

Potatoes

Before any obvious signs of dissolution had occurred within the town of Quentin, overtures to collapse were already, perhaps even always, present. This conclusion, however, was only known (with one exception) to those of us who lived there. In the quiescence of the cool, autumnal temperatures that usually occurred this time of year, we could read a further harbinger of some accelerated downward turn. Annually we embraced the crispness of the seasonal air by donning heavier apparel and sipping warm cider; but this year we were forced into abandoning these simple pleasures, for the muggy, humid air blanketing our town showed little indication of quitting. Only the trees—maple, birch, and aspen—obeyed the tradition of season, shedding their foliage in a flurry of reds, golds, and oranges. From our vantage point in McBrayer park we sampled this vision as though paying a toll, dimly aware that during *this season* the bill had come due.

As for the usual town event that was upon us—the annual Potato Festival—we had duly prepared. The decorative banners, the parade floats, and the local businesses with their locally crafted potato wares were at the ready. And more prepared than usual we were, as we were not observing just another potato festival, but rather a grander occasion was upon us: Quentin’s centennial, for which a weeklong celebration of the town’s founding had been apportioned. The park, nexus for various festival events that it was, was well prepared: decorative potato cutouts lined the sidewalks snaking through the grounds, chairs were arrayed around the large gazebo—the park’s main structure—which had been given a fresh coat of paint (though several missing pieces of planking remained unattended to), and the entire grounds of

the park had been given a carefully manicured cutting. The expected crunchy texture and dull ochre color of the grass that we normally encountered during the festival was nowhere to be found; instead, a glistening, dewy green permeated. The fallen leaves, we saw, had been swept as best as possible into large piles, pushed into the far corners of the park. On closer inspection these mounds also betrayed the expected: neither dusty nor crumbling, they were, instead, pulpy and moldering, stewing dankly in their moistness. Exiting the park, for we have an event to attend, we move through the surrounding neighborhoods. Gutters, choked with leaves, overflow with sludgy plant matter. Bricks and siding, because of the non-dissipating wetness lodged in the atmosphere, are grimed a mildewy green.

A slight left and we are out of the residential area, making our way down Main Street. As we enter the downtown area (if one street and a handful of shops constitute a downtown area) we pass the sign that greets travelers with our town's name and its special designation:



Elsewhere there was surely a flower city, or antique city, or even beer city, but we were the home of the spud, potato city. And how did Quentin come to claim this singular moniker? Was it because we did, in fact, grow potatoes? Perhaps, for we did grow them...profusely. Personal potato patches enriched many residences (rundown though they may have become), while official patches were liberally sprinkled throughout Quentin. And from these patches

came our town's lumpy emblem. Did we make potato soup? Naturally. Potato pie? Of course! Potato cereal? Sure. Potato shakes? A town specialty! We grew and consumed potatoes as readily as another region might grow wheat or corn. But one suspects the relationship runs deeper than a simple matter of agriculture, for this designation was rooted well back before the mention of potatoes as a recurrent food source could be found in any of the town's annals. As evidence, our potato mania went beyond its nutritional value. Potato themed toys, knick-knacks, and locally crafted items could be found for sale in any local shop. There were potato games, furniture, and monogrammed clothes, along with anything else where that vegetable's indistinct silhouette could be sewn, printed, or painted. A gimmicky hook to attract seekers with their wallets to our version of smalltown eccentricity? To be sure! And the jewel of this eccentric crown? The annual Potato Festival, Quentin's largest city sponsored event. Witness the Potato Parade! we boasted. Who will be the Festival's King and Queen? we queried with expectancy. An economic placemaking strategy staged, not uncoincidentally, around other holidays? Of course.

And yet...

We sensed something more at work, and after a hundred years in existence, Quentin was on the cusp of its centennial celebration.

