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CHASING THE BIRD

The hills glowed golden from the moon. An eerie wind struck warm from the west, sounding cold. The poet watched the motel rooms of his neighbors from a balcony, the glow of televisions through identical drapes, listened to children being put to sleep, chloroformed by songs, by water, by shouts and rubdowns, by threats, watched and listened as he smoked. A small courtyard light which kept thieves away would give him enough light, after the others were asleep, and he would sit nude in the wind and write.

The college had brought him to speak as a poet but by the time he’d arrived two days ago, he’d already decided he was something else, sad to be limited to words. He had learned some piano by ear and thought he would read and play free-form music along with his poems. It was in his nature to resist the expectations of others, even if he had created them himself.

Twice on the tour he had showed up for his readings without his manuscript and demanded that the audience produce found poetry for him. They thought he was being eccentric, but word had gotten out and this college had provided a “guide” to keep him from changing formats. Still, he’d insisted on the grand piano, a nine foot piano which had to be hoisted onto the stage with two fork lifts. The guide carried his black folder with all the poetry stashed inside. They watched.

“If you think there’s any order in there, you’re out of your mind.” He played with the awed young college student. Once he snatched it from under his arm and went running behind one of the janitors where he asked for a match.

“Boo, you didn’t even chase me. No one is doing their job, why should I?” He sailed the manuscript through the air at the guide.

“When I believe,” he roared at the audience later that night, “everybody believes.”

“When I fear, everybody fears. Do you believe?” he’d screamed, thinking of Ray Charles.

“Yes,” they answered, but the rattling of their throats startled him. There seemed to be more in there and he considered asking them to scream together until he noticed his friend Bullfight standing in the wings holding his hands as if there was a book in them.
Steven Flick

“This is like a tent meeting, a revival,” he said, tilting the mike to his mouth, “and I am just the excuse for your energy.” He walked around the piano improvising piano poems, simulating sex with the piano, until finally he sat down on the bench and opened his black folder.

“I wrote this poem thirty times,” he said, “it stinks, I’m going to burn it.” Out of the corner of his eye he could watch the faces of Bullfight’s colleagues and was tickled, encouraged by some real shock.

He pulled out three aborted letters to foundations, struck the long matches on his Levis and lit the pages. The audience gasped like a giant billows. Then he stood up: “You see how you need to believe? I’m testing you, goddam it, and you let me. Now I'll stop and read you some poems.” What he had done made him tremble. There was no one to hold one but oneself. The possibilities seemed endless.

The aftermath cost him. He had to concentrate hard to overcome the fear of reprisal. Afterwards he went to the party given by Bullfight, a second rate writer who’d acquired a position at the college with one book written fifteen years ago, by showing bullfight movies and telling Hemingway stories. During the summer Bullfight lectured on vacation boats to Mexico to make alimony payments. His first wife had gored him in court.

“I admire your work,” Bullfight had said.

“Come on, play the piano. You thought I was going to humiliate you.”

...“You paid your two dollars to suspend your belief,” he’d told the audience, “suspend, suspend.”

“I'll improvise a poem for you. Give me a word, a subject, a feeling. I'll find the words to make you see what's been lost.”...

Voices beyond the balcony startled him. Four men in bermudas and tee-shirts held big flashlights on the golf course next to the motel. A ball squirted from the dark and stopped near the cup. Their Setter sniffed the uncut grass at the edge of the fairway, searching for rabbits. Downstairs a woman coughed and blew her nose.

He'd left the party after the spaghetti. “Too much Scotch, too much olive oil, one glass of cheap wine. I can’t get sick here, no one to take care of me. I blew it; I made them one body for two hours and now I'm alone.” The guide had left him once the poet had been delivered to the podium.

It galled him to be a man who had to decide to puke. Bullfight’s new wife had lain her thigh against his while he’d sat on their stairs,
wrestling with this decision. She was a strange, overweight woman who'd worn a brown, flowered muu-muu and thought he was being sensitive while he had only fought a stomach preparing to reverse itself.

She patted his leg when he got up to go outdoors. "Just a nice patch of lawn is all I need," he thought. Several blocks away he lay down on the night grass in the neighborhood; lights of cars took him in briefly and let him go.

"If one person had come up out of the crowd, I wouldn't have come to the party," he thought. In his coat pocket was a vial with twenty-nine tabs of mild acid and one cyanide pill, all made to look alike. He fingered the slim container with its child-proof top. It seemed to feel good having the choice to continue or not. He was going to start taking them the next night in his motel room.

