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Table of Contents

Jorge Etchevarry Archaya

Steve Slavin

Bruce Edward Litton

Steven Stone

Joe Farley

Ethan Cunningham

Hanna Abi Akl

Josephine Dickinson

Introduction

Jorge Etchevarry Archaya

Las tiaras y coronas

Por los suelos, los cortijos

Antañones pasan guiando

Rebaños de cisnes, blancos

Y negros

Las multitudes los ven pasar

Nutridas hasta donde alcanza

La vista, se abanicán

Con el calor del sol de la

Historia

**Rojo de sangre se levanta
Sobre las antiguas sementeras
Ahora campos de ceniza
Las tiaras y coronas**

**Por los suelos, los cortijos
Antañones pasan guiando
Rebaños de cisnes, blancos
Y negros**

**Las multitudes los ven pasar
Nutridas hasta donde alcanza
La vista, se abanicán
Con el calor del sol de la
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Steve Slavin

Feeding the Hungry

1

You've probably heard stories about college girls who used to sneak their boyfriends into their dorm rooms after curfew? OK, I realize I'm dating myself by even knowing about this, but back in the days before the sexual revolution, we sometimes needed to be a little creative.

Not long after I graduated from college, I was dating a nun. I'm not putting you on – if you'll forgive my using a "sixties term."

As you know, very few nuns lived in college dorms. That's *right!* They lived in convents.

Theresa was in the Sisters of Charity. They were pretty strict, but had a great collective sense of humor. Here's a brief sample:

Three nuns had taken a vow of silence. After ten years, Sister Mary was allowed to utter one sentence. When her turn came, Sister Mary said, "My porridge is lumpy."

Ten years later, Sister Bethany reported that, "My porridge is thin."

After still another ten years passed, Sister Patience, who happened to be the cook, finally had *her* turn: "I'm going to quit cooking if this bickering doesn't stop!"

If any of the sisters had an inkling of my intrusions, no one reported me. Maybe they were sound sleepers. But one night, when I showed up at the back door, Theresa was standing there, just shaking her head.

"*What?*" I asked, knowing the jig was up.

"Harry, you are a complete *schmuck!*"

I almost burst out laughing. Theresa had grown up in Brooklyn, just a few blocks from me. So, I knew how she'd picked up some of the lingo. Still, she *was* a nun.

"Did somebody see me?"

“No! Much worse than that!”

“So tell me already!”

“Mother Superior received multiple complaints. Someone had been leaving the toilet seat up.”

2

Theresa and I knew each other when we were kids. Then she went to some out-of-town fancy Catholic College. I later heard that she had become a nun.

“What a waste!” I said to myself. Since we were thirteen or fourteen, I’d had a crush on her – not that I ever got up the nerve to ask her out.

We ran into each other when we were in our early twenties. I was friendly with her brother Frank, who had invited me to a family barbeque. As soon as I saw her, I was in love all over again.

She wasn’t wearing a habit or anything, although she still did have that angelic smile. We got into a conversation, and she told me the terrible news.

Shit! What a fuckin’ waste!

She saw my expression and smiled. And I was lost.

What I didn’t know at the time was that she had begun having doubts about her vocation. We agreed to keep in touch.

Then, once a month, we would meet for lunch. Lunch was safe, right? It wasn’t a date.

Well, as you easily surmised, one thing led to another, and pretty soon I was making out with a nun in apartment house hallways, Central Park, and even once under the Boardwalk in Coney Island.

The next step was for her to sneak me into the convent. I knew that we were bound to get caught: in fact, that might have made the sex even more exciting.

But our relationship was probably doomed from the start. Theresa was an idealist, someone who was charitable to her core. And *me*?

Well, besides just being a regular guy wanting to have a good time, I suppose I hoped to live the Great American Dream – a pretty wife, a big home in the suburbs, and three or four very bright and happy children.

I mean, was there anything *wrong* with that dream? Theresa teased me for being so middle class. After she dropped out of the order and became a regular civilian, she still scorned material goods, while devoting her life to helping the poor.

So even if I hadn't forgotten to lower the toilet seat, it would have become very clear that Theresa and I were just not meant to be. But I hoped to always stay in touch, even though our lives grew further and further apart.

3

I began to wonder if I would ever see her again. But maybe a clean break was better. Let's *face* it: how much of a future could there be in dating a nun – or even an ex-nun? And yet, deep down, I knew I'd never meet another woman anything like her.

I now realized that her attraction was her essential goodness. A few years later, I was not surprised to hear that she was running a soup kitchen on the Bowery.

I decided to drop in on her, so to win brownie points I brought a shopping cart filled with dozens of fresh-baked cannoli. As soon as I rolled the cart through the door, she spotted me, dropped what she was doing and threw her arms around me.

I don't think I was ever happier. Then she looked at the boxes in the cart and guessed. "Cannoli?"

"You betcha!"

There were fifty or sixty people seated around tables. She asked a couple of assistants to place some cannoli on each table.

"Well, *thank* you, Harry! It sure beats opening cans of fruit cocktail!"

"The years have been kind to you, Theresa."

"I don't know about *kind*, but as you'll surmise, they have been quite interesting. Did you know I left the order?"

"I think I *did* hear something to that effect."

"Yeah! In fact, you can say that I've gotten remarried."

She saw my jaw drop. Quickly, she placed her hands on my shoulders and looked deep into my eyes.

“Harry, you will *always* be in my heart!”

“So, who’s the lucky guy?”

She took my hand and walked with me to the back of the room. There was an older guy scraping bits of food from plates into a garbage pail. He was tall, slim, and had curly gray hair and a full beard.”

“Tom, meet Harry.”

“Glad to meet you, Harry. Where’s Dick?”

Only guys named Tom, Dick, and Harry get the allusion instantaneously. He was definitely a kindred spirit.

“Tom, if I can’t have her, then I’m glad it’s *you*.”

“Yeah, I’m like Allstate.”

“I don’t *get* it,” said Theresa.

“You know their slogan: ‘You’re in good hands with Allstate.’”

She playfully punched him in the arm.

I really liked him right off. I could see why Theresa did. But, jeez, the guy was old enough to be her father. And indeed, I actually *knew* her father. They were probably about the same age, although Tom was certainly much more youthful.

After all the guests had left, I helped with the clean-up as Theresa brought me up to date with her life – and Tom’s. The ex-nun and ex-priest had finally found happiness.

Tom had engaged in some activities that Cardinal Spellman had deemed unbecoming a priest. Spellman, an ardent supporter of our deep involvement in the Vietnam War, was particularly upset with reports about the vandalization of a couple of the local draft boards’ records.

Tom never denied the rumors. He enjoyed describing himself as a de-flocked priest, since they *did* take away his flock. And as far as he was concerned, the Cardinal was a war criminal. Anyway, he had been dead for years.

“And what about *you*, Harry? Still counting money?”

“Yes, Theresa. As a matter of fact, I’m now a CPA and saving my clients millions in taxes they should be paying the government.”

“Right *on!*” shouted Tom. “That money would have just fed the voracious war machine.”

“Well, I hate to tell you guys, but I agree with you a hundred percent!”

“That’s great to hear, Harry! I never *was* that clear on where you stood.”

“Hey, I’m a lover, not a fighter.”

They both laughed.

Then Tom said, “I surmise you were never in the service.”

“Actually, I almost was. You might know that each draft board has a quota.”

I noticed them glance at each other.

“Well, my draft board must have had a lot of guys who volunteered. So they would make up for any shortfall by drafting the youngest guys on their list. Now remember, this was back in the early sixties, just before the war heated up.”

They both nodded.

“So when they finally called me in for a physical, I was just a couple of months short of my twenty-sixth birthday. And that was the cut-off.”

Again, I saw them nodding. They seemed to know more about the draft than *I* did.

“Anyway, a friendly employee at my draft board explained that the military considered any guy who hit twenty-six ‘untrainable’ – you know, like being unable – or even unwilling -- to follow orders, or to withstand the stresses of military training.

“I never did take that physical, and on my twenty-sixth birthday, I was officially untrainable.”

Just then Theresa blurted out, “Did that include *toilet* training?”

Seconds later she and I were doubled over with laughter. Tom smiled, but he was clueless. Finally, Theresa told him that she would explain everything later.

