

## Theft and Ennui

It's raining. Outside my window the grill I cooked dinner on the previous night is getting wet. After moving it in I stand there on the porch wishing I could write out on the covered deck this morning, yet I feel that I will get a worse chill than I already have. The rain is generating that perfect white noise that an even, steady beating on hundreds of leaves tends to make; that noise heard between radio stations of low static. I suppose that I understand what "between stations" means. The temperature is perfect for standing there with my cup of coffee and shivering, but it is not so good for running, so I put off the morning run to an afternoon run. I also put off doing any real work at my keyboard and know that instead I will sort through my internal landscape on it this morning.

Before I can begin sorting through the theft, and words I use to explain it, I keep sneaking back out onto the deck to try and keep just this exact level of chill and this exact level of static and these exact over-painted green images in my mind. I see wet trees and the hill descending down to the lake and the mist subtly altering the colors as the distance shares muted greens in gentle distinction as they fall away from my vision completely. These scenes are so beyond what really exists I note and again cynically tell God that his technique is good but he tends to idealize his subject. His reality always seems to surpass even the most amazing watercolor pastoral landscapes, and this morning is evidence of that, and I continue taking little trips outside with my mug to offer my small complaints.

Rather than running or working I attend to the dishwasher as it has helped tidy up the evidence. Two wine glasses, three forks, three plates. Already clean, these dishes each are reminders of the meal that Tess and I made. We two, conspirators, in our plans to pry another person into our busy world with our food and drink and crayons. We rightly hoped that if we set the table like we always do, but we added another place for a guest that we could feed her and also perhaps prize from her even better art supplies. Further complicity in our evening's events as we cut and draw and paste and concentrate tiny fingers on our projects. So each dish I set back up into the cupboard now takes with it its proof of the perfect crime. Each cup tells its cup story of how she smiled while taking a drink and she held it in her hand. This is a collaboration of me and my young blonde charge in pulling someone else into our circle to enjoy the pleasures in which we revel all the time, without letting her know that we want her cool art supplies and her company. We trick her by allowing her to help set the table, and Tess even does the unthinkable and allows her to sit between us two.

Now I put the third plate away and there is no proof that she was here, but her paper cutter and stick-on butterflies are still on the coffee table. We keep the loot, but as the dishes are put away I erase all evidences of our victim, even though we cruelly keep even the cards she crafted with us. But for Tess, whose faery charms and motives are always suspect there is also that she will now get the serving maid from the deal. While our guest thought she came for dinner, she is now made to give the young princess her bath, and there will be candles around the tub, and it will be a long bath, and she will need to be dried, dressed and have her hair brushed. Oh yes, and also bed-time stories and reading much and long. Having had her child's way, she drifts off to sleep, and guilty father sits idle in the next room.

My part in this is similar to that of the princess, as I too hoped to lure her here and but then steal away her words and thoughts while Tess gets the new packages of construction paper. Tess does her work of wearing her down and distracting her and now I get to ask her all of the things that I want to know. While Tess and I work like accomplished and practiced thieves, sadly there are so few victims. Probably no more than several dozen; or, well, a handful, OK, to be frank we have only this one, but we had another. But it should not be taken as any fault of ours that we are so picky about who our marks are. We are too discriminating. Tess wants nice, but not syrupy. I mean not adults who are like in your face with the look-I-am-talking-to-a-kid, sort of Barney nice. She wants smart but not boring smart; interested-in-you, but also sort of interested-in-themselves; grown-ups who remain grown-ups and don't use that childish tone, but who, rather than talking like they are six, tend to think like a six-year old. And that is complex not simple. Tess also has a list of the types of art supplies she is after, and without questioning she can deduce this. She is best though at gauging kindness. Lots better than me.

As for me, well my list is shorter than hers. I like four things: A.) smartness, B.) beauty, C.) strength, D.) kindness (and wit comes under the heading of smartness). I am afraid that I have been a bit more concerned with B than D in the past several years and have stumbled on lots of A, but really not a great deal of C. I am a note taker and collector so when I meet people I covertly jot down in self-directed inventory what a person has that we might want to filch. I want to find a way to write this so that it sounds unselfish and even admirable. But that is like some Dickens tale where the Fagin tells the Oliver Twist that there is nobility to swiping from others. So I am looking for my favorites while Tess looks for hers we adopt them for our own gain.

