

# **Best Dive**

**by Eric Darton**

## I        **Signifying**

“So the big guy with the beard whumps J.C. upside the head and says: hit the street bitch and don’t come home till you bring me some real souls” – that’s what frilled lizard said and of course none of us believed her although he swore up and down she’d been there from jump, sequestered behind a boulder at the Temptation, scuttled all the way from Gethsemane down the Via Dolorosa and had personally weighted the dice at Golgotha. Out of respect for the amphibian’s dual nature, we kept our skepticism to ourselves – in any case, I had engaged her to tell stories and he was just proving worthy of her hire.

For my part, I’d won the bid to restore the monumental sculpture on the pediment above the railway station by low-balling the competition on the strength of my winged sandals, which eliminated the need for costly scaffolding.

Finding the job daunting, I hired a crew consisting of: two flying squirrels, Mynra, the wizard with a trowel, and her brother Cyprian – who was relatively an oaf, but they came as a pair – Bubba, a hyperthyroid lemur, and Yves/Yvette, the ambivalent frilled lizard – though getting them vetted by the syndicate had taken no small quantity of vim and vigorish.

In the course of our labors, despite the howling of the traffic, Yvette declaimed balance sheets from the annual reports of a dozen transnational pharmaceutical cartels, the greatest hits of ars erotica and wire service reports of coups and civil unrest. These last unfailingly upset the pigeons who gathered at teatime to peck our leftover donuts before resuming their intricate swoop formations and daredevil escapes from beneath

barreling truck tires. The frilled lizard's orations encompassed the Ramayana, passages from *La Morte d'Arbuckle* and vaquero poetry so pregnant with longing that Bubba wept into the epoxy, destabilizing the mixture. Like any savvy contractor, I insisted we use it up nonetheless. Imagine my relief when a section of the cornucopia, restored with this faulty amalgam, exploded in a shower on the passers-by, but was mistaken for fragments of a surveillance satellite whose launch, the frilled lizard reported, had gone mysteriously awry.

All things told, it wasn't a half bad job – freshening a key symbol of evaporated urban positivism, contributing at last to the reweaving of the threadbare GNP, renewing the massive utopian triad: Minerva and Hercules lending their respective mental and moral energies to the glory of Commerce – here emblemized as a leaping Mercury. What more does a city need than these avatars, I thought, buzzing about in my talaria, supervising my able staff, hair-trigger caulking gun at the ready – here burnishing a reconstituted toga hem, there applying the finishing touches to a brave new nose – as frilled lizard regaled us with tales from his prodigious, if spurious, memory – recountings of fabricated history and alarming gossip in couplet form, conflating bio with Bayeux and revising the whole to suit the perceived needs of the narrative moment.

Lest I give the impression of idealizing what, after all, was a pecuniary endeavor – image slavery, Myrna called it, or, referring, no doubt, to me, “working for the Yanquí dullard” – I should not shrink from mentioning our near tragedy. While on one of his frequent breaks, Cyprian had inadvertently basked against Hercules' still tacky thigh. Bondo instante e permanente – alas, we feared we'd never get him free. A spirited

debate ensued as to whether we should jackhammer him loose – almost certainly forfeiting our jobs in the process – in which case, beshelled like a turtle he would never glide again, or alternatively, feed him his favorite donuts until he expired and then cast him in amalgam, revising the blueprints *ex post* to depict him as a restored feature of the original design.

Yvette who claimed to have spent his first twenty-seven skins in the portentous years before the Big One pretending to be stuffed on a shelf in a Frankfurt lecture hall, articulated our dilemma in terms ethical, physiological, psychological and structural and exhorted us to prognosticate as to the effect each mode of action might have on “the system.” Not surprisingly, this exegesis raised a host of undreamt-of questions and answered none. Collectively we weighed the merits, the costs and benefits of our no-win options. Cyprian’s reluctance to become a permanent part of the cityscape was offset by the short term prospect of unlimited treats and our solicitation of his every ephemeral fancy. His sister, on the other hand, was all for getting out the pneumatic hammers at once, declaring that he’d always been a Hesperus and deserved to be grounded.

We had reached a true irreconcilable impasse when I had one of my rare flashes of inspiration. I directed Bubba to hang by his tail above the immobilized rodent and ordered Yves to recite from the *Mutton Odes of Scapa Flow*. Deeply moved by this rhapsody, the lemur poured wondrous solvent from his banjo jonquil eyes and by peeling carefully, we were soon able to secure the grateful Cyprian’s release. The patching of Hercules’ sartorius where it had been impressed by a flying squirrel’s dorsal ridge was but a small price to pay. Cyprian took a celebratory turn with the pigeons and, since chaos is punctuated by ordered sets, we nearly lost him again as he

swooped in front of a shuddering eighteen wheeler. Basta! thought I – some discipline is needed at this worksite. To that end, next morning I installed a punch clock in the very mouth of Minerva. Ring them bells.

## II            **Better Gnomes and Hard-ons**

What was remarkable was that we all didn't die when the economy did. A lot of us, in fact, breathed more expansively and walked centimeters taller due to the natural dynamic of the spine reasserting itself in the absence of having to perform obeisant anticlines before calculating devices.

We behaved with the pneumatic self-consciousness of the recently baptized or those who have overcome a fearsome and ravaging addiction. Yes, we wanted to believe that we were blessed at last – that henceforth all burdens would be lightened, that a cosmic hairpin had been turned – just imagine! – by us, not by one of a million precursor generations or our own telescoping progeny – but that this moment had been created and was being lived by and for us alone.

Of course, immediately, grave doubts set in. Was our elation the equivalent of hearing the ancient boiler rumble to life through five railroad stories of a sagging old-law tenement when we all knew perfectly well that it would sputter out just at the point when the risers began to clank, the valves to wheeze, and before the water got really hot enough for a bath? It was, no wordplay intended, cold comfort to know that we weren't paying rent – eschewing a vestigial reflex act of custom that would have made no difference in the temperature.

Lacking metallurgy, draft animals or a written language, we persevered and, after a fashion, prospered – hindered by the ongoing ill omen of the peregrine’s refusal to so much as budge from their mews – this despite our urging, our oft-expressed concern that they would forget how to fly – their wings fused to their fuselages: wasn’t the air the very reason to live? No movement, not even a cock of the hooded head. Well, there was intractability for you.

The closest thing we had to wheels was octagons, till the invention of the dodecagon – still a rough ride let me tell you – and whenever we built a chariot, one of the gods would turn it over and use it as a cave. But we weren’t about to stand still! Between the peregrine moltings and the plenitude of radial tire sandals secured with crisscross straps of bicycle tube, someone – and it embarrasses me to say that, though I am constrained from mentioning names, it was someone for whom we held out very little hope – a former CFO actually – who contrived to regift us with flight. He accomplished this via the simple act of vulcanizing the feathers to the sandals. Vavoom! Had we been giving prizes at the time, his would have presented an extremely attractive candidacy.

With heightened mobility, culture – forgive me – really took off, heralded by the reappearance of broadsheets that folded into chapbooks and vice versa. With such modalities within the grasp of whomever mustered the wit, will, block carving and olive pressing stamina, a pluralistic discourse returned in full measure.

“Why be celibate when you can buy-a-bit?” queried one service sector spread, while adjacent, an Op-Ed column extolled the omissions of a cleric, popularly known as St. Bunnyface, whose enormous asceticism was manifest in his transcendent renunciation of the multiplier effect for which hares are justly celebrated – a transparent

allegory decrying, for the umpteenth time, the principle of accumulated wealth. My point is that once again, folks did – and didn't – with articulation and conviction. And caused by what? It's anyone's guess. An incremental jog in the basal rate of the great creature who had been ignorance all along?

"Everyone will get taken care of if they clamor enough," I editorialized in *The MetroGnome*, my own rag – literally rag, since it was hand stamped on discarded shirtwaists. "Everyone will get taken care of, for there is plenty for all!"

Now distribution, though limited to the formerly shirtless and confined to the evermore frequent summer months – it having proved impossible, given existing technology, to print legibly on coats – were scant impediments to our ubiquity. When real summer hit, by reducing my banner heads a few points and moving the whole impression up a button, I accommodated distributors who wished to knot their shirttails *campesino* style – and thus avoided obscuring crucial final paragraphs. Realistic prop machetes, dangling jauntily from their waists, completed "the look." Our peerless distributors – publishers really, since what would have been the point of having piles of printed shirtwaists lying around the croft – were issued magnifying glasses to be loaned to visually impaired readers, in addition to surplus inverting periscopes that enabled the wearers to read themselves – back page included – to the blind and the aliterati. Believe me, our walking kiosks saturated the territory.

We covered every story without regard to our health or safety in those politically precarious days: bridge collapses, runaway chapeaux, crimes *passionnel et d'ennui*, the bogus rice pudding shortage, the scandalous drowning of a mole in a vat of locatelli – our index of topics was inexhaustible. Nor did we shrink from out-and-out fiction.

