

Thirteen Blackbirds Looking at a Lyric Essay

I

It's a story with a hangover.

It suffers from photographic amnesia, essentially a term in search of a condition. It can't remember where it was or why it was there. It doesn't know where it is or how it found its way back — if that is indeed what has happened. It sings like a traveler in need of a road soundtrack, as if music were a compass. And perhaps it is.

It sits and reads the *Wall Street Journal*, feet on the table, vintage Tom Waits always loud enough to fill the room. Because it doesn't believe in background music. Doesn't believe in anything whose objective is to set the mood like a table, the napkins stained, a fork or a spoon always missing, knives blunt and bent, and the hands never quite able to figure out which one is used for this and which one is not required at all for such a spontaneous meal.

The facts are always ornate, interpretation up for grabs. It will tell you to believe in facts, yes, but not in the proverbial black and white notion, the simplicity of what is visible versus what is visible but imagined. It will teach you origami or the art of the noose. Your choice.

II

Day laborers are packing up again, and the unfinished house is left more incomplete each day. It knows that. It knew it before the plans were drawn up, before the loan was approved, before the money was printed, before the morning broke.

Your house is its house. It knows what you're thinking and it's laughing because it knows an ex-con who has become the most successful locksmith of his time. Rock star status. He can open a bank

vault with a credit card — the higher the interest, he says, the more easily the card can talk the lock into giving up its combination. But it's the house you care about, the way you leave things slightly out of place, thinking that if you find them untouched when you return ... this is the problem. Untouched, or handled and then put back in their supposedly unnoticeable slightly-off positions? It was a given that the house was always empty when you were not there. Now it's getting hard to prove.

Its house is your house.

This is the place it mentioned in your sleep at the office when the thought of being unconscious kept you up all night. You slept between phone calls, between the shuffling of papers that should've been filed under nothing in particular weeks or months ago, and the shuffling of the day itself. In all your dreams, you swore you'd stay awake. And you did. As long as it didn't involve actually waking.

III

It takes no shit from you. Or from *you*. Did you think you were exempt? Immune? And *you*? What were *you* thinking? The ground rules are common sense and folk wisdom, but you have to know them a priori. You are expected to show up speaking with the right accent, which changes on a dime, like fashion. You are expected on time, of course, but not one minute earlier.

You have other commitments and honestly believe you will not miss a single one. But there's no limo and there's no driver. You hope the evening's warm, the dogs chained in their yards. The sporadic and fragmented sidewalks are safe as a minefield. Not much you can do about that. Buses don't run this late. Taxis don't come to this neighborhood. Better get an early start.

IV

Rumor has it that it's a cross-dresser.

Once and for all, the truth: It likes its crosses naked.

V

If it came to the costume ball dressed as a sparrow, would you recognize it? If it came as a long-held suspicion, would you get close enough to see through one layer and then the next?

In August 1965, it took the bus to New Jersey. Maybe it ended up on the other side of the Hudson and didn't know it. With its rather fluid sense of place, these things are hard to pin down. But let us say, for the sake of what we believe to be the facts (also fluid, open to interpretation), that it took the bus to New Jersey. Ended up in the hands of Chet Baker, disguised as a fluegelhorn. In those days, just back from Europe, Chet wasn't playing his trumpet. There was something warmer in this other sound. History will say he switched because his trumpet had been stolen, but history often misses the obvious.

It ended up in the hands and lips of Chet Baker, but only on the ballads. Listen carefully.

Maybe it came bound as a songbook (labeled *Ballads for Beginners* to mislead anyone not in on the joke) in the trunk of a car or in the mail. Maybe it thought of being the fluegelhorn and changed its mind at the last moment, just when the rest of the quintet was tightening up. It was afraid of the critics, the ones who talk about musicians sounding loose when they're a tight unit. Or is it the other way around?

The ballad is a safer thing to be. No one blames you for being out of tune. No one strains to make you spill your guts. In fact, you can blame them all for what they cannot do. You can claim that you were meant to be something more, that your limitations are actually reflections of their limitations, that what you're not is what they're not, that there's a world in you that the world outside could

not grasp even if sensed it.

The trouble with ballads is the tempo. A ballad can't leave the room when it wants to be elsewhere; it has to wait till it's done, or till they're done with it, and it takes time to travel the length of a ballad. It takes a lot more turns than the ballad or its interpreters ever bargained for.

VI

It shows you photographs it carries in its vest pocket. Photographs of mountains at dusk. Or is it dawn? They are all flat. Lined up like animals waiting to be fed. But they are not animals and they are not hungry. You wonder if you're being shown a question, if you're expected to provide the one answer. You have never been comfortable with these problems. Should you guess? Should you roll the dice and trust it?

There is a moral dilemma you have never been able to solve. One man learns the answer, memorizes it, keeps it, and hands it back when the question is asked. The other man knows nothing, but guesses correctly. Your dilemma is not about the man who guesses and the weight of such an answer. What you can't decide is which of the two men you'd rather be.

