

6/2 *Night was dark, but the sky was blue,
Down the alley the ice wagon flew.
Heard a bump, somebody screamed,
You should have heard just what I seen.*

Ellas Otha Bates. Born in 1928, McComb, Mississippi. Adopted by his mother's cousin, his surname changed to her's: McDaniel. In his youth he must have heard, and maybe learned to play the diddley bow. In 1935 the McDaniels moved to Chitown, South Side. Otha fell away and for a while he was Ellas McDaniel, until a flashier name was needed. Bo Diddley made it to 79.

*Come on take a walk with me Arlene,
Tell me hoodoo you love?*

Up to Sotheby's to check if the "Frans Hals" that, in a week will be auctioned in London, is – in your hardly definitive estimate – a Frans Hals. For the last few months you've made it a ritual to scan, on the elevator ride downstairs, the front page of the *New York Sun*, which, unbidden, appears on your doormat each morning. Upon reaching ground level, you chuck the paper in the recycling bin. But a couple of days ago, you found yourself putting the paper in your mailbox for later perusal. And why? Because of the picture of the purported Hals, above which ran the headline "Authentic – and Up for Sale."

Later you read that the portrait of the "wealthy textile merchant Willem van Heythuysen had been in the Rothschild collection for centuries....

"At some point since its creation in 1635, the painting's surface and heritage were obscured."

Hmmm. That may be, but it doesn't take great skill to tell exactly the point at which the language of the article was obscured.

"Normally, as auctioneers, we leave things the way they are,' the co-chairman of Sotheby's Old Master Paintings department, George Wachter, said. 'But in this case, we had to make a difference and clean it. We weren't so much questioning the authenticity of the painting as we were trying to find out what was beneath the dirt.'"

Yes, we had to make a difference and clean it. The more you read this the odder it gets.

But no more peculiar than the painting itself, which is expected to sell for \$6 to \$10 million, approximately the price of a laundry ticket doodled on by Jeff Koons.

"The [painting's] current owner, a European whom Mr. Wachter describes as a longtime friend and client, had a hunch at a small Vienna auction that there was more to the painting than met the eye. (And he paid no more than half a million euros for it only two years ago.) Not only had it been heavily varnished at some point in the early 20th century, but the Austrian auction house billed it mildly as "studio of Frans Hals.

"After the sale, he brought the painting to New York City and left it in the care of Mr. Wachter. For the next three months, the Sotheby's executive studied the painting. His recommendation was to take it to an expert... for a thorough cleaning."

And voila!

"The cleaning confirmed what Mr. Wachter...had suspected: That the painting was indeed an original work of Frans Hals."

Much detail follows on the rigorous authentication process undertaken by Wachter – down to identifying the year the tree which yielded the panel was cut and the type of saw employed. It turns out that Hals had painted a much more formal

portrait of the subject ten years prior. But the work in question shows van Heythuysen “wearing his riding suit, boots with spurs, and flexing a riding crop. He pushes himself back in a chair with an air of self confidence.

“Hals was good at getting his client to pose this way [!] because they were close friends...” Just like the painting’s European owner and Wachter. Whose statement closes the article: “Everyone’s happy now. They all have a Hals.”

Viewed live, it’s a bloody weird picture. Looks to have been painted by at least three different people or one person in three very different physical and mental states. Or some combination thereof. Lots of perfunctory, and at times, as in the shadow area beneath the chair, incoherent brushwork. A yellow curtain, so brutally rendered that it is hard to believe it was not painted by numbers, cuts a diagonal swath across the upper right corner. “It’s clear,” the article quotes the painting’s cleaner, “that Hals allowed an assistant to finish the painting.”

The subject’s face though, however odd this may sound, feels genuinely Hals. And it’s strange how van Heythuysen’s cavalier gesture – a few degrees more and he’ll fall over backwards – contrasts with his expression. This man appears thoughtful, even abstracted into some deep internal experience, yet you feel as though he views you with a sympathy verging on pity. And van H.’s eyes are painted in such a way as to suggest that he’s gazing in two directions and at different focal lengths: behind and above your right shoulder, and downward toward something in front of your left shoe.