“So Tom, perhaps in answer to your question as to whether I ever served in the military, the short answer would be ‘No.’ But a few years later, even *I* managed to engage in a very low level of passive resistance.”

They were waiting to hear more.

“A few years ago, this poor guy from Internal Revenue paid me a visit – at *home!*”

“Welcome to the war-resisters’ club,” said Tom.

“I don’t think I’m quite worthy of membership. All I had done was to deduct the federal telephone tax each month when I paid my phone bill.”

“Of *course!*” said Theresa. “That tax was earmarked to help pay for the war!”

“Absolutely! So, this poor man – he must have been in his late fifties -- climbed four flights of stairs to my apartment. He was huffing and puffing so much, I was afraid he would collapse. I insisted that he just sit and drink some water.

“While he was catching his breath, I began to feel very sorry for him. Here he was at this stage in his career, and he might just as soon have been working for a collection agency.”

“Anyway, we went back and forth on the subject for about an hour. He kept insisting that I pay the tax, and I kept demanding that the government end the war.

Finally, he summed up the government’s position. I had made my point. The IRS would now simply put a levy on my bank account. End of story.”

“You should have asked him for an IRS official war-resister’s certificate.”

“Thanks, Tom!”

4

After the last guest left and we had tidied up, we sat down and they filled me in on their operation. They got most of their food from the federal government surplus food program, and most of the rest from restaurants. This was supplemented by what they could buy with a few thousand dollars a month in cash donations.

“So, the good news is that we can provide lunch and dinner three times a week,” observed Theresa.

“And the bad news is the other fifteen meals you *can’t* provide.”

“Spoken like a man with the soul of an accountant,” said Tom.

I realized just then how much I liked him, and how much I wanted to help the two of them expand their operations.

“May I make a suggestion?”

“Of *course!*” they both blurted out.

“OK, you know how forgiving the Church can be, especially to the rich?”

They both nodded, smiling.

“A few hundred thousand – or better yet, a few million – dropped onto the collection plate can sometimes go a long way.”

Theresa and Tom were grinning.

“Now correct me if I’m wrong,” I said, pausing for effect, “but don’t you hand out receipts for your donors’ contributions – whether in cash or in kind?”

“I think I see where this is going,” said Theresa.

“Really?”

“Harry, you *rascal!*” I always knew you were a sinner, but until now I had never realized that you were actually evil!”

“Hey, if the church can forgive the rich for *their* sins, then surely it can forgive the rest of us for sinning while feeding the poor!”

“And so, ex-Sister Theresa, we have the blessing of a “de-flocked” priest to commit a minor sin for the greater good.”

“So perhaps, Harry, we can rename our operation ‘the Saints and Sinner’s Soup Kitchen. That might not only get the Church on our backs, but perhaps the IRS as well.”

“Look, you guys worry about the Church and leave the worrying about the IRS to me.”

5

Call me a cynic, but if there’s one thing I’ve learned on my job it’s that most Americans want to pay as little income tax as possible. Indeed, you don’t need to be a CPA to figure *that* out.

The only problem is that a lot of those potential tax cheats would feel at least a little guilty – not just because cheating is illegal -- but because it might even be immoral. My job is to not just keep them out of jail, but to even make them feel *good* about cheating Uncle Sam.

Through the late 1960s and early 1970s, a growing number of Americans opposed our involvement in the Vietnam War, and resented paying taxes to support that endeavor. So, a lot of my clients were receptive to what my colleagues and I called “creative accounting.”

Deducting the federal telephone tax from your phone bill was highly symbolic, but it was pathetically insufficient to starve the government of funds needed to pay for the war. Regretfully, my fellow accountants and I were not sufficiently imaginative to come up with anything more “creative.”

Although the Vietnam War had ended a few years ago, and the war-criminal-infested Johnson and Nixon administrations were no longer in office, perhaps more Americans still hate the federal government rather than love it. So, most of us not only *want* to cheat on our taxes, but feel justified in doing so.

Theresa and Tom were quite ready to provide their fellow citizens with another just cause for reducing their tax bills. Indeed, the Catholic Church and the IRS agreed that taxpayers were entitled to pay less tax if they helped feed the poor.

Like other charitable organizations, “Daily Bread” provides receipts for the cash and in-kind contributions they receive. But, adapting Jesus’s miraculous feat of feeding multitudes of the poor with just a few loaves of bread, Tom and Theresa would now try to follow a more up-to-date business model.

6

After spending a few days working out my scheme, I arranged a sit-down with Theresa and Tom to get their reaction.

“Let us begin by agreeing that none of this will go beyond the three of us.”

“This sounds serious!”

“It *is*, Theresa! It tests our very souls.”

“Nothing personal, Harry, but do accountants *have* souls?”

“Thanks a *lot*, Father Thomas!”

“OK, gentlemen, let’s get down to business.”

“Since we need to keep everything secret, we won’t be leaving a paper trail. But, I promise, my plan is very simple.

“Here’s part one: When businesses make food donations, you can encourage them to list larger quantities of the bagels, desserts, tuna salad, and the canned goods than they actually provide.”

“In other words,” Tom observed, “they’ll be getting larger tax deductions from the IRS.”

“Correct.”

“And that’s *legal*?” asked Theresa.

“Was the *war* legal?”

“Point taken.”

“Now, here’s part two of the plan. It’s a little bit iffiery, at least from a legal standpoint.”

Each gave me a very questioning look. Clearly, a little finagling with the food donations is not a very serious legal offense. If they ever got caught, they would be given a small fine at most and perhaps a stiff warning to never do it again.

“Remember the story of the miracle of the bread?”

“Of *course!*” replied Tom. “Jesus handed out a few loaves of bread to his disciples, who tore off small pieces and handed them to many hungry people. The bread kept multiplying and thousands of people were fed.”

“So, Harry, your plan is to have our cash donations multiply like the bread?” asked Theresa.

“Hey, if it worked almost two thousand years ago, it might *still* work now.”

“And if it does, it will be another miracle!”

“From your lips, Tom, to God’s ears.”

“So, here’s how it will work: You know all those monetary contributions you get each year?”

“You mean the hundreds of thousands of dollars that pour in?”

They chuckled.

“Yeah, right Theresa! Soon you’ll probably need to hire an accountant to help you keep track. And an investment advisor to get you the best return on your idle funds.

“Well, what if I told you guys that maybe you *could* be pulling in much larger monetary contributions?”

Just then a guest walked in the door.

“Hey, let’s ask her where *she* invests her money,” quipped Theresa.

“Hi Tom! Hi Theresa! I hate to drop in on you after hours, but I was wondering if you could help me out.”

“Sure, Bernice! Would you like a couple of cans of baked beans or tuna to tide you over until Friday?”

“That would be great, Tom! You’re an angel!”

Everyone smiled.

After Bernice left, Theresa got up to do a little more tidying up. As I helped her, I noticed that Tom remained seated. Maybe the poor guy was finally beginning to feel his age. On the other hand, *I* should be in that kind of shape when *I’m* as old as he is now.

7

The next evening we picked up where we had left off.

“OK Harry, we’re very curious how you propose to dramatically raise our monetary contributions.”

“Tom, I know that you guys are familiar with the concept of indulgences.”

They smiled at each other.

“So correct me if I’m wrong, but an indulgence is the Church’s forgiveness for having committed a sin. And it is granted – and I need to be careful here – in exchange for a substantial monetary payment.”

“Well,” answered Tom, “while the Church may phrase that somewhat more elegantly, your description is pretty close to the mark.”

“Good! So then, what I’d like to propose is that “Daily Bread,” with a genuflection to the Church, grant indulgences in the form of tax deductions.”

“But we already *do* just that.”

“Yes Theresa, but surely you can do that on a much a much grander scale.”

‘Exactly how much grander do you have in mind?’

“Oh, maybe doubling contributions over the next few months.

"I'll give you a numerical example. Joe Schmo has been donating \$100 a month, and each month you give him a receipt for that amount. Suppose you make him an offer: If he'll double his donation, you'll quadruple the amount on each receipt."

"Let me do the math," said Theresa. "Joe now gives us \$200 and we give him a receipt for \$800."

"Hey, maybe you picked the wrong vocation. You could still become a CPA."

"Thanks a *lot!*"

"Don't mention it!"

Then Tom observed: "This would easily work for cash contributions, but wouldn't the IRS notice that a contributor's deduction was twice the sum of his checks?"