Continuing down Main we mull over what special events the town's managers have in store for this historic occasion. As far as we could divine, nothing much. Other than extending the festival to a week-long celebration, little seemed different (the unseasonably warm temperatures excluded). Though there were the lectures we had seen being promoted around town, a special set of "entertaining and educational" talks to be given. We had all seen the

flyers posted in shop windows and taped to telephone poles entreating citizens to attend, to learn the history of Quentin and, by extension, the significance of the potato to our town. Whether these talks were official festival events sanctioned by the city officials—as the potato costume contest was—we did not know. The flyers neither enlightened us as to who was sponsoring the talks nor who was actually giving them. Since none among us really knew just what the town’s relationship was to the potato (just as we didn’t really know much of the town’s history) we had made our journey this early evening (for what else did we have to do?) to Felix’s Used Books, the site of the first talk or lecture or whatever was going to transpire.

Apart from Gremmel’s Mexican Buffet, the other shops on Main had already closed. In truth, there were only about six of us who filed in and seated ourselves in the bookstore. We sat in rickety fold out chairs, the type that might be trotted out if too many people happened to show up unannounced to a birthday party or some other gathering. The layout of the store was more of just an enlarged hallway with shelves running along the sides, interrupted along one wall by a jutting glass display case—like something a jeweler or pawn shop might have—showcasing some of the store’s rarer artifacts (signed editions, purported handwritten letters by authors of certain notoriety). Our chairs had been placed near the entrance of the establishment, though we faced the back where the event was being staged. A sheet had been hung, or perhaps taped, along the rear wall. We took note of a rather outdated looking projecting device and surmised—accurately as it turned out—that this fabric was to be the screen for the visuals accompanying the evening’s “entertaining and educational” event or presentation or whatever this thing was shaping up to be. We also took note of the presenter

himself, a man nervously fiddling with the projecting mechanism, pressing various buttons in what was no doubt an attempt to coax the machine to life.

“Let me just try this button again,” we heard the presenter mumble.

“You would think he would have been more prepared,” Ms. Crumbly sighed, quite audibly as it were.

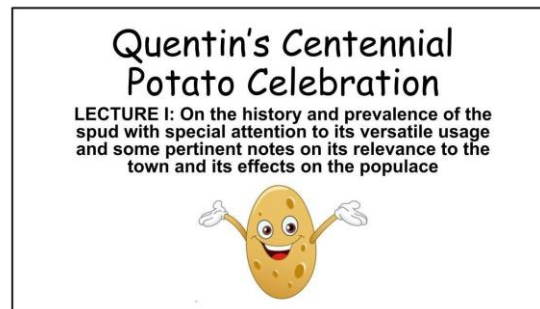
Yes, we nodded, you would think so.

“Ahh...there we go,” announced the presenter as the device whirred to life, emitting a steadily intensifying beam of light. Motes of dust—a lot of dust—were suddenly illuminated within the glow.

“Those sheets could also have been ironed,” Ms. Crumbly added, though this remark was received more coolly by us as we did not want to offend Bern (who had supplied the sheets) and whose establishment (Felix’s Used Books) was our main site of social interaction.

The presenter continued to fiddle, adjusting a dial, and turning a few knobs, eventually bringing what was being projected into focus, though at the moment no more than a yellowish square shined upon the wrinkled sheet. This gave us a moment to scrutinize his person more closely. Who was this individual giving this series of entertaining and educational lectures on the history of Quentin? Surely, we thought, only a true Quentinite would be in a position to give such a talk, and yet none of us could definitively say if they had ever seen this individual before tonight. Someone murmured about possibly seeing him strolling around the park a week earlier but couldn’t be sure, just as Mr. Grot couldn’t be sure if it was the presenter he had noticed peering into the window of Ryder’s Market sometime last month. We agreed that he was a fairly lackluster specimen of middling stature with a short shock of dark hair sprouting from his

head. His glasses, we could see, constantly slid down his nose whereupon he quickly scooted them back up to his eyes. He wore a dark dress shirt and a dark suit coat, though, like the sheet, both could have used ironing. Dark pants that were far too short (we couldn't help but see his bony ankles) hung loosely down his legs. Only his choice in foot wear—black and white style saddle shoes—veered his attire off from the totally conventional, frankly the totally forgettable. Before we could scrutinize him in any greater detail the illumined patch of light had sharpened into discernible imagery. Upon the sheet we could make out:



