

Thomas McConnell



Vanishing Point

“WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO?”

“Less and less.”

“No. Really.”

They sat on high stools at a round table out of the sun, just in the breeze, eating from little plates, drinking from tall glasses, watching the wayward sea, the bonewhite dome of local noon long past, evening just coming on again.

“Well, what time is it then?” the young woman asked.

“Later than it’s ever been.”

“Come on,” she said, sighed. “Let’s go for a walk. Isn’t that *de rigueur* here?”

“*De rigueur mortis*.”

They descended from the balcony—she waited for him at the foot of the stairs—and followed the path through sea oats to the beach, the young woman first, the man always behind, always bringing even one slow foot between the other and a cane that slogged deep in the sand. Through a cleft in the last dune they came to the sea, almost spent, turning from the flood, thrashing still. Fleeing stranded pools across braids of runneled sand, shimmers of water rilled home, leaving the land vesselled, veined. Seafoth skittered before the wind up the tilt of the beach. “It’s like tumbleweed,” the young woman said, pointing. The man nodded, looking on. A white straggle of gulls, ten or a dozen, sailed on among crests and troughs. One hung with flagging effort above the crash while a second climbed, still white, suspended itself an instant, then plunged all black into the dark green water, splashing a plume in vanishing, surfaced, calmly sat, stretched a gullet.

“Did you see?” the young woman asked, turning.

The man caned himself wordlessly on, watching the sand before him.

A black dog going gray in the face loped up, nudged their knees, lapped at her palms. “Need some salt?” the young woman laughed, bent, scratching. She looked up to the man staring down. “Go on, fellow,” she waved her hand away. “Go on.” The dog charged a brood of solitary sandpipers, pursued the largest scatter. The young woman’s eyes wandered back over their wandering trace, four short steps and a gouge in the sand between, then towards the pier ahead, another flat line con-

fronting them in the near distance.

"Which way? The pier?"

The man shrugged.

To right and left as they trod the boards the crowded hopeful cast lines, hooks, traps, baskets over the railing in a ragged succession of confident splashes. A toothless man chuckled to no one in particular that he was sure their luck would turn with the tide. "Expecting a grouper myself." The young woman smiled at him in passing and he doffed his watch cap, gave an empty grin. The couple continued, stood a moment at the very end squinting amid the flashing waters, then turned, the cane ringing against the planks with popped, rusted, bent nails. On either side the casting continued until a boy, with a groan, haled from the water a slender gray shape wriggling into space, writhing onto the planks with a sharp slap. All turned, some murmuring, and the couple stood not ten halting paces from the sleek white belly and the swept fins of the tail beating rhythmically against the hollow boards. The boy bent to touch his prize, but the toothless man said it wasn't dead yet and to bang its head. No one moved. With both hands the toothless man battened the cap to his head before lifting the gray tail and swinging the whole length to the boards. It bent and sounded like a rubber tube. He did it three times more and left it lying, flanks heaving with gills that opened and closed on seeps of blood. The boy laid a delicate finger on its dorsal fin, sprang back when the shape jerked away. He grasped, heaved, the shape almost as long as he was tall, and dropped it to the boards, where it shuddered once from nose to tail, then lay still.

The young woman wondered if she could touch it. The peeling face squinted up at her with its chapped smile. "Sure. It's only a baby but be careful. It still might be nervous. Its nerves might be alive still." From the nose back it was slippery smooth, but it in the other direction it caught to the skin of two stroking fingers. She looked up to the man. "It feels like a cat's tongue." Just as her fingertips closed on the eyes again, the black stare, the shape twitched, jerked a second time violently. The boy snatched at the tail and brought down the head and fins vigorously. Dark lines jetted over the ringing boards, scarlet spray fanned across the woman's bare legs. The boy stood guard, but it did not move again. He squeezed it beneath a bare foot, turned its white belly to the sun with stubbed toes. The curved needles of teeth hung through foaming blood in the open slit of mouth. With a tissue from her pocket, the woman wiped at her knees, shins. She took the man's elbow as she stood, whispered something at his ear, and they left the pier, her thumb rubbing again and again the palps of two fingers.