The head looks pasted on, and the great, inchoate mass of van H.’s hat resembles an immense black halo – just ridiculous. But you’ve seen these sorts of things plenty of times, in Hals and other Dutch painters of his era. So what goes on? Damned

if you know.

*I walk 47 miles of barbed wire,
I use a cobra-snake for a necktie,
I got a brand new house on the roadside,
Made from rattlesnake hide,
I got a brand new chimney made on top,
Made out of a human skull,
Now come on take a walk with me, Arlene,
And tell me, who do you love?*

What exactly is a “cleaning”? And what constitutes a Hals?

6/3 A rented moment, purchased with the coin of...

Conversation on “The Water of Life” with cousin G., which draws you into Grimm. After reading “Water...” you happen upon “A Jew Among Thorns.” Rarely has a tale held you so raptly in a barbed wire-like embrace – vivid in its particulars, utterly confused in form. And nauseating at the most basic level since the “good servant” – the Jew’s main antagonist, with whom the reader is supposed to identify – seems a very decent sort before a Dwarf gives him three wishes which make him immensely powerful. Once in receipt of these magical gifts, his character transforms into a monstrous id-driven machine concerned with nothing but its own advantage. He is rewarded in the end for taking on precisely the characteristics for which the Jew is

demonized and, ultimately, deprived of his life. Oy vay.

Often in these tales, a father (King) suspects one of his sons of murderous intent and decides to kill the kid first. He entrusts a servant with the task, but the servant proves too kindly to dispatch the lad who survives in exile until circumstances improve, as a result, say, of him doing some good or powerful deed in another realm that earns him widespread acclaim. Eventually, the son is redeemed in his father's eyes and inherits the kingdom.

Madder than a March Hare in June.

Sous les pavés, les nuages.

6/4 Last evening's headline in the *Messenger*: OBAMA CLINCHES NOMINATION, while smaller type explains the causal factor: "Superdelegate Surge."

Morning twin towers of Tweedle-dee and Tweedle-dum tabloids each featuring a full cover picture of the Democratic candidate, and each proclaiming a seven-letter word, boldface, caps and at least three inches high. The *News*: HISTORY. The *Post*: DESTINY.

And the invisible message vibrating the space between: MYSTERY.

Mystery will dissolve us. Clinch as we may.

And at the Hillary rally at Baruch College last night, her campaign chairman

introduced her to what the *Times* described as a roaring crowd with the words: “The next president of the United States of America!” Whereupon she emerged from the wings, wearing an electric blue pantsuit “to the speakers booming ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough,’ holding the hands of her daughter, Chelsea, and her husband, former President Bill Clinton. Mr. Clinton bit his lip through a smile and nodded until his daughter took his hand to walk from center stage.”



Todd Heisler/The New York Times

A supporter at the rally wore her emotion on her hands.

A friend around your age, a strong Obama supporter, emails this morning to say that she is “now having buyer’s remorse. (Yikes, I just bought a new brand even though my old brand wasn’t very good!)”

Still, she hopes he “fulfills his potential for greatness. Just like JFK he is going in somewhat green – (presumptive president – my optimism. But the journey, oh the

journey – from Selma and Freedom Summers to our country voting for a black man for president. The dynamic is grand, and for our generation, we may have screwed up big time, but it seems we have managed to raise a younger generation that is pretty amazing.”

You respond, in part:

From where I sit, O., Hill, and Mac embody different generational, political, and even cultural strategies, however unconscious, for attempting to deal with our unresolved Vietnam material. Vietnam, for a couple of generations now, has been the (more or less) camouflaged elephant nesting in the treehouse of American social life.

What I think O. promises for many folks is a the possibility of creating a new branch of collective narrative that will allow us to swing onto a less decayed tree than the topheavy structure we’re trapped in, having imprudently neglected to build an escape ladder. But then, in our defense, we did rise very quickly and the trip was heady while it lasted. To many, it felt like predestination, and lots of folks enjoyed the ripe fruit, which, apart from a thin season once in a while appeared inexhaustible. Now that the creaking’s getting very loud indeed, we see that while the forest floor may be soft in spots, it’s a long way down. Somehow, the wish seems to be that the empire simply fall away while we watch in safety from an adjoining tree, grabbing as much fruit off the old one as we can before it topples and determined more than ever to climb up even higher than before, yet somehow get it right this time.