“The Phrenologist’s Nightmare” was one of our most popular serials, copiously illustrated with engravings – actually woodcuts chiseled into the butt ends of old skid joists – which have since become classics of the genre. No service was too great to render our unflagging – in fact ballooning – readership. I am proud to relate that our personals column – infamous for its frankly stated intention of helping the forlorn to “effect a successful mating posture” – led to record numbers of pairings across the spectrum of romantic and juridical variables. To be honest, what this meant was that, with all deference to the homilies of St. Bunnyface, people were copulating like rabbits and vice versa. Everyone insisted on trying on the ears and tails of their internally-exiled contemporaries as evidenced by copious announcements of weddings and engorgements. Who’d have dreamed that some crushed blueberry mixed with soy oil, a few dozen remaindered Lady Hathaways and a little elbow grease could wreak such a high-pressure buzz?

### **III        Sang Froid**

“‘La!’ chirped Mistress Mireille, smartly administering the first of innumerable strokes to the Abbé’s cellulite posterior with a cane precisely lathed to the circumference of her left and fuller thumb. ‘Sing, my little scarlet cardinal, and spare not the vibrato!’ And sing the Abbé would have done, with diapason as well, but for being snugly gagged. ‘So! If thou will not sing – then thou must fly!’ Her judiciously applied boot heel propelled the hapless cleric forward and he would have soared, but for the bindings that impeded circulation to his already withered limbs, cunningly



directing it to the organ requiring greater perfusion.” All tools had fallen idle as the frilled lizard began her recitation.

“The leaves of the topiary baboons crowning the maze secluding Mireille and the Abbé from public gaze rippled in vicarious delight at the synchronous waves of pleasure oscillating in the circuit between their respective brainpans and erectile members, as, in followthrough, the silk hem of her diaphanous *empire* pareu brushed the rapidly suffusing welt left by her most recent bestowal. ‘And if thou will not fly, my ruby tanager, thou must be skewered! La!’”

I too was caught up in the breathless narrative, but could not fail to notice with astonishment, my usually bustling crew, absolutely rapt and unable to lift a trowel. As it happened, I was anticipating, with some trepidation, the imminent arrival of the Public Face Inspector whose surprise audits I had come to intuit with unerring accuracy. This laxity would not do. It had been difficult enough convincing the Authority that hiring *un lector* was essential to the maintenance of copasetic labor relations. Now, I foresaw the shadow of a gray, predatory disgrace descending upon us, talons unsheathed. I shrank at the thought of the Face Inspector’s reproving gaze, withered before his Isaiah-like denunciation of our brazen misappropriations and depraved assault on the public trust, which – he assured me, as I delivered our dog-eared contract into his outraged grasp – he could not conscionably allow to go unpunished. The scraps of our sundered compact with the polity would soon flutter down upon a demos justifiably ignorant of and, had they known, understandably indifferent to the plight of five small craft-wraiths hovering above.

“Basta! De trop! Demasiado!” I shouted. “Who authored that tripe!”

Yvette's jaw dropped, then quavered. "I... I did!"

Though I could feel the crew's mutinous eyes boring into me, I pressed on. "Don't you realize that you could bring the full weight of the obesity and porcenty laws down on all our heads with that sort of drivel? In future," and here, though still ostensibly addressing the frilled lizard, I wheeled to confront my circle of accusers, "forbear from publishing your fetishistic hallucinations among us and confine your panderings to the sequestered nocturnal haunts appropriate to this purpose."

Yves bristled her frills and scuttled behind Minerva's shield, while the others sullenly returned to work. "Sacerdote!" Myrna hissed under her breath. I pretended not to hear. Flitting to a higher elevation, I squeezed a short burst of epoxy into a crevice in Hercules' trapezius. The Face Inspector arrived as expected and I was able to dispense with him and his infernal clipboard in record time by plying the fellow with a hit of VSOP from the emergency flask in Mercury's ear and pointing out details of the superb reconstruction of Minerva's washboard abs which Cyprian and Bubba's efforts had brought into high relief only that daybreak. I was, needless to say, not happy with the way I'd handled Yvette's exposition, but vowed I'd do better next time and anyway someone had better keep their eye on the big picture for the sake of us all.

#### **IV        Epistolary Rapprochement**

"Let us now make clear what we should have stated at the outset," Yvette began her missive in extravagant quill roundhand on the ribbon-bound, wax sealed, parchment scroll that Bubba proffered with his prehensile tail, refusing even to face me.

“It is most imperative to tell stories. To fabulate is not merely to traffic in luxury goods. The fact that we give voice to consciousness – judge for yourself if there is any coherence to it – bespeaks necessity. Speech is not convenient – it is essential. Untold, and tongueless and with all gestural organs nullified, the continuum of pulverized living would still bury cities, coating truck doors with the detritus of promiscuous agencies that one day demand: Wash Me – with or without dirtying anybody’s finger.

But I am to the millstone born and made for grinding rumor fine – hatched the instant Aboriginal Mom declared Proto-pops sufficiently schooled in administration to allow her to focus on the serious business of fructifying the planet. A fatal delegation of power – practical seeming enough at the time, I’m sure – probably undertaken in a moment of fatigue, but spiraling into a wealth of reversals and bizarre manifestations. Just as in these latter days, the discovery of musak gives vertical tongue to the elevator, and the logic of internal combustion supines itself into the mile long mall – in no time at all the world as it then recorded itself was tripping over mass-produced helmets on which, thanks to Phoenician language compression techniques, Helenes were now able to incise: Born to Kill, distributing them in ferrous point-of-purchase dumpsters across the length and breadth of Asia Minor to be disinterred during fin-de-millennium mall-erection digs. If not for this multiplex imperative, how should we ever have adduced the classic tropes that to this hour underpin our discourse: Seize Him! Row You Slaves! and Make It So!? All this but elaborates the Fact – and I use the term in its most violently positivist sense – that we flow from our progenitors just as bootless Jumbo proceeds from worthy Mastodon. And here is where the conceit enters – perhaps one that can be shared among variegated existences over time and distance – that something elemental is being handed on here, something we may take to the bridge, carry to

another shore or deep six at the apex of our swells – some talking eugenics, some checkpoint of exchange that augurs either a comradely safe passage, else offers ballistic surcease to our weary temple – at once attenuating and retriggering new bursts of coded fugueings for which no intonation may ever prove just. Therefore, with your permission, I propose to resume my duties forthwith. Please be so gracious as to favor with a reply at earliest convenience, your most humble and obedient servant...” and here Yves had made her several-toed mark.

You can imagine my manifest relief. After a fortnight without so much as a sighting of the frilled lizard, the psychology of the workplace had turned miasmatic. Productivity was stagnant, communication strained and perfunctory. I drafted my reply with caution – inscribing it on the marbled flyleaf of a stamped, leatherbound Aldine Virgil I had facsimiled years before as a premium for lifetime *MetroGnome* subscribers – not wishing to appear over-eager and shielding my scribblings from Bubba, though I knew he couldn’t read. He must have sensed the nature of my message because his eyes finally met mine and watered copiously, threatening to overflow as he extended his tail to receive the volume. In a trice the lemur was scrambling nimbly over the Monument. After lunch, when the calliope steamwhistle implanted in Herc’s sternum summoned us back to our labors, Yves was ensconced, as usual, in the crook of Mercury’s arm, misting her pipes with a vodka atomizer and preparing to deliver his next feuilleton.

## V Cyprian’s Supper

After the near debacle with Yvette, I began trying to bond with my crew – attempting to transform the chain of command into a metaphorical circle. The dinner had been excellent. Cyprian might have been the consummate klutz on the job, but in the galley he was a veritable Escoffier. I sopped up the last of a generous portion of his confit of cheap duck with a slice of homemade bread as white and hard as coral, but which melted when it hit saliva. My tongue loosened by a sap libation – drunk in pint gourds and immensely popular among the Lesser Flying Phalanger – I waxed philosophical.

“Diasporas are us...” I sighed, feeling the weight of my years, my multifarious occupations and the world’s collective transmutations and transmigrations press in on my lungs. Luckily, my diaphragm cannot think, for after several moments of stasis, it leaped into action. “Everything is floating, Cyprian. Everything drifts away and washes up somewhere else. Sand blown into bottle becomes the shattered memento of someone’s gin addiction, worked by time and tide into an emerald of beach glass to be plucked from the waves by a white frocked girl an ocean’s breadth away...”

“You *may* be a linen person,” said Cyprian as he held swatches against my cheek, shifted the lamp and squinted. He flounced my leg ‘o mutton sleeves. “It’s what I call Eurodressing,” he continued. “Kind of a sense of history. Most people think it’s about events – really it’s about fabric” – this while braiding metalized elastic around the strings of my codpiece. “There you go, boss,” he said, stepping back to take in the full effect of his sartorial ministrations. “That’s your power look. Relaxed, but in control.” The sub rosa predilections of my crew were astonishing.

