

9/22 Someone has taken it upon themselves to hand paint big, stylized, brightly colored, borderline “psychedelic” flowers on the hoods and trunks of myriad New York yellow cabs. These blossoms cover the entire hinged surface, but do not extend to the sides of the cab. For all their apparent extravagance, they remain discreetly bounded. Something about them, including the way they’ve mysteriously appeared, feels a bit like the cow invasion of several years past. One senses a double message here: Spontaneity! Yes, but polite, domesticated spontaneity, SVP.

Passing by a bank of cabs stopped at a red light, their engines emanating still more heat into the Indian summer’d air, mixed into the attar of petrol exhaust, a distinct whiff of Bloomie in the bouquet. As though somehow, a symbolic plant will detoxify the all-too-real CO pumping out the all-too-real exhaust pipe. And of course, one recalls the daisy decals the city pasted over the boarded-up windows of the burnt-out Bronx tenements, back in the Drop Dead dayz.

“The ubiquitous terror drove people crazy, made them so paranoid they couldn’t credit anyone with being honest, pure, or courageous. After all, they considered themselves honest and yet they couldn’t bring themselves to express an opinion or a judgment, to make any sort of accusation, because they knew punishment lay ruthlessly in wait for them. Thus, if someone verbally attacked and condemned the monarch, everybody thought he was an agent provocateur, acting maliciously to uncover those who agreed with him, to destroy them. The more incisively and lucidly he spoke the views that they kept hidden inside themselves, the more suspect he seemed and the more violently they backed away from him, warning their friends: Watch out, something fishy about this guy, he’s acting too brave. In this way terror

carried off its quarry – it condemned to mistrust and isolation anyone who, from the highest motives, opposed coercion. Fear so debased people’s thinking, they say deceit in bravery, collaboration in courage.”

So wrote Kapuscinski, of the Savak’s reign of terror, subject only to the Shah.

Pick up the *New York Times*. Read the daily prognosis of your fear.

The boundaries of language ever diminished, like flowers confined upon a taxi’s hood. Sometimes you feel like a fatherless child.

Honor thy loss.



AP photo

Now here’s face for you. Will it launch a thousand planes? Voici Bernard Kouchner, aka Cauchemar, Foreign Minister of France under Sarkozy. Self-identified socialist, half-Jew and, once upon a time, co-founder of Médecins Sans Frontières.

Today he advocates the bombing of Iran should it attempt to become an atomic power. And tomorrow? What next from a France that has always – always! – moved with such circumspection and humanity upon the world stage?

Ahmadinejad comes to town. On his dancecard, an address to the General Assembly, and Q & A at Columbia – unless the academy weasels out. Will President Mahmoud, as his motorcade passes through the streets, see or notice the floral taxi hoods, some bearing yellow blossoms of the sort that signify hatred in Persia?

Will he, or any of the dignitaries, read the inscription from Isaiah “...nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more” cut into the granite wall beneath Tudor city? Or glimpse Evgeniy Vuchetich’s bronze giant as he stands in the UN garden by the river’s edge literally beating his sword into a ploughshare? Or do these ones take a different path, a path that protects them from these lines of sight?

Manhattan, vertiginous isle.

On verra.

“...in the end, when the victim had gone mad with pain and become a smashed, bloody mass, they would proceed to establish his identity. Name? Address? What have you been saying against the Shah? Come on, what have you been saying? And you know, he might not have said anything, ever. He might have been completely innocent. But to Savak, that was nothing, being innocent. This way everyone will be

afraid, innocent and guilty alike, everyone will feel the intimidation, no one will feel safe. The terror of Savak depended on this ability to strike at anyone, on everyone's being accused, since accusations had to do not with deeds but with the sort of intentions that Savak could ascribe to anyone. Were you against the Shah? No, I wasn't. But you wanted to be, you shit! That was all it took.'" This told by of Kapuscinski's interlocutors.

More recently, Wole Soyinka in *Climate of Fear: The Quest for Dignity in a Dehumanized World*:

"Even if bombs and rockets are raining down on the populace without cessation, the very process of war permits a certain space of volition, and thus reduces the inner debilitation that comes with a sense of impotence. In the case of Maryland, [the Beltway snipers of 2002] the murdering pair succeeded in making fear the controlling factor for a population. This anonymous force shut down schools and institutions and destabilized normal existence. Parents took to escorting their children right into the schoolroom, with a look cast over the shoulder. Obviously, while the killing spree lasted, there was deep resentment of, even rage at, the unknown assailant, but the commonest product of that phase was simply undirected fear. A notable aspect of all-pervasive fear is that it induces a degree of loss of self-apprehension: a part of one's self has been appropriated, a level of consciousness, and this may even lead to a reduction in one's self-esteem – in short, a loss of inner dignity."

Might this loss of self-apprehension – and the deterioration of inner dignity that derives from it – become cumulative. Does it pass on from one individual to another, from one generation to the next, by a kind of cultural osmosis until it becomes

what Soyinka calls “the new fabric of fear that we all seem to wear at this moment”? Is that the pervasive condition we are not facing now?

