx, I'll tell him.

(Saul has pulled out a pouch of tobacco and rolling papers.)

SAUL. The link between Latin America's liberation theology and Marxism could mark a shift as powerful as the Lutheran Reformation because it is based on—

JOEY. Saul, not now, please.

SAUL. *(Detached.)* Sure.

(Saul rolls his cigarette.)

SAUL. So what has it been, Joey, one . . . two years?

JOEY. Three-and-a-half.

SAUL. No . . .

JOEY. Yeah—with a few letters sprinkled in.

SAUL. I'll be damned—three-and-a-half years . . . Are you sure?

JOEY. Positive. Marla and I have our four-year, living-together anniversary this January.

SAUL. Four years you've been living together?

JOEY. Yeah, we moved in here right after you left.

SAUL. That's right . . . At the start of Reagan's second term—I remember now. "Clap if you're a contra."

(Saul laughs, then takes a swallow of his drink.)

SAUL. *(Finally.)* Remember how Mamelah used to say, "So tell me, Boychick, wh't new . . . ?"

JOEY. *(Softening.)* I remember.

SAUL. Wow, *mamelah . . . boychick . . .* I haven't used a Yiddish word in—well, fighting the wrong war, I guess. But it feels good, you know, rolls nicely off the tongue here. *(He raises his glass.)* Feels good to be home, Joey, sweet home Chicago *(he laughs)*—where the Windy City women, man, they sure are fine. . . . At least I hope so! *(Laughs again.)* *Lacheihem!* *(They both drink, Joey raising his carton of juice.)*

SAUL. *(Continuing.)* So tell me, Boychick . . . wh't new?

JOEY. Nothing, really. Same old thing. Staring at my navel, aligning myself with the powers of the universe, eating a lot of Chinese food.

SAUL. You're writing?

JOEY. Yeah, writing and meditating—practicing a lot of yoga.

SAUL. What are you doing these days for money?

JOEY. Working at a bookstore.

SAUL. Hmm. . . . And your own work—anything published?

JOEY. No.

SAUL. Nothing?

JOEY. Zero. My claim to fame remains the Illinois Young Poets award, "given each year to a graduating senior who shows outstanding promise for a literary career. . . ." Oink, oink, oink.

SAUL. I remember that award.

JOEY. I'm carving out a niche for myself in literary history as America's most prolific unpublished writer. *(He laughs.)*

SAUL. Well, commercial success isn't everything.

JOEY. Better not be. I have a couple thousand pages of the novel and a bunch of essays upstairs.

SAUL. Upstairs?

JOEY. The attic—my writing room.

SAUL. You write every day?

JOEY. Just about, yes.

(Pause. Saul gives all his attention to putting the final touches on rolling his cigarette.)

SAUL. Must be nice to have Marla around when you're writing.

JOEY. What do you mean?

SAUL. I've always thought I'd be able to write if I were in a good, serious relationship with a woman.

JOEY. The elusive Muse.

SAUL. That's right, but if I were in a relationship—well, Marla inspires you, doesn't she?

JOEY. I guess so. But she's a real person, Saul, with her own needs and wants and problems and all the rest. She's not here just to keep my creative juices flowing.

SAUL. You get many writer's blocks?

JOEY. Not really. I get writer's doubts.

SAUL. Doubts—like what?

JOEY. Not doubts, exactly. Questions—one big question.

SAUL. What is it?

JOEY. The question?

SAUL. Yes.

JOEY. Well, it's not really a writer's question. It's everyone's.

SAUL. Aaah! A universal question!

JOEY. Yes. A universal question. *The* universal question, so big and so frightening that we practically never take it seriously.

(Pause.)

SAUL. Enough already, the suspense is killing me. What's the question?

JOEY. (*Quietly.*) Funny to tell you about it. You of all people.

(Pause.)

SAUL. Why?

JOEY. Forget it.

SAUL. Come on—what's the question?

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JOEY. The question is. Am I doing what I should truly be doing with my life?

(Saul laughs.)

JOEY. Or, I guess if you're older you might put it. Have I done what I should truly have done with my life?

SAUL. Big question, that's a big question.