As Cyprian clattered the dishes in the sink and keened a sweet rodent lullaby, I attempted to balance myself atop one of his narrow bark settees. His unassuming

attentions had gone a long way toward righting my disequilibrium. It had been a bad day in my personal Black Rock, wasted in brooding over scuttled affairs and derailed careers including the financial collapse of *The MetroGnome*, but most of all over my unimaginably poor timing – which extended to having being commissioned by a celebrated Middle European symphony orchestra to compose a rhapsody in honor of the – now deceased – Chairman of the Presidium, which was to have premiered the very day the uprising began.

But my malaise ran deeper still. In bygone days, in my funks, passing cars would suffer burst radiators and, without benefit of bombs, they occasionally downright exploded. Manholes flipped like tiddlywinks when I took the air. I'll never forget the astonished faces of the real estate speculator and his celebrity paramour when the bonnet of their fawn colored Hispano-Suiza blew off at the corner of Madison and Seventy-first, spinning on the macadam like a misshapen saucer.

Several psychiatrists, consulted independently, concurred that I was presenting a virulent and previously unrecorded strain of repressed hypermisanthropy and, pro bono, I offered my services to a number of legitimately chartered private demolition companies, while politely refusing requests from fringe organizations such as Citizens for the Reversion of Brasilia. I was summoned before the Joint Chiefs, but assured them through intermediaries that not only had reports of my prowess been greatly exaggerated, but that in any event, I would in no way wish to find myself, farther down the road of life, in the shoes of the late, unhappy Dr. Oppenheimer. Nevertheless the authorities persisted in their attempts to uncover my secret, resorting to such “covert” blandishments as injecting sodium pentothal into my cold water risers – knowing that I was something of a hydrophilist – monitoring my consumption via remote sensors,

then telephoning and, in honeyed tones, congratulating me on having won an extravagant Galapagos cruise on a replica of the Beagle, if only I would relax and tell them every little thing on my mind after compliantly reciting backwards from one hundred – whole numbers only, if you please.

Apparently this subterfuge was successful since afterwards the military-industrial complex ceased their efforts in my direction. I have no way of knowing what, if anything of value I may have revealed while under the influence, except that I awoke feeling much unburdened. The explosions, however, continued apace, stopping only after I spent a midsummer's day at the beach during what I later learned had been a period of heightened solar activity. Besides sunstroke, this exposure brought a trifling memory loss – nothing to speak of, merely the names of a few childhood pets. It must however, have been sufficient to short out whatever associative circuitry was responsible for the detonations. Or so I supposed, until that very morning when, after years of dormancy, Mercury's upraised right hand – its vertical index finger almost Leninistic in its grandiloquence – blew off at the wrist in the midst of Yves' recitation of the Song of Solomon – the part that reads: *Who is this that cometh out of the wilderness like pillars of smoke, perfumed with myrrh and frankincense, with all the powders of the merchant?*

My pyrotechnic display caused the crew no small amount of duck and cover, particularly Cyprian who had been hunted as a pup. None of them, of course, had any idea of what had triggered this – our second on-site blast. Though shocked by the evident return of my unwelcome powers, I pretended to be equally dumbfounded, thus evading any leverage the crew might have turned to my disadvantage. Consensus chalked the incident up to the residual effects of the previous mid-August meteor

shower, but it was clear to all that, regardless of the cause, prompt action must follow were we to preserve our livelihoods. No one else must ever know.

Bubba was appointed to administer the vow of secrecy and requisite paw pricks, after which I held a straw lottery – fixed to allow Myrna to win – for the honor of crafting the replacement member, post haste. A granite block was procured, the rumpled drawings again unscrolled and at once Myrna set feverishly about her work, sculpting with perfection down to ersatz fingerprints – referenced from a series of lithographic reproductions of the palm prints of notorious assassins I had rescued years before from slow disintegration in the stall of a Pont Neuf bouquiniste – and details such as the frayed cuticles and paper cuts one would expect to find on the hands of a perpetual messenger. As she modeled the bold veins snaking over Mercury's thrice human-scale metacarpals, I heard Myrna humming *sotto voce*: His left hand *is* under my head, and his right hand doth embrace me.

## VI Tradition

This was the year that class came howling back to assert its claim on a tribe that believed it had long ago sunk a caisson to the bedrock of a many-tiered hell and that from now on, matter would tend invariably toward the vertical. Having escaped, or so we thought, its depredations – having gunned it down like a hydrophobic dog – imagine our surprise at its savage, unmediated resurrection.

For so long it had proven a useful fallacy to assume that loss somewhere represented, and even generated, gain in another sector. This specious notion was now



replaced by the consciousness, however temporary, that there was no such reverse indexing of extremes, that misery and joy could be heightened or diminished autonomously, and that, in short, we were dealing with an economy unbridled by finite quantities of anything.

In addition, the idea that disequilibrium might constitute the cosmic operating system enormously discomfited the ideologues of social thermodynamics – particularly since it was becoming commonplace for people to assume that the occasional sensation of balance was really an alibi for an underlying, fundamentally eccentric oscillation, which, because of its inherent capriciousness, could in fact not really be said to be fundamental or underlying – much less inherently anything.

Put short, all this goes to say that when pressed, we'll fabricate tradition out of whatever materials we have at hand. Meaning does not appear on the rack, cut from whole cloth, manufactured to taste and proportion but is painstakingly woven from the tatters of hand-me-downs. And this was why the *oraciones* of the frilled lizard eventually merged with our admittedly erratic work rhythms until it was hard to imagine that it was not the power of her words alone animating our leaden implements. And Yves, for her part – though he had veered perilously close to loose cannon status with her translations of certain recondite sutras – generally stayed within the pale of decorum. And lest I forget Cyprian's contribution, it was he who fried the donuts that became integral to the texture of each workday: french twists on Tuesdays, crullers on Wednesdays, honey-dipped old fashioned on Thursdays, a different jelly every Friday and glazed bow-ties on Saturdays. And as for Monday, it was no longer an issue. In all modesty, Monday was my *chef d'oeuvre*.

## VII St. Monday

It was, in fact, Yvette who introduced us to St. Monday – as I recall, it was *on* a Monday – lizards have a knack for timing. Well, after his little homily, the day was shot, as would all Mondays henceforth be.

God knows where she'd dug up this arcanum, but the way he presented it, it was hard to make a case that she was just angling for more time off. The gist of his pitch – much condensed, I assure you – was as follows: throughout the history of work – which Myrna interjected was inextricable from the history of workers – tasks had been put aside to celebrate festivals and later, among some, to honor the saints – of whom there were many, owing to the great multiplication of righteousness and miracles flowing through the land.

After a while – even with the revision of many vaunted reputations in light of emerging contradictions – resulting in a fair number of impeachments and subsequent eighty-sixings – there came a point at which the host of veneratees fairly overwhelmed the calendar. Clearly, a thoroughgoing attention to celebrating the lives of these multiplex transcendentals could not be easily reconciled with any form of production requiring sustained effort. In short, something had to give.

And give it did, thanks to a technology that might be called spiritual compression. Instead of investing, spending, or squandering – depending on your economic perspective – each day in devotion to one or several individual saints, why not conflate reverence into a composite Saint Monday, handily contiguous with the day already requisitioned by our Lord? But – I anticipate your qualms – would not such a

practice, by virtue of the same mathematical laws as had already produced one saint per diem and sometimes more, not soon create a Saint Tuesday, followed by a Saint Wednesday, eventually swallowing the entire week? Indeed no, for miraculously Saint Monday is endowed with the capacity of infinite absorption. No matter how prodigious the beatific host, Saint Monday may gather them all under her cloak. Tuesday morning then, if the task at hand demands it, we return to work with a will. But if not, why we would sooner celebrate the week away than invent imaginary labors for ourselves or others.

And therein lies the beauty of the scheme – given Saint Monday, other saints and their associated days become discretionary, to be invoked or not as Reason demands. Work and celebration thus cohabit in a dynamic that need never manifest as opposition!

It was a hell of an argument Yvette made, convincing even me, the strawboss, taskmaster and putative Simon Legree. The crew needed no coaxing. Though their religious identifications were strung along a modestly shaded continuum from apostate to atheist, they scarcely required bludgeoning into the notion of another day off. I could imagine Cyprian's mind reeling with the envisionment of weekend-long yard sale pilgrimages in search of the perfect size six beaded flapper dress or mothballed rayon zoot suit and the nips and tucks to come.

Nevertheless, it would fall to myself, El Pendejo, as they affectionately dubbed me, to float this vaporware over on the *über-jefes*. Since the Monument had been around for more than a century, a few Mondays not spent spiffing it up would make no difference in the grand plan and anyway what counted in art was not quantity. A spiritually recharged crew – a veritable tribe of Brunelleschis – would only add to the glory of the enterprise.

With Cyprian's assistance – he alone had any technical grasp of what we were doing – I drew up an extravagantly detailed – and I hoped plausible – rationale for blowing off Mondays. In pursuit of an ever higher more durable marriage of Art and Science, I wrote, our chief technician had discovered, after exhaustive trials, a new amalgam that would last hundreds and perhaps thousands of years longer than the formula specified in our contract. Given our devotion to the project, we were prepared to offer the benefits of our breakthrough to the Authority with no thought to additional compensation for this quantum upgrade in materiel. When cumulative labor costs were factored in, the savings to the Authority were cast in high relief.

