



Bhang

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By Theodore Pelton



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Bhang

1.



My name is Fried. I grew up on Long Island, but in the time I want to talk about I was living in Chicago, in Bucktown; having come back to New York on business, I had just managed to extend my visit there a few days for pleasure.

The pleasure proved short-lived, however, as news came to me that a friend of mine, Antoine, was dead. I'd met him in Chicago, but he'd moved to Brooklyn two years before, and that was where he would be laid out. AIDS. We'd been roommates for a short time in college, then had drifted apart as I began to make business connections and he to make art videos. It's funny -- I'd been in a couple of his college films, in short parts, not requiring any memorization of dialogue. He had

a wonderful imagination. He worked in a kind of frenzy of confusion, so that you thought the final product would be a disaster. Then, slowly, it would begin to take shape, the parts drawn connected from out of chaos. When you'd finally see his films, they'd be surprisingly tight, his editing having pulled visual motifs out of much more disorienting live performances. But that was his skill, his wonderful talent: he had a filmmaker's eye.

Anyway, it came as a great shock to me that he'd died. Antoine had been so full of life, always working on projects. He went fast -- I hadn't even heard he'd been diagnosed. But such shocks are not quite as shocking as they used to be. I was surprised, but then again not much really surprises me anymore. Still, I was in a kind of stupor when I talked on the phone with one of Antoine's Brooklyn friends, who introduced himself as Anders. He gave me the address and time of the viewing and funeral. He was great. Here's this guy I've never met before, and in New York, where nobody knows anybody and everyone's afraid of everyone else, and he offers to let me stay over in Brooklyn with him and his wife Sylvia if it would make my arrangements more convenient. I really appreciated that. But I

didn't want to impose, so I told him I had a place to stay in New York. He gave me an address in Brooklyn where I could meet and ride over with them.

We shared a taxi. When we arrived, it was in a strange, Eastern-looking section, where the predominant features were small, box shaped, sand-grained buildings and a pleasant smell of spices in the air. In general, living as an outsider, one forgets how geographically diverse New York City is. You just think of the granite rock of Manhattan, its crowded towers. But you forget how green Brooklyn is, especially if you spend any time at all in Midtown. And this was a section different again from Brooklyn's greenery, a place I had never been. I hadn't known anything like a Indian or Arabic section existed outside of Manhattan, and I had spent a lot of time in the city a few years before and thought I knew it well. We pulled up in front of a squat, cayenne-red cube with no windows or doors I could see. Anders and Sylvia, familiar with the place, led me to an entrance on one corner where one entered at a strange angle.

I felt kind of weird. For one thing, while Anders was very nice, and Sylvia was too, neither was very communicative.

Especially Sylvia. I know her better now, but at the time I thought she didn't like me. She hadn't said a word when we met or on the drive over; though we sat three across on the cab's newspaper-filled, vinyl backseat, into which we all began immediately to sweat, she'd hardly acknowledged my presence or even lifted her head. Occasionally I'd begin to see a shy smile come out from beneath her head. She held her head down so low that her face formed a kind of underbelly. I was tempted to bend down to see what was going on there. But I had just met them, and didn't want it to seem like I was forgetting my place. Did she feel I was intruding on them, on their personal space to mourn for Antoine?

2.

As I said, these were reactions I had at the time. Now I know that's just how Sylvia is, how she expresses herself. Sylvia's a percussionist. She never speaks, or even opens her mouth that I've seen, but she "plays" drums and even regular objects almost all the time when you're with her. She can't keep her hands from moving, even if she stays quiet, just touching the

things around her. But when she performs, she's incredible. It can happen anytime, anywhere. A few months ago she came over in the afternoon as I was starting dinner -- yes, I should say, I moved to Brooklyn shortly after the events which I'm describing. An envelope had been left on the table by the back door, adjacent to my kitchen. She started on that, alternately slapping it with her open palms and rolling a rhythm on it with her fingernails. Her feet were tapping. Then she moved in to the kitchen and drummed the counter and wall with wooden spoons. She played pots, the tea kettle, a bottle of soy sauce. I took out an extra plate and she began beating a rhythm on it; the same with an extra knife, fork and glass, never repeating the same tricks but instead, if she arrived at a point where I thought she could go no further, simply heading off in another direction. In this way she invited herself to dinner. This is how Sylvia interacts with the world. It's almost as if she listens to each object tell her how it wants to be played, and as if her muteness is the requirement, enabling her to hear what those of us who talk cannot.

