

Born Witness

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En mi soledad he visto cosas muy claras que no son verdad.

In my solitude I have seen things very clearly that are not true.

—Antonio Machado

2/28 Look out your window. A thousand cranes. Does anyone imagine these will really bring good fortune?

3/6 Death of Baudrillard.

3/7 The presence of the narrator changes everything.

The shadow of assimilation.

3/8 The silent self.

3/10 Le G., Saturday a.m. Stressed out people, up too early, smiling and grimacing over their tartines and au laits.

When one meridian opens, so the Chinese say, a hundred meridians can open.

3/12 A blizzard-stampede of wild and disturbing dreams – can't remember a one of them. Riding out this a.m. you pass a black SUV, NY State license plate: PILLDOC 1. Is that a message 4 u?

3/14 The Louvre de-accessions its holdings in the direction of Abu Dhabi as a small token of thanks to the emirate for having kept the French arms industry in business. Too bad the Louvre won't be sliding toward Egypt, but then one doesn't want to open up the specter of competing pyramids.

Smijinski, a very small ballet dancer.

3/13 *Times* headline: “Bad Loans Put Wall Street Into A Swoon.” Leave it to the Gray Lady to invoke Sleeping Beauty. On the cover of the online edition, a photo of an elderly Japanese man peering through a store window at the electronic display inside. Oddly, the glass doesn’t seem to reflect his face, rather that of a much younger man.

3/15 Ides of whatever. Hideous real estate conversation at Table 5 between a male and female pair of outsized gringos. Everything sounds twice real.

The Ides have it. Spring in the air, sixties zephyrs, then tonight a storm out of Ohio – round at the ends and high in the middle – will send us into the subzero prime regions. Mercury, quicksilver, everywhere metal can dance.

A man catches one of the children heaved out the windows at the site of an awful Bronx fire that kills ten kids. In the newspaper, he describes both the scene and his personal actions in terms straight out of the movie *Backdraft*. No language of his own direct experience.

His “trial” is presently underway in Guantánamo. Khalid Sheik Mohammed, to whom the tabloids refer simply as Mohammed, has apparently confessed to every crime ever committed. Yes, he done ‘em all. Finally, finally the judicial wheels have caught in their cogs a real enemy combatant. Not just 9/11, Daniel Pearl’s beheading

too, and the simpleton on the plane with the fuse sticking out of his shoe. Now we've got an answer to what became of Judge Crater, Jimmy Hoffa, Etan Patz and the other great mysterious disappearances of the Holocene epoch. Lizzie Borden and the Rosenbergs are definitively off the hook at last. Now we know that Manson was framed, not to mention finally resolving who killed MLK, Malcolm and all those Kennedys. McKinley? Shit, they hung the wrong guy, but hey, mistakes happen. Butcher of Whitechapel, it was Mohammed, the mountain of evidence is in. And yes, he did in Norma Jean and Lady Di on the side.

This is it – second coming of the anti-savior, Termagant, who, in the right light looks to be a dead ringer for the Devil incarnate. At last we righteous can sleep at night.

3/16 Sub-prime and Alt-A, the twin brothers of the mortgage apocalypse.

3/17 a.m. All over Chelsea, on every avenue and side street, people born in latitudes where frozen water rarely falls out of the sky are hacking and shoveling at the three inch crust of icy snow that, crystal by pellet, accumulated overnight.

3/18 Today, all day, you sit beneath your olive tree.

Every chicken wants to be a phoenix.

3/19 Early, on your way to Le G., a scruffy-looking fellow approaches. You think he's going to hit you up for change, but instead he asks, "Uh, 'scuse me – any peep shows around here?" Yeah, there is a porno place, a block or so north of where you

live, but it's just DVD and video rentals. You shake your head. "Up past forty-second," you say, motioning him uptown. In truth you don't know if there are any peeps left at all.

3/20 Vernal equinox and a robin hops out through the bushes, then across your path and onto the lawn outside Building 4. No more sobbin', oh no.

3/21 Every modality of power has its limitations – this we know. Still, these days, all attempts at critical thought, any small gestures toward political action go bouncing off the ironisphere.

Folks' iPod and CD player headsets look like nooses.