The only caveat – which I buried deep within the complex language of the finding – concerned the additional time the new formula required to properly bond with the original granite and previous layers of amalgam – in short, the sculpture needed to breathe. Decisions on suspending work would fall, naturally, to the foreman's – that is my – discretion. Mondays, as a rule, would be set aside for the respiration process, with the occasional Tuesday and Wednesday as optional bumpers – particularly if the weekend had been damp.

I dispatched the several hundred pages of eight point type in a backpack borne by the genuinely innocent Bubba and followed it up with a number of addenda via the more reliable pigeons, assuming – as it turned out, correctly – that the report, once logged in would be filed, never having been opened, much less read or evaluated.

Monday was exhilarating for the first time in eons. We took the ferry – ostensibly so that Cyprian could mine the thrift bins at the Armée de la Bienfaisance for possible brocades – the five of us, plus a “niece” that Myrna was babysitting and who

insisted, though she was barely out of the pouch, on donning a Mae West, climbing up the rigging, riding in the lifeboat with Bubba and sharing his telescope.

What a rush – the salty narrows tide spraying us as the megaliths receded – the whole ferry practically to ourselves with everyone jammed onto loaded boats passing in the opposite direction. Yves spotted a piece of flotsam tossing on the spume and possessed with *wandervogel*, had to be bodily restrained from spontaneously continuing the circumnavigation that had brought her to the Metropole.

Believe you me, we found ways to celebrate no matter how fair or foul the elements. But I'll be damned if Yvette didn't keep pushing her luck. Not six months after the canonization of Saint Monday, he was back at it, insisting that she was culturally, if not biologically female, and demanding estrous leave at time and a half for reproductive potentiality plus logarithmic bonuses for spiritual conception. Everyone looked at her like he'd grown a hump. Even Myrna – herself nearing menopause with no offspring in sight – cautioned the frilled lizard to “get a grip.”

I stonewalled Yves on this demand, counting on the crew to back me up, making her continued employment contingent on undergoing immediate psychiatric evaluation. No one ever read Heine like she did after that first session – everything was vibrating – you couldn't tell where larynx ended and lyric began. The intake had gone spectacularly well. Later she told me that the shrink had limpet-eyed him over mirrored shade tops and intoned in a resonant patois: “Woman, you look like you could benefit from pharmaceuticals!” Her day was made.

## VIII Catastrophic Nosejob

That I had the Face Inspector completely bamboozled hardly obviated the dangers emanating from inaccessible reaches of the Authority. One such was a proposal – very nearly adopted – to cease the restoration, demolish the Monument and substitute a hologram, furnishing optical enhancement devices for a modest fee to anyone coming within its sight lines.

The Face Inspector confided – manfully draining the last of my duty-free Cognac as, standing before the great triad in a driving sleet, he attempted to burn the pink slips he was to have handed us that very day – that this aberrant notion had been shot down because he, acting solely in our interests, since Lord knew there were many faces to inspect and the elimination of our project would have actually saved him work, had pointed out to the Authority board that the proposed virtual Monument was based on an untried and costly technology and might cause a public relations fiasco should the populace turn suddenly preservationist and decide it wanted its old Monument back. One could never lose by adhering to tradition with these conservative old goats, the Inspector intimated, especially if the bottom line was on your side. This apparently was all the set-up needed to galvanize the venerable Chair – a descendant, in fact, of the railroad magnate who had commissioned the Monument, but whose holdings were now considerably diversified – into laboring to his feet declaring that the genuine art of the stonemason would never be supplanted by a mere spray of digital information while he still had a breath left in his body.

We made the afternoon of his funeral, Friday, a fortnight later, the occasion for the celebration of St. Eulalia's day. We had lost an ally, but had gained a four-day weekend and – since none of the Trustees seemed inclined to immediately contravene

what turned out to have been the Chairman's final publicly expressed sentiment – at least a temporary reprieve.

But we were never entirely out of the woods, and management, for lack of any more fruitful application of its energies, continued its inane, positivist meddlings with our otherwise happy and productive worklives. On arriving back on the site after a rigorous six-day tussle with Mollucan influenza, I was astonished to find a homunculus timing the crew with a stopwatch and entering calculations into a minute keypad implanted in the palm of his hand. I flew directly up to Myrna who, purple with rage, was transforming Minerva's magnificently proportioned nose into a Leger-like slab.

"What's he doing here?" she hissed.

"I haven't the vaguest idea."

She glanced at me skeptically and continued slathering the nose until it resembled a Durantesque proboscis.

"Subverting the Monument will hardly further *la lucha*," I snarled. "Scrape that off immediately! How long has he been here?"

"Since Tuesday. He wanted to know why we didn't show up for work on Monday."

"What did you tell him?"

"Nothing. I pretended to be ignorant of your language."

"Good, good, you did good. What's he been doing?"

"Just what you see, timing us. Writing down every move we make, everything we do. Checking where Cyprian stores the amalgam and clocking how long it takes him to walk to the shed, to mix up a batch, weighing how much we end up throwing

away, clocking how much time we spend talking, having tea with the pigeons – and Yvette, *pobrecito!* He grabbed *Pharmacology of the Oppressed* right out of her claws and made him read *Little Dickey Brighteyes, an Edifying Tale* against a metronome to keep her tempo up. Two paragraphs of *Little Dickey* was all Yves could take before she completely clammed up. I think he's gone into hiding."

For once I acted decisively. The hard line was the only way to go, there could be no compromise. I descended, flapping, and planted myself squarely before the quantifying monad, trying to visualize myself as a tipping block of granite, about to come crashing down. If only I had developed the habit of wearing suspenders, I could now have hooked my thumbs into them, maximizing my efforts toward a cocksure, aggressive demeanor.

"Your services are not required, Sirrah," I began in an attempted baritone. The iota calmly entered a series of calculations on his keypad, totaled them and nodded with evident self-satisfaction before looking up at me and blinking with abstracted indulgence.

"I am afraid, Mr. \_\_\_\_\_," and here he mispronounced my surname, "that you are not aware that I am present on this worksite at the behest of the Authority and –"

"We are stonemasons," I cut him short, "and we hold zealously to our sacred arts. Terrible things have befallen those who have crossed us."

"Are you threatening me?" I have to say the homunculus kept his cool.

"No sir. I am prophesying."

The micro-Taylorite departed with dispatch, but not in disarray, and though the crew gave me a rousing cheer, I knew that vanquishing one functionary by no means constituted a victory, and that an awkward, escalating pas de deux of stylized



confrontational postures had just begun. The Authority inveighed and we resisted. When after a month of inconclusive skirmishes, their chief negotiator demanded productivity quotas plagiarized from a turn-of-the-century rolling mill, we gathered our tools and took a hike. From behind the inevitable picket line, watching a scab crew butcher our handiwork, Myrna and Cyprian composed *plenas* that carried the news of our strike mouth to mouth, drum to drum, ear to ear, to a world that knew nothing of us, our craft or our Monument.

At the height of the demonstration that choked The Deuce with throngs of our supporters – syndicates we'd never even heard of, waving placards in languages we couldn't understand, with horizontal exclamation points inserted into the hearts of sentences and vanished schwas – Myrna, from atop the pediment, declaimed her defiant list of "Us" and "Them." Bubba sang "Which Side Are You On?" accompanied by frame drums and the echo of thousands of voices reverberated in the canyon. The police horses reared but never charged – there were just too many of us, and besides they were shamed by Pegasus soaring overhead and the herd of disciplined zebras steadfastly holding our perimeter. Next morning there were no scabs or homunculi in evidence. The Monument was ours again. We'd faced the bastards down.

## **IX Frill Benefits**

Did I tell you how Yves had to shout above the traffic din and even resorted to a bullhorn the morning three olive-drab choppers flew in formation up the river toward the prison? Their movement was so deliberate it was possible for a moment, as they

knifed against the cirrus streaming south, to believe that they encompassed all flight – defined movement – till at a lower altitude, the pigeons sought chinks between the gusts and higher still, a gull glinted, coasting.

Did I tell you how I first spotted Yves at a Kung Fu triple-bill in a dilapidated multiplex, two rows ahead of me, sitting bolt upright, frills bristling whenever The Dragon sensed a threat. A few days later he nearly ran me over, charging out of a bar off the Deuce, some rented sloe-eyed jail bait in tow. Her companion gave the cabby an address in the South Bronx and they tore off, making out like crazy, in a blue cloud of vodka exhaust.

Weeks later when I scanned the reading room for contenders, there he was, scuttling down the aisle between the long tables of old horseplayers, conspiracy theorists and somnolent students. I glanced up through the vast, cracked windows at the cityscape beyond, and when I looked back, she had disappeared. That was how I discovered the hidden study, concealed behind the bookshelves – not secret really, just not apparent unless you knew it was there. I am no stickler for formality and since all and sundry were hunched obliviously over their labors, I climbed up the stacks and vaulted over. Brother was the lizard surprised, those frills went up like a drawbridge. On the table was a leatherbound book in Cyrillic opened to a spread of a frayed map – like weather fronts I thought – illustrating the heroic campaign against Kolchak and Yudenich. Except for us, the study was deserted. I pulled up an armchair, gave her a perfunctory smile, put my feet up on the table and buried myself in a huge tome which I couldn't decipher but pretended to read avidly. Through my feigned absorption I could sense her piqued curiosity – even detected a slight rippling of the frills. I waited her out.