"They can't seem to forget," she laughed towards the man, rubbing two fingers with a thumb as they walked out along the strand, beneath the obscure profile of a broken moon, occasional flashes out to sea, the pier diminishing at their backs. She pointed across him to a long mass of billowing

clouds, soaring borders backmoonlit, illuminated underneath, briefly, by veils of lightning.

"It looks like a nightscape from that museum, doesn't it?" she asked.

The man cupped his free hand around the near ear, jabbed the cane twice at the surf tumbling in froth and breaking beside them.

"That's called something," she said, pointing to the darkest horizon, leaning towards him, "way out there," near shouting. "What is it?"

The night tore suddenly apart and a rippling shaft of light fell across the water towards them, as if the painter had scraped a temperamental swath, leaving the bare canvas exposed.

The man's lips appeared to shape several syllables she lost to the wind and the sea.

"It has something to do with perspective, doesn't it?"

The man shook his head at the light. Her thumb rubbed two fingers, back and forth.

They walked on, the lightning preceding them up the beach, outpacing them. The man stopped suddenly, and when she looked back at him, the cane twice stabbed the air over his shoulder. They turned. The woman looked for the line of light that would be the pier, but the distance was all black. Before they had gone many steps, the fog met them, descended over the surf, the sand.

The woman called out, "Have you ever seen anything like this before? Or nothing," then laughed aloud. She reached beside her, eased her steps one after another towards the surf, felt nothing.

Keeping the crash to her left, she went on towards where she knew the pier must be, calling out, reaching, turning back to shout above the sea. She hurried, tried to hurry, in the dark, in the sand, until something refused to give, stubbed her toes painfully back. Her fingers discovered an old piling almost buried, a corroded nail that had nearly pierced her foot, and she knew she had made the pier at least. From there she could almost make out the yellowed lights of the motel entrance, but there was no one at the desk. The elevator never came. She took the stairs two at a time, panting in the empty stairwell. The key fell, bounced from the carpet, glanced against the doorjamb. The wall switch was in the third place her hand landed; the stretching form beneath the orange blanket lay dry, snoring, drew a scaly elbow over its eyes. Her hand too rose over her head, but fell, and she with it onto the opposite bed, the breath collapsed out of her, eyes on the rising and falling outline of the form. Then she felt her covers had been turned down and felt at the blend of pillow and mattress a paper scrap. From one hand she read the single scrawled line—Knew you'd make it too. Good night—while on the other the thumb unnoticed rubbed the palps of two fingers again and again.



She asked: "When you look at the sea, what do you think of?"

"Hardly the image of eternity.

"The shark that never sleeps turns teeth towards the hapless seal.

"All that life. All that death beneath that sometimes placid surface.

"Very much like here."



Late in the morning, coming down into the lounge, they found a crowd of guests collected around the television.

"What's happened?"

"Nothing."

"Storm's coming though."

"Weather changes fast here."

The forecaster on screen spoke of a trough of low pressure that once sat off a distant coast, in another hemisphere, and sat there, before developing, swirling into a depression. Elegant rednailed fingers her pointer, she reviewed the satellite photographs. One day the mass wheeled up, slowed, downgraded, its eye winking closed as it came almost to a standstill and merely drifted across the line, then reversed itself, crazily, against the clock now. The next frame saw the eye open again, enraged and red as a polished nail, under enhancement. The passage of a short time brought arms and a tail reaching menace far into the surrounding sea.

The manager appeared from behind his counter, holding out open hands. "Please." A black mustache fell over his lips, twitched up and down. "Just enjoy yourselves. There's no knowing where the thing may go."

"You know," an older man said turning to the crowd, "thirtysome years ago this place was wiped clean out by one of them. If they was two boards left together nobody knowed because all this was water."

"It will take some days before it gets even near," the manager twitched.

"Well, maybe some folks want to get out while there's still time."

