

Charles Freeland

The Road to Taxco

It's not the outline that disturbs us. Not even the texture. But the gravy that wasn't there when we first arrived. That seems to have fallen from the sky like Manna. Only it tastes better, and there isn't the question about tax and penalties. About distribution rights and the garbage backing up in the stream. I barter away the best of trinkets – the flowers made of broken glass, the glass made of the sand one extracts from the center of the termite mound. And still, I am treated as if I had never cashed a check. As if they expect to see me pull the scabs from my elbows and make of them something sinister. Or melodious. A statue that has inside it another statue that composes music by turning certain pre-arranged gears. This is done with the help of the wind, I suppose. Or the spells we used to cast on one another in the mountains when no one believed in spells any longer. We used to stay up late, concocting them with balls of yarn and phrases we had picked up from the user's manual for the leaf blower. They didn't work. But they didn't leave us feeling entirely vulnerable either.

Small Concavity at the Base of the Neck

The parking lot is the logical scene of the crime. But when you look closely, you can discern very little. A few packets of mustard. Insects scurrying about with other insects in their mandibles.

He follows the trail of sand grains to the corner where there is, inexplicably, another corner that faces in the opposite direction. He thinks this an impossibility at first and considers reporting it to the commission tasked with keeping track of anomalies, even the least significant.

But he knows they will file this one away as simple delusion and head off to a picnic that has been scheduled for weeks. There, employees who barely know one another will pair off and start fondling.

They will explain themselves later as having been possessed by something irrational, something with teeth and tortoise-shell glasses, that makes the woods its home.

They will make reference to the Hai-uri, a Hottentot apparition otherwise known as the half-man, possessing just one leg, one arm, and one side, and becoming completely invisible if you should look at it from the wrong angle.

Upon being met in the open, it will challenge all comers to a wrestling match, and if defeated, will provide knowledge of secret medicines and turn the victor into a shaman.

Someone who will save you five percent on your phone bill. That's assuming, of course, that you wish to speak to people who have no real desire to speak to you.

People who remember vaguely some good times in college, a few awkward back rubs. And nights when you all snuck onto the grounds of the city pool. But that doesn't mean they wish to re-ignite these things twenty years later.

They have skin conditions to worry about now. They have sheds on their property where occasionally something goes missing. Shears. Portraits of their mothers they painted themselves. Or which were commissioned and so cost a fortune.

And they are never very good, she thinks as she puts her lipstick on in the morning. She harkens back to her days with the easel. And a fire to be known, if not internationally, then at least on the block.

She'd hike the twenty minutes each way to the liquor store. And pray all the way that someone would stick his head out a window of one of the apartments above the street and ask her something that had been bothering him for weeks, but which she would know the answer to immediately, without really having to think.

The kind of thing that earns one grudging admiration, that causes people to fear you without their being able to express that fear in words.

But of course no one lived in those apartments, and so no one accosted her from above. They waited until she was far enough away on the sidewalk to seem like one of those mirages caused by convection. By the air rising in wraith-like patterns from off the surface of the earth.

Attach the Harness

The committee is still undecided when it comes to the part played by simple chance. The toothpicks tumbling from a box by the hundreds. The sales pitch delivered with a nasal quality reminiscent of those times when we thought we would all wind up emperor of some kingdom that hadn't even been surveyed yet. That hadn't coalesced on the bank of the river like salt crystals forming in the sun. Ah! to be young again and wishing we were old! To be certain the afflictions of old age are more than compensated for by the wealth that must accrue to it, the way feathers are part and parcel of a bird. I remember sneaking into watch the westerns on the cinema screen that was as tall as a palm tree. And the evil men made off with the heroine. But no one went after them. Not a single soul took to his horse in pursuit. And I thought maybe this was just an oversight on the part of the director. Or the haberdashers on set. People who believe that the mind is itself infinite and ought to be left alone to determine the nature of the rising action. Much the same way it determines the direction of its own thoughts. By embracing that infinity. By stubbornly insisting on trying to document it through an exploration and cartography of the sort that hasn't been seen since Poincaré and Duhem. When they demonstrated the successful prediction of events by a theory in no way ensures that that theory is correct.

The Infatuates

Someone whispers from across the room, and yet still makes herself audible through a process we have no doubt took its substance from magic. Is descended from it the way we are descended from snakes. And isn't it funny how all of that merely vanishes with the accumulation of days? How we no more think of the horrors that disturbed us endlessly when we were children because to do so would take our concentration away from the horrors that disturb us today. Sure, the cleanliness thing has been overstated. And there are times when we'd just like to be granted the leisure to compose for the bell choir. Or to read the whaling manuals we inherited from our great grandfathers (men who, nevertheless, went their entire lives without setting eyes on the sea). But plenty of opportunities still present themselves for our edification. And for undermining the structures that hold up our communities, like balloons. If we don't take advantage of them, well then, we deserve the label that gets affixed. Even if we can't read it. And if we can, then we ought not to tell the others. Because they will want to know what else we have been able to determine while they were left to fend for themselves in the cypress swamps. Battling scurvy. Listening to those songs that are composed of almost nothing but words.