“Who are you? What are you doing in The Study?”

“Just seeking a little respite from ye olde urban vicissitudes. And yourself?”

“Oh nothing serious, just this and that. Since Evie died and my dissertation bombed, I haven’t had the heart to take on a real project.”

Intuiting an opening, I made my pitch: a healthy work environment *en plein aire*, not to mention decent pay, intraspecial good fellowship, fresh donuts – in short, all the advantages of meaningful employment. While Yves considered, we strolled and confabbed. In the course of the afternoon, she recounted her journey: how you get from Wyndham through the Narrows on a bark raft via Port Moresby, Auckland, Tonga, Papeete, Isla San Cristóbal, The Canal, Bluefields, Isla Mujeres, Galveston, Pascegoula, Key West, Matanzas (thanks to Hurricane Zoë), Cat Cay, Charleston and Hatteras. This was, allegedly, only the first of many subsequent voyages, but even if none of it was true, it made a great story embellished with high seas bravado punctuated by risqué encounters at every port of call. But that’s not all. I found how she had come to live among the stacks, as companion to the crusading librarian who reclaimed the collection after decades of abandonment and abuse.

“It was Evangeline who drove the goats out,” Yves said as we meandered toward the Monument. “They’d been pets of the athenaeum’s benefactor, a socially mobile and philanthropic pelt monger. Hundreds of goats had been roaming the flaking Tiepolo-ceilinged halls for generations, breeding, masticating volumes, breeding, ingesting tomes – the marble floors strewn with their ordure – breeding, grazing on the stacks, even gnawing the oak shelves to splinters, eating binding tape, glue, thread, buckram, ancient leather, gold foil – the works. Evie reckoned they books on the lower shelves were becoming scarce before they evolved a race of leapers who

could running-jump to pluck volumes from the higher stacks and that the less nimble had learned to form *Capra* pyramids taking turns at the top to access the tender upper leaves. 'You can imagine,' Evie said – and I could. 'When I got here I had to jimmy the door. What the goats hadn't eaten just about fell apart in the fresh air. Believe me, I didn't treat them with kid gloves. I turfed them out in a hurry. Then I set about restoring what I could and rebuilding the collection.'

I shook my frills to show I sympathized, and to cover the fact that I thought she was kind of fine, and asked her 'What happened to the goats?'

'Why should you care?' She stared at me as though I'd suddenly grown horns and a beard.

'Well, just out of curiosity,' I ventured circumspectly, 'after all, the goats are part of the library's history.'

'Well it's no secret. Some migrated north and adapted to grass grazing – the squatters in the park domesticated them. Others, the leapers mainly, drowned in the reservoir – the 'pyramiders' are still defoliating the conservancy for all I know. Once they were gone, I didn't much care. But the ones who were too old or bloated to run away, I curried myself.'

My blood ran colder than usual when I heard this. She must have known she had freaked me out because then she stroked my frills – I'm a sucker for that. I had seven quakes and thirteen aftershocks on the spot, which I kept to myself. What a lover she made, her hands so adept at caressing *fogli*. It was quite a stretch for her, accepting me scuttling all over the stacks – my unorthodox research methods – but eventually she realized I was a serious researcher and a woman after her own heart, despite the disparity in the number of valves and chambers, not to mention basal temperatures.

Anyway, Evie just got more and more smitten with me, and I with the library. When she found out that I spoke Latin, she called me her Satin Doll – could hardly keep her hands off my frills. We had quite a game going there – me up her skirt and nuzzling when she was behind the desk on information duty. People were quite taken with her high color, dilated eyes and sprightly repartee, not to mention the occasional whoop in the midst of a stultifying job. I loved her smell. The library still smells like her, though she’s been dead two years.”

We had reached the Station. With some effort – frilled lizards aren’t exactly as light as geckos – I flew Yvette up to the Monument and we sat on the pediment watching the setting sun blaze red behind the ruin of the entwined skyscrapers.

“What became of your research project? I asked.” She shook his frills. “I’ll never forget how the doctoral committee reacted when I went to defend. “After all that work.... According to the Chair, it didn’t qualify as legitimate scholarship. ‘A colportage of anecdotes. Half-baked prevarications.’ Those were his words. But what about all my references? The hundreds of texts I’d synthesized? Contemptuous silence, sidelong glances and raised eyebrows is all the acknowledgement I got. It’s on that shelf you climbed over, gathering dust. You serious about that job?” I assured her that I was. “Sure I’ll come read to your crew. When do I start?”

## **X        Recondite You Dig**

It was months before I visited the library again and then only to check the Venice phone book for any sources that might clue me in to the details of my debut before the

congregation.

Periodically, in ice ages of discontent, when my negligée of identity provided purely nominal attire, I made such stabs at concretizing the augury of my birth, driven by the belief that the apperception of its circumstances could somehow allay, or at least rationalize, the vicissitudes of my present. The improbability that any logic operated within and around these layers of asynchronicity did nothing to deter my search for one.

Whatever early memories I could claim had been thoroughly conflated with the recollective trance imaginings of my mother, whose descriptions of the moment – though saturated with fervor and imagistic intensity – could hardly be considered reliable and who, in any case, was no longer available for consultation. But someone *had* to have witnessed, clear-eyed, my social beginnings and the conflict reputedly surrounding my investiture. Whomever this might be, possessed unbeknownst to them, the key to the reintegration of my refracted selves. If they could be located, I was determined to initiate an encounter. Accordingly I planned to depart for Venice the moment the restoration was completed, prepared to remain until my efforts either dredged up an epiphany or engulfed my resources.

Almost out the door after copying down several promising phone numbers, including that of the Processional Hatmakers Guild, I remembered Yves's dissertation and clambered over the stacks, again finding myself in the hidden study – this time alone. The manuscript was on the shelf she had described, bound in a tattered portfolio and prodigiously dusty. It was entitled *The Malaise of Productivity: The Fabrication of an Infraideological Pandemic*, and though I was pressed for time and merely flipped through its brittle pages, scanning only a few passages that arrested my eye, my critique was by

no means as harsh as that of the worthy Committee. Indisputably, Yvette possessed a formidable, if undisciplined mind. The treatise began with the assertion: "The steam iron is not for everyone," and proceeded to chronicle the struggle between the "hot rockers" – who, like John Henry, pressed their heroic and ultimately Pyrrhic challenge, and the "steamers" – disciples of the new order – as they vied for a supremacy foreordained but desperately contested.

Though it was hard to discern, particularly at a casual glance, any clear line of exegetic development amidst the multitude of references, the text was full of wild and compelling adductions, several of which made a sufficient impression on my memory to allow me to more or less paraphrase them here. Yves proposed that the key to modernity lay neither in the invention of crucial machinery, nor in a host of other material or philosophical causalities, but in the belated recognition by Europe of the properties of the zero – which had been there all the time, waiting to leap into reification and whose popular use quantized the accountancy that underpins power economics. For the most part the lizard's style was clipped and peremptory – for example: "There are millions of tools. We didn't just find them lying around." She contended that: "of the two inseparable worlds, one is of the materials that animate our ideas, the other is of the beliefs that politicize our materiality" and further: "renunciation and integration are not mutually exclusive." To this day, I haven't any idea what she was driving at in suggesting that: "primary sources speak in ways their re-presentations cannot. But their very authenticity – their tangibility – can preempt imagination. Secondary or tertiary sources can, though distorting original intentionality, set off streams of association that may be truer than the originals – but at the risk of turning chimera. Hence the affectations of one generation become the

vaunted traditions of another. Our simulacrum produce our progeny's totalisms – and now this... ”

Yves had consigned steam irons to the scrap heap by page thirty-two. Twelve hundred pages later, she closed his magnum opus with a strained haiku:

*Behind a No veil  
waits at its discretion the  
implacable Yes*

## **XI        Shell Shocked**

Alright, Cyprian had in his youth been somewhat indiscreet in the application of his energies to the point of having served, for a short time, as *un traficante* – well, really just a runner. All over the world, and at every taxonomic rank, it seems, creatures want to get high. But Cyprian was lucky in two important ways. Whatever his cognitive limitations, he had been born with a warm heart and a clever sister two estruses older who saved, literally, his tail, on more than one occasion. It was Myrna who could smell a decoy a hundred yards away and it was Myrna who swooped down and knocked her brother off the branch a nanosecond ahead of the burst that took out his best friend.

Cyprian had called him Little Pastor, a nickname that stuck, and everybody laughed when they saw the miniscule devout gliding their way – as much at his earnestness as at the inevitability of his eventual inquiry, however the conversation might have begun, into the health of their immortal souls. Thus Little Pastor was



tolerated, even fed, by those for whom material immediacy called out more strident demands.