At her ear, the woman heard her companion mutter something about last resorts, but not quietly enough. Many in the crowd stared at him before trouping upstairs. From the safety of his office, the manager glared out before shutting the door.

The couple passed another afternoon in the shade of the balcony. Strand by strand, chin wrinkled on her chest, the woman carried out an examination for split ends. By an unbidden prompt of sensation, the tickle of her shampoo, she suddenly inhabited a winter night haunted by dark winds, felt on her arms the heat of his fire before which she bent and dried her hair. She was asking him if he knew any jokes. He said only the one he was living. Dropping the final tendril with a sigh, she clacked her glass on the table amid the little plates; the man closed his book on an index finger and from the shade of a longbilled painter's cap looked at her over dark glasses.

"Wouldn't packing be a good idea?"

"May as well be here."

"What are you reading now?"

He held up a broad cracked spine briefly for her inspection.

"Gibbon?" she squinted. "Gibbons? About the monkeys?"

"That's the author."

"Wouldn't you like to go see what the tide washed up today?"

"Won't it be roughly the same flotsam and jetsam as yesterday?"

"Who knows?" the woman said, smiling.

The man opened his book, nodded into it.

"True."

She waited, dozed, rose eventually, took the stairs slowly, lingered in her footsteps at the dune, eyes lifted, but he was still lying there, a book hovering over a body at rest. She walked alone through gentle breezes, saw no one among the remnants of yesterday's castles crumbling all the while. Then she heard his voice so clearly that she turned on her tracks, but it was only a remark he had made during a lecture long before: Words are the sand of thought's castles. She was not aware that she had forgotten that to remember it. Or the other way about.



Rain fell. Winds gusted and the birds ceased to fly. The manager said all would be prepared, should that be necessary, they needn't do anything. The chambermaids spoke elbow to elbow in the corridors.

"Did you understand them?"

"One said what do you expect and another said yes, it's the time of torments. As for the rest—" —he shrugged.

In the town, beneath a lowering sky the color of wet streets, the couple passed merchant windows covered with planks and boards or taped with crosses. A man, black suit glazed with water, dark hair bewildered with wind, stood at the intersection of two long avenues, his arm crooked round a corner lamppost. He opened his mouth wide, but the woman heard him only when she was close enough to see that where his eyes should have been dark they were milky white and where they should have been white they were all red. "Now does mankind reap the whirlwind." Pausing long enough to toss some coins that each rang once in a watery tray at his feet, she hurried on. Further down the way, directed by the cane, she slid coins into a paperbox and drew out the news. They stared at the ambiguous headlines, the uncertain maps, the possible paths of least atmospheric resistance and the likely routes of greatest destruction. She stepped carefully amid puddles the man seemed not to notice.

"You'll rust that ferrule too."

"That would happen anyway."

"Maybe you should get a rubber one, or plastic."

"Like they use for false feet."

When she opened the door to their room, she had to creep and reach her hand over the wall—"Wasn't the curtain open?"—until she found the switch, almost gasped in the sudden light. Sheets of wood darkened all the windows: dead eyes and ghostly forms, knots in human grains, loomed just beyond the glass.



In the night she dreamt of destruction. As if from above, she saw all the devastation carried by the broadcast, twig trees snapped, houses peeled to the elements, cars obscenely riding one another, fires the downpour would not extinguish, what looked like a stray leg.

Rats hustled their haunches through the rain. From flying debris, boughs, a muddied baby blue blanket, some head took shelter crumpled behind a leaning headstone, one hand lifted uselessly before it, a wan face bled tears from all four eye corners and her hovering ceased.



Standing at the limit of a smaller crowd, the woman tiptoed, wincing, to see the screen over their shoulders.

"Sure, glad that's over," an old man said.

"It's just the not knowing gets to you after a while," an old woman added, "until you can't stand it any more."

Tears gathered the cosmetic dust of her face and rolled it towards her chin. The old man handed her a limp handkerchief.

"Until you think you can't stand it any more," he said. "And then you do."