We lure these unsuspecting people over to do art, steal their supplies and then I get to soak them for all of the thoughts that they have that I so much want to know. Our other adoption was Shirley Solms. I have just lost her, my sweet friend who, at 89, died this year. She was the epitome of my list and Tess'. She was beautiful as anyone I have ever known. By saying that I mean that she was as beautiful as anyone I have ever known. She had lots and lots of art supplies. She would take untold numbers of trips to Wal-Mart for more. She was wholly kind and she was wholly smart, and she was strong. When she was eighteen she was the May Queen of her town, back when towns had May Queens. And Tess loved her company and I loved her words. We would sneak into her world and spend hours drawing and writing and being forced to eat ice cream and drink Sprite. I miss her.

Thinking about breakfast I look in the fridge where I find other over-looked evidence. A couple of Tupperware leftovers remind me of last night's victim. How she does not drink with her meal, and how she laughed so easily and slid so much attention to her right where Tess sat and told us both stories. I have her image in my mind as she pulled her black sweater on and off her shoulders as she warmed with the laughing and cooled again. As I close the refrigerator I can tell this morning will not be about doing the paperwork that needs doing, but will be this series of reminders that keep making that evening's events linger while I come to terms with unrepentant guilt for stealing the stickers and the fancy scissors and then hours of her words.

I suppose that in writing there are column inches, but when talking, words are measured in minutes, like water is measured in gallons, and weight in pounds. I stole four hours away from her, each word secretly taken and wrapped in some colorful tissue, and hidden away like we have hidden her scissors. She gives me sentences that I get to hold and bring out later. She shared paragraphs of ideas. Are ideas then measured in paragraphs, even when we are talking? Or did she give me two and a half cups of words? Or maybe with words they are measured like geese, by the flocks, uncounted flying by overhead? Well I saw many flocks of ideas and thoughts all through the evening. But I suppose that I should not mix these metaphors beyond recognition. Her words were the spoils that I was interested in collecting. They were then, these prizes from her and I carefully wrapped and hid them away.

The fireplace set the mood for my theft. In front of the hearth it was warm enough that she again pulled off the sweater showing her smooth skin and continued to tell me about her fears and her past and after these years she ended up where she is now and how this is good, and how this is bad. She described herself with the language of superlatives. Not vain at

any level but by reaching the center only by math. All of her goods were bests. All of her bads were worsts, so that in one breath she might have said both. The strongest, the most driven, and the laziest with no ambitions. She has joy and pleasure that is full and boundless coupled with despair and that sets her against some cold reasonless existence. Her childhood was the happiest and the most harrowing. These stings of words and these views and the way she packages them all spoke of a person who knows her story but will not hint at the moral. She does not know how well she speaks. But she knows well who she is. There were layers of honesties that she willingly gave over. Plot without theme so far, and I studied her words and tried not to be distracted by the smooth shoulder.

I smiled as I collected more words and then ended up sharing mine. Not clever, I felt like the pick pocket, who upon walking away with a stolen wallet notices that his own was taken during the exchange. She had me and my little stories as well. But worse than all I found myself dropping any distances that I would have liked to keep for myself and handed her the words that I try to keep to myself. While I do see speaking with her like going to some Japanese shrine and taking the bread or rice offerings left to their gods and stealing it to devour myself, I also try and keep my words to be given over at the right time for the right purpose. While stealing her ideas and thoughts is my crime, it is not that I am dishonest with my own words. But I try to hold them tightly but then lose them over to her as they slip from my mouth to hers.

Then she kissed me. Lost in her words and my thoughts, I had slipped into the low hum and reverie that I so enjoy after the second glass of cabernet and the company of someone who does not know that I am collecting their every thought and nuance. But I had missed this nuance. The shoulder was on my mind but so too were the dozens of flocks of word that had flown through my internal sky. I was dealing with the intoxication of her story, and there is of course a joining of stories that seldom happens, as her words slip over mine. Her ideas and joys meet my dreams and fears. These stories that we tell do make a certain celibate love and I am aware of this. My secrets and hopes intertwine with hers descriptions and all of the nouns give way to all of the adjectives and then those amazing verbs come to play bringing the delightful adverbs to give intensifiers to actions.