He got a finger down his throat. To his right was a small water main valve box. He lifted the top and covered the pipes with his cookies. "Just not through the nose, god," he'd prayed, then, "god spare me the physical pain, I'll take care of the moral pain." He got up and spotted a restaurant where he bought coffee and some Certs, careful not to breathe on the checker. He walked around Bullfight's house several times, numb from the alcohol, his cheeks and extremities tingling in the night air.

... The golf course men talked and he could hear their words helped by the indiscriminate channel of the wind.

"Nice putt Char."

"Didn't I tell you it would work? You stop thinking about where the bunkers are. Like being blind."

"No waiting in the clubhouse."

"I miss driving, that's what gets me off."

A figure approached the phosphorescent golf ball on the green close to where the poet watched from his room. The flashlights turned on him and made a path to the hole. He heard the click of the putter and could trace the ball. The golfer missed, groaned, then sunk a two footer, his legs illuminated like a dance hall girl's in a spotlit theatre.

"I miss the broads," said the man plucking out the shining ball. "Who knows what'll turn up if we play at night?" said another in the foursome.

They all laughed and took their lights down the next fairway. He felt an envy for them, their simplicity, the knowledge of their limits. He opened his journal and put the pills on one of the blank pages.
"Pharmaceutical roulette," he began to scribble, "it's the only true form I've contributed to poetry, multi-media of course.

Bullfight's colleagues, startled at first, were impressed by the way his crowd responded. They offered him a teaching job. He wanted to call and accept but he was afraid the wife would answer instead, that she would force herself on him and ruin his plans.

"Plans," he thought, "I might be dead!" For years he had been the _enfant terrible_, fighting schools, fighting foundations, fighting everything in the fear that relaxation would damage his writing.

"I just can't see you grading papers, going to meetings," Bullfight had said, "I just can't see you taking any shit."

No one saw him in need. That was how he played it, but he felt tired, ready to take his dose, to eat a little shit and be comfortable.

"Able to be comforted, I am not; this is mistaken as a sign of strength, of independence."

... "What made you become a poet?" The woman who asked him the question would have gone home with him, he realized, remembering the look on her face. She didn't want an answer.

"I have a need to be heard," he said, "if no one has heard you, you have to say it better and better until no one can misunderstand. I am living the most hopeful life possible, that is, trying to make a living by writing about myself." That's not it, he thought, that's after the fact. I want an answer, one I can accept, and I want it tonight. I should have told them my plans, it would have been more honest. My mother is why I write poetry. If I didn't know better, I'd think this was a nervous breakdown.

He dumped the pills from journal to his bed, looking at the phone to save him, waited for a knock at the door to keep him from being alone and forcing himself to make this decision. This waiting, he knew, had always kept his work from being great; if one is distracted, one may have someone to blame.

... "Such punishment for escape," he'd mumbled drunkenly to Bullfight's Irish Setter. He stroked it on its haunches. It was a young dog with a brown-orange coat and seemed starved for affection. The petting aroused it and the dog grasped his leg for a hump before he beat it off. He felt disgusted by its need, by the feel of the animal's member against his knee. Then he'd laughed and thought two things; misunderstood again! and, this could be funny if I had a sense of humor. He shut the door on the dog and returned to the party.

The bullfight movie was ending. The lights went up gradually as he
heard Bullfight say, "Hem was in the audience, he was present in the operating room and talked to the stricken youth. There were tears in his eyes when he came to me and said he'd never be friends with a matador again."

Another reel was put on, the short one where Bullfight gets in the ring himself. He looked tall and graceful then; the poet could trace the shy, almost effeminate way of walking, the cautious imitation of the strutting matadors which had sanction and place in the ring. Facing the bull, a little swish could be excused.

Bullfight joked, narrating the silent film; he made fun of himself and promised to show his scar when the movie was over. "They said I could've worn the suit," he interrupted, "but my first wife objected." The genteel group tittered. The poet had a momentary wish for some movies of his own, some proof that he had evolved, had contributed. There were only two small books, some tapes in university libraries, and moments of love with two or three people. "And the writing," he added, trying to be positive, "the writing. . ."

He lined the pills up in three rows of ten, closed his eyes and picked one. He had been promised, by his chemist friend in New York, that the acid would be mild. The chemist had a worried look as he handed them over. "I'm killing you, in effect," he said, "don't pin me if you snuff yourself."

"You have made this possible, it's true," the poet told him, "but it's my problem that I've chosen to try it." Blame it on anyone, he thought, blame it on the pusher. He picked number one, in the left, top row, scooped up the pills and put the cover on the bottle, sucking the pill from his flat palm like a horse eating sugar.