“We’ll be immortal soon enough,” chided the pubescent Myrna who was secretly attracted by his fervor and assiduous asceticism. “We’ll be immortal even sooner if you don’t shut up and let us get on with gathering something to put in our bellies today!”

“But little sister,” he would reply, as, by way of assisting her, he helped fill her membranes, “who knows when today ends and eternal tomorrow begins? There is One who does.”

“There are two,” said Myrna resolutely. “I also know what time it is. It is now dinner time. Will you join us?” He was, of course, honored to accept.

Sorting the nuts, Myrna always had to throw out most of the Little Pastor’s contributions. If he paid attention to what he was picking, instead of eye-locking with her all the time, perhaps he wouldn’t have chosen so many that were underripe or wormy.

But blood is a powerful bond and the night she felt it coming, she had to make a choice – the two friends sat too far apart on the branch for her to save them both. So she dove for Cyprian so hard she broke what in *Glaucomys volans* passes for a clavicle and amazingly enough, the Bible in his breast pocket didn’t save the Little Pastor, in fact it killed him, since unimpeded, the bullet would have gone straight through – a messy exit wound, granted, but he might have made it – but instead the slug just added the good book’s mass to its trajectory and blew the Word and his heart straight out his back.

So if Cyprian was a little gun-shy, Lord knows he came by it righteously. But what he didn’t know about demolition wasn’t worth knowing. Intellectually Cyprian

wasn't gifted, but he wasn't beyond acquiring sophisticated skills, so when *Homo Robustus* came through with their .22s and their explosions, blasting what his sister jeeringly called their Road to Utopia, everyone headed for the hills and wondered later how Cyprian had come by that maximum nut supply – enough to feed the whole clan till kingdom come. But Cyprian, who'd been sleeping at the time, heard the boom and what sounded like rain on the leaves but kept on dozing until a ripe nut fell and hit him right on his mending clavicle. When he got through seeing stars, he figured out that the detonation had caused the nut shower. That was key information and he stayed with the road crew most of the way to Utopia, bringing the nuts back to base camp on Sunday when the sappers knocked off to go squirrel hunting. Along the way, from the highest branches, he studied how the bipeds set the charges, and placed them so they could move a mountain just so if they did it right. He lost some sleep and dropped a few grams of fat, but he figured it would be worth it some day – the knowledge would be good for something. In the meantime, who was he not to take advantage of the cornucopia?

“All balls and no brains” Myrna would think when she saw her brother coming slowly, barely gliding, his membranes weighted down with all that food and then she'd turn to lock on the Little Pastor's eyes until she remembered they weren't there.

## **XII      Impotence Corrupts**

*When love tapp'd by the paw of circumstance*

*To turnstile suck revolving lives are bent*

*Then brassy moons our infant tongues romance*

*'Twi'xt labia that mock at virtue rent*

*Whence heavenward angelic hosts proclaim*

*Our labors worthy of deliverance*

*The orbit we traverse unmarred by blame*

*For token love refutes all violence*

*Tho' by the world our yawning gape's reviled*

*In hunger's womb all faults knit reconciled*

“Jesus, Yvette” I said, “your shit gets bleaker by the minute.” The amphibian fluttered his frills in evident self-satisfaction. Clearly there was still power in the discipline of verse. Bubba dangled by his tail from Minerva’s wrist, arrested in mid-donut, his dejected ears flattened against his head, his oceanic eyes splashed in agonized parabolas. It was too hot to work, everything was sweating. Myrna hung out her tongue, untied her shirtfront, and flapped the tails in an attempt to circulate the fetid air. Cyprian mixed a batch of amalgam with such exquisite lassitude that it catalyzed in mid-stir, the paddle freezing in the tub like the angled stick of an upended popsicle. The world had become a great suppurating cheese with no holes for angels to hide in. A symphony of metropolitan stench drifted up from the Deuce. In the extraordinary and unforgiving midday glare, there was no mistaking the thousand errors and crude degradations we had wrought on the restoration. We were bathetic. We had no business going anywhere near the Monument. A cacophony of horns and amplified bumper crumplings wafted above the ambient din as a chain of cabs rear ended one another in the wake of the lead hack’s screeching attempt to halt for an

overshot fare. Was today the day to finally get it on? I looked at Cyprian, passed out, supported by his paddle, his dark fur matted and a pool of sweat collecting at his feet – at Myrna splayed out on the portico with the tabloid pages of today's *Ardilla roja* tented over her face – at Bubba swaying in the torpid fumes that passed for breeze, and Yves – absolutely unaffected by the suffocating heat, basking obliviously – scribbling yet another monstrous poem.

I wandered the pediment, fruitlessly seeking a shadow. In my mirage I walked into that air-conditioned building where you couldn't even open the windows, the one-way obsidian panes so black and reflective that from outside, all you could see was a mirror of the denigrated city and yourself rippling in distortion. But from the inside, the universe was visible, possessable, husbandable, penetrable: the park and beyond, to the curve of the earth – bridges named for warriors, adventurers and engineers and facing south, the Teleport, the golf course with imported kangaroos for authenticity and beyond to the narrows and the great container ships plying the kill, nuzzled by tugs shipshape and everything in its place. Was this the day to slip in my filched magnetic key card, suction up to the stratosphere, glide past the tracking lenses in my mummy's rags, mopping with threadbare Veronica my engraved and futile brow, pour myself into the Brno chair at the head of the redwood section tabletop and finally lay the .38, still tacky from gaffers tape, cool with condensation and untouched in thirty years, down on its lacquer – look up, lock the stunned, rotating Authority boardroom eyes and say: *Gentlepeople, I believe we represent the majority. You see, we have seven ballots on our side.*

## XII **Bedfellows Make Strange Politics**

The fact is that Myrna and I never made love. We got very drunk and tried. It's probably a good thing, ultimately that we never "assumed an effective mating posture." Everything conspired. The sheets twisted into knots, self-consciousness rebounded around her tiny bedroom like a ping pong ball bouncing lightly off our heads every time we almost forgot that we really knew one another too well, that there'd been far too much history between us and that whatever gut animosity first attracted us had blunted into a standoff. But the best part about this melted, rancid affair was that the end of the evening was euphoric. Once we gave up, agreed it was hopeless, we were close for the first and only time. We flew to the park, perched on rocks overlooking the lake and the soccer field, drank lukewarm Sanjuaneros between bites of takeout flan, then lay back and watched the August meteor shower. It was hard to believe that it wasn't my first time at the Planetarium somehow regenerated after all these years but joined to a vibrating imminence whose hip I was barely touching. Myrna traced outlines of unfamiliar constellations with a radiant claw – the way so many years before the narrator's flashlight arrow had swept the random illuminations into coherence. She talked of magnitudes nebulae and the flayed man and a hemisphere of stars I couldn't see. I was fully prepared to be in love.

The next morning, St. Monday, was born to the sonic boom of a transcontinental hangover. There are times when I am stupefied, but I am not such an imbecile as to imagine that whatever transgressions swim in the dark may not parch into rifts by daylight, that flash floods cannot yield dry river beds, or that every soul is born to be

drenched in the honey of abundant equity. So when on Tuesday morning, in response to my simple request to spiff up the meander on the hem of Herc's toga, Myrna favored me with an uninflected "Yes boss," I was glad that the rest of the crew hadn't showed up yet and that by the time they did I was yards away, sloppily criss-crossing the basket weave of a still inchoate cornucopia.

Yvette began his news summary by reading the front page headlines from the morning's paper of record: "Decomposed Leader Prepares For His Return" and "Finance Ministers Agree to Slave Trade Pact." I was barely listening. Aside from robotically fashioning a horn of plenty so pathetically crude that I am still amazed we got it over on the Face Inspector, my day was spent trying to locate my internal organs, which seemed to have vanished into the chasm separating me from Myrna. It was only later, when in passing I glanced at the discarded broadsheet, that I realized the degree to which Yves had been waxing inventive with her redactage. The headlines actually read: "Deposed Leader," not "Decomposed Leader" and "Save Trade," not "Slave Trade."

I took the frilled lizard up on this privately, asking – although I knew the answer but wanted to appear to give her the benefit of the doubt – whether these recastings of meanings were manifestations of innocent dyslexia or born of a deliberate intention to misinform. Neither, he said. They represented associative leaps – metaphysical extensions – geysers erupting from beneath a roiling discursive water table. She bolstered his argument by quoting or misquoting Jung – how would I know? I told her that even though I realized it was a hopelessly square position to take, I would nonetheless prefer – even if no one else minded – that he confine elaborations on the

purportedly factual to a point just short of where they completely subverted meaning, or at least cow-catch them with a disclaimer or caboose them with some nakedly ironic twist that let us know we had been taken for a joyride.

“Of course, of course,” she replied solicitously, “absolutely anything that makes you feel more secure. But heaven help you if you think you’ve located the truth. Heaven help Myrna and heaven help us all. My dear, you’re such a transparent fellow, you really needn’t bother with clothes.”

