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Against Narrative

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AGAINST NARRATIVE

THE YEAR WAS 1965. I was traveling west on a Greyhound bus, all the way to California. You know what that's like. Grimy face, eyes slitted from the impossibility of sleep, the smell of a thousand cigarettes in your clothes, and that light, the steady glare of the highway all day and all night, even when the ritual dark came on. You know what that's like. So when the other light happened, there was an easy explanation.

It was a long trip, Milwaukee to Oakland. There had been only one recent stop for the bus and its exhausted passengers before San Francisco—a stopoff in Sacramento, the capital, but a bus terminal like any bus terminal, filled with sad dirty bathrooms you had to stand in line for, and vagrants the color of the cold cement floor.

I bought a paperback in that terminal. I had to show my I.D. to prove I was old enough. That's one reason I remember that terminal, and the book, which was a cult novel about the underside of city life, called *Last Exit to Brooklyn*—queens and pimps and junkies—a kind of Diane Arbus without the wide-eyed interest. In those days, the early sixties days, we had an obsession, I guess, a romantic identification with the seamy world, the underground, the darkness, our sweet middle finger uplifted to the middle class. Our world had little shadow though, at least until Viet Nam's jagged reach. *Journey to the End of Night* by Céline, or William Burroughs's *Naked Lunch*—certain books gave us power, like a secret, like a special club. I am not as fond of their darkness now, having learned some of my own. But it is odd, affectionately odd, to see myself then, avoiding the bums at the depot, wanting to be with my new slatternly book.

I was too tired to read, too tired and too excited, because soon I'd be back in Berkeley, my new chosen home, although I had no place to live and knew few people. Friendships happened easily there. I wasn't worried.

I imagined catching the #51 College bus and riding its long weave back into Berkeley. I'd get off on Telegraph Avenue, Telegraph and Bancroft, and lug my solitary bag of books and clothes the few blocks down to Pepi's Pizza. Not for pizza though. I didn't eat pizza there. Pepi's had the cheapest, richest, biggest bowl of minestrone soup in town, thick peasant soup you could spoon for hours. Today Pepi's is no longer there, its tiny indentation between the Med (the Mediterranean) and The Forum, the old coffeehouses on The Ave, now some hair product store. The owner killed

himself, I heard. Why, I do not know. And today I can't imagine the luxury of owning so few possessions that change needed little planning beyond the desire to change.

As the bus began to cross the Bay Bridge into Oakland, pushing its bulk through the traffic, a man got up and ambled the length of the bus to the back. He was an ordinary guy—nondescript, rumped, dark—nothing to attract my attention. I am attending to his appearance only because of the change. Something altered dramatically as he walked back through the narrow dusty aisle, something I soon forgot until later.

“The inquiry into a dream is another dream” said somebody much smarter than I. And Prouse, that voyager of memory, ventured that “When we have understood, we hear in retrospect.” So what I want to tell you—several stories in fact—is something only partially understood, and filled with layers of discounting. There are fewer layers as the stories continue, but I'm not sure there is more knowledge, unless acceptance is a form of knowledge. You shouldn't expect Shakespeare though, and I won't be upset if you wave me off with the word “coincidence.” That was my word too.

As the nondescript man stepped past me, suddenly a light formed around his body, a glow not neon and not sunlight, though it was day. Not like any light I could identify except as an emotion, as if that were a light—a mixture of warmth and happiness. Not “like,” even though metaphor seems the only guide available. “The sun came out and kissed me,” said a man in “Close Encounters of the Third Kind,” trying to identify this sensation. “Like an ice-cream cone,” a child in the film called it. A yellow light, a blond light, a light that disappeared when I thought about it. But in the flash second before that thought, the man I saw had physically changed to someone else, someone I couldn't remember anymore. Somebody I knew, but not in the past. And then it was gone.

If the technology of freeze-frame had been invented, perhaps I had pushed a button, for the dark man continued on to his seat as if nothing had happened. And what did? I saw something that disappeared, and I forgot something that I had remembered that I didn't know. This sounds like a riddle, doesn't it? “The foot feels the foot when it feels the ground” said Buddha, or “I have always taken the tips of my fingers for the beginning of her hair.” That's from the poet Edmund Jabès, and it is very charming. But I was more apt to think like Woody Allen when it came to metaphysics:

“Eternal nothingness is OK if you’re dressed for it.”

The bus pulled into Oakland, stopping with its usual wheeze. I got off, slapped some water on my face, brushed my teeth and dirty hair, found my bookbag, and caught the local bus to Berkeley. I was very happy to be back in the town I already thought of as paradise, and my happiness increased as the houses turned into landmarks, down College with its narrow tongue of traffic, a left turn up Bancroft, past the totem pole, and up to Telegraph.

I sat down in Pepi’s, dropping my bag to the ground, and said hello to a vague friend of a friend, someone I didn’t know, who turned towards me—and—it was the man on the bus, the one he was in that changed moment, exactly him, a young man with the yellowest hair I’d ever seen—and then I forgot again. He was sitting at the table, eating a big bowl of minestrone, and reading *Last Exit to Brooklyn*. “Caress the detail, the divine detail” is Nabokov’s advice to the writer, and I must also admit to a shifting of focus, a misunderstanding of plot. I felt I had always known this man, or always would, that I was now in a world of before and after.

One might call that the world of love. I’m more comfortable with that word than the more specific “faith,” although it is the leap of faith, a dramatic experience, that imagines the world as before and after. And is that world, then, one of rising or falling?