"Three point three percent chance of dying tonight," he thought, "and I don't feel a thing."

The phone rang. He listened to Bullfight's wife making her case, at the same time, he studied his body to see if he were about to die. What if I croaked on the phone? She would think I was really sensitive. Bullfight was gay, he was frozen, he was bitter, he was through. You have some life left, she said, I'm not ready to give up.

Could she come over?
No, he was still recovering.
Could they meet tomorrow?
Not if I'm dead, he thought, but said he would be writing.
He took his clothes off while she droned on. The story of unmet needs, hers, placed a knot in his back. I'm a poet, he wanted to say,
not a psychologist. People are supposed to listen to me. He grew conscious of his anger, thinking that. As much as he wrote, as many people who came to his readings, when someone got close, they never seemed to hear him, to be able to contend with his anger. His mother hated his work, said she was ashamed of the sex in it. The first wife had simply ignored the fact that he knew he would be poor, stopped taking her pills and had a child. He left a month after it was born. In lieu of making other mistakes, he kept on the go, had affairs, and never committed himself. A weight was on his work which hadn't been there before his marriage; the pressure to succeed, to justify himself. Acquaintances thought he was a listener; like Bullfight's wife, he thought, like my mother, and he expected them to know he wanted the same in return.

"If you're unhappy, you should leave old Bullfight. Besides, you shouldn't tell me, you should tell him." Just like my mother! She had told him everything his own father should have heard, made him someone the father couldn't be. He wrote in the journal, "Some footsteps are so large you don't know you're in them."

What feels good after you've done it, was the favorite Hemingway quote of Bullfight; does death feel good? Was that what he was after? . . . Students had gathered at his feet; what order he could make out of words would be destroyed if they had known the disorder of his life. That's what made him sick to think about. The limit of words is your behavior. He couldn't bear to write it down.

"What about Zen?" one asked. For Western Man only an escape. "You believe, then, your ego, your poet's ego is enough to get by on?"

"No, or I wouldn't be here talking to you, would I? It is simply my job to make you see with words." A laborer with words, bringing hope to the people. There was some reality to that one, he felt, it made him feel useful, masculine . . . so what followed? He got drunk, puked, covered up his pain and here he was waiting to die. He clocked his heartbeat, listening to the arid, parched voice of the senora, trying not to tell her he'd swallowed a pill.

A lucid twinge of mirth started in his lower bowel, followed by a succulent wave of release moving upwards into his belly and brain. The upper body joined to the lower as his room exploded into the present through the sound of the curtains giving way to a warm wind he felt washing over his skin. A thin membrane seemed to slide from his whole body and rested like an amnionic sac at his feet. A laugh,
like a child’s after a pillow fight, after a tickle, ballooned in his torso, floated to tears several times and back to laughter again. Her words took on the quality of sensuous strokes on his eardrums and their content did not drain his energy.

“It’s not my time,” he yelled deliriously into the phone, “my time is not nigh!”

Now she was silent. “You see? You hear me now. To register I must scream. I’m going to give in to you on one condition,” he whispered, “you have to take acid with me.” She was afraid but she would come. She was ashamed of her body. He would make her feel unashamed but only after she had taken the risk.

He said goodbye to his work. “His work understands, it is a friend, it loves him.” He walked to the edge of his balcony after turning off the lights in his room. Over in a corner apartment the drapes shifted in the open window. He stood proudly naked, staring out over the golf course, glancing sideways. Was someone watching? The curtain moved rhythmically—flap, flap, swish.

“The breath comes like the wind without thinking. The thinking should govern something else and I’ll find it, what should be governed and what should not, and when I find it, I can tell them what I’ve found.”

The curtain succumbed to his right and folded itself against the sliding glass door in the dark room. That disappointed him; he wanted to be watched, hoping someone was curious enough to look, to make his exposure worthwhile.

“I can’t stay here with Bullfight,” he thought, “this will change everything, this risk is my reality, that is the gift and the bomb.”

He looked at the bottle on his dresser, his mood dipping in a shady place. The bottle seemed to have an aura. Light from the courtyard over his shoulder made it a translucent yellow. “That’s what I should govern,” he said shocking the room with his own voice. He felt too good to die. He wanted her to feel good too, the way he imagined she would when she was finished with the test. “I’ll rule these lights, this plumbing, I’ll rule my mouth; I’ll rule what stares back and says ‘rule me’.”