#### **XIV      Turning the Wheel**

Everyone pays lip service to the big picture, but mostly they’re just running down their own agendas, half the time not even knowing how they came by them. A certain point gets reached though, where even agile minds strain toward graspable realities. Give us something concrete yet heightened, something we can feel. Our organs demand – and lo, creation: Shiva city.

That’s pretty much why they blew up the Monument – a flood plain confluence of winding agendas and maybe a few parts sheer boredom, till even the path of the clock-watching homunculus might have seemed preferable – a tendency toward inertia that needed a handclap to get it going – a creeping identification with our gray, earthbound materials – a smacking ourselves back to the last moment we really felt alive – well, mercy, it was coming anyway.

The idea that something so tremendous blowing up would go “pap!” – voluminous afterwaves, of course, rolling around like the proverbial Hudson Valley

ninepins – the great awakening to the realization that something massive had suddenly grown transparent – the visible thrill of its absence – gone, done, dispensed with – better living on in the mind than writing itself on the body – yet how much of this, I had to ask myself, was an enactment of my unexpressed desire to be rid of these troublesome stones?

The explosion was far easier and cleaner than I could have imagined. Cyprian – genius – had engineered the charges so well that the Monument rained down as fine as cocoa – except for Mercury’s right hand with its extended index finger and a chunk of talaria so Demiurgically charged that they punched holes in the sidewalk and jutted out intact – quality workmanship, thought I. The main force of the blast surged away from the street and toward the roof, the concussion taking out a scatter pattern of grid windows in the obsidian slab toward the north. I saw it all, flying up the avenue – late as usual – saw everyone wearing earplugs and hard hats – saw Cyprian’s paw twist the transmitter dial, heard Myrna’s final bullhorned “para su seguridad personal...” aimed toward the passersby below – saw the pigeons on their ledges all rooked up, heads tucked under wings with just one eye peeking out from beneath – then gone Hercules, gone Minerva, gone messenger, gone wings, gone Caduceus, gone cornucopia, gone mental and moral energy, gone connective tissue – yet gone none of the above, only disincorporated their granite gestures of reductive bombast, gone only congealed and protean dust. “No!” I shrieked, a New York second after the fact.

A mufflerless motorcycle rips out of the silence through the canyon below, triggering a crescendo of uninvited associations. Investing in the floor sander was what had propelled me into entrepreneurship so many years before. Why with all the dust



that went into my lungs – who knew from masks in those days – with all that dust, you could have made sculptures. I did, in fact make sculptures – made little model Quan Yins, Buddhas and Ganeshes and not one had turned Galatea – anyway, that’s how I developed the original amalgam formula of epoxy mixed with bagged sawdust, shellac, wax and linoleum paste residue. Now the Monument was dust – so much labor atomized by its bankruptcy of meaning and everything in the afterblast breeze was unbearably hot – as stifling, even with all the air conditioning liberated from those blown-out ventanas, as the courtroom where the trial would go down next summer.

## **XV    Sensation Scenes**

Cyprian went butch and tried to take the rap for the whole crew but despite his bravado, he made a totally implausible ringleader. Bubba, who it was clear had played no role whatever, wept throughout the proceedings – the press said he gave “good eye” – and eventually got off with probation and a device strapped to his tail that transmitted a stream of data on his whereabouts, pulse rate, basal temperature and libidinal status and looped back as voltage if he stepped out of line – but zut! I run ahead of events.

Astoundingly, I was not arrested, even after I revived the *MetroGnome* as a PR vehicle for what came to be known as the Figurehead Four, printing the news on file cards this time – a handy size for the pigeons who did the majority of the distribution and allowing the public to organize the flow of information in whatever sequence suited the narrative moment. The new format was an immense hit – helped along by

what I can only assume was the paper's frankly partisan content, shorn of any pretense of objectivity. I pochoired an edition of prints adapted from a photo of the crew – looking particularly toothsome the day I snapped it, months before the pyrotechnics – and as value added, wrapped it around the little wooden boxes we packaged the file cards in. We couldn't produce them fast enough even with the jigs and automata I set up – folks were grabbing them as the glue dried – the special orders for up-to-the-minute collections flew at us in trilingual droves. The pigeons worked for their donuts that spring, I tell you – it took teamwork flying those file card boxes to the four corners of the waiting world.

Myrna insisted on organizing inside. She ended up spending most of her time in lockdown – nothing I could tell her would chill her out – consequently her legend preceded her when she was shipped upstate. I'm convinced that the Metropole speeded up the normally glacial judicial process just to get her off their hands. One afternoon, sawing, rabbiting, gluing and screen printing in a frenzy, up to my elbows in a rainbow geyser of ink and gouache, I flashed on the day I'd met her and recruited her to wear the original *Gnome* – how she'd talked about her sculpture and needing a job to support it and how I'd taken her to the Battery and we'd eaten takeout microshrimp and fiberoptic noodles, watching the ferries and cutters churn the bay and how the conversation had turned suddenly portentous. "God does not judge us," she replied to my flippant remark deferring culpability beyond the mortal sphere.

"That puts a heavy burden on us," I said, tracking a ferry's wake resolving in the choppy tide. When I met her gaze again, she was giving me her look, head cocked to one side, that telegraphed a silent, fatalistic shrug: Of course, how could you ever know the weight that's in my blood?

The Movement came through with, as the pigeons put it, “frying crullers” and sometimes in touching and unexpected ways. On the day the grand jury handed down its indictment, the Donkey, Burro, Mule and Jackass Caucus of the International Beasts of Burden (IBOB) – having shifted it’s annual hemispheric convention from Montevideo to the Metropole’s Central Pasture to be closer to the action – held a bray-in on the steps of the granite courthouse, ornamented with structureless fluted columns and cynical chiseled mottoes, attempting all in all, a Blutoesque appropriation of specious classical order. It took repeated barrages of tear gas to disperse them, and the ubiquitous vapors seeping indoors caused judges, jurors and a multitude of functionaries to cascade gagging into a square already filled with choking, bucking, hoofed quadrupeds. The incident made headlines everywhere, not just in the *MetroGnome*, and soon we were beating away opportunistic advocates eager to make their bones riding the high profile backs of the Figurehead Four.

In such a market, we quickly scored five of the most advanced legal minds and they worked like dogs – two of them were dogs, actually – and *pro bono* to boot – though eventually I stopped counting the benefits I organized to defray expenses: zebra rides, kodiak bluff charging contests, pelt auctions, tusk carving retreats – you name it. The head of the defense team was a Sumatran Panda of the old school, who among other achievements had appeared on numerous occasions before the Supine Court most recently arguing the precedent-setting “Rogue Defense” in the celebrated carnival elephant stampede case, had gotten mistrials for the Orca Nine, and was, moreover, a respected scholar of – again the pigeon’s term – “constitutional paw.”

Despite Bubba’s tears, unrepentant solidarity was the order of the day – no one wavered and no bargains were plead. Defense decisions were made collectively. For

instance, it was agreed that Yvette's contention that the Monument had not so much been blown up as "recontextualized" would probably go above the heads of the jury.

But everyone brings something to the group effort and the frilled lizard contributed vastly to creating a *cause célèbre* by penning and clandestinely recording (on a rude little tapedeck I smuggled in) a ballad that grew more anthemic as each tier of inmates joined the refrain. "If we could hit the right frequency," the chorus swelled, "Oh, baby, what a blast there'd be!" ¡Oye, niña! who'd have thought we'd have a crossover hit on our hands? Even though the state attached the royalties, circulation was so massive that the song set new production values for natural reverb – you couldn't get airplay anymore without "maximum security ambience." Besides, Yvette's lyrics proved so catchy that even the prosecutor was heard humming it on breaks, waddling down the hall toward the marble birdbath to preen. What amazing turnout, I thought. In another life, in another form – who knows – ballet?!

## XVI      **Leveling**

Unlike the painted clock at Treblinka station that reassured the discomfited traveler that she or he was reentering an ordered universe, the great illuminated timepiece beneath the pediment had survived the explosion, its hands and works intact, merely jogged – ironically – two minutes ahead to the correct Greenwich mean.

In the months between the arraignment and the trial, I visited the station every evening viewing my former worksite from different angles, trying to imagine that it had ever been home to our crew, to real breathing stone, to tubs of amalgam that had to be

worked in a frenzy before they seized up in an indissoluble mass – indissoluble, that is, except for dynamite and lemur tears.

Once I even popped a farthing to rent the requisite headset and experience the new pantheistic hologram cakewalking atop the portico, sirening: “For never yet hath any man rowed past this isle in his black ship, till he hath heard the honeyed music of our lips, and goes his way delighted and a wiser man.” I had to admit ambivalence. In its way, the *Odyssey* metaphor was just as forced as that of the original triad, but nonetheless the choreography was stunning and the harmonies downright seductive.

Despite the not-inconvenient evaporation of the Monument, the Authority used its considerable influence to slam with both Mosaic tablets those whose actions had coincidentally functioned as the unofficial, hypervisible and hence vulnerable – channels of its own impeded drives.