"Yeah, if they actually looked. But their practice is to look mainly at the receipts from the charities rather than the charitable deductions claimed by taxpayers."

"The IRS knows that some charities inflate the value of the donations they receive, but most taxpayers probably inflate the value of the donations they make. So the IRS examiners figure a receipt from a charity is more reliable than the deduction claimed by a taxpayer."

"You know, Harry, this can certainly work to some degree with our donors, but over a year, maybe just a few hundred people give us more than, say, twenty-five dollars."

"That sounds about right," added Theresa.

"Well, that's a start. You can ask your contributors to help spread the word. But I've saved the best for last."

They looked at me expectantly.

"I just happen to have a few dozen clients who might be interested in making contributions to "Daily Bread" *if* you would be willing to provide them with inflated receipts. And better yet, some of the partners at my firm might want to help out as well, especially if *they* could take nice deductions for contributing to a good cause."

They glanced at each other. Then Tom suggested that they each sleep on it, and try to reach a decision the next day.

I knew that neither of them was risk-averse, but would they want to take the chance of being prosecuted for tax fraud? On the other hand, I was counting on their anger with the government not just for the war, but for its centuries of oppression of the poor and of minorities.

When I arrived at the soup kitchen that evening, they appeared rather subdued. Perhaps they had some remaining doubts about this entire enterprise. Were they really willing to take the risk of getting shut down, and leaving all their guests in the lurch?

As I approached, the two of them stood there, their faces expressionless. Then, bowing their heads, they raised their fists, just like Tommie Smith and John Carlos did on the victory stand at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.

I was overjoyed! Not only were they *in*, but they appeared as defiant as Smith and Carlos in *their* protest. It was *their* way of saying “Fuck you!” to our corrupt and murderous government. I got their message loud and clear without their having said a word.

The three of us hugged, and Tom declared, “All for one and one for *all!*”

Then I handed them a check and asked for a receipt for the amount on the check. They each gave me a questioning look.

“Look, you’ll want *some* receipts to match the amount on the checks. Besides, don’t you want your accountant to be above suspicion?”

“Over the next few days you’ll be getting some checks in the mail from new donors. Each will mention my name. So could you double or even triple the amount of their donations on their receipts.”

“It will be our pleasure!” replied Tom.

“Oh, and one *more* thing. For the folks I send to you who donate cash, could you quintuple the amount on their receipts?”

“Of *course!*” said Theresa. It’s like the long-honored practice of merchants who don’t charge sales tax on purchases paid for with cash. I believe that every service station in New York has that generous policy.”

“Cash is *good!*” I replied. After all, every piece of our currency contains the statement, ‘In God we trust.’ And as some of our fellow citizens have added, ‘All others pay cash.’

“Oh, and speaking of cash, here are a few donations my clients just made.” I handed them each two envelopes.”

“Holy *shit!*”

“Isn’t that a little blasphemous – even for an *ex-nun* to say!”

“Not for *this* donation!”

“So how much will the receipt be for?”

“Two thousand five hundred dollars!”

“*Thank* you, Theresa! That’s very generous.”

Then Tom piped up, “Oh Lordy! It looks like Alfred Goldfarb has just earned himself a five-thousand-dollar deduction!”

“Wow! Now, if our guests don’t have *bread*, we can let them eat *canoli!*”

“Yes, Tom! And to paraphrase the American Revolution War naval hero, Captain John Paul Jones, ‘We have just begun to cheat!’”

9

One evening when I came by, I found Theresa all alone in the store. The assistants had left for the day, and Tom, who had not been feeling well lately, had stayed home all day.

“You know, Harry, this might be a good chance for us to talk.”

I gave her a quizzical look, not sure what was coming next.

“Oh, don’t worry! It’s just something that I’ve wanted you to know. Let me start by asking if you’re familiar with the ‘Underground Railroad.’

“Of course! It was a network to help escaped slaves get themselves smuggled out of the South to their freedom in the North.”

“Well, when I volunteered to help draft dodgers – and even some military deserters – I met Tom. He was one of the organizers.”

“That doesn’t surprise me at all.”

“You really *like* him, don’t you?”

“You *know* I do! He’s fun, he’s modest, he has great ideals, and he’s even almost as good-looking as *I* am! What’s *not* to like?”

She gave me a playful jab in the arm. I pretended to double over in pain.

“You know, Harry, there might be a future for you in professional wrestling.”

“Seriously, Theresa, Tom has been leading an amazing life. If the Feds had known even a fraction of the shit he’s done, they’d have given him the electric chair.

“By the way, there’s something I need to tell you.”

I could see that she was very curious.

“You know, when I first laid eyes on him, my first thought was –

“How could she *go* for such an old guy?”

We both smiled.

“*Right! And now I know!*”

“I believe you *do*, Harry! Still, I want you to know what Tom and I did, not all that long ago, working on the modern-day Underground Railroad.”

I waited, watching her gather her thoughts.

“Tom’s main job, besides planning and organizing many of our operations, was driving to the Canadian border with a couple of young men who were his ‘nephews.’ They were ostensibly on the way to a family birthday party or maybe a wedding. Tom would vary the routine, sometimes heading for Toronto, Montreal, or even Vancouver. Remember that even a few years ago, the customs officials of both countries did not use computers, which might have helped them keep better track of who crossed the border lately.”

“And what was *your* job?”

“Would you believe it was that of the blushing bride.”

“You’re putting me on! “

“*Moi?*”

“Yeah, *vous!*”

“Harry, I’ve lost track of how many times I’ve gotten married – not to mention how many times I’ve seen Niagara Falls, for that matter.”

“So, it would be fair to assume that you and Tom did not go there on *your* honeymoon.”

“That would *indeed* be a fair assumption.”

“Did you or Tom ever have any close calls?”

“Probably. You could never be sure. When the young men were asked to show their draft cards, *that* was kind of a tip-off. On the other hand, it was probably just a random thing they did.”

“I would have been scared shitless!”

“Hey, Tom and I *both* were. The thing was, of course, that if either of us got caught, we’d have been facing long prison sentences. Tom kidded me about that, saying that he probably didn’t have all that long to live anyway.”

“Lovely.”

10

As our scheme took hold, “Daily Bread” began providing lunch and dinner a fourth day each week and there was hope it would eventually be able to fully live up to its name. And with federal government surplus food shipments increasing, we added a food pantry to our operation.

We were indeed duplicating Jesus’s bread distribution miracle, aided as we were by modelling our contribution plan on the old-time Church indulgences. And all this made possible by a former nun, a “de-flocked priest,” and a creative accountant.

My thirty-third birthday was approaching, and I spent increasing amounts of time thinking about what I had done with my life, and what I still hoped to accomplish. I’m sure its symbolism was not lost on Tom and Theresa.

I remembered a cartoon which pretty much summed up my thoughts. This poor soul in a business and clutching a heavy sample case was standing nervously before the Pearly Gates, waiting to learn if he would be admitted to heaven. Saint Peter was poring over a ledger. Finally, he looked up and asked, “Salesman of the year in 1971? That’s *it*?”

I was confident that if, even five minutes from now, I were to find myself in that man’s place, I would have a better shot at getting into heaven. Perhaps Saint Peter would be impressed with

my CPA. But I was certain that the assistance I had provided to “Daily Bread” – however dubious its legality -- would be much more helpful.

But hopefully, the greater part of my life still lay ahead of me. Then I thought of Tom, trying to imagine all the amazing things he had done. And how, decades from now, my accomplishments would stack up against his. As I did this, I began to realize that this man was truly a living saint.

You could not help but love him. So, I easily understood how *he* – and not *I* – had ended up with such a wonderful woman. Did I still *love* her? Of *course!* I knew that I would love her until the day I died.

But Tom truly deserved her, and I was very happy that everything worked out for them. And better yet, in just the last couple of months, I had certainly added to their happiness – and to my own as well.

Indeed, for the first time in my life, I began to understand the proverb: “To give is better than to receive.” I don’t think there had been any time in my life when I was happier – with the possible exception of when, in 1955, the Brooklyn Dodgers finally beat the Yankees in the World Series. That miraculous event convinced me – and perhaps every person in Brooklyn – that all things were possible.

