

Milk Man

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I only worked there for but half a term—
the campus dining hall, I mean, and in
the early mornings I would drag myself
down from the dorm to greet the breakfast crowd.
I'd fill the vats with orange juice, load the milk
in hulking cartons into cabinets.
Each box came with a nipple that I clamped,
then sliced so it could pour upon demand.
One day, however, I no sooner placed
a full six-gallon carton in its nest
than like an egg it broke and avalanched
its contents all across my chest and thighs.
To this day I can still hear the applause,
the raucous cheers that rang across that room,
as I stood dripping in a private lake
of the local dairy's finest, pasteurized.
Hands trembling, I found a mop and bucket,
did what I could to wipe the tiles dry,
and then, no time to shower or to change,
I headed off to join my eight o'clock.
I must have had a test to take, although
it's possible I simply couldn't bear
to miss a lecture by a favorite prof.
Whatever the poor reason, I recall
the scent of my soaked clothing as I sat
immersed within my desk. It was a smell
like that of stale goats or unwashed dogs,
an odor no sane person would inflict
upon his peers behind closed doors. And yet
I did. With shame I say the others shrank
away from me, the teacher raised her brows.
But class went on, I wrote my test or took
good notes on all I heard. And did I pass?
Or did I learn? It's hard to say. The milk
of human kindness is a thing not strained.
It drops from heaven, or just from a box,
not gently, but in a divine cascade
that shapes our ends without our even knowing.