They watched the postmortem. Unexpectedly a strong and contrary upper atmospheric disturbance had sheared away the brunt of the cyclonic force and the storm had undergone a dissipation. The announced weather event, the forecaster announced with pursed scarlet lips, would not be occurring. On the satellite images, the curled embryo closed its eye a final time and disappeared from the screen.

The manager shouldered in beside her. "See," he began, "a whole 'nother season, the sun is already beginning to come out. You people have nothing to worry about." His open hand gestured to the seaward window, from which, at that moment, the planking fell noisily away and yellowed light streamed in. Some guests even applauded. The manager's smile shone almost through his mustache before he returned to his office and shut the door.



Sitting at the end of the bed, legs propped on a latched trunk, the man looked up when she

opened the door, then resumed snapping clippers smartly over five bare toes.

"Some of them think it's a miracle," the woman said.

"They would."

"They all thought they were going to get it this time."

The man snapped a last careful time, returned the clippers to his pocket, still staring at his feet.

"They will."

"Yes," the woman said, "they will, won't they?"

He shifted one leg to the floor, with both hands lifted the other and settled it in a chair.

"Time for this then?" She knocked on the lid of the trunk, received no response, sat at the end of the opposite bed, gazing, vaguely listening to the hollow sound as the man began tapping the cane steadily against the pallid foot in front of him. She found her mind counting twentytwo twentythree before she stood, went to the dresser and began rattling open empty drawers, one after another, top to bottom, left to right, until from one she drew out a folded brownpaper bag, enlarged it with a fist thrust inside. Releasing the clasps of the trunk, throwing up the lid, she began to stuff the bag with bright clothes.

The man watched her, lifting and dropping the cane steadily.

"Do you have everything you need?"

She hesitated, a sky blue blouse in her hand, but did not turn.

"More than a year and that's all you can say?"

"A year isn't really such a long time."

"For who?"

The hollow sound continued steadily.

"Or is it whom?"

From her sorting a yellow article tumbled out, fell to the floor. She kicked it aside with a flick of her ankle. "You gave me that. You can keep it."

"You always said this day would come." She whisked a hand over her brow. "One more thing you were right about."

The man shrugged unnoticed. "It's always best to bow to inevitability."

"You always said the fascination would wither, didn't you? Along with everything else."

He nodded. "Something like that."

"Yeah yeah. You knew all this would happen. You'd been solitary before, you'd know solitude again. You know everything. As if that made any difference. Yeah yeah you said that too."

"First you'd lose one leg, then the other, then your hands would become claws then rags and your eyes would fail. Your tongue would grow still. You'd lose your hair, your teeth, your so forth and so on, not necessarily in that order of course, everything but flatus. Isn't that it, you wouldn't be able to move, see, feel, speak, or screw, right? Just shrug and fart?"

She caught at her breath.

"You're always so shitful of rationality about everything. Did you have your heart amputated too while they were at it, or just your tear ducts?"

She turned now, held out both open hands. "Behold: the prosthetic man. Soon there won't be anything human left."

"Everyone has his failings."

"Poor pitiful. Him and all his failings. It's disgusting. You can go to hell all by yourself."

She resumed sorting, more slowly.

"You said you'd show all of the world you knew."

"That seemed the only possible promise."

"Right—that and that every mentor becomes a tormentor."

Her eyes narrowed on his profile again.

"Well to be so goddamn wise all the time, you aren't very smart. Even for a quasipod. That's the term you like to use, isn't it?"

His lips compressed, shoulders fallen. The tapping had stopped.

With a sudden lift of both hands she upended the open trunk, which had borne witness to like conversations but never yet taken such a tumbling. Both of them watched the dark clothes sprawl over the floor. Then the room was quiet once more.

"Well, do you?"

"WHAT?"

"Have everything you need."

"Enough."

She roughed the top of the bag into a closed crease, flung a small purse by the strap over one shoulder, reached the door, clapped it shut behind her, walked steadily down the hall.

"Tess."

"Resa?"

Silence again. 🐼