JOEY. I've dreamt about it, too. I've dreamt that total strangers ask me, "Are you doing what you should be doing with your life?" and I tell them . . . *(Pause. Joey leans closer to Saul.)* I tell them I could answer the question if I were you.

SAUL. If you were me?

JOEY. That's what the dream says. I could answer the question if I were you.

(Saul remains still, then pours himself another drink.)

SAUL. Mind if I smoke?

JOEY. *(Ambivalent.)* No.

(Saul lights up.)

SAUL. *(After taking a long, deep drag.)* So Marla really quit smoking?

JOEY. Yes.

(Pause.)

JOEY. Listen, Saul, maybe I shouldn't have told you that dream. I don't mean to make you uncomfortable.

SAUL. *(Waving him off.)* Forget it, forget it. I'm not uncomfortable. It's just a dream. But let me ask you something, does Marla do yoga with you?

JOEY. (*Hesitant.*) Yes, almost every day.

SAUL. Hard to imagine.

JOEY. She's not as serious about it, I'd say, as I am.

SAUL. But she *is* into it?

JOEY. Yes.

SAUL. Those crazy positions and breathing and the vegetarian diet?

JOEY. That's not really the essence of what it means to practice yoga.

SAUL. But she does it. And she did quit smoking and drinking?

JOEY. Yes, basically.

SAUL. Amazing . . . I'll be goddamned. She must look terrific.

JOEY. (*Startled.*) What?

SAUL. Healthy, I mean—that yoga is damn good for you, isn't it?

JOEY. Yes.

SAUL. The body is the temple of the soul . . .

JOEY. Sort of the slogan, yes. You ought to try it sometime.

SAUL. Me?

JOEY. Sure.

SAUL. I'm stiff as a pipe.

JOEY. Doesn't matter.

SAUL. Those pretzel positions?

JOEY. I could show you asanas for beginners.

SAUL. What d'you call it?

JOEY. Asanas—means, like, pose.

SAUL. Is that what Marla does?

JOEY. Yes.

SAUL. I can't believe it. She gets all twisted up in those pretzel positions?

JOEY. That's not exactly what it's all about.

SAUL. Does she chant and have a mantra and all that?

JOEY. No, not yet—

SAUL. What do you mean, "not yet?" You guys have a guru?

JOEY. No—well, sort of. We have a teacher.

SAUL. Do you have to get to a certain stage before the teacher gives you a mantra?

JOEY. Not exactly.

SAUL. Does Marla like this teacher?

JOEY. I don't know, Saul. You'd have to ask her. But as soon as you're feeling up to it, I'll show you some simple poses and you can see what it's like for yourself. When are you having this surgery?

(Pause.)

SAUL. I'm not sure.

JOEY. Didn't the doctor say—

SAUL. (*Interrupting.*) He said I should have the surgery as soon as possible.

JOEY. So . . .

SAUL. Forget it.

JOEY. What do you mean—forget it. Where are you going to have the surgery done?

SAUL. I don't know.

JOEY. Do you have the names of any surgeons?

SAUL. No.

JOEY. Well, what are you—

SAUL. (*Cutting him off.*) For chrissakes!

(*Saul grabs his crutches and hobbles to his duffel bag.*)

JOEY. What are you doing?

(*Without answering, Saul unzips his bag and takes out his wallet, then hobbles back to the couch. He pulls out the wallet, counts his cash, and drops it on the coffee table, then he empties the change from his pockets.*)

SAUL. Three hundred twenty-three dollars and seventy-eight cents is all the money I have.

JOEY. And you don't have any health insurance?

SAUL. No, I don't have any health insurance. I was hoping to borrow some money from you, Joey.

JOEY. I don't have any, Saul. (*Pause.*) Maybe Marla—

SAUL. (*Cutting him off.*) She's got money?

JOEY. Well, her father . . .

(*Saul smiles, then shakes his head.*)

SAUL. I should have known.

JOEY. What do you mean?

SAUL. Another one of my stupid ideas—that you'd be able to help me.

(*Saul gathers his cash and change.*)

JOEY. I can make money. What does the surgery cost? A few thousand dollars?