I asked myself: “Am I truly happy?” Well, to be completely honest, I certainly would have greatly preferred the Hollywood ending, where the boy ends up with the girl. But to have had that ending, the boy never should have never have let her go.

And yet, to see her so happy – probably a lot happier than *I* could have ever made her – well, that makes *me* happy. Tom is really perfect for her, although I laughed to myself thinking, “Couldn’t she have gotten someone a little younger?”

These last few months, helping them answer their life’s calling, I began to begin to recognize – if I was not being too presumptuous – my *own* calling. Even accountants can contribute to a great eternal plan.

Theresa and Tom took me out for dinner on my birthday. They had become my closest friends. Tom mentioned that his *own* birthday was just a few weeks away. It would be “the big six-oh!”

“Tom,” I can’t believe all the *things* you’ve done with your life!”

“You know, Harry, I must confess that your own life has been an inspiration to *me!*”

“Really?”

“Of course! For me, God was always there to guide me. And if I may be so presumptuous, God has also always been there to guide Theresa.”

“Hey, I think you guys should give yourselves a lot of credit. I’m sure the two of you are familiar with the adage, “God helps those who help themselves.”

“Of course we are!” replied Theresa. “That said, the individual still has to go out and *do* it!”

“Harry, just consider how much you’ve changed during these last few months. Think of how much more you’ve enabled us to help our guests.”

“You know what, Tom? I am forced to concede that you and Theresa are right! So I hope you remembered to order a birthday cake.”

As if on cue, the waiters came out of the kitchen singing “Happy Birthday,” and most of the diners joined in”

11

It might have been just my imagination, but Tom seemed to be dragging ass more and more. It made me wonder what I’d be like when I was *his* age. And what I’d be doing and who I’d be with when *I* reached the big six-oh.

I asked Theresa if she and Tom had any plans for *his* birthday.

“Funny you should ask. I was just thinking about throwing a surprise party in the store.”

“That sounds *perfect!*”

“I’m glad to hear that! I’d like to invite not just his family members and old friends, but also all of our regular guests.”

“How can you keep it a surprise?”

“Well, there’s the old trick – or should I say ‘tricks?’”

“And what would *those* be?”

“Well, we can hold it a week before his birthday.”

“I *like* that! It will catch him off guard.”

“And we’ll keep him out of the store when we’re setting up.”

“How would we do *that*?”

“With my secret weapon: Father Timothy.”

“How do I *know* that name? Wait! Did he have something to do with damaging some records at the local draft boards?”

“*Bingo!*”

“Anyway, the two of them have not gotten together for some time, so Timothy agreed to come over to our apartment on Friday the 20th in the late afternoon. I’ll open a bottle of sacramental wine, and suggest that the two of them hang out there while I go to the store to get dinner started. Then, if they came over towards the end of dinner, say around seven p.m., maybe they could help clean up.”

“Sounds like a plan.”

“In the meanwhile, I’ve got a list of about a hundred people I want to invite – in addition to our regular guests.”

“Can the store hold that many people?”

“Well, not all of them will be able to come, so there should be enough room. The main thing is to invite Tom’s friends and family, and to surprise the shit out of him.”

“So the dinner guests won’t know about the surprise party until they get there, and the friends and family will be sworn to secrecy.”

“Correct!!”

“So Father Timothy will be a key player.”

“Yes! And I know he’ll enjoy every minute of it. The two of them go back a long, long way.”

On Friday, May 20th, at four minutes after seven, the lookout spotted Tom and Timothy coming down the street. She could tell even from fifty yards that they might be just a wee bit tipsy. She rushed into the store and gave Theresa the high sign.

Theresa announced to everyone that Tom was about to walk in. By now everyone knew that it was his birthday. As soon as the door opened, and the two of them stumbled in, everyone yelled, “*Surprise!*”

Tom blinked a couple of times, perhaps checking to see if he was awake. Timothy put his arm around him and announced: "The birthday boy has arrived!"

Theresa rushed up to Tom and gave him a long, long kiss. Everyone cheered. Then Tom looked around, laughing as he pointed at each of his old friends and his brother, his sister, his cousins, and even his favorite aunt.

Then, one-by-one, they came up to him for a hug and wished him a very happy birthday. Then he needed to sit down for a while. He looked exhausted.

Theresa stood behind him, her hands resting on his shoulders. Tom clearly needed a break, so she introduced Father Timothy, and asked him to tell everyone about the good old days.

For the next half hour Timothy told anecdote after anecdote, some of them dating back to their seminary days. He had Tom smiling and nodding, while he himself basked in all the attention.

Then a huge birthday cake was wheeled in and placed in front of Tom. After a rousing "Happy Birthday" was sung, Tom asked Timothy if he had enough wind left to help him blow out the candles. Together, they were certainly up to the task, as everyone cheered.

Then the crowd started chanting, "*Speech! Speech! Speech! Speech!*" until Tom held up his arms in surrender.

"If it's OK with everyone, I'd like to remain seated. I hope you all can hear me."

"Tom, we hear yuh and we love yuh!" yelled Bernice.

"Thank you, Bernice! Unlike my dear fellow seminarian, I promise to be very brief.

"To see all of you in this room is like viewing a vast photo album of my entire life. Because you are the most important people – to me, at least – on this planet. Indeed, you *are* my life.

"Were I as eloquent as Father Timothy, I would thank each of you for enriching and giving meaning to my life. So please, let me pause for a minute or two, to let you imagine how I would be thanking you.

"Now, let me close with the immortal words of a man I always greatly admired, New York Yankee great, Lou Gehrig. 'I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the Earth.'"

I shuddered, remembering that Gehrig died months after he uttered those words. Only now did I realize just how ill Tom was, and how gently and considerately he was bidding farewell to everyone in the room.

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Bruce Edward Litton

The Lithium Spring

Fingers at the edge of a score, notes
trellised melodies as if to relieve the weight of the air.
A whitened head nodded among swaying branches
that wrestled with the man like the ranges of a pipe organ.

On a warm, autumn day he lay in the same hammock
while leaves fell from the same ecstatic nets of notation.
Snow bunting whistles in a cropped field beyond
aroused music rare as a lithium spring.

Winter came, leaving no memory of haze in the night sky.
Subtle feeling again played him like an organ.
He stood gazing upward, possessed of reason
understood when reason was lost.

Passages of life gathered overhead as if he played
a final chord, stars linked together like an immense cupola.
Andromeda to Hercules.
Polaris to the reversed point of the Southern Cross.

Steven Stone

the heart of spring.

It comes in the heart
of spring,
this feeling,
this
age of emergence;

Blistered hopes
on battered walls.

Give me a bridge
to waltz on;
give me a river
to shade my
heart against
the turquoise sky
of no dreams, against
the earth
with its term limits
and cruel boundaries;

I want to go where
the sun wants to be

I ask no reward
but your divine
summer flavors
when you are
ready

nothing.

I walk into
total darkness
knowing nothing

A new year can't
wash away my fears

When the quiet
curtain capes me

I will be as one
with the stars and
the spaces between
them

and my fears will
be blankets with
patterns of kisses

and the darkness
will turn to an
onyx iris

i will hold your
hand as we walk
over the boardwalk
to the stars, no end,
no beginning

no beach of sleep

JANUARY'S GIRL.

I don't know what to
expect from her
transient odors, promise
of death at life's door;

she is always one
graceful slide from
ignominy;

vicarious as the sky,
precarious as eggs,
high as hills
of the January snows;

choked into sense
by a twisting squall
that animates my heart
icy blue

death's breath
infuses in my mouth
all pieces of
splintered clocks
dragging the hours
along

and I will drown
in the ocean of
her smile,
as wide as my life
can save her

Joe Farley

It's Just A Matter Of Life And Death

Nothing to get excited about.

The rope to which you cling
chaffs against thighs and hands,
but you have a beautiful view
of the gorge as you dangle
two hundred feet above the rocks.

You'd take a picture if
you could reach your camera,
but your hands are tied up now,
busy with your meager attempts
at survival.

Maybe a helicopter will come by,
or a wise and giant eagle,
or a troop of boy scouts
with skill and gumption,
but why worry now
whether the cavalry
will, or will, not arrive on time?

You still have breath and sweat

and muscles that can strain

and strive to get you out.

A knot, if you can manage it,

could serve as a grip

or foot rest.

And there's still that lovely view

that will always be there

even if you fall.