Anyway, we went into this building even though there was no sign saying what occurred here, no Funeral Home sign or anything. Or, rather, I realize now, signs abounded -- but none I could then read. Around the perimeter of the building, about two feet from the roof, was a line of figures that looked to have some symbolic import though I had no idea what it might be. This string of figures included a crescent moon, a lizard, gems of various descriptions, as well as some designs -- lines and squiggles to my eyes -- which I can't really describe. There was also a wheelbarrow-like cart, something that resembled a bowler hat -- totally incongruous objects, many not objects at all. These all stood out from the wall some three or four inches each, so that the late morning sun distorted their shadows into odd streaks down the side of the building. And no sooner was I out of the cab than I suddenly had an image that these shadows on the building were the teeth of some strange animal, which almost seemed to be purring, like a tiger, a low, barely audible growl. I was entering a funeral home; it wasn't surprising to be having morbid thoughts. But what surprises me now as I recall these details is how soon I entered a new world; without having yet

entered the building, without yet even fully having exited their car, I was already swimming in new understandings, puzzling oddities. How can I describe that feeling? Let me give you a for instance: I thought the purring I heard was one of two things: a furnace deep in the bowels of one of these ancient buildings or a large animal native to, say, Burma or Nepal, and these words were in my mind even then, “Burma,” “Nepal.” As out of place as these apparition would have been here in Brooklyn, all possibilities occurred to me at this moment as equally likely.

The odor of spices was stronger when we opened the door. This was the parent of that scent I had smelled in the street, its features stronger, more developed. A long table with a linen tablecloth full of mugs and a kind of coffee urn -- let me call it a samovar -- sat immediately to my left. This was a kind of anteroom or lobby. Within, there was a thick fog of incense and mourners sitting in what looked like very comfortable chairs, like recliners. Out of place, perhaps, but also rather appropriate. I felt like sitting down myself. I had been doing a lot of walking, as one does in New York, generally wanting to avoid the cost of the taxis and the closeness and smell of the subways. It had been

hot outside, hot like only New York gets hot in summer, the heat packed in and the air sucked out of the city as if the five boroughs were domed and giant machines were performing these operations. This contributed to my fatigue. But the temperature in this building was perfect. I don't like air conditioned buildings either; they seem to freeze the life out of air molecules, or so it seemed to me now. But here, the molecules were suffused in warm scented oils. They massaged my muscles simply by my moving through them, breathing them in, absorbing them through my skin, and I was neither sweating any longer nor chilled. The walls in this room were white, like the table, but with thin horizontal red stripes. Stripes they seemed at first until I noticed they were not painted but rather linear designs constructed in a tile mosaic. These lines of red colored tiles seemed somehow responsible for the atmosphere I'm describing, though I can't say how, unless they emitted light as well, functioning as heat collectors, perhaps working in tandem with the steam from the samovar.

I was pondering these things when it occurred to me I should interact, if not with new people, then at least with

Anders, who stood beside me. Anders is a tall, thin man. It's very likely that you've seen him yourself if you've spent a great deal of time in New York. I know that seems absurd in a city of eight million people, but that's what Anders is like. He's highly *visible*. When he enters a room, people tend to gravitate toward him. Simply having entered the room, he now stood over a group of acquaintances like a tall ostrich. I noticed he didn't have good skin. It was the first time this had occurred to me. Perhaps I was looking at it too closely, but he towered before me and his skin seemed to be everywhere. It sloped downward from his forehead into a sawn forest of stubble at his chin. Or blackheads, I couldn't be sure. I was being rude. "It's good, Anders," I said, pumping his hand.

"What's good?" he asked, in his deep drawl. Was he from the South? And what had I meant? Now I couldn't remember. The words came out of our mouths into the oily air like large soap bubbles, fighting for room with the air molecules and getting bent and pushed, wobbling, higher and away. I followed one of my words with my eyes until it entered the next room, then turned the corner and escaped my sight.

3.