As Stephen Hardaway sang when he was no longer Little but still Wonder:
Heaven help us all.

If you want to really alienate yourself from something, study it.

For the infant, hello and goodbye afford equal pleasures.

Downtown to meet an old friend at the Woolworth Building. On the streets around, a remarkable number of young people losing the battle with obesity. Gorgeous at a remove, as the mosaic may be, the bits, taken one by one, appear ever more curiously misshapen.

Extraordinarily weird language in a *Times* article headlined “Clinton to End Bid and Endorse Obama.”

“Bid,” of course, rings oddly because it’s slang for a prison term. But that’s just a choice of words that carries an unintended coding. The truly strange part of the article reads:

“Mrs. Clinton’s decision to suspend her campaign... was a bow to the emerging political reality. No one in her campaign – including by all reports Mrs. Clinton herself – saw a viable road to the nomination.” Which at first sounds like typical journalese until one begins to unpack the implications. When Mrs. Clinton announced the suspension of her campaign, the political reality had already emerged. As of two months ago it was clear to anyone who could add that only his death or some astonishing implosion of Obama’s campaign would have allowed Hilary to win a majority of the available delegates. At that stage, perhaps reality might be said to be emerging. As of last night, reality simply was.

In light of which, what does “suspend” mean? The word itself terminates in “end” but it doesn’t signify that. A thing suspended is not a thing ended, rather it

remains hanging over something else.

Then there's the bit about not seeing a "visible road to the nomination." If one's opponent has exceeded the necessary delegate count, then what other roads remain potentially visible?

Now this strange language might just be an empathic reporter's projection of Hillary's point of view. But it may also reflect an editorial reluctance, or even incapacity, to come to fully to terms with incommensurable news. And why, after all its lengthy history, should the *Times* bow to any reality, political or otherwise, other than the one it consecrates as its own?

*Oh, the leaves began to fallin'
And the seas began to part,
And the people that confronted him were many.
And he was told but these few words,
Which opened up his heart,
"If ye cannot bring good news, then don't bring any."*

6/5 Newsflash: This morning, ex-president Hillary Clinton announced her withdrawal from the race...

"The soles of my feet, I swear they're burning."

Pastime. Past time.

Having hit the ball, you rush for first base. You find yourself at a frontier outpost surrounded by hostiles bent on tagging you out. But another player is running headlong toward your fort and there's only room for one so you must quit it and advance to a base even deeper in hostile territory.

Throughout the progression, you are moving counter clockwise, cyclonic, and if you are successful, partly by your own efforts, partly through the efforts of atomized others, those waves pushing from behind you, you might get home, sometimes by prostrating yourself in the dirt, embracing it by necessity.

There is, however, a chance that despite all efforts, you will misjudge the situation, or those behind you will not push you strongly enough forward, and you will be abandoned at your outpost, exposed, isolated, stranded, marooned on the beach.

But you can't think about that. To get return home means you must move relentlessly forward, even as you turn back time.

The beachhead. *Saving Private Ryan*. Normandy. Anzio. Repetition compulsion of the Plymouth Rock landing and Jamestown. Move up the beach in the face of whatever, for another wave of men pushes you inexorably from behind. But then, at long last, you reach another shore. Still the tide of men behind you pushes. But the sea is wide and you cannot cross over. What then?

Who's on first?

The leap from field of dreams to Eden to...

First the towers collapse, now implode the airlines.

Bong! through the overhead speakers. Ah, the plane has reached cruising altitude. Then the voice of a flight attendant chanting the corporate slogan: *You are now free to move about the country.* Once upon a time *cada día* in the Southwest air.

*And what archaic beast, its hour come round at last,
Slides into home to be reborn.*

Second coming stretch.

Safe! Yerout!