It might not be pleasant

at the bottom,

but you'll have nice things

to look at

all the way down.

That Dancing Fool

I shall dance tonight
despite the hip
or the knees that ache
and no longer bend,
despite the swelling
in my feet,
despite all the worries
and the pain,
I shall dance tonight
as best I can,
keeping time
as best I can
with the rhythm
of all that is
and which includes
a dancer like me.

Dreaming of dreamers

In far away places
where dreams go to sleep,
we exist in some measure
in the mist of their slumber.

So much we are,
and so little.

A word to the wise,
and nothing more.

Crossing

Rocks in the creek
almost allow
you to cross
with long steps,
or with jumps,
without wetting
your feet.

Not as safe
as a bridge,
but quicker
than building one.

Still, there's the risk
you will fall in,
your back pack
swept away,
and maybe your life
ended in froth
and stones.

Maybe that's why
we don't hike
the extra miles
to the nearest
footbridge.

What would be
the fun in that?
Anyone
can play it safe
and dry.

The nearness
of tragedy
through a slip
or misstep
helps us savor
each element
of the day.

Even though
the chance
of injury

may be small,

we know

it's there.

The probability

of wet shoes

and socks

is much higher,

and possibly

a cold tomorrow

from frigid water.

We will be brave

in our relative

timidity,

and go forward,

crossing

with a hop,

a skip,

a jump,

and a plunk.

The Transient Nature of Passion

Once I held you in my arms
and you said I was the best
you ever had.

That made me feel good.

I think we both believed it
for a while,

that we were, together,
the best that could happen.

But, it is hard to keep that glow
going month and month,
and year after year.

The world fades. The miracle ends.

And the eyes, always open,
see other things, and wonder,
if miracles still occur.

2020

This was the year of trouble.
Not that trouble doesn't happen
every year,
it's just that this year was TROUBLE.
The less said about it the better.
But one should not curse
if you fell in love,
or birthed a child,
or found the tune
\you had been searching for.
It was a year of trouble,
but it was so much more
for so many who will remember it
for the blessings and joy that it brought
along with the riots and body counts.

Rat Race

It was a Monday in Philadelphia. The perfect morning to oversleep. The weekends spoil you, break your conditioning. Five days of rising at 6 AM. Two of getting up at ten. I didn't hear the alarm. By the time I noticed, I was well behind schedule. I had to skip the shower, abbreviate the shave, ignore breakfast. My face was still bleeding when I got into my car.

I headed south on Frankford Avenue. If I didn't hurry I would not be able to find free parking along the street at the Frankford Transportation Center. I'd have to pay to park in the lot before getting on the Blue Line, the Frankford Elevated. The EI to locals.

Traffic was slow. Much slower than on Friday. There were more cars. And school buses. Never liked to ride them. Liked less to drive behind them. A school bus ahead of me kept stopping every block or two so elementary students could board. The red stop sign would come out on its arm from the side of the bus. No one was allowed to pass. Horns honked. All the drivers were mad at having to go to work, at having gotten a late start, at having gotten stuck behind a school bus. Finally the bus turned into the lot for Brown Elementary.

I sped up. Then got stuck behind a trackless trolley. The Southeastern Pennsylvania Transportation Authority or SEPTA's 66 line. SEPTA was a name and experience that required derision. Schelpta. The Septic System. Rehab on wheels.

The 66 was easier to pass. Just look for a turn lane and ride it, or a yellow striped median, until you can make a move. Every car that could passed the 66. This, and the surreal experience of the passengers, was why I preferred to drive to the Frankford El that take public transit. The trolley driver honked, but it did not matter. She and her passengers were losing the race. I was up a lap.

The road widened to two lanes. I picked up the pace. I was making up time. There was still a chance for street parking. Still a chance of getting into work on time or within the grace period for lateness. Then I got stuck behind a Verizon truck. It was a mid-sized truck, going pretty fast, but not fast enough for me. I tried to pass, but couldn't. Too much traffic. Too wide a truck. I looked at the truck blocking my way. White. Big coils of wire. A lift arm. No tail gate. Canvas bags secured by chains hanging from the back and side.

I thought about the bags and coils of wire. Were they going to fly off and hit my car? Something like that had happened before. A refrigerator had bounced out of a pickup truck on I-95 one morning and smashed into my car. That happened 14 years ago, but I was still driving the same car. Repaired, but never the same. I'd had already had my flirtation with extinction during rush hour, thank you. Once was enough.

I kept watching those canvas bags, looking for any sign of the chain unhooking or the handles of the bag, to which the chain was secured, tearing. I saw something else. Something brown. Did it have eyes? An opportunity came for me to pass on the right of the truck. I took another look at the bags, one of which was swinging beside my car door, and the brown lump on the back of the truck bed next to the chain holding the bag. It had large dark eyes and brown fur. A rat hunkered down in a ball, trying to resist the g-forces at 50 MPH. It quivered in the wind from the truck. I wondered if it would make it to its destination, or go flying off and smash into the windshield of an unlucky driver.

I made a turn, and then another. I neared the station. There was no street parking. I had to park in the lot. \$3.50 wasted. Money I could have saved for something else, like new razor blades.

I climbed the stairs to the EI platform, passing through the clouds of weed and crack, ignoring the beggars and the transportation police frisking a turnstile jumper. A train was ready to pull out. I got on.

During my ride to Center City, where my office was, I thought about what I was going to tell my boss when I arrived late. Once I came up with an answer to that riddle, my mind wandered elsewhere. I thought about that rodent. When had it gotten onto the truck? How? Was it still on the truck when it reached its destination? If it survived the

ride, what would happen to it? Would it be killed by the workers, or scurry off to start a new life with a new rat family?

The rat made me think of my older brother Frank, deceased now, kidney disease and heart failure. Frank had been in the year of the rat, one year before me. I'm an Ox man. Frank had always been a bit of a rat. There were some hard memories. Drugs, booze, thieving, fights. Cheap shots in the dark. We had a falling out in our twenties, We never completely reconciled.

Frank had worked for a while as a mechanic for the City's Sanitation Department. He used to bring a b-b gun with him to work so he and his friends could shoot rats in the parking lot on their dinner break. He used to brag about it.

I could easily imagine the telephone and cable workers having b-b guns. A rat firing squad. So much for stowaways.

Plenty of rats hung around the Sanitation Department's maintenance facility along the Delaware River. They had nests in the high weeds near the river. Plenty caught rides on trash trucks. Often in pieces, Frank would say, crushed and pulled apart along with the trash bags by the trash trucks' compactors. Rat guts, maggots, and feces from disposable diapers were hazards of the job. A nasty job. Cost my brother half a finger.

Those big springs can be evil. One of the reason he walked away from the job and found another one driving a sludge truck for the Water Department.

Wasted thoughts. I couldn't help it. My brother and the rats. Me and the rat. Rats never gave me a warm and fuzzy feeling, but I was feeling something now for the little bastard on the Verizon truck. Wouldn't want it in my house. I'd kill it. Poison or a b-b. But I wanted it to be alive, live a little longer, at least for the rest of the day, maybe the rest of the year. Just so long as I didn't see it again, or any of its relatives.

I had no luck with that. When I got off the EI at 5th and Market Streets I saw the rats sneaking around between the tracks. There would always be rats in my life. That was the way of it. There would be rats. There had to be. Just not in my house. Not anymore. There used to be. My sister is also a rat, born in the proper year. So is my youngest son. But he lives with his mother now and is too old to compel visitation. Some rats I need. Some rats I long to stop by and spend some time with me. Just not the kind on all fours with fur and a tail. None of that. But that's enough about rats. I needed to remember my cover story as to why I was late for work. There were more rats where I was going. None as nice as those I grew up with or fathered. The world is just one big wainscoting with plenty of teeth gnawing on it.