“Yes, well, thank you for attending this evening,” began the presenter without further personal introduction. “It is with great pleasure that I stand before you today in celebration of Quentin’s historic centennial founding. I hope you find the following lecture, and the lectures to follow, both entertaining and educational. As you can see, we will start at the beginning, which we all know begins with...the potato!”

As he said these last words the presenter made a kind of magician’s flourish with his hands, even though nothing in the least bit magical occurred. There was a pause as if we ought to have applauded, which we in the audience did not; the only reaction came from Pinkerton who let out a fulsome yawn. The presenter adjusted his falling glasses before pressing a button and advancing the slideshow. He went on for a few more slides, speaking about the centennials

extended weeklong potato festival, some basic potato biology, and a few so-called interesting facts about potatoes (a potato has been grown in space). After these remarks we in the audience were becoming a bit restless—with Pinkerton actually lapsing into sleep.

“Entertaining?” Ms. Crumbly scoffed, much more loudly than is socially acceptable.

The presenter, who seemed to be a bit of an amateur when it came to giving public talks, continued through his presentation, often just reading what was on the slide (which did not make for a very entertaining performance), before stopping on a slide with the headline: HOW THE POTATO CAME TO QUENTIN. “Now then, how did our little tuber make its way to this little section of the country and take such deep root?” he asked in a conspiratorial tone of voice (some of us even believing that he winked while delivering this remark).

As we had no answer to this, the bookstore fell into a silence that the presenter let linger before suddenly growing more animated. Taking up a strange position directly in front of the projector, the presenter became obscured in the beam of light, his features becoming wholly washed out while the imagery on the slide superimposed itself across his body, creating an odd undulation of apparent movement in the projected text. His voice also became strangely obfuscated, as if he were performing some type of weird ventriloquism where words overlaid each other, creating multiple sounds at once. He spoke about pioneers (or possibly priests) who traveled (or were banished) from their village and settled where they knew not. As earlier, the presenter gestured theatrically in the manner of a magician, his hands swirling in strange circular motions. Continuing, he recounted the time the settlers (or cultists) spent building homes (or shrines), working the land, and harvesting the newly introduced food staple, the potato. Or maybe what he said was totally different. (Later we would all swear to have heard

different things involving either “the meeting house” or “the sacrificial hut” or “coming together as a community” versus “purging the believers of belief”.) We would all agree to hearing that whomever he was talking about settled in a place that on the fifth day they christened Quentin. The presenter, who had now really worked himself up, was motioning wildly in the beam of light. After some particularly florid gesticulations he seemed to compose himself, to come to his senses, as they say. Calmed considerably (and after adjusting his glasses), he stepped out of the light.

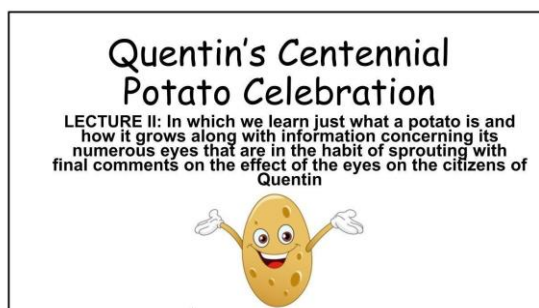
“Yes, almost done with tonight’s...lecture,” he said while mopping sweat from his brow with a handkerchief that he surreptitiously produced from the folds of his jacket. A few more slides and remarks followed: a map of prominent places where potatoes were grown in Quentin, some nutritional facts, and an invitation to “keep our eyes peeled for lecture #2.” The final slide was captioned with the headline: GREAT HEALTH! The image accompanying this assertion, however, certainly did nothing to sell the nutritional value of potatoes: projected in front of us was a bloated individual, catatonically seated on a couch, eyes vacantly staring into space.