SAUL. How can you make money?

JOEY. I'll teach tennis.

SAUL. Don't worry about it, Joe. I'll figure something out.

(*Saul stands up and reaches for his crutches and his jacket.*)

SAUL. I'll be back later.

JOEY. I want to help you, Saul.

SAUL. Forget it. You don't have any money. Don't worry about it. It was stupid of me to ask.

(*Saul starts toward the door.*)

JOEY. Where are you going?

SAUL. A friend of mine is getting off work just about now, I think.

JOEY. It's two in the morning.

SAUL. I know.

JOEY. Who's getting off work at two in the morning?

SAUL. I don't think you ever met her. Someone I used to know.

JOEY. In Chicago?

SAUL. Yes, when I drove a cab.

JOEY. She works on Rush Street?

SAUL. Yes.

JOEY. Is she the one who . . . uh . . .

SAUL. A dancer.

JOEY. I thought she did massage.

SAUL. She does. (*Saul rubs his neck.*) That's what I need right now—if nothing else. At least a massage.

JOEY. Have you two kept in touch?

SAUL. A little. (*Saul smiles.*) Enough, I hope.

(*Saul goes to the door, but before he opens it Marla enters wearing a robe.*)

MARLA. I thought I heard voices.

(*Pause.*)

SAUL. (*Playfully.*) You must have been dreaming.

MARLA. (*Entering further, restrained.*) Hello, Saul.

SAUL. Are you going to make a wounded man crawl to you, or are you going to come over here and give me a hug?

(Marla hesitates, then goes to him. Joey exits.)

MARLA. Good to see you—God, we were worried. *(She turns and notices Joey has left the room.)* We just got the letter tonight. We were out of town.

SAUL. I hope you don't mind my barging in like this.

MARLA. Oh, no—of course not. Are—are you okay?

SAUL. Yes, fine. *(Motioning to the headband.)* Knocked some sense into me. Makes me see how stupid I was . . .

MARLA. Stupid?

SAUL. To cut myself off from you.

(Marla smiles uneasily, then tucks her robe under her chin and turns away. She takes a deep breath.)

MARLA. That tobacco smells good.

SAUL. I'll roll you one.

MARLA. No, no—I shouldn't.

(Joey reenters carrying blankets and a pillow.)

JOEY. You'll probably be more comfortable here than upstairs in the attic. The cot up there is that crummy old one that used to be on Mom's porch.

(Joey sets the blankets down, then everyone is silent.)

JOEY. Well . . . I guess I'll go to bed.

(Pause.)

JOEY. *(To Marla.)* Are you coming?

MARLA. *(Firmly.)* Yes—in a minute. I just want to visit for a minute with Saul.

JOEY. Right, sure. Well . . . welcome home, Saul. *(He shakes Saul's hand awkwardly.)* And I'm going to help you work this out. Really, we can work it out.

MARLA. Work what out?

SAUL. Oh, you know Joey—he's always trying to work something out. *(To Joey.)* Forget it, kid, don't worry about a thing.

(Joey starts to exit, then stops and turns around.)

JOEY. Hey, Saul, don't call me "kid," okay?

SAUL. Take it easy, Joey. It's just a figure of speech.

JOEY. Yeah, I guess you're right.

(Joey nods and tries to smile, then exits.)

(During this exchange, Marla has picked up Saul's bottle of whiskey and is looking at the label when Saul turns to her.)

SAUL. Help yourself, Marla.

MARLA. No thanks, I shouldn't. *(She sets the bottle down.)* Were you on your way out?

SAUL. Yeah.

MARLA. At this time of night?

SAUL. Yeah, a friend of mine's getting off work—but I'd rather talk with you.

MARLA. *(Nervous.)* It's been a long time, hasn't it.

SAUL. Tell me all.

MARLA. (*Laughing.*) Sure, Saul.

SAUL. No, really. I want to know.

(*Saul takes off his jacket and sits down on the couch. Marla remains standing.*)

SAUL. I want to know what you do with every minute of your day—what makes you angry, sad, happy, scared—I want to know how your sex life is, and what goes through your mind in the morning while you're brushing your teeth . . .

