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The Man with the Arm · *Lucy Hochman*

(a break-up story)

1. Retrospect

a: We spent time surrounded by our peers, post collegiate in a college town, coffee, beer, teashops, cinemas, but we pointed and gaped. Look at those silly men with baseball caps, look how they walk around, hear their excuses for conversation and so on. I lived in a zoo, wandering along the proposed path and avoiding what was not on display, and though I was also caged, there I lived with my furry mate, and we might gaze into the cage next door, but we could always turn to one another, have babies, and impress a great keeper, the ignorant organizer, the sloppy maker of categories upon a whole earth who had placed us there.

b: He kept looking for his arm.

c: Walking down the street was not a thing of affirmation in the sense that looking into a mirror and recognizing ourselves could be one; there you are but in another place. It affirmed in the same way looking in the mirror can be profoundly displacing, as if you, because of the fact of your image, were of the mirror more than looking into it, and so you think of yourself as a mirror facing a mirror, you've seen that, your face infinitely repeated and you believe, therefore dense. In that way, it may well have been frightening, except for our ability to face one another and poke our ribs about it. It's only a mirror, and we'd wanted to believe. Ah, love and the mutual. We could look about in fear of being confused with our peers by a grand evaluating stranger, someone who ought to confirm our difference with a plaque and a key to our dream city, make us famous for rising above. But we had only join the hands we possessed in order to feel righteous and without the guilt of arrogance which might have ensued for lack of substantiation had we not been together.

d: When I was in school, people were always telling me I was getting my education, and when I was done with school they said, now you have an education.

e: After, I soaked beans and stuffed cabbage for freezing, organized my letters into labeled files and alphabetized my books, all this for convenience, as if I hadn't the time to search for a thing when I wanted it. Suddenly

unoccupied by another person, knowing what to expect myself to feel, I dove into a phase of desperate self-recognition and care. Soon, I knew, I would embrace self-loathing, and then search for a new item of man to distract me from my loneliness. I predicted comfort in this ritual of time spent which in retrospect would be easy to summarize and be done with. I could not think of a piece of my life which I had not, in the past, managed to resolve.

f: I made bread because I heard it was spiritual. The dough was very stiff. It flattened and kept its foldmarks. “Coax the bread, do not connive,” read the spiritual article on breadmaking.

“Become one!” I cried to the bread. If I ate the dough, it would rise in my belly and make me sick.

g: In Key West, people gather on bleachers on the docks every night to watch the sun set. Everyone is kissing or pointing the sun out to a presumably stupid child, and then everyone claps and cheers when it’s over. “That was a good one,” says one stranger to the stranger seated beside her. They do this every night.

and so on: Sounds rose from the house next door. I thought of my coat, a day in the teashop with Jim and the rain. I’d never met my neighbors, though we waved for a sense of community when we were standing at our doors struggling with locks or groceries. He was a construction worker, building things all day, a nice job, I thought. She went jogging. He threw a knife into the side of the house, stood up, and went back inside. His wife laughed and laughed, shook her head, went tsk, tsk, rolled her eyes, and followed him. Someone had come to my grandmother and asked to do a biography of the family. In the newspaper was a map. On the curb was a bottle, and I kept track of it. I jerked my elbow away and he dropped the cup, which made a noise with the sidewalk. I didn’t check to see if it was broken. There was a teashop which I understood: the table, the glaze on the cups, the waitress with interesting habits. When he noticed me, I waved.

