

5/30 Exoskeleton shmexoskeleton – the average first world person has become a kind of animate dummy from which to hang all sorts of portable crap.

I walk along the street of sorrow

The boulevard of broken cranes...

And yet another, this one at 91st Street and First Avenue, a planned thirty-four story condo that would have enfolded a new middle school. Unlike the spectacular accident March where almost the entire shaft of the crane ripped away from the building's side, this crane essentially decapitated itself. Due to causes yet unknown, the entire rotating top: cab, jib and counterweight snapped off its turntable, tumbled onto the roof of an adjacent penthouse then continued their fall, scraping along the side of and partly de-terracing the façade, before hitting the street in front of a Duane Reade. Two workers killed – a tragedy within a minor miracle, given the potential for far greater carnage.

Is it soup yet?

*Si, si hombre.*

Boom.

You turn 58. And 58 turns you.

Manhattan solstice – one of the two days each year that the setting sun aligns with the crosstown street grid.

8:15 and the sky, having been cloudless until moments ago, turns overcast. No brilliant copper flashing off the downtown windows. Folks on the street cast no shadows. Nor their dogs. Nor vehicles. Still you venture out to make absolutely sure the sun's obscured. Which it is. But between say twelve and twenty degrees up from the horizon, there's a break in the monochrome – a band of creamsicle-orange clouds edged with pearlescent gray. Not what you'd anticipated since dawn, but pretty cool.

Time has come today.

A falling tide grounds all boats. The big ones fastest.

Three years after the end of WWII, E.B. White wrote of New York's "changes in tempo and in temper" during the years he had known it.

There is greater tension, increased irritability. You encounter it in many places, in many faces. The normal frustrations of modern life are here multiplied and amplified – a single run of a cross-town bus contains, for the driver, enough frustration and annoyance to carry him over the edge of sanity....

The city has never been so uncomfortable, so crowded, so tense. Money has been plentiful and New York has responded. Restaurants are hard to get into; businessmen stand in line for a Schrafft's luncheon as meekly as idle men used to stand in soup lines. (Prosperity creates its bread

lines, the same as depression.)...

Apartments are festooned with No Vacancy signs. There is standing-room-only in Fifth Avenue buses, which once reserved a seat for every paying guest...

At certain hours on certain days it is almost impossible to find an empty taxi... By comparison with other less hectic days, the city is uncomfortable and inconvenient... [But] the subtlest change in New York is something people don't speak much about but that is in everyone's mind. The city for the first time in its long history, is destructible. A single flight of planes no bigger than a wedge of geese can quickly end this island fantasy, burn the towers, crumble the bridges, turn the underground passages into lethal chambers, cremate the millions. The intimation of mortality is part of New York now: in the sound of jets overhead, in the black headlines of the latest edition.

All dwellers in cities much live with the stubborn fact of annihilation; in New York the fact is somewhat more concentrated because of the concentration of the city itself, and because, of all targets, New York has a certain clear priority. In the mind of whatever perverted dreamer might loose the lightning, New York must hold a steady, irresistible charm.

It used to be that the Statue of Liberty was the signpost that proclaimed New York and translated it for all the world. Today liberty shares the role with Death. Along the East River, from the razed slaughterhouses of Turtle Bay, as though in a race with the spectral flight of planes, men our carving out the permanent headquarters of the United

Nations – the greatest housing project of them all. In its stride, New York takes on one more interior city, to shelter, this time, all governments, and to clear the slum called war. New York is not a capital city – it is not a national capital or a state capital. But it is by way of becoming the capital of the world.

Which more or less it soon became for a generation's run. The U.N. headquarters was completed two years after White's writing, the year you were born. It took fifty-one years more for the planes to arrive, and they resembled in no way a flock of geese, nor did they visit a Dresden-like destruction upon the city. But somewhere along the line, probably around 1975, a convergence of forces undermined the basis of the U.N.'s authority as a world arbiter. And at the same moment, New York imploded economically – crashed and burned doped up on short-term, high-interest debt. It's been a banker's fiefdom ever since. But they've no idea what to do with the place besides tart it up and parade it as flashy, abject urban arm candy. And now, as things start going sour for them, as paranoia edges out their vanity, what then?