VII

It knew a guy who became an atheist in a foxhole. A lifelong believer of the supernatural who was sent to the front lines and miraculously stopped having visions. It was one of the big wars, the kind that gets a number for a name.

It knew, and still knows, a lot of people in trenches, in bunkers, in safe rooms, in wine cellars and attics and crawl spaces.

It knows the dark by heart. It has night vision. No special equipment required. It can maneuver its parachute to land at the deep end of the enemy's pool, just steps from the sliding glass door to the

room where the enemy sleeps with the wife who has cheated on him once, twice if you count Tacoma. It can land without making a splash. It can swim the length of the pool with one arm.

VIII

There is time and there is no-time, and between them there is only the doorman.

After a good day's work, it wants to go back to its apartment in the city, inherited from some misunderstood tradition; it wants the wide-angle view from the broken window.

There is time and there is no-time, and between them is the doorman's hand waiting for proper identification — a name, a matching photograph. What he means is a face to match the name. It doesn't matter if it's someone else's face. It doesn't matter if it has counterfeit features.

After a while, one of them will give in. Suddenly. So suddenly that the other will not notice. It's a strategy they both know well, but they're so preoccupied with defensive moves — creating them, polishing them to the point of invisibility — that they leave themselves wide open.

There is time and there is no-time, and between them it has seen the lights dim and the doorman's silhouette move cautiously from one stance to the next. It has heard the plotting of hinges and locks when the doorman steps out, and it has wondered what we would do if we were suddenly left out, everyone and everything on this side, nothing on the other.

After the fact comes the echo. It hears it and conceals this much — in plain view, as they say when they talk about the life they came for.

There is time and there is no-time, and between them the doorman tips his cap, bows his head, clasps his hands — a semaphore of des-

peration when the coast is empty. It watches and learns and replies with its own improvised contraptions.

After the echo, an uncertain reckoning unloads its cargo.

There is time and there is no-time, and between them the door-man occasionally absent, a different stand-in each time, not always a look-alike. Other things matter more. It's a study in essence.

After a noticeable absence and a truckload of good excuses, it returns to close the deal.

IX

It is not a victim, and it has the scars to prove it.

X

It tries to imagine a world without furniture, but chairs unfold themselves on the beach like harmless — no, make that useless — crabs. In the waves, the grinding of the rumor mill. They're expecting a mean season, a critical summer, a devastating answer to the smoke signals that always end with ellipsis points. They're expecting rain as well, but they always say that during the drought.

It tries to imagine the beach before the last good erosion, the last noticeable sweep of the ocean's hand. Before they drew the maps from scratch, the coastline unrecognizable to anyone who knew it well.

It imagines the sea from its landlocked town.

It imagines land from its lost boat drifting toward a horizon with little promise at the other end.

It knows how it really works, how the maps invent the land and the land conforms as long as the ocean allows it.

It imagines that it knows what cartography can do to the empty continents of memory. There used to be a lighthouse here. The locals agree there was a lighthouse here, but that's where their collective past falls apart.

The lighthouse was always freshly painted

The lighthouse was stained with neglect

The lighthouse was here by these rocks

*The lighthouse was farther up,
where the sea oats begin*

It knows description is what matter relies on to remain visible and viable.

Only the sea oats can stand up to the persistent tides.

XI

After the heist, it was pointless to ask the witnesses what had been taken. They could only remember how polite it was, greeting everyone by name, saying thank you, pardon me, would you mind, if you please. It never counted the money, they said; it trusted them.

XII

It practices a kind of limited polygamy, like a mad weaver who keeps repeating an unfinished pattern.

Not theology, that erudite séance where you can easily spot a fraud (start with anyone who claims to communicate with the living). Not the preamble's aftermath with its comforting stranglehold on what we sweep away, put aside and claim. Not rain gutters so tired of waiting that they moonlight as tiny gardens

of caked mud where birds have planted enough seeds to fill the season. Not a garland of abandoned towns rebuilt by wind in the rearview mirror. Not the voice implicated by a guilty mouth. Not the ravages of inertia. Not the arrogance of conventional wisdom. Not the careless meteor riding the beveled edges of the galaxy's carved-out core.

✱

It reinvents bifocals, but doesn't bother with the patent. It grows increasingly dissatisfied with itself and the limitations of the lens, not to mention the way the eye will have to train itself to shift consciously from one half to the other. It grows restless and volatile, like a potentially destructive chemical that is harmless while it is isolated. But it's not isolated; it moves among us, it's almost one of us, it speaks like the people next door, it even moved next door for a time, tore down the walls, put up something more solid, changed the carpeting, tore it up, painted carpeting on the floor, paying so much attention to detail that we walked in and our feet reacted to what we saw and not to what they must've felt.

One day it smashes the bifocals and comes up (necessity's the mother and all that) with the progressive lens. A stroke of genius, really. He had other words in mind, like *graduated*, but there was something about *progressive*. It catches on; it makes us feel better; it tricks the eye into thinking that it is not adjusting to much of anything (some eyes claim they are not adjusting at all); it tricks the lens itself, which starts to believe its surface is level, providing the same degree of magnification at all points. It cannot explain how it does this, but it believes it and that's enough.