2. Rituals

a: He kept looking for his arm. We can all say thy kingdom come thy will be done and it has an echo though we have not all been in a church and heard it fill the room like a gong in a cave. He no longer felt a difference between the moments during which he searched for his arm and the moments he was as if complete. We walked down shop-ridden streets and his shoulder

twitched as if to point something out. I wanted to be it for him. I could usually tell what he'd have pointed out before the explanatory reference was from his lips and through the air.

b: Clumps of intimacy consistently proved by an accumulation of moments interrupted by the absent arm: I noticed he missed it. I soaked beans and stuffed cabbage for freezing, organized my letters into labeled files and alphabetized my books, all this for convenience, as if I hadn't the time to search for a thing when I wanted it. It had evolved into a thing he didn't know he missed. It shaped what we were near each other, dictated our silences, illustrated what was understood, and what we left in the air between us out of compassion.

c, and so on: She let me soak it up while she used her teabag to wipe behind her ears and under her chin. "This is my favorite kind of weather and I didn't want to miss it." Our waitress passed her hands over the steam before she left. We seemed to be living in the same tunnel and could only have avoided contact had we wanted to. Breaking things. I made bread because I heard it was spiritual. He'd hemmed his shirts six inches after the seam. She went jogging. A biographer wanted to summarize my grandmother. He made a gesture of it. Raise glasses, look into eyes, clasp all our hands. I can no longer arrange myself around his presence. In Key West people gather on the docks every night to watch the sun set, kiss in front of it, and point it out to children.

3. Examples

a: I found a green bottle banked against a wall. It had been smashed at the neck, but though I searched with a fervent premonition, I couldn't find the remains of it. They don't make bottles with pre-broken necks. With a stone, I marked on the bricks the shape of what ought to have been there, a silly impulse, but I was alone.

The dough was very stiff. It flattened and kept its foldmarks. "Coax the bread, do not connive," read the spiritual article on breadmaking. If I ate the dough, it would rise in my belly and make me sick.

b: An appointment I had for lunch which I'd planned to break for the bread: Natalie, my ambitious, ex-idol of flammable grace, had been a graduate assistant for a class I took in college. We'd bonded over a mutual distaste for the professor. Ah, bondage and mutuality. I think I was her first protégé.

I was late, and the consistent British teapot and glazed cups had already arrived.

“I think I may as well be charting a beetle I discovered,” she said. “The kind which will never be crushed to a powder and cure cancer, the kind which could be exterminated and not even the food chain would notice. I ought to be presenting my dissertation to the bug itself. But wait—” she leaned under the table and brought out a book. “Jim took off, huh?” It was a book about Nigerian Textiles and Quilting Techniques. “Look at that. Look how gorgeous it is.”

I said, “They’re into sparkly stuff, I guess.”

“People love a thing they aren’t used to having their hands on. Imagine what these ladies could do with polyester! Darling, nothing—” she said, trying to look me in the eye, though she had a wall-eye and it was hard to tell which eye of mine she’d chosen, “nothing need be garish.” Was this how people always spoke? Ah, solitude, and the selective memory. She let me soak it up while she used her teabag to wipe behind her ears and under her chin (a custom?). “But still,” she said, “while I say that with certainty for you and your situation, it sucks to specialize. History is too big, and not just because it’s been around for a while, and not just because we’ve suddenly decided everyone is potentially valuable after all so we’ve gotta figure out who we fucked over, it’s because, Jesus,” her teabag broke and spilled down the front of her dress, “what was I saying? The point is, boy, I really wanna be famous.”

b thru c: When I was in school, people were always telling me I was getting my education, and when I was done with school they said, now you have an education. When it finally comes to you that you do not have it, and that it was never there for you to have, it is as if you woke one morning certain that you fell asleep with eyes in the back of your head, and now they are gone. I passed the place where the no-neck bottle had been and found it smashed to pieces smaller than would be useful even for making a mosaic, and there above the sparkling pile, the cloud of the mark I’d made for it. We had walked around with three arms visible.

d: I didn’t want to go back into my apartment. I knew it would be filled with things I had deemed worth keeping and the ghosts of things I’d thrown out, or else, and I suspected this would be the case, I would enter and find the place empty. I would say, “No, no, I’ve been robbed!” and call

the police. The police would rush over and say, "I'm sorry, dear, but this apartment has been vacant for years."

I'd say, "But I have keys," and jangle them at the police, and they'd say now isn't that odd. Or else I would search my pocket and find a bluejay feather and pennies but no keys.