3/24 In her solemn mode at the tertulia up at Cervantes Institute last night, Marithelma owned as she was glad you kept on writing *Notes of a New York Son*, because to her it seemed important work to do. Big affirmation from a brilliant soul, and someone you consider an elder of sorts, though she's younger than you by a decade or more.

And this a.m. at Le G., amidst a roaring Saturday burbed-out brunchtime, you discover that someone, person or persons unknown bought – at list price! – a copy of *Suburbanization of New York* off the little rack you set up on the counter last week.

Ba Gua Song 25:

When the eyes arrive, the hands arrive and the waist and leg arrive,

Then intention, spirit and power can be real.

When the three reals and four arrivals combine into one,

They're sufficient to defend oneself, and defeat others.

Weirder and weirder the headlines, particularly the Gray Lady's tortured idiom. Yesterday's eyeraiser: "In Surge in Manhattan Toddlers, Rich White Families Lead Way."

Surge? This morning's corker: "In Limbo, C.I.A. Awaits Rules to Quiz Suspects." Limbo, aw gee that's tough. No use lighting a candle, or even saying a mass. Their plight is beyond earthly powers. And whassup with "quiz"? Are they playing Twenty Questions in Guantánamo? What's My Line in Uzbekistan? Jeopardy in Romania or wherever else the Company keeps its hellholes? Where is Vanna White now that we need her?

3/25 a.m. rush hour. Climbing the stairs amidst a crowd of people from the Spring Street subway station. Almost in the clear, half a flight to go. At the head of the steps, a fellow, silhouetted by the sky, is attempting without success, to make his way down the left hand side. No pasaran, buddy. A tall guy heading up a few folks ahead of you calls out: "Yo man, yo – stay to the right!" The tone's not threatening, just authoritative. The man trying to descend moves to his right and the tide of ascendees parts to accommodate him. He brushes by you. Flustered. Possibly South Asian, probably a newcomer. Most likely he thinks it's all chaos here, no patterns, no customs. Which is understandable because mostly that's true. But then, one solidly grounded soul invokes an ancient rite of street etiquette and, for a New York instant, common

sense prevails.

Filing through papers you come across Wolfgang's editorial in the *Times* back in April '03 when the Iraqi army collapsed. Online, you call up the image that triggered his public rumination on the historical pattern of both sides being present for an official surrender. What does it mean when the vanquished have vanished? The Iraqis missing from the "victory table" in Baghdad, Wolfgang speculated, had not ceded defeat, but rather gone underground.

It's an iconic photo, once plastered across countless front pages and showing six American generals, Tommy Franks among them, seated at a baroque table in a once grand, but now well-trashed stately chamber. You must've read the caption at the time but the placename meant nothing to you then. It took a while for the empty signifier to fill up with associations: Abu Ghraib Presidential Palace.

The *Times* interviews Alvin Curran on his "piece for 300 outdoor brass musicians." But nowhere do you see addressed the issue of whether they are cast or welded and what steps, such as regular polishing, will be taken to prevent their corrosion.

3/30 You're bombing west on 25th, pedaling for all you're worth for fun and to make the flashing light and cross and bank into the downtown flow of Ninth. Your mind's way ahead of your bike, it's passing at 24th already, when a homeless guy pushes three concatenated shopping carts down the wheelchair cutaway directly into your path. Going too fast, got to swerve round. Your best move is left between the

man and curb's edge – just enough room if he keeps moving, but uh-oh, he sees you coming and halts the train and there goes your clearance. Quick – glance right and back. Nothing. Whip around that way. Whew. Make eye contact to let him know you recognize he acknowledged your presence, your trajectory and tried to correct his own. Funny, his politesse could have landed you up in traction. But then, it didn't. And what you value above all is his awareness, however belated, and his intent to make it right.

A tale of two cities. Those opening lines – clichéd as Mona's Lisa's moustache – seem every day more descriptive of now. Folks seek meaning and beauty in this wasteland like those who subsist by scouring garbage dumps for unpunctured and therefore resellable plastic bags. All this yearning adds up to a fragile seawall at best, when set against a rising tide of perfunctory contempt, a Blackwater of the mind, wrapped in mirrored shades and carrying too much ammo, intent on taking out all life, all energy, all grace. And substituting for it airs.

Email correspondence with Kelvin not long returned from a voyage to China. Would love to catch him before the impressions begin to fade and concretize.

He signs his emails "muchness..."