The rest is easier. The lens is shown *afterglow* and the eye sees *aglow*.

Not myopia. Not astigmatism. Not macular degeneration in the eye going forward. Not loss of peripheral vision in the eye about to make a subtle turn away from its path. Not blind justice or what the faithless are constantly trying to avoid. Not the visual equivalent to the singer with perfect pitch. Not the ama-

teur sailor who argues that a blind man cannot possibly enjoy the sea, cannot fully understand or appreciate the experience with the balance of his senses, no matter how much of a correction they offer. Not Matisse who merely invented what his eyes kept from him, but called it an art of equilibrium that would not upset the subject matter. Not the horse that was never given the benefit of the doubt: we were certain it would be distracted by the pastures and towns along the road. Not the cross-eyed. Not those who never blink — the ones who can't, the ones who have forgotten how to blink, the ones for whom it has become a form of protest. Not tears inappropriately displayed in private. Not the visionary surreptitiously photographed stepping out of her work clothes.

✱

The audience is amazed. It has been singing a cappella for hours and hasn't even grazed a bad note. What they don't know is that it was born with a piano in one ear. It's an imaginary piano, but always tuned. And it will play anything. Some are born with an inner ringing, a gathering of cicadas that will not die; some are born with utter and unimaginable silence; some are born with a single voice lost and wandering between the chest and the cranium, an unfamiliar voice with a persistent cough and a repertoire of rather interesting stories.

It was born with a piano in one ear.

Science is marvelous even when it's being absurd. They can grow a human ear on a mouse these days, but they can't tell it what to hear, what to tune out, or what to imagine.

It was born with a piano in one ear and a radio in the other. At night, it listens to Ken Nordine. This is a redundancy, of course. Nordine's voice disappears with the first light of morning. One would imagine that one could imagine Nordine in the daytime, but even that possibility disappears. So it lands a gig on the night shift. It works with machines it doesn't understand. Someone leaves in-

structions each night. *Press this button, wait, then press that one.* He is alone with the machines and the instructions and the radio. Ken Nordine comes on, like an antidote to the day it caps.

One night, it tunes to the wrong station (there's a baseball game, the teams are tied at the bottom of the twelfth) and believes they've taken Nordine hostage. It calls the station. It listens attentively to the machine's recorded instructions (remember, it's working with machines it doesn't understand), takes a deep breath and registers its concern:

Not on my watch. Not in my yard. Not at my expense. Not from the tip of my hat. Not at my urging. Not under the impression that I was here just because I had proof that I was not somewhere else. Not through my envoy. Not for my sake. Not on my behalf. Not in my name.

✱

In his open letter to the people, the benevolent dictator promises a change. The democracy he overthrew was kept afloat by the same promise. The amused anarchists in the wings are weighing their options, writing their own letter.

It has ideas of its own and an ink blotter, but no desire or plans for a letter. It draws a diagram of the future on a brick wall. Over it, it draws a diagram of the present repeated ad nauseam. When it steps away, there is only one diagram starting and ending at the center.

Not above suspicion. Not the ones in line, quietly waiting their turn; certainly not the impatient ones. Not the uninformed — cave dwellers after the avalanche, tourists stranded on the island, mountain people who assumed they were living at sea level. Not exactly here. Not in transit, but moving. Not at their mercy. Not on foreign soil. Not that it matters.

✱

With travel restrictions temporarily relaxed, it leaves the country on what it calls a working vacation. It is always the Year of Stayin' Alive on someone's calendar, and somewhere they are wearing too much white.

Not sand. Not these bones bleached by the desert's breath. Not amnesia. Not insomnia. Not the alibi of the wedding dress. Not a handshake. Not the promise of a blank check. Not an annulment, a dismissal, a pardon, an expunged incrimination. Not the hollow sound of the empty cartridge. Not these boots, posing ankle-deep in early snow to dispel any vague notions of winter, or the prints of bare feet returning home.

XIII

Because it's prehistoric, it can predict the past and get away with it:

We forgot our names
We married young, acquired land, invested wisely
We forgot our names again
We knew we'd forget, but forgot nonetheless
We lost the land
We assumed, we supposed, we suspected
We were wrong
We forgave
We prayed to be forgiven
We were forgiven
We prayed because we were forgiven
We prayed in case forgiveness was a finite blessing
We built with our hands
We borrowed against our hands
We paid our debts
We forgave ourselves
We underestimated our capacity for fasting
We gave up Lent
We stocked up on adjectives
We described our provisions
We went home before the flood receded

We knew the consequences
We were troubled by coincidence
We were haunted by superstition
We counted ourselves lucky
We counted the survivors
We lost count
We counted ourselves lucky again
We began to make a list of the missing
We lost track
We renounced our fate
We took everything we found
We abandoned what we'd been given
We had nothing to declare
We made a living from the ruins
We gambled with the windfall
We bet on the underdog
We lost the unimaginable
We never trusted our wings
We landed on our feet
We dove headfirst and landed on our feet