Or else I would call the police and they would say, "My dear, where did you get the idea there was a law against robbery?"

actually: Jim had one arm, and the other arm he didn't have, which I noticed. Also, there was more to him. I remember.

e: I sat on the porch with my keys, and caught the sunset, though my favorite part is the moment you think you can see a sliver above the horizon, and then you realize that you can't, and there is no view of the horizon from my porch steps, and it's not quite the same thing to watch the sun disappear behind a house. In Key West, people gather on bleachers on the dock every night to watch. Everyone is silent or kissing or pointing the sun out to a presumably stupid child, and then everyone claps and cheers when it's over. "That was a good one," says one stranger to the stranger seated beside her. Do they walk away bonded by experience? Do they go out for a drink? Do they shrug in the dusk?

f thru g: Sounds began to rise from the house next door. I thought of my coat, that day in the teashop with Jim and the rain. I'd never met my neighbors, though we waved for a sense of community when we were standing at our doors struggling with locks or groceries. He was a construction worker, building things all day, a nice job, I thought. She went jogging.

In the house, they were breaking things. Something thudded against the front door from inside, and then the door bounced open. The woman was dragging the man by the armpits. He'd bent his knees and was trying to use his boot treads for friction, and then trying to hook his heels on the threshold, but she sure was strong, or else he wasn't struggling as much as he made it look like. Once she got him outside, he wrenched free and tackled her, straddling her and pinning her shoulders to the ground with his knees. She tried to spit on him but it fell back onto her face. "Get the spit off me," she yelled. The man unclipped a jack-knife from his belt loop, opened it, and held its point above her eye. Then he noticed me. I waved.

“Fuck you,” he said to me. Then he threw the knife into the side of the house, stood up, and went back inside. His wife laughed and laughed, shook her head, went tsk, tsk, rolled her eyes, and followed him.

h: I went to visit my grandmother, who traveled from Portugal to California with her parents to work as migrant farmers, and slowly accumulated enough land to plant pear orchards which ended up supplying a cannery. Her father drowned himself in the swimming pool anyway. Someone had come to my grandmother and asked to do a biography of the family.

“I don’t like it,” she told me. “I don’t want someone summarizing me. I don’t think it’s very nice to edit a person’s life. Those biographers, they just want to make sense of it. Well, don’t go making sense of my family. It’s humiliating.”

“You could do it yourself. Lots of people do that. You don’t have to show it, even.” She screwed up her face with disgust, the way, having wrinkles, only an old person can do with conviction.

“Do you know what it would teach me in the end? That a person’s life is only long enough to prove its own brevity. I already know this. I am certain to die soon.”

“Because you figured it out? Really, Gramma.”

“Because of it, despite it,” she frowned and held her hands out, fingers upward, cupping nothing, air slipping through. “Maybe I’ll live on and on, expecting to die any minute. Though what’s the difference there?”

h, etcetera: Humans used to be old at twenty-five, but that was in the days when you weren’t expected to learn anything your mother didn’t know. We do get older, but not older enough, not for what you should learn from men, too, or from all those libraries, from the herds of people who live in your town, from the seeming species of them who inhabit all the places you’ll never go to, though conceivably, you could, let alone the real other species, or the life of a waterdrop, or any piece of dust. All this seemed to be leading up to something. I suppose other things were happening as well, the invisible accumulating past, but I will never know. Certainly, it was more than a good man leaving me. In the newspaper was a map of the new place where all the Soviets used to live. The new names and boundaries were in black, and the old places floated behind them in dotted lines and gray titles.