"Oh, I'm sorry," I said. "It's good to be here. For Antoine." I realized, thinking about my own relationship, and how it might be summarized in a title -- "ex-roommate" -- that I didn't know how they knew Antoine. "Were you ever in any of his videos?"

"We're glad you could come," said Anders, ignoring my question. I gave up trying to place his accent, which seemed to have various layers. He turned me toward the samovar and the mugs. "Have you had bhang?"

He poured me a mugful of what wasn't coffee, but a hot milky beverage whose scent now completed the spectrum of scents I had smelled upon entering the room. For instance, if a rainbow -- ROYGBIV, remember from school? -- had only red, orange and yellow, and you came along with green, blue, indigo and violet, then that would complete it. The air was one half and the cupful of -- he had called it bhang? -- the other. Or not half and half like left and right, but each supplying half to be intermingled with the other, like red, green and indigo from one part and orange, yellow, blue and violet from the other, or like

fingers interlace. Of course, all of these colors together make up light and are inseparable, and so too the bhang and the air, for I was now sure that I had in a very real sense been drinking bhang as soon as I had breathed air inside this room, and even before entering this room when we had come to this section of town, and even before we had come to this section of town when I had entered the cab -- listening to the engine buzz, to Sylvia's fingers on the uncertain upholstery -- perhaps even before that. There was no separation between things for me at that moment, but rather a long continuous flow of matter, all-connected.

Others now arrived in the door behind me and ripples in the environment carried me into the interior room. Antoine -- the body of Antoine -- was at the center of a swirl of mourners, who orbited slowly around him, each coming close to me in their turns. I saw many faces up close, but none I knew. I joined the circular procession, keeping turned toward the center as if held by gravitation. Antoine was eclipsed from view now and again. He lay not in a casket, but upon a board piled with flowers and herbs, the board upon an aluminum stand, the aluminum stand upon rolling wheels, the rolling wheels upon the swirls of a

Persian rug, the Persian rug upon a worn linoleum floor, the linoleum floor upon, I supposed, a wood sub-floor, the wood sub-floor upon the cement foundation, the cement foundation upon a layer of topsoil, the layer of topsoil upon a layer of shale, as I seemed to remember from having taken a Geology course as an undergraduate years ago, the layer of shale upon solid New York City granite, the solid New York City granite atop layers and layers of hot and liquid rock stretching down to one true level, the core, where the curvature of the earth made all perpendicular lines drawn from points on the surface meet. I saw the long cone described by the circling mourners on the surface, the needle-sharp point untold miles beneath our feet. I was nearing the center of that surface circle; others seemed to have retired to the perimeter of the room as I got closer. It was like they inhabited a cosmological universe while I operated in a geological one. Theirs subsided as mine ebbed, like tides. Antoine's corpse and I cut through the very earth, moving through all of those layers, solid and resistant.

It. History. All this time the room was still breathing.

As I paid my respects, voices came to me as if from radios all around the room. The voices of the others. They struck me as very learned. I'll try to remember what they were saying, reconstruct how it came to me. First came kind of sharp cries, as if someone was being harassed by the heavy in an old-time radio play. I didn't catch the beginning, something about "Scythians," "north of Macedonia." It sounded weird, coming from this voice I pictured as a young girl's in an old movie tied up on the tracks in front of an onrushing train:

"They'd celebrate the first anniversary of the death of their chiefs by killing fifty of the chief's former bodyguards! Cutting them open, filling their intestines with sacred herbs!"

And then, as if in answer, in a voice like the announcer coming on to pitch laundry detergent:

"They would kill their horses as well, impale them on spikes and sit the bodyguards atop the horses, where they would stay until they rotted, guarding the chief in the afterlife."

I moved to touch Antoine, maybe just his clothes, as one does with the dead at such viewings. I suppose you need another sense to confirm what you are seeing. Or maybe you want to test

the limits of living, give yourself the sensation as well as the sight of death. But I stopped myself short, feeling worms would slither into my mouth and my skin at our touch. My mother, who'd grown up in Brooklyn, used to sing me a gruesome song about worms and corpses; I loved the way it made me shiver as a boy. Then I heard the whooping voice of a cowboy from the far side of the room:

"All who took part in this gruesome rite would cleanse themselves with oil" -- he pronounced it like an old-time Texan, "erl" -- "then put up small tents, into which they'd place metal censers containing hot coals. Whoo-hoo! Men would crawl into these tents and dump sacred seeds onto the coals!"