Ethan Cunningham

CONTEXT

gravel crackles in evening gloom
in concrete valleys metal trees
cast recurring pools of light
in the urban night abyss

a shadow
female
stabs the ground faster
car keys clenched and spiked through
her knuckles
battle-ready
all the world her enemy
every man her foe

shrinking from scathing glances she
casts in my direction, I am
staring groundward letting her
diligently outpace me

alone at a bar we might have
become friends
a glass of wine
a sparkling glance
a kiss
maybe
but here's the forked truth

isolated, the slabs of iced
pavement parking filled with fog
instead make me her problem
shunned, avoided, gouged, burned, and stomped

when at last she's vanished
into the jungle gloom
my lungs exhale
my muscles relax

I am safe
I am me again

DINNER PARTY

clinking icy clatter of cocktails
a surreptitious wink
a portal of inclusion into
an exclusive moment
shared and secret
sends flutters down
my throat, into my guts
lover, hostess
the slender golden key of
my hopes and dreams
fragile like the thin glass
of mixed drinks
nudged or dropped
at the whim of careless spirits

THE FLOCK

white light.
a long fluorescent bulb.
dull. sick.
a pain in the skull.
my stomach churns in
the stagnant air.
suffocating. dry.
the stuff desiccation
is made of.
this is modern Purgatory.
an abyss of false illumination
where one waits
outside of time
in a crowd of listless eyes.
zombies. sheep.
whose rotting brains
stink the room with their fetid mush.
catch my neighbor's glossy glare
empty. null.
but a reflection
nonetheless.
in his mirrors
a milky-eyed corpse
stares back.
my expression
just like the rest of them.

Hanna Abi Akl

Barricades

some people think it's hard showing
your true self in a crowd;
but it's when you're by yourself
that you're most afraid of being
what you want to be.

some nights i sit
lonely in my chair
in my small paris home.

some nights the quiet is too much
and i beg the neighbor across the hall
to play his piano keys.

you don't even have to play,
i mumble,
just touch them,
tap them ever so lightly
to break the soundness of silence
between you and me.
between me and this room.

some nights i wake up with sweat marks
from a dream i can't recall to recount
sometimes it's a dream of dying —
most times it's a dream of death.

at times i look across my dining table
and remember my girlfriend left;
had she stayed i would be glancing at her
between the pages of a book i'm reading.
now i occasionally dust them out and put them
back on the shelf.

what sort of sick melancholy is
toying with my fate? i feel like
a puppet on a string being played
by a puppeteer. except i'm at this
point where i no longer care
about performing.

new age

make this feeble heart
fly — take it away
now
that it is a nameless thing
like so many others
i've harbored and lost
over the years

today it is reduced
to nothing
stripped of its essence

and love itself
that heavy chest secretly sleeping for so long
now opened, tarnished, worthless
makes all else look so ordinary.

where are we going
alone
and is it still worth getting there?

the day the world began

fear inhabits us all
and somewhere on the evolutionary
line more traits
have started to show
on our faces

what was once thought to be
overcome
reveals itself
like the sun behind a pair of blinds

we have reverted
to our primal selves
we have allowed fears like
loneliness
abandonment
and low self-esteem
to claim our lives

and those fears like torches
are enough to drive some of us
out of houses, gardens
deep into the woods of the world
probing like fearful wanderers
demanding only to be felt and
understood
or at least compensated

while leaving others in a standstill
engulfed, consumed
until almost finally accepting
and relinquishing themselves.

i am of the latter kind:
i haven't moved
since the day the world began
for me.

a plausible death

woke up to the
smell of death
and rot
in my coffee cup.

i feel the world
slipping between my fingers
through frosted lenses
and hollow eyes

my muse is absent
and my days are already
condemned
before they begin;

i walk through
endless revolving doors
spinning perpetually
between a life
that is here
and somewhere else:

if i could take it
all back
and begin again;
send the fish back
to the deep end

reset the motion
of the earth
the tides and currents

strip the human evolutionary
chain

maybe rebirth is
the only answer for
failure

maybe bringing back
yesterday
will force the muse
out of her hiding
into my arms

the arms
of tomorrow.

Josephine Dickinson

Rotherhope

1936

They were putting the power lines in when I first went down the mine.
The cable was like this - four inches round - and wouldn't could be put underground.
I helped put it in, did just about everything that anyone did in the mine.
Three to a bargain, one guy did the drilling and two filled the stuff into trucks
on the later shift, 3.00 to 9.00. The driller, alone, worked 7.00 to 3.00.
The others came in and cleaned the stuff up the guy had got in the drill.
At the month end profit was measured and shared. We were assured 7 shillings a day.
The senior guy was the driller. I got to be a driller pretty soon on.
He wasn't paid more, but he ran the thing and could say when he didn't approve,
and if his bargain made more money he had a good choice of fillers.
This guy from Garrigill always made the most money and the others were jealous.
They always said he had a soft working, though he worked it far enough, got another.
It was perfectly obvious to me when I went this guy was the one to watch.
I would go up to his working and watch to see what he was doing different to the others.
The bargain paid for any dynamite used. This guy was using a lot.
The others were skimping, but they were so thick in their bloody heads they didn't see it.
So that was that. I didn't say a word, but I saw what was really happening.
A closed mouth makes a wise head. I was in there for two years.

1938

When Chamberlain came back from Munich and said there would be peace in our time
the mines stopped working. He went to meet Hitler in Munich. Came back with a piece
of paper and said there would be peace in our time. The mines stopped work the next week.
The hen farm was what I had to rely on then, the hen farm and the dole.
But I had ample time to spend on the hens and so things went well.
I never went back, was never hungry again, never worked for anyone else.
But before that I was a driller in the mine, I had two very good sweepers up.
All sorts of accidents used to happen. One time when my shift was over
and the other two guys had come in the working across the roof, there was only
a six inch skin on top from the dynamite. It was obviously going to come down.
I said to one of the fillers would you put a small hole in and a stick of dynamite.
As they came out it would drop it down. He did but bored further than he should have done.
The whole bloody works came in and we wouldn't could work there any more.
He lit the fuse, went home, and next day there was no work place left.
He was a good filler, yes I kept him on. Another day, the power was off
and we wouldn't could work and had to go and clean the troughs out on the fell.
The water came from Greencastle in a wooden trough two feet by three. It got silted up.
We threw the mud out of the trough, twenty or thirty of us, mixed workers, some drillers -

who thought they were above it - and a man walked the line with a bloody walking stick.
Well what was he doing that for? We were convicts and a warder with a walking stick.

Moss Flatts

A lizard on the mossy rock. Green with brown ribbing along the length of its tail.
Moves when we look away. Stops and starts to the water. Cross-hatched limeflags
half under sparkling water. The sky with its clouds reflected in pools of water.

the blossoming jewel red of Devil's Matchstick lichen
on the rock, my boot stuck in the bugha.
thought to limp across the sops foot bare.

smooth black peat, cotton grass tiptoeing across, waving its fronds
and here and there feeling tracks in the soft sponge that will be smoothed over
by rain, by next time, you tell me.

Crest and trough waves in a heather ocean crumbling down the sides yet motionless,
thick with tangle of roots, here and there worms of spraint, high over the pools,
holding the stacked up detritus of seven thousand years,

enclosing it like the hold of a ship, a beached ship, an ark.

slack hollows and basins and various boglets,
bright flashes of green, bow shaped fluorescences, green galaxies,

birch scatter, bog cotton creep towards it,
twisted arms of tree, birchen twigs, eriophorum advancing
towards them like an army

in the stanza on the flat moss
atop the moss flats in the room, the theatre with soft carpet upholstery
absorbing footfall for yet we step so softly it is giving, giving,

gently rolling with water sitting on the peat hassocks here and there,
mini hags with big yellow hair, protective troll dolls, starry water, clumps
of grass, pools, and, in the big centre, the train of wave upon wave of brown

with curled discards and a moss and sedge topped tusk and lawns of mop-headed
mats and pixy fruit-stalks and pink mushrooms, and always shuddering fizzle
of singing cotton grass on the bare shallows and on the tops and sheltered nor'east

of the boggy hags, a fizmer that stops when you turn your head,

and how I longed to be there when nobody including myself was there,
the soft giving ground, no rocks, like a womb,

or a concert hall where someone arriving late for the show tiptoes
down the carpeted aisle in the glowing dark, receptive, a doorway, then silence,
not even the sound of footfall, stepping gently, not wanting to wound

this wounded earth with its spirits, caterpillars, tracks of small feet and wheels,
too shallow here for the didder of an intact bog, plimming with the swell
of moisture, full of toothing, sou'westerly worn hagg surfaces surrounded

by husks, thumb thick, ankle thick, arm thick, chunks with roots, with doll,
with fronds, with limbs, with glossy flecked, ridged and eyeleted silver bark,
phloemed, xylemed, intact, sandy hued trees, open skies,

and in the pauses the sense of being here, the velvet mottle
of gently rolling calluna deep winter brown on verdant green
and lichen clouds of grey.