It seems a joke, too, a sweet ascendancy of chance. I should also say that we were married a few months later on Halloween, my favorite holiday. Yet it was years into the future that I would remember the incident on the bus—I would “flash” on it, as we said back then—and even later that I would tell my husband about the vision. I don’t remember if it was a story he enjoyed hearing, as he was very rational, interested in what William James calls “the icy laws of outer fact,” but that’s not the point.

The point is something about vision, and I don’t know how to talk about that. I saw something, a very bright thing, and then it was dark.

I want to tell you another story now, a harder one. No, let me back up a bit. The summer before my father died I was up in Port Townsend, Washington. The summer had no name like that, “the summer before.” It was just a summer, a beautiful summer, a recent summer, and I was a writer-in-residence with a cabin near the woods, overlooking the Strait of Juan de Fuca.

It was a beautiful cabin, secluded, with a wood-burning stove and wild roses growing near the woodpile. I used to sit on a white metal chair out-

side my door and look down the hill, trying to write. Or I would walk the trail down to the bluff, through the wildflowers on all sides in purples and blues, through the kite-tailed swallows with their low and crazy swooping after bugs. I would spread my blanket on the edge of the hill overlooking the water, and watch the water, and try to write.

I did more watching than writing that summer, and not because of beauty. There is one poem I wrote there, depressed, allowing the thoughts that seemed to interfere to interfere, thoughts that wouldn't go away as I lay on that hill looking down – watching the ships, the gulls, the tiny people on the beach as they played, the waves. Is it immodest to quote myself, or am I only a fraction of some larger text?

PARENTS

Impossible thought – that they will die.
You sit on the edge of the bluff watching boats
inching their way under the sky.
To fall now would be willful.
If you sat here

a long time into the future, it would be
where they are seated now, tilted,
already looking down, avoiding the fear
in your eyes looking back at them.
Maybe there is an underwater hand

seductive as the come-hither coral
that waves at them. Maybe the landscape
wants crying though you refuse to cry.
Across the sea the seagulls gather.
It looks like all of the birds

of the one small world are here, the blue
sea surrounding a huge white flutter
like the mouth of some god at a feeding.
What dreaminess of detail can love us
at the place of sorrow.

There is a coldness in this that somehow feels right, and a kind of avoidance at the end, a turning away. How did such thoughts make their helpless way inside?

That fall I moved to Seattle and began another section of my life, a life that now seemed defined by movement, a different kind of movement. It was a difficult time of no jobs, or poor jobs, a loss of ease in making friends, a brooding and isolated time. I joined a writers' group, the Northwest Renaissance, which met a Sunday a month at members' homes, scattered all over the scattered and beautiful city.

One Sunday in winter one of the writers arrived to drive me to the workshop, which was across the bridge into Bellevue, one of the commuter cities. I was planning to workshop "Parents" for the first time, to face it and talk about it.

The second I opened my door, something smelled different in the air. I don't know about you, but I'm very sensitive to smells, and the air, I kept saying to the writer, smelled like Wisconsin. More precisely, like Wisconsin after a spring rain, a very bright smell. Seattle, as I'm sure everybody knows, is the Rainy City, the Emerald City—green, dark, wet. The rain is beautiful, not depressing or gloomy. Just wet. Dark. A continual wetness, and nothing like Wisconsin.

The sensation of Wisconsin after a spring rain was so strong, so insistent, I kept repeating those exact, surprised words, so often the others in the car began to laugh. It was a good feeling, that rain, that smell, like the feeling of stretching. So what if my eyes begin to fill as I write this now? At the time the sensation was joyful, extremely joyful. Disturbing, yes, and uncanny—preposterous!—but joyful. All the way to Bellevue, a distance of about an hour, I would return to my pronouncement as if I had newly discovered it. "Smells like Wisconsin after a spring rain! I can't get over it!"

At the workshop we talked about poems, ate our potluck, socialized. I read "Parents" and listened to comments, mostly about the easy rhyme in the first stanza, and the scary, hateful image in the last. It was a normal workshop.

When I returned home that night I got the phone call I know you now expect, but it was a shock to me. My father, in Wisconsin, had died that afternoon.

I am oddly unemotional about much of this now, except that I sigh. "A

sigh can break a man in two” says the Talmud, and I believe it. So “unemotional” must be the wrong designation. I can lose myself in crying but that doesn’t seem part of the story. There is something here that I do not understand. And yet I do. The patterns, the stories, seem as if they occurred to someone not myself. To the character that is me perhaps. I look to authority to heal the rest: “It is of no avail to weep for the loss of a loved one, which is why we weep.” And to the shape we call a story, which is not personal.

I see myself from a distance, as if suspended above the scene like some threadbare fluttery kite, looking down at myself. Is this the shape of knowledge, to be separated so? I say to myself that whatever happened, happened. A personal understanding is not part of it. There is a shiver overlying the world of memory.

And yet a third thing happened several months after the funeral, another bright thing turning dark. I had been given a tiny, almost weightless, family tree, one of those gilt five-and-dime photo-stands. My mother had pasted in four small faces, awkward circles cut from some larger photos: mother, father, son, daughter, all hanging from fragile gilt hooks to the tree.

I packed it and brought it home. I was frightened of it so I left it in its wrappings for a while. What could a photograph do, I asked myself, though I avoided an answer.

Later I unwrapped it and found the tree broken in half, the mother-and-father-half severed from the son-and-daughter-half. The tiny photo of my father, cut from his wedding picture, so long ago I do not even recognize him, had completely fallen off. So too does my likeness refuse to stay banded to that sad gold story tree.