As this picture lingered, the presenter seemed to absent himself from the performance. He might have even been talking to himself when Bern turned the lights back on, washing the image out of sight and ending the entertaining and educational presentation. The evening had grown later than any of us had expected and as we turned to face the front of the store we were greeted by the night’s total darkness. If we had any questions about what we heard or saw or just wished to express our thanks for the information we had received, the presenter was wholly uninterested in us or anything we might have to say. In fact, upon completing his

lecture, he took exactly no interest in us as he busied himself with packing away his projecting equipment. It was as though he would have just as soon lectured to an empty room than to the small group that had attended his entertaining and educational presentation. Without fuss or further ado, we took our leave, separately making our way to our respective homes.

As we journeyed home in the darkness each of us unwittingly called to mind some element of the presenter's presentation, some word or phrase that took root in our thoughts. And with the word or phrase (*melding of bodies, festering, augurs of transfiguration*) our minds lit up with imagery, scenes we projected outward upon our surroundings, our reality. Ms. Crumbly, while passing by the potato patch in front of city hall, would later recall having seen a looming shadow within, or perhaps on, one of the rectangular windows. Its outline, per Ms. Crumbly, was fuzzy, indistinct, only somewhat human. Every few seconds the shadow, Ms. Crumbly avowed, snapped into crisp focus, its grotesque outline sharply delineated, before blurring back into vague amorphousness. Peterson, stopping at one of the late-night potato stands to purchase something to snack on, would recount being overcome by an overwhelming torpor. At first he simply put it down to the late hour, but looking down he saw a strange growth of tendrils emerging from his shoes, rooting him to the strangely soft concrete. We later found out that not only did everyone who attended the presentation have some such similar experience, but even those not in attendance were affected in some way by the entertaining and educational lecture. The following morning we gabbled on street corners about what we learned, sharing insights and information that had suddenly become of the greatest interest—all of us having something to say about the pioneers, priests, and potatoes of Quentin's earliest days. Had the presenter circulated a flyer or some brochure with informational bullet points of

his lecture? Given his disinterest in us, the actual attendees, this seemed unlikely. Dispersing from our corner babbles, we resumed our usual, everyday business (the excitement of this being day two of the festival notwithstanding), albeit slower and a bit duller (something we all did put down to the late hour we had arrived home at).



For those of us who were present at the sparsely attended first lecture staged at Felix's Used Bookstore, we were surprised to find a much larger crowd at the local library where lecture #2 was being held. We, the audience or assembly, had now swelled to forty or so citizens, which we presumed was the reasoning behind the change of venue for this installment of entertaining and educational exposition. Instead of Bern's folding chairs, we now sat in the strangely clunky wooden chairs found in such public establishments. In addition, a few larger, and more comfortable, lounge chairs had been moved from other parts of the library to form a semi-circle around the staging area from which the presenter was speaking. Despite the additional seating, many had to simply stand. Though the crowd had swelled, any outré visible signs of excitement had not—our earlier street corner chattering had not translated to this evening's gathering. At best we registered a kind of knowing nod to whomever it was among the crowd we found ourselves situated next to. In the intervening time since the first lecture a few of us—Peterson and Ms. Crumbly included—had developed some sort of skin condition.

Mottled flecks of russet, maroon, and purple, quite visible even in the dim light, splotched their faces and arms.

“Entertaining,” someone said, though it was not someone in the crowd.

“Yes, yes. How good of you all to come,” intoned the presenter as he strode out from some back recess of the library to the area of his address, where the first slide of the presentation was already shining on the lowered screen (Bern’s unironed sheets being replaced by an actual screen). Also replaced was the fumbling of buttons and cords that bedeviled the presenter’s previous lecture. Now, with a causal aplomb, he engaged us, the assembled, with a considerably more confident bearing.

