

Charles Freeland

from *Eucalyptus*

*

Breadcrumbs accumulate on the pavement, seem to spell out certain words that the language has long since abandoned. These remind us of our attempts to understand texts that elude all understanding. They catch on the ear like mites. I wave the spectators away, thinking maybe I can make things right again by participating in the wider world around me, by admitting other people have something important to say on occasion. Though the evidence seems circumstantial, at best. When was the last time we opened an envelope and found another envelope inside? And thought to ourselves: These are trying times, to be sure, but they don't seem as despicable, ultimately, as say, the time before the law described by Augustine in his *De Trinitate*, and mentioned originally in the Babylonian Talmud. All of which, perhaps, is designed to impress those in our company who have yet to immerse themselves in such matters. Who don't even seem to recognize their own coats when it's time to leave. They whisper among themselves in the corner, waiting, I suppose, for the opportunity to declare their own beliefs, to point out anachronism and inconsistency. But the time for all that passes and they are left merely with a pair of brass knuckles. A photocopied poem of Blake's. I try reason, I try cajoling, I even try date nut bread but the recipe is flawed in several particulars and the resulting loaf puts everyone in mind of the trip they took once to Cozumel, or the x-rays ordered up after a sharp pain in the side appeared and then disappeared and then re-appeared again in such quick succession, everyone present threw down their dictionaries and stormed out the one exit that also served as the only entrance. You might have thought there was treasure to be had out there, so intense was the rictus, and the bulging of the eyes, though this could be explained as well by any number of horrors we couldn't see. But which we can imagine now and relay to our audience by means of electronic messages and a certain training in rhetorical flourish. The sort of thing you pick up when you are originally intending only to study to become a paralegal, to make a comfortable income so as to support your family and have enough left over to get a room now and then when you decide to sleep with someone you barely know.

*

I read the word “amiss” lengthwise, as if it does not operate the way other words operate. As if it has been injured in a race. And no one wishes to examine his own feet because the eddies and backwaters will cause a sense of vertigo it is hard to get rid of so long as your feet are still attached to your body. So long as they are capable of reminding you of what you see every time you are forced to make your way from the cereal aisle in the grocery store to the steps of the house where someone you were very close to grew up and then met her end in tragic fashion. Immanuel knows, though, that the wheezing is just a symptom and ought to be treated as one, ought, in fact, to be overlooked for hours at a time while the barn owls are still in the barn. You can take photographs of them. You can explain to people later that the name is really supposed to be accidental and that to find the creatures in the structure that gave them their name is a little like getting struck by lightning at exactly the same time the toaster falls into the bathtub with you. And maybe we aren’t supposed to breathe a word of this to anyone, but Immanuel knows it’s very difficult to breathe almost anything else. Even ordinary oxygen is apt to send us tumbling down the stairs.

*

Less rainfall proves the estimate, even suggests the original framers of the estimate were people of supernatural ability. They found a place that was not exactly at the top of the mountain and they settled down there as if it were. And before you knew it, the rest of the mountain had all but disintegrated. Or at least it was hidden from view by the clouds which themselves seemed to obey some law or command not altogether apparent. Others were drawn to the site by rumor and innuendo and by the promise of cold hard cash, but they didn't stick around, the temperature at the time hovering near zero, so that anyone without an extra pair of socks, say, or suffering a vitamin deficiency, soon found himself suffering unduly from the cold and the things it does to one's skin. I remember balancing on one foot for over three hours, though I can't remember what the purpose was and what the outcome and why the reporters failed to show. It's as if we believe the circumstances that surround our own lives don't actually belong to us, as if they were trucked in and unloaded by someone who was just following instructions on a piece of paper, which was itself stuck to a clipboard by unseen hands. That's the way they imagine it to this day in the school that takes its name from one of the founding fathers and honors him every year on his birthday with an enormous cake, the recipe for which calls for no less than three dozen eggs and which has been kept in a secret vault on the premises for decades. Some say it originated with the man himself, or at the very least, one of his mistresses, and it is said to be able to reconstitute the dead if the steps are not followed exactly. This, of course, depending on how you look at such things, could be an enormous boon or the sort of disaster they make movies about because people will pay large sums of money to see other people go up in flames. All of which suggests we as a species have yet to learn our lessons. We have yet to even realize there are any lessons beyond those we grew up listening to. Like don't sell your soul to the devil and don't smoke cigarettes in front of your impressionable cousins. This is why someone like Humpty-Dumpty is reluctant to do interviews, why he wanders from place to place in a Klonopin-induced haze. He worries he smells like wet grass, that strangers will recognize him and insist they have the right to a photograph. They will huddle about him in enormous gangs, their teeth chattering with excitement, their hands all over him as if he is no longer entitled to shame. As if he was born neither man nor woman but something in between, something so smooth at every angle, the hand can find no purchase. It must roam ceaselessly, or until such time as someone in authority decides to intervene.

*

The valley falls away at our feet and we wonder if perhaps the trip isn't a mistake the way ordering white wine with beef is a mistake or the way trying to romance three people at the same time is mistake, but only if you are found out. Sometimes we long to savor flesh we are not accustomed to, that has been hiding in the back room so as to avoid the direct exposure to sunlight that will cause it to fade. Of course, all that has been rendered obsolete by vitamin supplements and a desire to reach speeds no one else has ever encountered before. Or at least no one has done so and lived to tell the story in the pages of those magazines that circulate among young boys. The bullets have hollow tips and we conjecture as to what damage might be done should we decide to use them rather than leave them at the side of the road where we found them in the first place. I, for one, am never sure what people expect of me and so I begin to expect nothing of myself in anticipation. I throw all sense of pride and accomplishment out the window as if it were a handful of quarters. And those who pull up beside me on bicycles are infuriating! I consider them the sort of thing that attaches itself to the underside of boats when the boats have been left in the water too long. I consider them flea-like creatures inasmuch as they don't seem capable of getting anywhere on their own. They must forever be attaching themselves to those of us who have decided the river is much too lonesome a place to grow up. With its muskrats paddling back and forth as if they have no shame whatsoever, as if they couldn't care less what you think about them and the condition of their coats. It's why I keep a slingshot handy at all times, though I usually only manage to poke myself in the eye with it. Once I was able to make a stop sign sing for over a minute. They are still talking about it west of Temple City, and I imagine the tale grows larger and more impressive with every day that passes. It puts on pounds and waddles down the middle of the highway until even the sheriff is forced to pull to the side of the road to let it pass. He's been on the job a long time. He knows what it means to pick your battles. And what it means to wake up nights screaming and sweating from your forehead as if someone had held a blowtorch just inches from the skin there so as to be able to make out your features in the dark.