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Hearing Voices

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Hearing Voices · *Stephen Berg*

to Charlie

I.

Late one night, one of those mild, hazy nights
just before Christmas, elated, burning with red wine,
I dialed the number of the house you were staying in.
No answer. You were out, or making love, I thought.
I pictured you on the beach, Laguna Beach,
faint, phosphorescent whitecaps slitting the darkness,
appearing, brightening, sliding
until they dissolved at your feet.
You were amazed, I thought, by the immense, incessant hiss
of the sea; you stood there, watching and listening until
it got light.

I needed talk, talk about poetry and women, one of those talks
when we'd sit for hours, say anything to reach that
moment of insight, truth—gone instantly—you see it, feel it
but can't say what it is—
its doomed, wordless afterimage wounding the air.
We're anything then, anyone—the moon, a face, branches,
windows empty and dark, words crossing a page—that's when we
know
what is. That night, I sat in my kitchen in the dark, remembering
how Giacometti's despair grew.
In his Notebooks he wrote he couldn't sculpt a head the way he
saw it,
“the way it is,” but it wasn't only that.
He couldn't believe consciousness must include death, his death.
“. . . he goes on speaking but he's dead. . . . Is he dead?”
He wrote that too, seeing himself awake at the moment of his
own death, feeling
something like what James the novelist in his great short story
about the fear
of love chillingly calls “the horror of waking.”
That skinny, agonized, bent arm G. gouged into shape
and set on top of a black steel rod,
the hand splayed wide open, is his scream, a scream you actually
hear

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corkscrewing its way up through your chest into your throat and out
when no one's there to hear, the aloneness of life, how strange
and beautiful
it is, how it simply is, how all is,
is, is pulsing in every cell as what I'd call *conscious fire*.

Now it's another of those nights.
This desk, this lamp, this paper, these too familiar hands.
The moon seems not to move; every time I look away, look back,
it's passed deeper
into the web of branches splashed on my window. Its bleak light
quivers.
Frost tinges the oblong panes. Down in the street

a black man in a big, buttonless, brown overcoat is
hacking with a handax at a sawed-off chunk of tree trunk pinned
under his foot,
cutting short pieces, splinters, stacking them against a wall
of the backyard shack he sleeps in,
working in a cone of lamplight.
Each time he slashes the ax down puffs of steam
burst from his lips the way words bud, blossom
and die almost immediately between us.

II.

Late night here and you've come back.
We talk on the phone. You say
it's impossible to go on paying so much alimony, you say
something incomprehensible about going to jail
then confess you coughed blood out there on the coast
but kept it secret for a month until today
when you heard the tests were negative, and say
California was all sun, few friends, freaky cool people,
nothing. I fill my glass. Listen—

"Do you ever think about yourself?" I ask again, and see
the kind,
unindulgent face of a shrink who treated me (at first I was
so terrified
I could barely speak), and hear him say

“Almost never,” and in Princeton, years later, a teacher
from Japan, a short man
dressed in a shiny, gray suit, asks, after I tell him I’m
in pain,
“Who is the I?” twists his right hand like a corkscrew
above his head
and asks “This is the sharpest sword in the world—it can
cut anything—
can it cut itself?” “No. No. Be the sword!” I blurt out.
Jeff’s sitting next to me
in that stuffy, third-floor office in the Religion Building,
and says, “Of course it can!”
definite, sure. “The ego has no foundation, you know . . . ”
I hear the teacher say.
I stand: “I’m standing here—on the floor!” “Show me where
you’re standing,” he says
as I hesitate, look down, step back, and point to where I was
and we start laughing. “Why didn’t you do *this*?” he says,
and walks toward me,
stops, his face a few inches from mine, his clear eyes mine.

This morning I’m waiting for the 33 bus half a block from the halfway
house near my house when one of those baby-men who sits in the sun
on a bench all day next to a wire safety door or picks up candy wrappers,
loose trash, leaves, who’s somewhere between old and wise and infantile
and stupid, walks up to me, stands next to me, tilts his head and smiles
at me and I ask Do you ever take the bus? No No he utters, shaking his
head, No No! Do you ever go downtown? Oh No No No he answers,
so clear and sure, urgent. Can’t even find my mother, he intones, all too
seriously. I ask How old are you? Sixteen . . . his toothless, wizened, shy
bag of an adolescent face seems to sag at the pavement to escape seeing
me, to escape being seen, as the bus doors wheeze open and I step up and
in, trapped on the reeling floor, squeezed between a fat black woman
clutching a Bible, hugging a steel pole with her free arm, and a man
with a stiff curly red beard flashing his age card at the driver. Poor sweet
little guy--I watch him, shod in blue socks, blue plastic bedroom slippers
open at the heels, shuffle back to his brothers and sisters in the nut house
as we pull away. No No Oh No No No No No