And, in answer, the voice of a frightened heroine again:

"The seeds soon would begin to smolder! And the smoke made the men howl with joy!"

My fingers felt icy despite the warmth of the rest of my body, what I've already mentioned about the comfort of the room. Walter Cronkite's voice then entered, his reassuring, authoritative baritone:

"The intoxication they'd experience connected them with the fallen in a cult of the dead, comprised of those already dead and those who through artificial stimuli wished to approximate the effect."

A wind was now blowing through the room. I looked up to see the sources of the wind and of the speaking I'd heard and saw a number of things I'd missed before. There were lights on the ceiling, some with tinted gels to create different effects. I also saw cameras strategically placed around the room, angled in toward where I stood by Antoine's body in the center. Several things seemed to have changed in my few minutes in the room as well. Around the perimeter where I had seen easy chairs, sentinel guards now stood, sheltering Antoine's body from the wind which now was growing fiercer. It whipped and blew the long hair of the ladies in the corners whom I hadn't noticed before; some were knotting rugs on looms, others dyeing wool in vats or preparing their dyes by grinding brightly colored plants. Spray (machines by the far end of the room produced many of these effects and seemed now to subtly rock the room as well) caught us in the face and began to dot like small moths our

clothes, skin, hair and the baggy shirts worn by the attendants.
Wetted, these rippled and flashed in the wind.

4.

We moved at a fast clip. We were now on a boat. I'm not sure exactly how that happened. But it was not strange. People don't think about often, but New York City is, after all, a collection of islands. Manhattan, Staten, Long. I remembered the joke from when I was a kid, having grown up just outside the city: "Staten Island?" "Yup, that's an island." You need the proper accent to make it work. Boating has been a part of life here for centuries, but one we're isolated from with our planes and automobiles and the insulated lives they've encouraged. I think the suggestion we were supposed to take was that we shouldn't regard traveling on water as an unusual experience. I made an attempt to link these events in space and time, nostalgically perhaps, but old habits die hard. Maybe the red storefront was the entrance to a pier, with the death chamber inside a boat docked closely by? Was the building itself a boat, a houseboat, which slipped nicely, squarely, into an inlet of land, so that it would never appear to be any different from any other building until it floated away or turned over its engine? In any case, it was large enough that we were not crowded, but slow

enough that the boat rocked hard as it crashed through the waves as we headed away from shore. While the air was warm and salty, the water was rough. I went to the stern, where there was a high observation platform. I looked around for the Statue of Liberty, but it was nowhere in sight. I surmised from this that we were on the ocean side, in the Atlantic, south of the island rather than west. I looked up into the sky and small seams began to appear and disappear just as quickly, like zippers being closed from the other side of the firmament, or like darting little fishes touching the underside of the membrane between us, then disappearing. Oh, the guards, I was about to tell about the guards. Through their baggy garments, poorly buttoned, their skin appeared ghastly white, with horrid scars out of which poked -- and I'm sure I'm not be mistaken on this: I stared hard, though sidelong, not wishing to be rude to people to whom I hadn't been formally introduced -- dried plants. Dead flowers, leaves One man's chest was half visible. He had the chest of a male model, muscular and buff. He didn't stir in the least, despite the wind, the stares I'm sure he must have felt. He was given over to his role, like a Buckingham Palace guard. His hair

was long and dark, which exaggerated that much more the mottled paleness of his skin; water-soaked in yet another mosaic of color -- the result of the splashing, spraying dyes -- it pasted his cheek and shoulder down to his sternum. Here, the hair almost made contact with bright yellow surgical clamps that held what must have been a gaping torso wound together against the previously mentioned stuffing that protruded from within. His eyes were closed. He was a truly potent image of grief.

Later, we were on shore again, just outside the cayenne-red building, by an empty lot strewn with smashed glass and small amalgam rocks. A tower -- like an antenna, or better yet like those ladders circus performers climb to the trapeze platform -- this rose over the lot at least a hundred feet and a man stood motionless at the top. Anders was with me. He signaled. The man saluted to us and dove headfirst into the weedy concrete.