4. Broken things

and so on: She passed her hands through the steam. It scattered every time. The bread flattened and kept its foldmarks. I found a green bottle banked against a wall. They don't make bottles with pre-broken necks. With a stone, I marked on the bricks the shape. I no longer arrange myself around the ritual of his physical presence. Suddenly unoccupied by another person, as I had been before, I dove into a phase of desperate self-recognition and care. I could not think of a piece of my life which I had not managed to resolve. Breaking for bread, we'd bonded over a mutual distaste for the professor. She had a wall-eye and it was hard to tell which eye. Her teabag broke and spilled down the front of her dress. Education: when it finally comes to you that you do not have it, and that it was never there for you to have, it is as if you woke one morning certain that you fell asleep with eyes in the back of your head, and now they are gone. I passed the place where the no-neck bottle had been and found it smashed to pieces smaller than would be useful even for making a mosaic, and there above the sparkling pile, the cloud of the mark I'd made for it. I knew it would be filled with things I had deemed worth keeping and the ghosts of things I'd thrown out, or else, and I suspected this would be the case, I would enter and find the place empty. I would say, "No, no, I've been robbed!" It would turn out that I'd only lost it because it had never been there. I'd made the whole thing up.

also: In the house, they were breaking things. I don't think it's very nice to edit a person's life. It's humiliating. The new names and boundaries were in black, and the old places floated behind them in dotted lines and gray titles. Certainly it was more than a predictable break-up; certainly, more was breaking up.

thus: I could bother to remember him in multitudinous detail, I could push myself to notice what was not absent at the time, but the collection of encounters which followed his sudden departure seemed edited to sparkle and point, as if the encounters were the invisible triangular pieces of that unwhole bottle, forming a chorus of identical arrows. He could still be a person. However, he has one arm.

5. The Answer to the Arm

a: He no longer felt a difference between the moments during which he searched for his arm and the moments he was as if complete. It had evolved into a thing he didn't know he missed. His little closet was filled with shirts, all amputated properly six inches after the seam and hemmed. I believe that what led to our first sex was my telling him I wanted to decorate the edges with ribbons and beads. It was probably something better.

b: He didn't realize what had happened when his arm tried to assert itself, and sometimes I was sure he noticed and found it a lovely thing. Mysterious private smiles would occur in my company, distant, not seeming to necessitate my company. I couldn't picture what he might be enjoying all by himself, except for the ritual of remembering again, as if a piece of wind had flitted its way from the ocean, which is far away, and a thing you fear and long for. But then, he is distinctly no longer here, and I can no longer arrange myself around the ritual of his physical presence.

c: His brief arm looked like a drawstring bag, tied shut and clipped. The skin which had had to join the rest of his skin late, and had not gone through as many haphazard sloughings, was deep pink. I wince at my impulse to describe it as textured similarly to a reproductive organ, but this is accurate. That soft and volatile, that shade, its tendency to change color according to its comfort, the weather, or his health. If he'd been a stranger, come to me and doing this with me in the dark, would I have noticed that empty portion of him? We had only to join the hands we possessed in order to feel righteous and without the guilt of arrogance which might have ensued for lack of substantiation had we not been together.

d: A man my age with a baseball cap and a jangling belly ran out of the teashop as I passed by. "I just got a letter from Jim," he said, clamped to my elbow to keep me from leaving. "Come and sit down with me," he said with a teacup, "I'll read it to you." I didn't want to go in there. "He got a job fishing in Alaska."

I asked: "With his arm?"

actually: He had no arm in order to teach me I could never have all of something. He'd gotten rid of the arm because it made it seem like nothing could be missing. He was born that way but lied to make me think he was more of something, having lost something. He lost his arm in a boring way, which was why he left the circumstances of the loss unspoken. He was sixteen and lay on his back in a field of hushing timothy to look at the sky,

which he thought of like mirrors facing one another between which he was magically spying in such a way that no part of his face served as a referent, so that he witnessed the mirrors themselves exchanging glances at speeds faster than his eyes could compute, so that it was smooth, smooth, and then on his stomach to watch the traffic stomp over clumps of wheat that he had crushed into highways with his presence, and there was the sound of a hay-baler in the distance, a terminal hum that became a form of silence as it persisted, a baler closer, an immersion in the simultaneous belief in himself as too vast to be bothered and too tiny to feel, and finally his arm, baled in a field.