It took the bailiff who, granted, stammered severely, the better part of the morning session to proclaim the charges – this to a courtroom packed with sympathizers and the press corps, whose denizens swept blinding lights around the docket, bench and jury box and clamored up the musty drapes and treacherous blinds onto the chandelier chains to beam panoramic shots back to schoolrooms, social clubs, nickelodeons, hospitals and yes, carceri – where by means of a special coherence scrambling technique, the image appeared as a high definition barrage of visual nonsequiturs.

First came a pride of Class A felony counts: arson in the first degree, conspiracy to violate sections A through Z, reckless endangerment, criminal nuisance, possession of explosives, burglary – the Authority actually alleged that we had been restoring the Monument without their permission! – followed by a gaggle of lesser accusations.

Clearly the crew was in deep trouble. How deep I didn't realize until the judge, a withered mongoose, peremptorily rejected the panda's motion for dismissal. There had been, the bear pointed out, gross procedural irregularities. Further there was evidence that the police and the DA's office were acting in collusion with, and as de facto agents of the Authority. Moreover, could the Authority deny that it had planned to demolish the Monument anyway, floating a bond issue on the proposed hologram months prior to the explosion? The judge's gratuitous sarcasm in refusing to even consider the motion combined with a dismissive wave of the paw – the sort of gesture one might use to divert an annoying insect – augured ill, and declared him at once to be aligned with what the staff of the *MetroGnome* dubbed "The Railroad Gang." With a few exceptional moments, it was all a juridical free fall from there on down.

"We don't have a defense," said the old bear at a strategy session in a relentlessly surveyed holding pen. "They have us hogtied. They have substantial evidence and none of you contests involvement. Certainly we have grounds for an appeal based on procedural irregularities but for the moment all we have to put up against these charges is the historical consciousness that the creators and sustainers of symbols – that's you – are endowed with the right to determine the fate of those symbols. In this light, yours was not an act of destruction but rather a democratic intervention."

"But the Authority owned the Monument," wept Bubba.

"Did they? On what do they base that ownership? Who authorized the Authority? Look, if the facts are on your side, you argue the facts. If the law is on your side, you argue the law. Since we don't have facts or law on our side, we have to reframe the discourse. We argue first for the collective ownership of objects of symbolic

value and second, for the principle that laborers alone have authority over the fruits of their labor.” There was a long pause during which everyone stared at their feet or the at ceiling or through the bars into the dim, shadowless world beyond. Amazingly it was Cyprian who broke the silence. “If what you say is true, we’re cooked either way. If this is going to be a railroad, let’s goddamn well make it a transcendental run. As I see it, we got nothing to lose. Let’s take it to the bridge.”

So we fell back on a line, a line with a genealogy going back half a millennium to the pamphleteer who declared: “In the beginning of time, the great creator Reason made the earth to be a common treasury...” and winding back ages before, to the dawn imaginings of universal abundance and though this atavistic consciousness resonated long-buried yearnings in thousands of hearts, a vast and invisible wall of internalized tautologies stood fast against exoneration. The jurors were dutiful and punctilious, and when charged not to stray from their allotted path – the Law, the mongoose reminded them, was the Law – they sadly, predictably, deferred taking flight.

I’ve played the tape back over and over. If I didn’t have it documented I’d have convinced myself by now that it never really happened. When the verdict was read, the whole spectator section stood up and started singing the Internationale – in whatever tongue – most didn’t even know the lyrics – just hummed along in rhythm. It took us totally by surprise. Everyone cried – the jurors, the bailiff, the old panda, even the dodo prosecutor – everyone that is except for the judge and Myrna, who no one could read anymore, she’d become such an emblem. In fact, even we, her best friends, had come to call her by her *media nom de guerre*: The Impregnable.

## XVII      **The Preoccupied Territories**

After the rising, there was no getting near the prison for months until the report exonerating the state was issued. “Things are tough all over,” the abstract preambled, “that’s no excuse to start a riot.”

Oh to be a fly on the wall in the room where they shredded the incriminating files – the particulars of the governor’s strategy for feigned negotiation. Easier to disappear people than documentary footprints, since inevitably, some renegade memo leaps to the fore – some unerased diskette – it’s veracity beyond dispute, crying out for plausible denial, and then more people and more data must disappear. Once begun, it’s a hard cycle to stop, especially if one lacks the political will. Each death, each lie, requires the invention of exponentially more complex and threadbare alibis till eventually someone learns your secret name and you yourself come to embody liability.

I was only able to see Myrna once before visiting privileges were suspended.

“How’s Cyprian?” I asked. For more than the usual reasons I found myself unable to look directly at her – her face was so misshapen.

“He’s OK. He was laying up in the hospital when the shit came down – the imbecile flew into a fencepost in the exercise yard and gave himself a concussion. He was laying up in the hospital when the shit came down – only caught a whiff of gas.”

“What about Yvette?” A crescendo of inconsolable infant wails broke over the undercurrent of adult murmuring. I focused on the inch of fogged, striated plexiglass separating us, Myrna’s form fading into an anesthetic blur.



“He was pretty high profile during the siege so they targeted her when they came in. I don’t know what happened only somehow he made it through the gauntlet and then they turfed her out to Green Hills. I got a note from him the other day saying it’s the best sex she ever had.” Myrna laughed and then I had to look at her.

“They beat me and beat me and beat me. “They thought I was dead. I stopped breathing. I still don’t remember anything that happened. Someone told me a raccoon from D block gave me CPR. She got shipped to Woodview and I never got to thank her.”

“Hang in there,” I said in my best Dale Carnegie voiceover, examining the fingernail indentations in the caulked seam between the riveted metal wall and the plexi. I could imagine the look Myrna was giving me.

“How’s Bubba,” she asked finally.

“Fine. He’s being a good boy – hooked up to his little monitor. He’s something of a celebrity now – got a contract with an agency to do a series of commercials for a line of romantic novels. They show him in the bathtub, in bed, by a waterfall, at the beach. The tagline is ‘read ‘em and weep.’ His residuals are going toward the civil damages.” The buzzer sounded, signaling our imminent parting before a succeeding wave of prisoners and their families. Before I had a chance to look at her again, a guard’s massive back had interposed.

We – the herd of visitors – made our way out to the parking lot through a hundred doors that hissed and clanged, echoing behind us. We were going home, passing down a defile of peak-hatted, blue-suited guards, shotguns hoisted on their ample hips, and onto the bus. The autumn hues were in full cry along the parkway. Tomorrow would be Saint Monday. Lulled by the fumes and motion, I watched my

fellow passengers one by one nod asleep – gorgeous leaves interpolating our dreams. A jolt woke me. Through swirling colors, Myrna spoke as clearly as if she were next to me on the empty seat. “There are no rights – only expectations.”

## XVIII Triage, mon amour

There must be something left to tell. Some things we do know. The Face Inspector developed prostate cancer and opted for early retirement. He’s in remission, but is heartbroken since his son the CPA – his pride and joy – got indicted for I forget what weird venality.

Cyprian runs a sort of thrift store cum specialty shop uptown and does shiatzu on the side – he has a diverse clientele. He finally got hooked up and has started a brood without benefit of clergy. I went up to his store the other day and he’s behind the counter wearing a tee shirt that says: *Pop Me – My Fam Needs the Insurance \$\$\$*. I pushed my .38, still covered with old tape stickum, the one that had for years been gaffered under the toilet tank across the glass countertop in a brown paper bag. “You don’t want to be caught up here with nothing,” I said

He opened the bag and looked at me quizzically. “What do I need a burner for? With what I got –” he eyed the display cases of power objects surrounding him “– no one’s about to be messing with me.” I shrugged but said nothing. He hesitated a moment before sliding the gun into a shelf under the register. “But hey, whatever you say, boss.”

Yvette’s dissertation finally got published after I spent a year hustling it to agent

after agent – a fluke, but a runaway success – edited down to human scale, of course. Now he's got carte blanche to publish whatever glossolalia comes into her head. A tenured lizard now, but he still hangs out at the same bar off the Deuce conducting her perennial hands-on ethnography. And Bubba, oh shit, that is sad. He managed to contract bovine TB – who knows how since he was never within ten miles of a farm in his whole life. But they completely misdiagnosed it – thought he was ODing and shot him full of ritalin. The vets didn't have a clue. He'd put me down as nearest living relative when they admitted him and they called me when he slid into a coma. I was there with him when he died, held him. His mom swung up from Amazona for the rites and to help close up his apartment. Tree to tree, it took her months to get here. Flying, she said, was for squirrels – it was hanging around with rodents that had got him into trouble. She looked just like him only smaller and grayer – same huge eyes.

The good news is that Myrna is finally coming up for parole. The *MetroGnome* has a petition campaign going strong on her behalf. Tomorrow the pigeon brigade flies twenty thousand verifiable signatures upstate to the governor. Yvette leveraged Myrna a job offer as sculpture curator for a new museum in the sunbelt. If she gets out this time – I don't care what she looks like, or if she disses me or what – but when she glides out that gate into the free air, I'm going to be there and pop the question. What more is there? What more could there possibly be?