"Some hold life to be very little at all," said Anders, who never hitched in his even walking pace past this spectacle. I remembered a similar line in a Bob Dylan song. "They will resign it all for the perfect gesture." Someone inside called out to Anders now, and I now recalled earlier hearing him referred to

as "the curator." He wasn't in the least agitated as he turned and went inside. I was too overwhelmed to move, to do anything.

What had just happened? Had a man just leapt to his death? Had we just walked past, watching?

I've replayed this scene in my mind hundreds of times since then. There he stood again, there he plummeted. He was about the length of a football field away. I wondered if there was some trick. Was that pile of clothes there a dummy or an actual man who has just given up his life, seemingly just to give me a demonstration of . . . of what? I moved no closer. There could be no doubt that he had died, fallen from that height into solid rock. I had never seen a dead human body outside a funeral home, much less an actual suicide.

This is where my breakthrough began. This was expression! How unbelievably powerful! My immediate reaction had been to judge. I felt that Anders and I had been at fault somehow, or that the man himself was crazy, a lunatic. But then it came to me: this was not an act which I could change, this was not even a person that I knew. There was no possible framework into which I could put this experience. The worst

thing I could do was reject it outright, say I didn't understand it, push it away, decide I failed to comprehend. All I know was that he had chosen to do what he'd done. I can only marvel, still, today, at the beauty of such a decision. There had been no audience! It was staged entirely for me! And who was I to this man? The symmetry of it is awe-inspiring. The doubling of Antoine. The exchange here, artist surrendering all for audience, who must as a result be utterly filled up, a pure one for one. Talk about catharsis -- I was blown away. How do you react to such a thing? I still can't. I wanted to know more about this person. But this reaction filled my mind with new questions. Why had I not wanted to know more about the numerous living people I had encountered during the day? What does anyone care about anyone else while they're alive, to hear about them and their story? But let that person kill themselves and all of a sudden the story is worth hearing. And it wasn't a suicide done for the usual reasons, whatever those might be. It had been an artistic performance. Now, today, as I speak, it's very strange but true, I haven't heard of any suicides in this neighborhood. No one will kill themselves because now *it's been done*. A life saved lives -- I

have no doubt about this. It was something I knew even then, standing alone, looking at the far-off body.

But even as I reflected upon this, I was unprepared for what occurred next.

I thought I saw a spirit rise from the crumpled body on the ground. It was like the performance had so pleased the Gods that they gave it their own ovation, their own salute. I can't say for sure, because it was invisible, and it was something I only put together later. That is, I could only tell that it was there by the changes it made in things around it, and perhaps through my other senses, and by piecing together memories. But let me tell you, one thing invisible man movies never allow for is people's sense of smell. The spirit that rose from the dead man had a peculiar odor; I've never smelled anything quite like it. Let me try to explain. In college I once had a summer work study job in a science lab, cleaning and sterilizing beakers and glass tubes called pipettes which biologists use to draw up milliliters of fluids with their lips on the clean end. In the corner of this lab was an enormous jug of hydrochloric acid. You can't pour hydrochloric acid from the main container into smaller containers out in the

open because the fumes are so noxious. You do it under a metal hood which keeps your head from the fumes. Once, I wanted to see what the smell was like without the precaution, so I put my head underneath the tent. It nearly knocked me off my feet. Ammonia gives off a similar, but much weaker odor, a sharp painful shot to the nostrils that makes you reel. This invisible moment had something of that smell; it rang loudly up my nose and into my sinuses. But it wasn't sour and painful in the same way. I'm at a loss for words. Keep in mind, this happened in just an instant. Then it was gone, to the extent that I wasn't even sure it had happened at all until later. Of course it was present that whole time, something just intervened, keeping me from seeing it. But it was hot, I can say that, sort of like the blast of chlorophylled, humid air you get when you open the door to a greenhouse -- magnified a thousand times. It was also living, like the smell of meat. When I was sixteen, my father took me deer hunting in Upstate New York and I shot a deer and gutted it. With a four-inch hunting blade I cut the animal open from sternum to crotch. It had been living just a few minutes before; now I reached into its viscera up to and past my elbows. It gave

off a greasy smell that reflected blood, the slickness of the inner side on its skin and the surprising solidness organs had when I ripped them out of this body.