In the blithering of cotton grass under the immense skies in this intimate room
you put three birchen twigs in my hand, said take them.
I said substance of wounded earth, should I? O birchen treasure,

silence of seven millennia held in my hand, a portal, a door carried home
from the narrow band like a river bed between cotton grass
and wind-gouged toothing where the mat of birch is slowly reinterred —

there where it lay in the pauses under a riot of mackerel clouds in the biome,

in a mosaic amidst heather matted lichen, cross-hatched
hag-crusts, heath bedstraw, cowberry and deergrass, tormentil,
mosses, sphagnum, bog asphodel, the slow accumulation

on the jumble of rocks left after the ice departed, sheep-browsed,
swelling with moisture, tusks, rosettes and curled
discards topped with moss and sedge, degrees of erosion terraced

Portrait of a Nightmare

Why am I standing here, on wooden floorboards
between the picture of my nightmare
and the creature of my nightmare?
looking no doubt to you as nonchalant
and unconcerned as if I were posing
for a portrait, but in fact, I assure you,
petrified out of my wits, but at least
spared the necessity of looking behind me
even going so far in my concessions to your
strange fantasy of painting my portrait
as to hold in my right hand the symbol
of my adulthood, a top hat, in my left a book
which alone contains the key, the colour
in the picture, the life, the one thing which is not,
though caught between walls and monsters,
contained by them, another world in which
I can be free. But I've still to somehow live,
haven't I? in the hostile world.

The only way I can do it is to keep doing what
I'm doing, stand and pose for you and concentrate
so hard that the means of sustenance magically appear
on a table behind me, between, would you believe,
me and the picture of my nightmare, and so saving me
further from it insofar as it gives me greater distance.
Ditto the light with which you look
at this whole spectacle and in which
I resolutely do not look at you, the dream,
the monster or anything except the tip of my nose.
Well, I suppose I'm having my portrait done at the end
of the day. I may be in a gray confined world
caught in between the greatest dreads and dangers
of my life, but by Jove I'm going to look the part
and dress in a Crombie coat and a cravat as if ready to take
on the world and fame in a London street.

Listening

Texts and notes from Soundcamp 2016, Octopus Collective, Ulverston.

i/xviii

Pennants flag flapping
swat snail sound
 bug

I am learning to hear. At the age of seventeen I found a way to listen to each sound. I listened and sensed each note with my body.

 swore burr of plane
 kissing gate sheep lighthouse
 imprints in concrete path
 letter?

In Ovid's Metamorphoses, the sculptor Pygmalion made and fully finished his statue and then it became flesh. It is the body that feels the poem, more than any of the five senses alone. To call what it senses a rhythm goes some of the way but is not enough. The meaning is included. Language and other acquired skills are felt in the body, whether by sound or other means.

 Snap of yellow pom
bracken flag plants
 reeds ferns laid crisscross
a concru hole

I am a composer, a composer in words and image as much as in sound. I have used parallel methods of working with material in words, line and colour as in sound. This I see neither in terms of a traditional 'formalism', nor what is usually termed 'experimentalism', but as a 3rd possibility: the harvesting of structure from selected

ram ram ram of sliding cars

wind off the sea

tip of lighthouse

ii/xviii

to the lighthouse

ram-ram-ram-ram

scurry

material by analysis. This was something I learned originally from Michael Finnissy as an extension of the analysis assignments he set me.

hearing across time — the stick dropped

when

on the path

then two brown horses in the next field

seen later

rocks melted — stacked — cracked

Premise: How to treat sound as a material in creative writing?

two white horses walking slowly a curved

muddy track

with their shadows across a

field.

slower and slower

'Keep on going' (Lines, A brief history, Tim Ingold p. 90)

a body of water

reservoir

trembles

wind from the sea at my ear

One could make a pair of columns:

pictograms/ideograms

v.

phonograms

translate
depict
interpret
plot
meaning
structure
ideal representation

transcribe
alphabet
sounds
sense data
paraphenomena
sound as 'purely physical' (Lines
p. 15)

neat rows of roofs

the tall buildings of Barrow across the

bay

iii/xviii

wind swirling in and out of

carsnarl in and out of the hum inside

and shush of breath

Rituals. Preparation — involving the body. 'By the time I was at the place of ceremony, I was physically ready...' (*Presence, Patsy Rodenburg p. 46*)

wind roaring up

Listening to the plate in making monoprints. In 'The Veil of St Veronica' by Francisco de Zurbaran a cloth hangs nailed in a dark void bearing a ghostly monochromatic image of the face of Christ. This face itself seems to float somewhere in front of the depicted cloth, like a modern hologram. Itself a depiction of a mythical image, the picture creates with its immediacy the direct physical presence which is at the heart of the myth. It has the same sort of power as those two tiny pieces of body paint ochre discovered in a South African cave, smoothed and etched with cross hatched patterns by 77,000 year old hands.

black forms glide

chinks

mallow or elecampagne? move differently to

nettle

the silence inside the hut in the field where

the white horses are now heads down

'May I use a simile?' (Paul Klee, *On Modern Art* p. 13), *'the growth of the crown of the tree, must of necessity, as a result of entering into... pictorial art, be accompanied by distortion.'*

the puddle in the midst of rushes

waves in the path someone trying to draw the sounds

iv/xviii

a second burr — mournful

then again

gorse

then more

'Follow a trail', 'inhabit' a place, a page, from close within, as opposed to 'surveying as if from a great height' (Lines p. 92)

move my head to hawthorn

kneeling to reach the trunk

a listening station/place

Letting the material be.

'Anything that is small and intimate, and has some love in it, is beautiful' — John Cage (in conversation with Richard Kostelanetz, 'Conversing With Cage')

'hi!' dog lifts leg

v/xviii

flames a black

gorse husk

shadow

wind shadow

car shelter

boom of space

Words are the 'difficult air' and 'live water' and its creatures' of W.S.Graham's The Nightfishing. The poet is 'befriended by/ This sea which utters me', has also 'uttered that place/ And left each word I was.' Poetry, like DNA, is profoundly connected with death: 'That death is where I lie/ In this sea you inherit./ There is no counter to it.' (W.S.Graham Letter 1)

in the silence almost a melody

cloud far west casts

black shapes on distant field with two horses one black one brown

wind disturbed

more waves marks impressed in the path

IN MEMORY OF PETER
Died 31/5/84

vi/xviii

turquoise wool caught on gorse

moves up and down

hanging lantern

dry gorse fragment

air shooms down sheer face

above

settled hum

Art, music, poetry/ alpha and theta waves/ parasympathetic nervous system.

rock splintered cracked

tall jag

dropped cigarette

sawn off stems

Language/ beta waves/ sympathetic nervous system

emerge in sun

sounds roar out again

bubbles of

cracked rocks

on top

sheep rip

vii/xviii

bodies of water

lakes mountain and sea talk

droving routes loanings by

mountains

rush of gathering

gathering

gathering

The sound of place. 'By having inscriptions placed upon them, even artefacts could be given a voice..... if writing speaks, then to read is to listen.' Indeed, the idea of 'sound as a purely physical phenomenon..... is a modern construct.' (Lines p.14-15).

One day years ago when I was passing by Abbotsford House I stopped to have a look. I ran through all the doors and rooms and found myself very quickly in the dining room which had a large polished oak table laid with a dinner service. The walls were covered in plain wood panelling and there were portraits hung around the room. Underfoot was a patterned woven carpet. Immediately I entered the room I sensed a very special atmosphere. At first I could not work out what it was. There were no books, and nothing of obvious interest to look at apart from the portraits. But then I felt as though Walter Scott himself was talking to me, and suddenly I realised it was not his actual voice I was hearing but the printed words of his son-in-law, an excerpt from his biography set on a little stand on the table, an account of Scott on his death bed in this very room, looking out onto the river Tweed. They had seemed to have an independent existence, to enter the air as sound even before I set eyes on them. As I read these words it was as though he spoke directly to me. It felt as though I was physically hearing his voice speak as I looked through the window and saw the same Tweed he had looked out upon with his dying eyes. I could smell the stuffiness of the sick-room, feel the sticky warmth on that day when windows had had to be fully opened to relieve the September heat.