Paranoia strikes deep

Into your life it will creep

Starts when you're always afraid

Step out of line the man come and takes you away.

So sang Buffalo Springfield back in the day.

And what if alongside and apart from the coercive forces that surround one and, at every moment threaten to pounce, there exists a wider fear that inheres in a shift in ontology, one insufficiently completed, in which everyone walks on quicksand? We arrive all disconcerted in the threshold space, neither in one room nor the other. The old relationships have fallen to pieces, there's no turning back, and the new ways of knowing remain indistinct, we suspect the actuality may, in fact, be a void. And we have no grammar of the void. Which is understandable, since no one told us we would need one.

Pema Chödrön tells of a young warrior whose teacher instructs her to do battle with fear. With great trepidation the student agrees. To do battle with another mortal being is one thing, but to face fear one to one is quite another. When the day of the confrontation arrives, the young warrior, feeling helpless and small, finds herself standing before an unimaginably intimidating and wrathful-looking adversary. At first, she is unable to act, but with a great effort she rouses herself and walks toward

fear before whom she prostrates herself three times. “May I have permission to go into battle with you?” the young warrior asks. To which fear responds by thanking her for her show of respect.

“How can I defeat you?” she asks, seizing the opportunity. Fear replies, “My weapons are these: I talk fast and loud and I get very close to your face. When you are completely unnerved, you will do whatever I say. But if you don’t do what I tell you, I’ll have no power. You may listen to me, and have respect for me. You may even be convinced by me. But if you don’t do what I say, my power is empty.”

Death of Marcel Marceau, né Mangel.

9/23 Fall. On yr ass.

9/24 In the café, the sound of jackhammering up the block on Ninth, growing closer at intervals. You register this, but don’t do the math until you step outside et voila! Close by the pole where you customarily chain your bike stands a fellow engulfed in a cloud of white dust and wearing industrial earmuffs. He’s slamming away pneumatically the cement at the base of a parking meter which in turn lies no more than three inches from your rear tire. Aha, at last. End of an era. All the parking meters to the north have been systematically uprooted and they lie at the curb’s edge like a row of felled trees. Or a Matthew Brady shot of the aftermath of Antietam. There’s the DOT crew mid-block installing an automatic machine that will issue little tickets for folks to place on their parked cars’ dashboards. Efficiency and surveillance – twin pillars of the corporate world – coming to your neighborhood, immediately.

Without thinking you approach the human dust devil, impelled by the image of your bike wheel getting accidentally jackhammered – a small instance of collateral damage in the great culling. Good timing because this particular meter is hanging in with a kind of grim stamina and the fellow has to pause to give his kidneys a rest and wipe the sweat from his forehead. In which interim you point to your bike and he nods, backs away a half step tilting the jackhammer so that its chisel remains planted in the ground. Unlock, mount up and wheel away southward.

Hmm. Two of the remaining three meters to the south have bikes chained to them by someone who's not around. You're late, got to go, hence don't see what happens when those meters fall to the scythe. They won't just leave the bikes on the street, will they? Maybe they'll be loaded them into a van, taken to a pound somewhere. But how will their owners know what became of them? The workers can't leave a note, nothing to tape it to. What would you do if your bike went missing like that? Call the police precinct? Does DOT talk to NYPD – does Macy's tell Gimbels? Mysteries of the darkening city, and it's only 9 a.m.

9/25 Greatly outnumbered, Ahmadinejad decisively wins the battle of Columbia Heights. Attacked viciously at the outset by Bollinger, the university's (p)resident imbecile, Ahmadinejad seems surprised and taken aback, but responds by asserting that "In Iran, tradition requires when you invite a person to be a speaker, we actually respect our students enough to allow them to make their own judgment, and don't think it's necessary before the speech is even given to come in with a series of complaints to provide vaccination to the students and faculty. Nonetheless, I shall not begin by being affected by this unfriendly treatment."

Trained as a traffic engineer, Ahmadinejad's rhetoric possesses a strange, lithe quality that Teddy says reminds him of Malcolm X and which invariably succeeds in placing the debate on a ground his adversaries find uncomfortable to hold. In a way too, his mode is very Jewish, Talmudic even, in that he won't answer a question directly, but poses what he sees as a larger question that places the original question in a different light. As the event continues, the audience applauds his remarks with greater frequency and enthusiasm.

Ahmadinejad differs so much from that rigid Baathist straw man, Sadaam Hussein, that one wonders what purpose is being served by giving him so much screen time. Certainly he's no caricature of anything.

Teddy's friend V. is having dinner tonight at Felix Rohatyn's. Other guests include Kouchner and perhaps Putin. The leviathan beat goeth on.

Comes a report of the reestablishment, most discreetly, this past June, of Project Checkmate, a gathering of some twenty-five top Air Force officers and diverse military strategists. The current cabal reincarnates the Pentagon group responsible for planning the 1991 Gulf War air campaign against Iraq.