The odor now had something of this smell, but without the overlay of death and decay. That is, the smell wasn't unpleasant: it radiated like light beams flashed in all directions at once, then shut off just as quickly. It didn't linger like earth smells do. That's how I knew what it was, but again only after the actual experience.

I was now sent back -- again, all of this happened in the briefest expenditure of time -- to where I was living in Chicago. The street where I'd been renting an apartment for five years appeared to me now in the smallest details. I could see specific cracks in the sidewalk leading to the front porch. In summer, I sometimes walk around with no shoes on, not an intelligent thing to do on city streets, I know, with all the broken glass and garbage, but something that in some small way gives me a hold over the place. Somehow, to walk Ohio Street without shoes or socks is to master it, like the cognoscenti of an Eastern religion might master coals. Even when my feet get cut, it doesn't bother

me. It's the price of familiarity. Who experiences familiarity without occasional injury? Now I was walking shoeless again. But I was further away from my apartment than I'd ever gone before barefoot. I was walking around the city, over tiled station floors, up the rusty metal stairs leading to the els, stairs which reddened my feet with dirt and decayed steel, then down stone steps from government buildings, etching my feet with fine scratches. I walked through the thick grass of parks, stepped over the cardboard dwellings of the homeless, smeared through spilled food and animal and bird shit, collected rings of soot from the street like anklets. My naked feet went through it all; I was proud of them.

Anders had returned and spoke, bringing me back. It was late, though I didn't know where the time had gone. How long had it been this dark? Soon it would be morning. Did I want to go get breakfast? I nodded. We were joined by Sylvia, her brown bangs still blown to one side by the wind from the boat. We walked up to a main avenue and hailed a cab. We got out at a little New York-style diner with large plate glass windows, a

counter and two dozen tightly-packed tables crammed with people eating. The clock read 4 AM.

The waiter came to the table, a small, balding, Italian-looking man. He waved his finger as a way of pointing at both Sylvia and Anders, who sat on one side of the table, then spoke: "Two eggs over, coffee, grapefruit juice, rye toast dry, right?" They smiled and Anders said, "That's right." The man turned to me.

"The same for me," I said automatically.

"Dry toast for you, too."

"You don't have to get what we get," said Anders.

I suddenly felt defensive. "No, that's fine." A moment passed.

The waiter left. "The guy's amazing," said Anders. "He remembers everyone's order. If you were to come here again, he'd know exactly what you wanted." I looked over at this man, now pouring coffee for customers. Anders also turned and looked.

"He's probably been doing this for thirty, forty years. Can you imagine doing the same thing for so long? What a chore!"

Sylvia tapped the fork rapidly on the table and on the napkin and told us in this way that perhaps the man derived sustenance from the life he'd chosen but in such a way that we could never really know it, comprised of numerous small understandings renegotiated from minute to minute. When her hands settled, she had touched her spoon with the tip of her finger so that it emitted a faint ring.

There was something about our conversation that reminded me of the meaningless small talk that sometimes occurs after you've just had sex with someone for the first time. You don't know what to say; your bodies have just finished speaking in a wholly different language, have been so eloquent, have said what needed saying, and then you are thrown back on your brains, your store of words, none of which seem capable of doing the same thing. The day had been dizzying; all day, normal experiences had been turning, as if by some large wrench, at quarter-turn increments, into realities I couldn't recognize as such, which seemed to break the previously established rules of time and space, memory, thought. All sorts of things were askew. I wanted to ask a question that would

delve into the workings of this. It wasn't the influence of drugs. I wasn't some bumpkin who could be deranged by a little acid in my coffee. In fact, I had once had some interest in psychopharmacology and had written a paper on how Charles Manson utilized LSD to help destabilize his followers' grasps on reality. This was different -- a chance to actually live a life I knew would be different every day, forever, until the end of time. Every day in itself could be the end of all previously recorded time.

So I took the opportunity, quit the job in Chicago, returned only once more to pack my things and settle with the landlord, and moved to Brooklyn, joining a loose constellation of artists. And I could see all this to come at breakfast that day. We were all quiet. The coffee was very good. Sylvia indicated with quick fingertip pulses that the coffee was the real reason they came here, not the waiter's memory trick, impressive as it was. I had never tasted coffee quite like it. Very fragrant, as if one drank it through the nostrils, through the pores of skin its steam touched. I've had coffee here countless times since.