White again:

“This race – this race between the destroying planes and the struggling Parliament of Man – it sticks in all our heads. The city at last perfectly illustrates both the universal dilemma and the general solution, this riddle in steel and stone is at once the perfect target and the perfect demonstration of nonviolence, of racial brotherhood, this lofty target scraping the skies and meeting the destroying planes halfway, home of all people and all nations, capital of everything, housing the deliberations by which the

planes are to be stayed and their errand forestalled.”

Ah, *that* New York. Capital of the world. Kan ya makan, when the world mattered.

*City of the world (for all races are here;*

*All the lands of the earth make contributions here;)*

Sang Whitman.

*Proud and passionate city! mettlesome, mad, extravagant...*

And as you write, one day slide into another. You get up, pull down the shade of the window facing east. Gone are the lights that, from twilight until midnight, bathe the superstructure of the Empire State in whatever hue the programmers have chosen. It's only wearing its circlet of lights around the base of the spire. Simple. What more? Yet enough like the crown of Liberty to suggest equator, and by extension, the roundness of a globe.

5/31 Little League baseball's a dangerous game. Everyone knows that. Especially if your field is adjacent to where Tishman Construction is throwing up the new Goldman Sachs headquarters in Battery Park City. You can be fading back, positioning yourself right under that long drive to left field and instead catch a sixty pound, thirty-by-thirty-inch slab of steel. OK, so everyone'll get helmets, not just the batter. But seriously, nobody was injured when the plate fell off a hoist during a Saturday game and landed in the field of dreams. Besides which Tishman fired the worker presumed responsible,

and vowed to install safety netting, re-examine its hoist protocols. Moreover, they'll suspend work during games until the season's over in two weeks.

That said, John Livingston, president of Tishman Construction, "would not," according to *Downtown Express*, "commit to avoiding weekend and late-afternoon work once the Little League season is over. Manhattan Youth uses the fields for its summer day camp and the Downtown Soccer League uses them in the fall."

"We think this building is very, very safe," Livingston said. "The faster we can get it enclosed, the safer it will be for everybody."

Everybody in the Green Zone.

And tomorrow, all earth zones, of whatever hue or cry fall into the path of another solar windstream. Holey corona!

Whist Democratic bigwigs debate rearranging Florida and Michigan's delegate deckchairs...

6/1 The new religious blockbuster, *Sects in the City*, opens to packed tabernacles.

And unless anything seriously awful happens, the Israel Day parade will occupy Fifth Avenue and its immediate margins and vanish unnoticed by the vast majority of New Yorkers or even visitors.

Which is a quality White deals with extensively and beautifully:

New York blends the gift of privacy with the excitement of

participation; and better than most dense communities it succeeds in insulating the individual (if he wants it, and almost everybody wants or needs it) against all enormous and violent and wonderful events that are taking place every minute. Since I have been sitting in this miasmic air shaft, a good many rather splashy events have occurred in town. A man shot and killed his wife in a fit of jealousy. It caused no stir outside his block and got only small mention in the papers. I did not attend. Since my arrival, the greatest air show ever staged in all the world took place in town. I didn't attend and neither did most of the eight million other inhabitants, although they say there was quite a crowd. I didn't even hear any planes except a couple of westbound commercial airliners that habitually use this shaft to fly over. The biggest ocean-going ships on the North Atlantic arrived and departed. I didn't notice them and neither did most other New Yorkers. I am told this is the greatest seaport in the world, with six hundred and fifty miles of water front, and ships calling here from many exotic lands, but the only boat I've happened to notice since my arrival was a small sloop tacking out of the East River night before last on the ebb tide when I was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge. I heard the *Queen Mary* blow one midnight, though, and the sound carried the whole history of departure and longing and loss. The Lions have been in convention. I've seen not one Lion.... At the ballgrounds and horse parks the greatest sporting spectacles have been enacted. I saw no ballplayer, no race horse. The governor came to town. I heard the siren scream, but that was all there was to that – an eighteen-inch margin again. A man was killed by a falling

cornice. I was not party to the tragedy, and again the inches counted heavily.

