

Cowcatcher

By Gennady Gorin

These are the broad strokes of what happened. L is having a lunch in Burbank with his date, F; F is vegetarian; they meet at one of the hipper restaurants at the triune conjunction of Burbank - Glendale - Griffith Park, yet one of many. They're outdoors, the weather is perfect, the pandemic is near extinguished, subtly avoided, gently sidestepped in their conversation, a bad dream, the joy of relearning their own pitches, bristling with the regular and embroidered with the fun and idiosyncratic, outweighing commiseration. It is not yet fire season, there is no haze. The mountains are deceptively deep. L finds it hard to focus on the conversation and begins to daydream.

He takes this for granted, perhaps naively. When L falls asleep and wakes up, is L still L in any meaningful sense? Nature works because of symmetries. L is still L. Nobody forfeited the symmetries governing the constellation of atoms in his body. But how does L's mind make its way back from its journey? The mechanism is mercifully obscured, occluded, seen through a glass, darkly, the sharp edges are sanded away, the track switches, the train passes without so much as a jolt. Yet without the comforting implacability of symmetries, the mechanism can break down - everybody dreams and daydreams; everybody L has ever met; everybody L will never meet; the lost seagull perched next to L and F, surveilling with mad beady eyes, too; the lobster at the bottom of the lobster tank at the restaurant next door, conscious, lost in confusion but conscious, aware, murky perspective, alien perspective through water and glass, the lobster can't snap, can't move, the fur on his claws bristles, meditative calm, waiting, but all of it superfluous, embarrassing, pedestrian, compared to the signal of I AM I AM I AM I AM I AM, orthogonal to the west side of the tank, to the north side of the tank, to its bottom, orthogonal to all three, beam of I AM I AM I AM I AM piercing through total darkness in that direction, no more is necessary, I AM I AM I AM I AM fading out, the lobster begins to dream, dark and watery, molting, decomposition, a legend of whalefall, the beam falters; finally, even the bamboo shoots on L's plate, grilled, no longer alive, but the dreams are stored and latent, there is nowhere for them to go, an echo of I AM I AM I AM, being, awareness, slow but awareness, memory of shoot from seed from blossom from shoot from seed...- what seems like ad infinitum, but a vague and menacing darkness, no genesis, just a fading void, yawns further back. The mechanism works, works, works, keeps working, the gears turn, I AM I AM I AM leaves, travels; the gears slip. For the first time, the mechanism fails.

L is in Burbank, daydreaming, the Santa Ana wind coming down from the mountains, then he is nowhere at all, gasping, transforming like spawning salmon, he was on the train, the tracks switched, now he's off, in a bubbling turmoil, swept off by a cowcatcher into a boiling sea, tracks visible but rapidly diminishing, replaced by his own frantic, chaotic efforts to reconstruct them, but aimless, nothing to grasp onto, the tracks are quickly forgotten, replaced by the sea, now wine-dark, now dappled with veins of gold and turquoise and lapis lazuli; California is lost, something is gained, memories of another wine-dark sea, not his, but at this point it's vulgar to claim belonging or property; the few things that belong to him, night in Santa Monica, gleaming gloaming waves breaking at the pier, astringent blue berries scattered like jewels, astringent betel nut, astringent persimmon, the Santa Ana wind, again, forecast by the television the day before and, symmetrically, forecasting the arrival of F half an hour

earlier, dry and hot on his face, welcome relief, reminder that he is chemically bound to the world around him, a reminder that has now been categorically shown to be wrong, he is not bound to anything anymore; the belongings are lost, vaporizing off, leaving only the hint of a memory of a suggestion of astringency, the I AM I AM I AM signal is in panicked overdrive, flashing beam, incongruous lighthouse in a winter forest, but the primal lizard fear rears its lizard head too, lizards experience fear and birds experience fear and crabs experience fear, but jellyfish cannot, but the Portuguese Man O' War can, not its own, but the fear of a paralyzed fish, the fear of a diver emerging from darkness into its tentacles, there are no hard and fast rules, I AM I AM I AM, still incongruous, but now surrounded by the scent of DANGER, a lit oil lamp suspended by spiderwebs in a disused attic, the dust hangs heavy, suspended in mid-air and in the instant before deflagration and immediate annihilation; fear and danger, overlaid on remains of the astringency of an unripe persimmon, astringency is the solvent that remains when perfume evaporates, the closest tie between the body and the I AM, the sensation of a throat struggling to swallow air in big cold gulps, until it's gone too and L is adrift.

After that, a lot of time, very little happens. L wakes up, a curtain of fog and smoke and haze between him and the colors of a wild, chaotic sundown, stars and galaxies violently pinned and static on a bright sidereal purple velvet. Land rises around him, no context and no reference and nothing to rest the eye on, the cliffs are scale-free, no trees for comparison, bare rock, they could be hills or they could be mountains, the sand is scale-free too, it sifts, but hurts to think about, could be the forgotten sand at Santa Monica or could be the remembered but forever lost sand under the whalefall or could be something too fine to grasp, finer than silt or clay, how far can it go? And L realizes that the end is near, the cliffsides are polished by a cold wind, the purple velvet shimmers and dims, the sidereal stars blink out, if L could look orthogonal to the scene, he would almost see the tiny, thumbnail-sized tapestry of silk and gold thread he inhabits, no doubt already separate from the unfathomable tapestry that contains California and whalefalls and comfortably cold stars and every other siren of I AM I AM I AM but beautiful in its own right, he does not notice the scorpion man behind him, and he does not feel the sting.