And who decides? Umpire.

Batterup.

Grand slam.

The *Messenger* reports that Hillary Clinton has “disavowed a campaign by some of her supporters to press Senator Barack Obama into selecting her as the Democratic party’s vice presidential candidate. Mrs. Clinton said the supporters were acting on their own, and that the choice of a running mate was ‘Senator Obama’s, and his alone.’”

Now that's mighty white of her.



Mohammad Soltanolkottabi

While a crescent moon appears behind the Jaame Abbasi mosque in Esfahan.
And over the next three days, looking west at sunset or just after, if the evening's clear, one may see the moon dancing among Saturn, Mars and Regulus.

6/6 Yesterday a.m., and for who knows how much of the rest of the day, a line of identical dumptrucks – actually cabs and chassis with dumpsters mounted on them – sat idling along Ninth alongside where the Seminary building's been taken down. Within the hoardings, twin steamshovels filled the hoppers of twin dumptrucks with remarkable speed, from the materials of the copious ruin. Filled to the brim, the dumptrucks headed off, to be replaced immediately by others. The barge – for where

else could the rubble be dumped locally? – must be moored very close by along the river, since the laden trucks returned empty – you could tell by noting the license plate number – within fifteen minutes or so to take their place at the end of the queue.

You might have followed one of the trucks on your bicycle to see where it headed, but something about the synchronous movements of the steamshovel necks and the near-rhythmic scrape, pause, boom – the latter sound changing to a kind of amplified patter as the hoppers filled – kept you in a kind of thrall.

Dust aplenty. And the content thereof? The demolished building was a WTC-era one, built just at the point where structures became standing repositories for toxic waste, but long before the content of the materials used became an official health issue. This is a real old-school demo alright. But these convoys of trucks give a sense of military offensive that feels entirely state of the state. Very Green Zone.

Around ten thirty last night, a friend, trying to convert you to the cause, sent the following email message: “Knowing your skepticism about politics, I thought about you when I came across this in an essay by Tom Hayden,” whom, she notes, was a friend of her late husband’s.

Open the attachment.

“Win or lose, the Obama movement will shape progressive politics, and our racial climate, for a generation to come.....

“...Those who denounce Obama – and the possibilities of all electoral politics – should ponder the effectiveness of sitting judgmentally on the sidelines while an Unexpected Future arrives through the sheer will of a new generation. They should consider whether politics and history can be reduced to a fixed determinism that is

endlessly repeated, as if there are no surprises. We can have our differences with Obama's specific policies, as I certainly do, but those should be measured against the prospect that a movement might transform him even as his very rise continues to transform the rest of us."

You let this sink in a bit, then commence a response: "Wow. Is Hayden really implying that the only effective progressive political action one can take is to support Obama? If so, he's working the Us vs. Them territory pretty hard" – before realizing that you're staring at the screen without moving your hands, that your mind has effectively shut down and the whole thing can be deferred until morning.

And now it *is* morning and you're pedaling home along 19th Street. What to say? If anything.

And then the shade of the not-yet-dead Fidel coalesces in the form of a phrase as you swerve around a bottleneck: *Silence is argument carried on by other means.*

One the streets of Chelsea-Flatiron, two trucks, one massive and a tanker, the other a diminutive van. The first proclaims *Aggressive Energy*. The latter, *Timbuctou Messengers*.

Still, potential responses swirl in your head. *When hope is doesn't work, there's always fear.*

Little did we know...

Plumbing & Pyrotechnics

Panopolis.

Curious how, as you head to the recycling dumpster each morning to chuck *The New York Sun*, something glimpsed on the front page furnishes you an instant's pause. This time what catches you nearly mid-fling is a corker of a metaphor. The article contrasts John McCain's insistence that Chevron sell off its Burmese interests with Democrat Diane Feinstein's laissez-faire approach to the corporation whose HQ is, after all, located in her state – the reporter, Joseph Goldstein lays out a tale of two senators:

“One of them is taking a hard-line human-rights stand against the military junta in Burma. The other is carrying water for the interests of America's second largest oil company.” Like water for oil. That's gold.