MARLA. You're still nuts aren't you? And a goddamn flirt.

SAUL. I think the line is, "still crazy after all these years"—(*Pause.*) And I'm not flirting . . . that would be a waste of energy. . . . Talk to me.

MARLA. (*Laughs nervously.*) Well, things are great, actually. I'm incredibly busy these days—directing a news show for a Polish radio station. And I'm also doing a lot of community organizing on women's issues—economic empowerment, as well as, of course, the abortion question. What a time to be on the forefront of that one! With the Reorganization of the federal courts, the states are being forced to turn to their own general assembly and constitution in a way they haven't done in decades!—which means local, grassroots organizations can have an enormous impact. (*Stopping herself.*) Listen to me, I sound like I'm campaigning, don't I? (*She laughs.*)

(*Pause. Saul has taken out his tobacco pouch and begun to roll another cigarette.*)

SAUL. You and Joey happy together?

MARLA. Happy? That's an empty word, Saul. You know how I feel about that word, I've always—

SAUL. (*Interrupting.*) A couple of happy lovers having a happy life here in this happy country?

MARLA. What's that supposed to mean?

SAUL. Have I overstepped my boundaries?

MARLA. I don't think I like your tone.

SAUL. I asked about my boundaries?

MARLA. (*Firm.*) You're right on the edge.

SAUL. Well, here I go, Marla, I'm going to cross the line right now—spend it all, go for broke, this moment . . . I still love you.

MARLA. What are you saying . . .

SAUL. (*Flatly.*) I love you, I love you, I love you . . .

MARLA. Stop it.

SAUL. I want you, I want you, I want you.

MARLA. You're out of line, Saul. This isn't funny.

SAUL. (*Quickly.*) Would it be better to keep it to myself?

MARLA. Yes.

SAUL. No way, Marla. Here it is, right out loud, where both of us can hear what a scum bag bastard I am. (*Slowly.*) I am still in love with you.

(*Marla is silent. Saul lights his cigarette.*)

SAUL. Sure you don't want me to roll you one?

MARLA. (*Nervously.*) I don't think you should stay here, Saul.

SAUL. I've got no place else to go.

MARLA. You can't come back here and make a play for me like this.

SAUL. I'm not making a play for you. I'm just telling you how I feel.

MARLA. I'm not a prize that you win for going off to war. You can't add me to your collection of medals . . .

SAUL. (*Cutting her off.*) I don't have any fucking collection, Marla. I don't have any medals or prizes or even a goddamn souvenir . . . (*He gets up and hobbles to her on one crutch.*) But I don't expect anything from you. I'm not that dumb . . .

(*After a silence.*)

MARLA. You don't even know me.

SAUL. I know you . . .

MARLA. Not anymore.

SAUL. Oh, you've changed—is that it?

MARLA. Yes.

SAUL. Now you do yoga? You have a new diet and exercise regime—loose limbs and legumes . . .

MARLA. (*Firm.*) Shut up, Saul. All you have is some idea in your head of who I am. And that's what you're in love with—your own idea. You don't know me, Saul. This is a fantasy—your . . .

(*Saul grabs her wrist and squeezes tightly.*)

SAUL. Listen to me. You can reject me or ignore me or hate me—but don't say my feelings aren't real.

(He releases her wrist and turns away, limping back to the couch. He sits, then covers his ears and squeezes his head between his hands. After a moment, he sighs heavily.)

MARLA. *(Rubbing her wrist.)* What is it?

(Saul remains silent. He squeezes his head more tightly and rocks back and forth.)

MARLA. You're head hurt?

(Saul doesn't answer.)

MARLA. *(Still rubbing her wrist.)* Saul, you want some aspirin?

(He keeps rocking, breathing more heavily. Marla steps closer but stops when she is several feet from the couch.)

MARLA. Saul?

(He lets go of his head and looks up. Then he grabs his jacket and crutches. He hobbles past Marla and goes to the door.)

Saul. *(As he opens the door.)* I'm sorry, Marla, if I hurt your wrist.

(He exits. Marla stands there, still rubbing her wrist as the lights go down. Chick Corea's "Return to Forever" fades in.) □