I mention these merely to show that New York is peculiarly constructed to absorb almost anything that comes along (whether a thousand foot liner out of the East or a twenty-thousand man convention out of the West) without inflicting the event on its inhabitants; so that every event is, in a sense, optional and the inhabitant is in the happy position of being able to choose his spectacle and conserve his soul. In most metropolises, small and large, the choice is often not with the individual at all. He is thrown to the Lions. The Lions are overwhelming; the event is unavoidable. A cornice falls, and it hits every citizen on the head, every last man in town....

The quality in New York that insulates its inhabitants from life may simply weaken them as individuals. Perhaps it is healthier to live in a community where, when a cornice falls, you feel the blow; where, when the governor passes, you see at any rate his hat.

I am not defending New York in this regard. Many of its settlers are probably here merely to escape, not face, reality.... Many people who have no real independence of spirit depend on the city's tremendous variety and sources of excitement for spiritual sustenance and maintenance of morale. In New York the chances [for rejuvenation] are endless. I think that although many persons are here from some excess of spirit (which caused them to break away from their small town), some, too, are here from a deficiency of spirit, who find in New York a protection, or an easy



substitution.

And where did you find your 1949 first edition of *Here is New York*, with its warm gray cloth cover embossed in red block capital letters, its interior set in Monotype Aldine Bembo, formatted by A.W. Rushmore, manufactured by The Haddon Craftsmen and published by Harper & Brothers?

In the gray Rubbermaid paper recycling dumpster that stands midway between the laundry room and the rear door to your building. A small library, or parts of a larger one, had been flung there by someone – perhaps the porter, perhaps whomever was cleaning out whomever’s apartment – and you excavated *Here is...* from among thirty or so other hardcover volumes: several poetry anthologies from the ‘40s and ‘50s, but mostly Modern Library editions in good condition, some of which you stacked and took upstairs creating an even worse bookshelf overcrowding problem. Soon you’ll be stacking the books in towers on the sections of your floor less traveled by.

Twenty minutes later, when you left via the back way, the entire contents of the internal dumpster had been transported to the even larger green metal dumpster on the driveway outside the building which is locked so as to guard against potential messes made by outside pilferers.

Whose books were these? Don’t think I know. T’was someone in the building though...

In an age not long past, handwritten notices of folks’ deaths would appear in the elevators, giving dates and locations for funerals. Occasionally these would include invitations to come by a now vacant apartment and help one’s self. And it only strikes

you now that you haven't seen such a sign in several years. Not that people have stopped dying or moving out to nursing homes. If anything that pace has accelerated of late. No name in *Here is...* nor in any of the others. No ex librises. No identifying marks or scars.

Which flashes you back to two yesteryears, one in which you wrote an article for *Metropolis* on WNYC radio as a "virtual community," and the other, an earlier memory-event described therein, and quoted here entirely out of context:

*...But until that afternoon, listening to the voice emerging from the three concentric gold rings of our plastic wood-grained RCA radio, I had no idea that Owen Thomson, aged 32, five foot ten, wearing gray pants and a blue shirt had last been seen at approximately 4 p.m. on April 11. Nor was Mr. Thomson alone. Quite a few people, mostly "Caucasian," but a few of them "Negro," and primarily, but not exclusively male, had recently vanished off the streets of New York City. If I had seen Mr. Thomson or any of the others mentioned, or knew of their whereabouts, I was urged to call a special number. "This concludes the Police Department's Missing Persons Report," the announcer said. "The time is two thirty. You are listening to WNYC, the voice of New York City, where eight million people live in peace and harmony and enjoy the benefits of democracy." Upwelling strains of a Bach melody which you know as well as your own pockets, but cannot, unfortunately, identify. "And now, The Masterwork Hour..."*

One hundred and eleven countries sign on, but on behalf of three hundred million 'mericans, our representative just says "no" to the international treaty banning cluster bombs. Such munitions, according to State Department spokesman Tom Casey, remain "absolutely critical and essential" to U.S. military operations.

All wrongs reserved.

As the hammer said to the loose shingle, "I haven't got a clou."

Necrobatics. Contortions of the dead.