Though it's been an open secret that Centcom has been planning for an attack on Iran these past several years, it falls to Project Checkmate to turbocharge the sclerotic and entrenched strategy-makers who would likely attempt to "fight the last war."

Brigadier-General Lawrence "Stutz" Stutzriem, a veritable Sirius in the Air Force constellation, leads this braintrust, assisted by a certain Lani Kass, ex-IDF officer and purported expert on cyberwarfare.

This a.m. at Ba Gua you learned, albeit tentatively, the seventh of the eight mother palms. The long march.

9/26 Your book, *Notes of a New York Son*, is too long and you are not sufficiently famous. This is the message communicated, ex-cathedra and with bare feet up on her desk, by a very certain-sounding literary agent who, paradoxically, read most of the text and pronounced it a work of genius. Vatically, as though the gods speak through her, she informs you that publishing *Notes...* is commercially impossible. Why, she asks, don't you do a blog?

Weave it in. Weave it all in.

Flying by on NPR news this a.m., so fast you nearly missed it, a teaser about some Stuyvesant HS students protesting the "security measures" invoked after 9/11.

The gentle breezes have woken.

Hail Columbia! A \$7 billion plan to expand, toadlike, into seventeen more acres it holds in Manhattanville. Wellmeaning city councilors propose rezoning in order to cling to a shred of "affordable" housing. And, Gød and mammon love 'em, for whatever the Columbians build, they'll pay not a dime in taxes given their status as one of Gotham's mega-nonprofits and parasitical sacred cows.

And... another fine mess: Federal funds, \$1.3 billion, approved and in the pipeline for stage one of the Second Avenue subway – a project so mythically deferred it constitutes a kind of Utopia nobody remembers having desired in the first place. The

state kicks in nine zeroes and change. Out of the city's pocket comes half a bil. Youze an mine tax dollars at work. That's the ticket – the people! A hole in the ground! Why? Why not? Why now? Because!

And what may be unearthed when they start to tunnel? Perhaps the Twelfth Imam emerges after fourteen centuries underground – last seen entering the cave beneath the great mosque at Samarra – the Awaited One, the Mahdi. No, more likely he'll rise out of the foundations of the posh new buildings Columbia U. has in store. The zoned, rezoned, and zoned again. Rezonating in the land: the rezonario eternal. Rezondo beach where I went looking for you but you were gonegone.

It arrives in the mail: your honorary Doctorate in Dissociation. Return address, the medical school in Grenada. However flattering, it's purely shambolic.

“These people seemed like weird, surrealistic bifurcated monsters whose upper half would bow obsequiously before anyone important or endowed with authority, while at the same time their hind parts were trampling on anyone weaker. This apparently led to an inner equilibrium that, however mean and pitiable, made it possible for them to survive.” How of the moment this description sounds. Yet these are impressions of the people of Teheran in 1977 as observed by an Iranian returning home from eight years abroad and related by Kapuscinski in *Shah of Shahs*.

At Le G. this afternoon, you hear through an informed, if unverifiable source, that the fatality rate for American troops in Iraq is much higher, by exponential factors, than the official count given. Of course, there's no way of knowing, but suddenly, in

the midst of your lemonade, against the backdrop of dogs, baby strollers and glazed young things passing outside, it occurs to you that the numbers released by the DOD seem modest indeed, given the intensity and duration of the conflict.

9/27 “Although the dictatorship despises the people, it takes pains to win their recognition. In spite of being lawless – or rather, because it is lawless – it strives for the appearance of legality. On this point it is exceedingly touchy, morbidly oversensitive. Moreover, it suffers from a feeling (however deeply hidden) of inferiority. So it spares no pain to demonstrate to itself and others the popular approval it enjoys. Even if this support is a mere charade, it feels satisfying. So what if it’s only an appearance? The world of dictatorship is full of appearances.” *Shah of Shahs*, p. 116.

9/30 a.m. Make the bed and notice that soot has collected on what’s visible of the bottom book in one of the piles at the head of your bed. Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice*. How long ago did it come to live there? How long since you opened it? You haven’t been actively researching Venice in years. Your mind is a model of the West: so many dead letters.

Eight months gone and the posthumous assassination of Kapuscinski begins, initiated with numbing predictability by the “progressive” organs of what passes for an intelligentsia. First comes bloke named Colin Thubron in the *NYRB*. Next Andrew Rice in *The Nation*. Soon their squeaks will grow into a chorus, Carl Orff-style. *He’s a fabulist, not a journalist and, moreover, a fink for the dictatorship*. Soon he’ll be an anti-semite and a pederast. A hopeless addict of too many forbiddens. Funny, we’re so close to a

Kapuscinski moment – the whole social fabric evaporating before us – and here are these punters lining up to take their cheap shots at a ghost. When all that Kapuscinski really said was: *Look out your window. Look at what's before you.*

And when you do, you see the Deutsche Bank building every day getting a little smaller. It must be pegged to the dollar.