The word epiphany coupled with a word for drunkenness may exist in some language. But I do not know that language. In her Spanish things may be said for which she has no English counterpart, and I love hearing the words as they spill over me. And now I try to coin some words that may well exist in French. Words that would describe when you get all you

can hold in thoughts and insight, which are spirit and mind, and this is joined to an unanticipated affection, that is not received but given like a sheet pulled tight and filled with purple fragrant petals, all dumped at once over you and you can do little more than smile or laugh. That was how I felt, but there is no concise way of saying it. I was tipped over. All the words that help me hold on slip by, and I cannot lose myself in this. Not tonight. So I stammer and clutch to sentences and paragraphs as they float by and grasp to try to right myself. I am not able to clutch any passing wreckage of the words and I begin to flounder.

Unlike her, I can't find anywhere to place this. I am trying to hide away little thoughts and ideas and smiles that she has. By taking these delicate wisps and folding them and slipping them into my mind for later consideration I give order to my emotions and try to apply substance to those things that have none. I try and find ways to measure flocks into cups and they do not convert. But this is my world. For her there is naturalness to this because I am another person on a given night and there is a casual affection. But for me, I am stealing grains of sugar and she has dropped me in the bowl. I know that I cannot have the bowl, and that later I will not be able to remember a taste as I remember her shoulder. So I immediately grieve her leaving. This is the emotionally addictive part of me who knows that recovery means that we hold it all lightly. We do not allow ourselves to fall into the sugar bowl, because once covered in her, in her words, in her kisses, in her soft voice, in her responses, in her sighs and in her smiles, who could want to be anywhere else? But she can't know this.

I struggle to bring my head up from this torrent of thoughts and feelings and actions, and manage to regain myself. I begin to be aware again. I notice that with her, with this delight, there is a correlate to her conversation in her affection. She is at intervals wholly there and wholly away. She is playful and present and then she is removed and distinct. I am trying to see through my own internal rapids and think that maybe there is the average here that is a mathematical center to her in my arms as well. Maybe she is wholly both at all times, and the average is where others are? Does she see herself as the best and the worst here also? I can barely see above the next crest so I have little time to know. The best I can do is know that I will have to consider this later when I can begin to try and reduce the skyline of her words full and all flying to some Southern locale in my mind's eye. I will also need to find ways to steel myself to ever kissing her again, and to never kissing her again. She does not and cannot know that I am trying to enjoy little parts of her, and kissing her is more than I can want. More than I can bear perhaps.

The word ennui is adopted into English for a reason, as we need to describe some lingering melancholy. I have need of a word that describes the conflicted enjoyment of this feeling. Because I already miss her. I have already told her goodbye in my mind and now try to remember the taste of sugar as I remember her shoulder. I smile as I remember a line that I had read to her from another poem that night, "if ever we die we do not live." So as this acolyte to temporality I immediately sense the loss of anything that I would like to keep and for which I will be lessened by not having. In missing what I cannot keep, like all addicts, I derive my pleasure from the concept of the drug more than the taking of it. And she cannot begin to understand this, how by trying to steal some thoughts and words my evening came to be more than I could find anyway to respond well to. Like the child expecting a doughnut who walks through a pastry shop, and in seeing so much they can't be happy but instead they cry.

I turn on the CD player, and take out the evidentiary music that was playing that night, and choose the CD she had on in her car. Like an adolescent I milk the ennui a bit more before I finish and then go and hide our ill-gotten art supplies. I have a sense that I am not where I was and am not where I will be. I feel like that radio dial between stations, with no clear tune, but the white noise. My usual way of knowing where I am, I get from Tess. She is not here today, and I am supposed to be doing something else other than enjoying a memory stream. As I pull out those words that I stole from our guest to unwrap and look at again. But I will do this for just another minute and then I am done. OK, now I will stop thinking about her. OK now. Well maybe after lunch, when I eat that leftover steak.