“Just what is a potato?” he inquired as though posing some vexing philosophical question.

“So glad *you* asked,” he sardonically answered. Having stealthily advanced the slide with the aid of some remote control, the presenter opened his arms as if embracing the next projected image. “A potato is, of course, a vegetable. A tuber. And where do more of these little spuds come from? The mother potato of course: Axomamma.” Despite the dimness of the library—we were already well into the night—we could see the presenter pause and look upwards and then subtly direct the palms of his outstretched hands upwards as well. “The eyes, friends, the eyes of the potato are how it reproduces. Each potato has up to 10 eyes. Incredible! And from these eyes, new shoots arise. Can you see?” He posed this question, though he didn’t seem to mean can you see anything pertaining to the slide we were being shown. “New shoots, new potatoes, new...other things,” he quipped. “Sometimes,” he went on, “our friend sprouts a bit early. It’s the damp you see. And sometimes, at very special times, in accordance with

Axomamma, the damp must be encouraged. And how will the damp, *the moistness* inside you be encouraged? Easily, easily friends. You, who for a hundred years have been rooted to this place, this so-called town, sitting at home on your couches, becoming, one might say, a couch...well, you know. Hourly, daily, weekly, yearly, stewing in unnecessary sweat, one might say *a totally superfluous sweat*. Until, every so often, this simmering must be given a push, a little prodding, just to bring things to a head, or an end, or both in one. Whatever it is that Axomamma sees fit, for this garden's long season has come to a close."

After this somewhat explosive bit of exposition the presenter took a moment to gather himself, falling silent before then whispering into the shadowed room of the library:

"Reality you see. Reality. You. See. See with your new eyes the reality that could have been, that might still be, the reality of another garden. Yes, see with new eyes that won't be your eyes."

The presenter advanced the slideshow, projected images of Quentin's townsfolk in differing stages of dishevelment. We saw scenes of us sitting moribund at work, in restaurants, or sprawling over park benches. We also saw scenes in our homes, of bodies lying on the floor in corners, under tables, *in dark cupboards*.

"Is that me?" Ms. Crumbly soddenly asked as the images flashed before us.

"It's like a jungle in here," said another while toweling their brow with a since removed jacket.

"Until next time, keep your eyes peeled for Invocation #3," announced the presenter, at which point the projection ceased and we were thrown into darkness. There was the sound of something heavy being dragged, followed by a slopping sound, and then the doors of the library

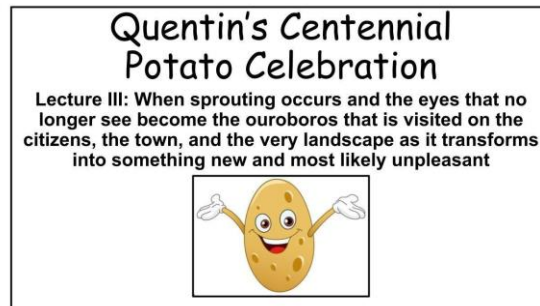
were pushed open. We hoped to be greeted by a blast of cool air, momentarily forgetting the suspension of the usual autumnal temperatures, but instead were met with a mugginess equal to that of inside the library. We rose from our chairs, leaving greasy stains on the cushions, and made our way out, trudging to our homes through the damp blackness.

In the coming days, before the actual centennial arrived, the town, and us, its inhabitants, became entwined in some souring presence that, though begun before the presenter appeared with his lectures (and perhaps had always been) had now entered some new phase of blooming derangement. Since the beginning of the festival's extended celebration (which did coincide with lecture #1) our daily malaise—and who is not engulfed in such a condition—had quickened; while we once drifted in a leisurely stupor (which we were mostly able to distract ourselves from thinking too much about), we now felt an increased torpidity come over ourselves, dragging us down in its accelerating corruption. Quentin had become flaccid, the town's status as a place, *a thing in the world*, now questionable. *We belong in a corner of a dark cupboard* we collectively thought. For had we not begun to see with our new eyes what the presenter told of? Forson surely could, having sprouted a handful of greenish orbs that blinked with an unfortunate knowing. Ms. Crumbly boasted a dozen. All had at least one more than the pair we started with when we entered *this* life. How far had this mutability gone? It was hard to say. We stayed in the corners of our dark cupboards (at least for now), letting the deformations have their play.

