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Sliding in due time

by [Alec Solomita](#)

The first story in James Lasdun's latest collection of fiction, *It's Beginning to Hurt*, is called "An Anxious Man." Half of the book's sixteen witty and harrowing narratives could bear the same title. And nearly all of the stories could be subtitled "The Anxious Reader": Lasdun's ability to unsettle his readers, to usher them within a few sentences into a state of high anxiety, is peerless. Poe, Kleist, and Spark, step aside! Lasdun makes the wind whistle through your heart. He's the scariest writer since Jonathan Edwards.

Lasdun is spiritual heir to that brilliant evangelical writer and preacher rather than to the more sanguine Franz Kafka, with whom he is often compared. He's borrowed from Kafka the haplessness and impotence of his protagonists and a knack for conjuring up a wonderfully ominous atmosphere, but he rejects the emotional distance and playfulness on which the surreal depends. Lasdun creates moods so immediate, so threatening, and so dire, that, in comparison, Kafka's *Letter to My Father* seems like it could've been sent from Camp Granada.

Like Edwards—and unlike the preponderance of Lasdun's peers—Lasdun wastes no time "celebrating the resilience of the human spirit." He has a more urgent task: to sear into the reader's mind, as the preacher says, that "It is no security to a natural man that he is now in health... . The manifold and central experience of the world in all ages shows that this is no evidence that a man is not on the very brink of eternity, and that the next step will not be into another world."

Ever since Lasdun's 1985 debut fiction collection, *Delirium Eclipse* (he is also a fine poet with three published volumes), he's deployed an elegant, erudite style to inflict pain as often as to offer pleasure. In the title story of the book, a confident young man "now in health" takes a trip to India with his free-spirited girlfriend. In this fecund setting, the boy quickly loses his footing, becoming at once frantic, ill, and cuckolded. It's soon apparent that if a Lasdun character has the temerity to feel anything more pleasant than a "distant alarm," he will end up, as the Reverend Edwards puts it, "emptied and annihilated."

Lasdun's most sympathetic characters (usually reflective but surprisingly dense strivers who exercise and recycle) continue to writhe with Calvinist doubt and self-accusation, perceiving themselves as fallen human beings immersed in odious depths of depravity. In the story "Cleanness," Lasdun makes this literal. Roland, a man on his way to his father's second wedding, stops at a farmhouse and asks a woman for directions. When her husband shows up and seems jealous, Roland questions his own innocence and, in the midst of his doubts, slips on a plank and falls into a septic tank. He has fulfilled the prophecy of Deuteronomy 32:35 ("Their foot shall slide in due time") and become, as the divine from Northampton would put it, "utterly polluted."

In “An Anxious Man,” the passive, insecure Joseph Nagel is on holiday with his family. Large investments that he and his wife made prospered at first, but have dropped steeply in value. As the investments fall off, Joseph’s fears spike: “he began to think that to go on much longer ... would be to accept failure, a marginal existence that would doubtless grow more pinched as time went by and end in squalor.” Joseph’s disproportionate anxieties widen to include worries about his wife and daughter’s safety. When he goes for a swim, they are not at the pond as he’d expected them to be. “A slight anxiety stirred in him.” After twenty minutes, it has grown: “How wearying, how humiliating it was to have so little faith in anything, to be so abjectly at the mercy of every tremor of fear in one’s mind.” Even after he learns that they are safe, Joseph continues to castigate himself. “A surge of love came into him, and with it a feeling of shame.”

That evening, the family has cocktails with an imperious couple newly installed next door. As they sip drinks in front of the grill, the woman flirts with Joseph. Edwards would have approved of the following sequence:

She caught his eye, giving him a sly, unexpected smile. Then she placed the living lobsters on the grill. Joseph had never seen this done before. The sight of them convulsing and hissing over the red hot coals sent a reflexive shudder of horror through him, though a few minutes later he was happily eating his share.

In the morning, when he learns his daughter has gone missing, Joseph knows exactly who to blame. “His obscure, abiding sense of himself as a flawed and fallen human being seemed suddenly clarified: he was guilty, and he was being punished.”

Abel, the similarly self-effacing, middle-aged protagonist of “The Natural Order,” is roughing it in Greece with a Scot libertine named Stewart, who mocks his married partner’s ways. Throughout the story, the enervated Abel compares himself unfavorably to his travelmate with his “incandescence of sexual interest.” When tempted by freewheeling women travelers, Abel prophylactically summons up his own holy family: “the swaddled child silently sleeping; his wife immobile, statuesque.” Like Joseph Nagel, Abel’s flirting begins over a vividly rendered grill. “The sky had turned violet over the mountains. The one-armed man began hacking up the goat, which had been spit-roasting on a brazier... . Abel invited Xenia to dance... . [He] had drunk enough not to feel any self-consciousness.” By story’s end, the fallen Abel, irrevocably unpinned from his vision of the manger, has “stepped into another world.”

Like Lasdun the canny poet, Lasdun the fiction writer frequently makes the reader smile as well as cringe. His sketches of the wealthy, particularly, are often grimly amusing: “Mrs. Knowles was dark-haired and pale-skinned with bright blue eyes and the kind of delicately faceted English features that can arouse feelings of vague inferiority in those, like Martin, who did not possess them... . She was wearing pink nail polish, pearl earrings, and a white silk T-shirt, under which her breasts showed like two thorns.”

A transplanted Brit living in upstate New York, Lasdun has an ear that’s pitch perfect on both sides of the Atlantic. A Wall Street money manager explains his motivation to potential investors: “I think it’s just so much fun to help people attain the things they want from life ... be it a yacht or a house on St. Barts or a Steinway for their musical child.”

In the story “Totty,” an aggressive boor makes an unwelcome late night visit to a woman in a quiet cottage in Sussex.

She looked at him warily.
“What are you doing here?”
“I’ve come to see you.”

“Why?”

He said nothing.

“Are you drunk?”

“Possibly. In a sense.”

Sometimes the traps Lasdun sets for his characters (or they set for themselves) make a story feel formulaic, but most are more like brilliant concoctions than clever contrivances, looser and wiser than his earlier work. Some stories are gorgeous—large-hearted and exquisitely written. “The Old Man” is a delicately terrifying account of love won and then subtly and devastatingly lost. And the very American tale “Oh, Death,” which features a mountain man more emotionally complex than mythic, moves the reader like a New Hampshire earthquake. It’s a pleasure to read an author combining such wit and gravitas, even when it begins to hurt.

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