The words on the table were: 'Sir Walter Scott died in this room on September 21 1832, his bed having been placed near the window that he might see his beloved Tweed.'

wind harvesters silent

do not resist

I resist and in so doing resonate

John Cage tells us in his 1990 'Autobiographical Statement' how Oskar Fischinger 'happened to say one day, "Everything in the world has its own spirit which can be released by setting it into vibration."

*So, let's get to the experience itself. How do we do that? It requires a process of stripping away, which Don Ihde in *Listening and Voice, Phenomenologies of Sound* (p. 29-30), calls 'epoché', a 'hermeneutic rule... that excludes, "brackets," "puts out of play," all factors that may not be noted as "bodily present" or actually fulfillable (intuitable) within ongoing experience.'*

This leads to the second hermeneutic rule: 'Describe the appearances or phenomena. In this case description calls for a careful note taking of what goes on in the "flow of experience." Moreover, the descriptions undertaken presuppose the "purification" called for in the first rule: Describe, don't explain.' (p. 30).

lump of gravelly tarmac

next to lump of smashed rock

*Just a mouth speaking, all the rest gone as the layers drop away, as in Samuel Beckett's *Not I*.*

stumping to the lighthouse

path spools below waves of
sound walkers

Information: tension and release, consonance and dissonance

breathing hoaring wind

viii/xviii

tall straight long
into the shadow over the rim where wind
rubs my back
knubbled shadow
ribbed rock piece
shimmer white rock gumbled
into a path
schock schock schock
against urgent-ling of wind round the
Hoag corner

What does it mean to 'inhabit' a soundscape? (Lines p.92). Not power, not to 'assert... mastery over it' (ibid), but a kind of service, perhaps, to the experience.

(s)ting of water cap

splurge waves in

paper

green yellow

membrane

ix/xviii

black plastic slithering on the
gate rod in the wind
twisted a higher section
fills out in a blither
 on ground betw -wind wall
 lifts every few
 moments

Opposition of natural to cultural is an Enlightenment idea which swept away the immanence of meaning in everything which characterised the Middle Ages. There is no distinction between the natural and the cultural in the cry of an animal or the sound of wind in the trees. Nor is there in the direct utterance which is poetry. Poetry is lived before it is spoken.

 the wind comes on more
 urgently
 now sheep cry
 a hum of air against
 blacknesses lie and stand
two birds dive over wall
 starlings peck in the field then all
 rise in a thrill together
 chip chip chip chip
 burnt banks of gorse point up still silent

only bits of wool cling on

shudders

blackness

crunch of Alys and Andrew walking

x/xviii

swish of page

puddle tremble

steady wind pushes on

a pipe under the path

a pipe in a water runnel

water adds its flow to the flow of air

and moves differently to a puddle

four sheep rip grass under a stand of

Scots pine bent eastward

a bit of smashed sewage pipe

a scallop a wave in stone in the path

a hank of wool turns and turns

on the path

an empty seat

Poems are 'places... stumbled into: warmth for a night perhaps' (Creeley, preface to For Love)

ripples in the grass uphill

my notes get lost

Alys scrums for them

canter of cows

strut of birds pecking

xi/xviii

cry of page

rattle shush sigh

coming

water shimmers over the path

a rocky chamber

a green and red stone

a chunk of concrete with smashed shell

a this red and green rock

juts up

cracked shell fragment

murmur and change in the room

a tiny fly settles on my paper

wind goes quiet booms on off

held in the room

cracked and splintered open out of the

hill

grasses blather

a seat listening booth

'There is all the/ time in the world for studying music,/ but for living there is scarcely/ any time at all./ For living takes place/ each instant.' (John Cage, *Silence*)

wind gathering low

xii/xviii

I see a row of four white polytunnels

their fibres/ membranes resonating in the same air

snap and crackle

a cyclist in the Scots pines two boys throw a ball

in the shadows sheep

kick chankle of wine bottle

a fiery hair twirls in the wind

chestnut leaves up and down

branches slow }

}

twigs medium }

}

leaves fast }

}

chord

Richard Barrett told me how he would notate direct for the actual body of a musical instrument, thereby eliminating the 'notes'.

Two voices Alys and Andrew

three sets of feet

bow of bramble nods and waves

and circles

a conductor

another one shakes side to side

xiii/xviii

through a tiny gate another valley

sitting sheep cars beyond

chirriu chirriu chip chip chip

three sit facing together . silent

wool ruffling

wave forms in

smashed ffr of china

a strand of myosotis

green door padlock

stone lintels with remaining slosh of green paint

tic toc tac tac tac irregular

wind booms out

growl of distant aircraft

de de driiii de de de drrriiiii

chu chu chu chu

Sign the sound, then right/write

Couch grass reaches out from the

top stones of the wall shuddering

a minute fragment of stone on an invisible thread

shakes back and forth

cobweb shakes gently

xiv/xviii

couch grass in different places on top

shakes in bursts in front of raspberries standing

spaces within ancient hedges holding

rising shaking variously

umbellifers and nettles

ivy — slow and slight

under the hawthorns

shadow thick ivy

shaking variously

large leaves more amplitude slowly

little leaves less fast

quietness of wind

waves of tree limb

'no unauthorised beyond this sign by

order of town lambs'

man talks to four dogs

'I often choose my city walks purely on the basis of sound, undergone in situ, sounds by which a city reveals itself in unexpected ways...' (Cilia Erens, *The Audible Space*, from *Hearing Places* p. 362)

rusted metal rod dud thud on stone

chu chu chu
chuchuchuchuchu

xv/xviii

clank of page

lighthouse affects the appearance of

space around it as though it bends it

all the various trees respond to wind with their
own unique rhythm

shrill bird solo conversation

a church tower — bells?

a swallow lone

cham chowm kissing gate

into the narrow walled path

dandelions — big and fat

a wall rushed tumbled

pee! sweet! heeh!!

kissing gate

With eyes shut I listen

smudge words — smudge sheep

dung

scrape

xvi/xviii

the way I move

changes my breathing

changes the sound

Listening to breath - listening to how things sound on the in and out and holding. We tend to hold when listening to something we want to hear. In the breath we are part of the world. 'When the outward breath focuses on a specific point you are immediately ... connected to that point through your breath in a very tangible and powerful way. Your energy touches that place, person or object.' (Patsy Rodenburg, Presence p. 64).

wind drums on my back

chum

chum

drum steps

snitch pencil

gruckle and snatch of feet

slap of shoelaces

whisper of shoelaces

smoke

sea slate grey too far to discern waves

cloud song

four dark windows of lighthouse

black membrane draped on barbed wire

getting closer crackling crumbling sound of its wind response

an empty brown bottle balances on top of wall

xvii/xviii

net green and yellow

crawl of waves

canal one mile long

and river in Ulverston

plumes of smoke

ribbed knuckle of rock tops Hoads Hill

shaped by wind

Where in my body do I feel the sound? Before I received my cochlear implant and therefore had no sound at all through the usual auditory pathway of ear, nerves, brain, I often found it difficult to believe, when the wind blew on my face, that I was not actually hearing it, but I knew it must be so.

clouds yield and resist

as does wind

crumbled scatter of rocks

slide scurry gorse bank

above silent sheep circle

xviii/xviii

scramble write on the steep gorse hill

All the while imagining the sounds in the place from which my journey started. Thinking of the sounds here. Imagining a line joining them, like the line I drew down the side of the hill in the gorse, picking up dust and thorns. The sounds gave me words. And the words asked to be given a voice, whether visual, olfactory, tactile, gustatory or of the imagination, like the wind on my face, it made no difference.

sheep circle stones

a blackbird

sings

in the top of the flame tree

Post Scriptum

Klaus J. Gerken

rose

my love is like rose madder

teaches me surrender

chains me to a ladder

and asks me how i feel

the sun will rise at midnight

has to be in starlight

creates a seventh wonder

that never makes a deal

i sometimes talk to daylight
but daylight doesn't answer
it frightens with its shadows
and discusses no ideal

there's a portrait i remember
a forgotten face from somewhere
envisioned but a closet
she never graced my soul

so moving on to nowhere
i peel the sheets of software
that hinder my advancement
in world of flesh and blood

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