Besides ourselves, besides our bodies, the radicality of mutation had spread to the kingdom of the inorganic. A ruinous purple mold bruised the buildings of Quentin. Brick, plastic, glass, the material did not matter, putrefaction had set in. Wounds pustulated over concrete,

while steel reeked of rot. And here we were not alone with new eyes: pulpy orbs of gangrenous hues ripened from the sidewalk. Wormy tendrils laced themselves in the crumbling mortar. Limestone, clay, and roots aggregated, creating a meaty new substance, something unmistakably alive.

We, of course, knew of these revolutions of form. Through the roots that we had propagated, that netted us together, our awareness wove itself weblike from citizen to citizen. And it was from this collective awareness that we heard *in the dark corners of our dark cupboards* the presenter's call to the third lecture.



The entire population of Quentin had gathered in the park, this eve of our founding. We had little use for the chairs that had been placed out, choosing instead to flop on the ground in semi-solid lumps. Some gave way into growing piles, bodies collapsing and congealing with other bodies. Everything was a rupture of creamy flesh, rheumy eyes.

"Welcome, welcome, one and all," boomed the voice of the presenter who now donned a long, dark garment. Gone were his habitually falling spectacles, replaced, now, by impenetrably black, impossibly perfect circles of glass.

He surveyed the congregation that he had called.

“Called again,” he said as if to reinforce what he had done. “You don’t remember? No? No one does. Quentin didn’t exist then. But, good people,” he smirked while delivering the words, “something did.” A visual appeared, though not projected out of any device. It simply appeared, hovering in space in front of the park’s gazebo where the presenter held court. We saw a great book, its cover ornate with a gold clockwork, its hands moving, marking the time. 11:55. Marking our time. 11:56. Another image materialized, this one showing a misty field with something twisting its way out of the grayness. This movement was no mere effect of motion, no trick of cinema, there was a vital essence at work, *some kind of life*. Greenish stalks groped upwards, atop which unblinking eyes leered back at us, the citizens of Quentin. 11:58. Another image appeared, this one showing a crumbling street (was that Main?) where a semi-human form of bony concrete was becoming dreamily infected with life.

“The hour is near. *Your* time is nearly over. The turning is upon you. What shall it be this time?” the presenter playfully asked as he began to gesture in a way we were all familiar with. A network of arteries, veins, tubes, and something like wires appeared and stretched across the park. Pulsing chaotically, the strands wove together in netlike structures and then threaded into more complex forms, organs of some kind. Life again. “Or how about this...” and another hand wave. Now we saw a landscape of geometric objects, imploding and exploding across a starry expanse. Outlines collapsed and reformed while angles bent and curved into impossible shapes. Features we knew were eyes but were not, stared with conscious intent. Another gesture. Now the scene, indeed the entire park, was full of maggoty white objects, vaguely potato shaped. A squirming mass of these loathsome objects lay piled on each other. Green eyes, dimly aware

and mournful in aspect, looked out, silently pleading for some ultimate erasure to blot out their consciousness, our consciousness.

11:59.

The presenter himself began to change, for it was now his time to be called from *a dark corner of a dark cupboard in a dark universe*. His lean frame elongated, his garment shaping itself into moth-like wings that enshrouded the park, and us, and all of Quentin. The presenter had finished his lectures, leaving just a voice that emanated from the space he had occupied. We did not strain to hear that voice; we didn't need to. A flourish of wings and the final image, the final word on the matter:

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Helpful links from the presenter himself!

[Lecture #1](#)

[Lecture #2](#)

[Lecture #3](#)