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The Miami Tales

When in December the great rain clouds frown
and cold damp rain with icy sleet comes down,
the grass is slick, the soil turns to ooze
that sticks, and wrecks the leather of your shoes.
Then also comes the snow, with frigid blasts,
that blocks the lanes and will not let you pass;
the winds like hounds roam the abandoned streets;
the population sits and stares and eats.
The mayor, of course, at home and toasty warm,
has not yet realized that there is a storm.
So leaving places where the cold winds whip,
people take off on lengthy business trips.
Stock market traders send word from warm climes;
they're online poolside with the *New York Times*.
As palm trees sway along the sandy shore—
no need to think of thick coats anymore.

It happened in that season on a day
in Palm Beach at the Hilton as I lay,
that I could hear them renting rooms and suites,
a group of people, minutes from their seats
on Southwest, US Air, and Delta flights,
half-starved and tired: they'd been up all night.
But after slumping, tired, into chairs,
they soon felt better and they came downstairs.
They ordered dinner and I had the occasion
to meet them and engage in conversation.
So without great ado or any reduction,
I will repeat for you their introductions:

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When you read and understand a poem, comprehending its rich and formal meanings, then you master chaos a little.

”

-Steven Spender

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First came a Lawyer, who had argued cases
in many courts in many different places.
He knew the law and things of the same sort;
he had a trial inside the Supreme Court.
A briefcase he carried held files stuffed with papers
which he could use against murderers and rapers.
He'd made long speeches tailored to impress
impartial juries, but never spoke to the press;
he could argue until his face was blue,
could stand and wave his arms and shout loud, too!
And he could play the race card very neatly,
comparing men to Hitler, always discreetly.
All his morals were contained in this:
That money is the only road to bliss.
Though he was paid huge sums to rave and rant,
he had but one friend: Ulysses S. Grant,
whose face adorns the fifty-dollar bill—
of these he was certain to have his fill.

He had with him, late of the same profession,
another man whose talent was expression,
a Politician slightly nuts but cunning,
and he for President had started running—
after six weeks of having twisted fun
making the country guess if he would run.
Indeed it was just a week before the primary,
when he finally announced his candidacy
and won the state, confounding all the polls,
who'd said in the days before they'd bet their souls
that his philosophy was cracked and lame—
a rich man playing at a rich man's game.
He planned to have a rally in Daytona
and on the next night fly to Arizona.

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There was a Plumber with him to campaign;
he could fix toilets and repair a drain
and had a stick made with a rubber bell
and wore blue jeans, with a peculiar smell.
He had a watch on, set one hour slow
so that he could decide just when to go
to fix a sink or when to vegetate—
and so he usually was one hour late.
But then most workmen are, and we expect it,
so why try to change or even correct it?

There came a Feminist who talked of things
like the upcoming conference in Beijing,
oppression, jobs, men, and abortionists—
No one called her Mrs. or Miss: it was Ms.
She knew statistics on the business world
and spoke until your cerebellum whirled.
And she used euphemisms, quite PC,
being sure to respect minorities.
Also she marched and sometimes demonstrated;
the piglike male chauvinists she hated.
She swore a lot, her oaths indeed were many
and as for modesty: she hadn't any.
She thought this habit sped her liberation:
she was profane on every occasion.

Sitting nearby and scowling, full of hate,
sat three in suits who thought God did create
the world in a week, I'll put them on this list;
they have the title of Creationist.

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A Journalist was there as well; he bore
a heavy bag in back and one before.
These bags around the country he had carried
and hadn't seen his wife (for he was married)
or slept for long or eaten well in weeks
but had to keep on interviewing freaks
and writing stories, sending them away:
would they be published? He could never say.
He toted too a lightweight powerbook
and often he would log online to look
for a big story, perhaps a football strike;
he was prepared with recorder and mike,
pens galore and fifteen books of notes
and snacks that he ate like a starving goat.
He tried hard not to sleep on the hotel table
but blinked like a barn owl in a stable.

There was a Teacher there who taught fifth grade
and every day she faced a cannonade
of children's problems and of children's questions:
they all went to her to get suggestions.
She taught them how to read and what to write
and had to grade their homework every night,
check their quizzes and record their tests
and deal with troublemakers and with pests.
And she was taxed beyond ability:
for she had perpetual responsibility
and felt harassed and also somewhat sad
when any of her students made her mad.
She made them out as angels, every one;
it slipped her mind, the naughty things they'd done.
Still, to her credit, one can't fail to say,
she worked long hours for very little pay.

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A Football Player there was, quite a hulk;
he was awesomely large—muscle and bulk.
He played q.b., though for a wretched team,
but still a salary like his would seem
to satisfy a person; it's quite nice
having riches beyond dreams of avarice,
a steady job, a million cheering fans,
autographs and press and clapping hands.
But though his salary was easily able
to buy the food, the tourists, and the table,
the whole hotel, and mayorship of the city,
and leave his wallet still fat, full and pretty,
he was a miser and he wished for more:
three million was not enough—he wanted four.
Though what to do with it I didn't know;
he was quite entertaining, even so.

I heard a College Student seated near,
say he liked to party and drink beer,
and stay up late till twelve or even later;
he had the temper of an alligator.
He got hungover drinking, woke up sore,
with a groan, a cry, a belch, God knows what more.
When he got up, he watched obscene TV,
loving the shows that I'd never see.
His grades were low; his parents would surely cry
if they heard how, barely, he scraped by.

There was an inner-city cop who came
from Los Angeles, his name was Kevin:
he wore a badge, number five three eleven.
He carried his cuffs, his gun, and other gear,
and he was tough on murder, drugs, and beer
(purchased by minors, or when used while driving);
he was very diligent and ever striving.
To keep the constant pressure up on crime
he had twelve men already doing time
plus three or four others that he had to release.
I'm sure his vigilance will never cease.

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At the Cop's side there sat a Tax Collector;
bad forms and math mistakes would often vex her.
She was the very essence of red tape—
bureaucracy in living human shape.
Two demons are that come inevitably,
but death was never feared as much as she,
for death is easier, you must admit:
you buy a coffin and get put in it.
No forms, no bills, and zero paperwork—
dying is possible for any jerk!

A man there was who worked on DNA
and what the double helix had to say
about heredity and genes and things;
he liked to study flies with mutant wings
to see what twisted sequence made them grow
although for what purpose I just don't know.
He might have been the Czar of Norwegian rats
and grew *E. coli* in gigantic vats.
So to us mortals he was far above;
he did not go on dates, but studied love,
and he was working on a cancer cure,
a drug for AIDS, some new vaccines, and more.

But sleep our tortured minds just couldn't reach,
and so we called, "Good fellows, we beseech
you tell us some stories—we're all awake,
and bored as hell, and please, for God's sake—"
Here the Creationists jumped up and said:
"The good Lord will rain curses on your head!"

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“Oh, pipe down!” we told them in disdain,
“Who gave you the right to be such pains?
So just shut up and maybe go to—
for we want entertainment, can’t you tell?
Some bawdy tale you might have chanced to hear;
each one who holds back has to buy the beer
for everyone that’s present.” “Very well,”
the lawyer said, “I’ve something I can tell.”
And then, of course, he straightaway proceeded
to tell the story that is here repeated. ★

—Micha Elsner
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