5.

But there's only one drink for me, and that's bhang. Antoine's favorite. I make it every chance I get. I'm just now at the point of beginning to understand it, if I do say so myself.

I'm told that bhang contains different ingredients each time it's made, that it's in fact impossible to create two identical batches, but that any time bhang is made it possesses its own particular identity. There are favored recipes, but even these provide little more than a framework for the beverage's actual making. One who makes bhang is encouraged to intuit what ingredients should be used in what amounts from the suggested authority of a recipe; experienced makers create their own versions in styles unique to each creator but always in a process which must be called open-ended. That is, they make new decisions at each moment of its composition. Error enters the process for some chefs in the haphazard way they grasp handfuls or pinches of the spices and substances at their disposal; others are known to measure minutely using the sensitive gram scales, to wait months for the perfect missing component to arrive in the neighborhood or even to lose patience with the entire endeavor

and toss in scoopfuls of ground herbs, irregardless of the label on the jar they find themselves reaching into. It is even said by some that the drinker can feel the emotion felt by the creator when emotion has had an effect on its creation, even to the point of being able to feel financially pressured, one man told me, a former accountant, when the person who made the batch was in debt and derived his energy and genius from that tension. But there are finally no guidelines for its making and each creator claims the level of expertise she or he feels comfortable with, the level with which they feel comfortable addressing themselves. Some makers never refer to their own creations at all, waiting to be recognized by their guests, unable themselves to taste what they've created, having spoiled their palates through the trial and error of sampling unfinished concoctions. Others hold that it is more proper to drink bhang before it has been completed, when you can still best understand the different textures and qualities of the individual pieces of the collage. It is a type of violence, they say, to heat and blend ingredients. In their hands, the brew becomes more like a salad, an assemblage rather than a mixture.

Needless to say, this is called heresy by those who, no more correct in their citations or historical understandings, disagree.

Sorry. This is just part of what I wanted to say, yet I've already gone on too long. What precisely is it I wanted to say? I guess I simply want to describe a process of movement. I didn't stay in Brooklyn long, as it turned out. It turned to be a life that could be maintained. After all – I think it was Byron who once said it – you can't live entirely in lyric enthusiasm; sometimes you have to wash your face and comb your hair. These aren't things you can do if you aren't sure the face in the mirror is your own. And at times I felt as if I had become Antoine or the man on the pavement, and that I was buried deep within an immovable silence, even though I could see myself, or Antoine or the man as me, walking around and talking to people, making dates, drinking and joking. I was liberated to act in the most impulsive, even dangerous ways; I wasn't myself and had no fear. I'd insult men much larger than me, or proposition their women just behind their backs, more for the thrill of tempting fate than for sex. I grew enamored of the game of chicken. The last one to move wins. I'd play it with oncoming taxi drivers,

heavy-eyed men who knew the world's dangers and had come to New York to race through their days for money. I'm told that a cabbie in New York lasts an average of twenty months, and that averages in the few that do it for forty or fifty years. While driving, racing, having a lifetime in the course of their year or month, these are men who felt it a matter of honor not to swerve, who made others move first. But I had none of the fear that limits sane people. My body stood in front of speeding taxis and it never occurred to me to move it because it wasn't exactly me.

Had I been taken over? Was someone else living in my body? And if so, where was I really?

As soon as I asked this question, I knew the answer: I was deep under the street. Then I knew I had to go if I ever wanted to reunite myself and my body, if I ever was going to escape the allure of being dead.

I was broke, so I had to save some money first. I sat on the edge of my seat in the theater of my life, cringing as I watched myself in danger night after night, powerless to keep myself safe for the journey I planned to make, hoping only to stay alive long enough to leave. Finally, I couldn't wait any

longer. I stole four hundred dollars from an art gallery where I worked, breaking open a locked filing cabinet with a crowbar. I left a note apologizing, telling them I'd return the money eventually. Then I got on a train heading, by way of Chicago, for the desert southwest.



Theodore Pelton lives in Buffalo, New York where he writes fiction and criticism and teaches literature and writing at Medaille College. In 1994, he received an NEA Literature Fellowship in Fiction. In 2000, he founded Starcherone Books, which publishes new innovative short fiction and reprints of classic experimental works.