
Ariadne's Dancing Ground

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(This is an excerpt from Di Leo's Garage. The speaker has lost track of his companion. A door opens into the garage.)

I.

The garage door rose in rusty grooves. Brown water, still and sandy, flowed gently as entering tide, packed the lot, forced its boundaries back, and back further until the walls were dawn sky, pink at the lower rim and pulsing with hydraulic motion, a living engine with a lunar heart hung on a horizon scrubbed clean and lightless. The rising spread of water quieted a flock of sea birds, whose circling kept to the horizon's edge until they disappeared and there was shore of no kind visible. Warm mud oozed at my feet. I stood out of all sight of land entirely alone, up to my knees in water.

My shadow or reflection radiated out in all directions, branching starlike from livid gray trunk of my legs and feet, cleaned by the water. Abandoned in this silent desert I yearned to wash myself, to scrub Tom's metaphor off, but was so disoriented that I feared submersion would sweep me away, even this still shallows. No guess or knowledge where I was: only the sense I was at the center of wherever I was; was twenty inches below sea level, though I might be on a ledge surrounded by chasms miles deep; that I needed washing; that Tom was gone.

I trembled, afraid to cry out, convinced drowning or the rolling snap of shark's jaws, waited for me if I lowered myself. But I stooped, September Morn, and splashed at myself; tested my footing's size,

squatted down, sat, and then lay full length, rolled side to side, scrubbed head and face, confident I would regret it. Nothing happened. A cloud of chunky slime slid away, diffused into the water and dissipated. Transparent fingerlings began grazing at it and nipping my skin. I sat up, feeling foolish, determined to make some sensible move. I must apply my intelligence, find my way somewhere.

We on the east coast on the New World, by instinct, in a predicament like mine, think land is to the west. I recalled I had seen pink dawning in the sky, whose sun should guide me. I looked up. The pink staining extended unbroken, evenly, around me and at every point I looked a sun was rising, no two suns being visible at the same time, but each new quest for orientation finding its own sun. My horror was complete. I rubbed, beat my eyes to correct them, without success. I clenched my lids, tested the air for wind, discovered a slight breeze was moving away from me in all directions.

Having no reference, I longed to doubt my senses but they were clear and pure. Each nuzzling mouth of fish rang like a bell on my skin; taste of salt, crystal; the silence vivid to my ears; colors of sea, sky, infinite suns, accurate and even lovely. Defiantly I began walking without aim, testing the bottom in case of sudden shelving. The depth did not change. The thought of night overtaking me here was panic worse than my present panic. I realized then for all the effort of walking through this desert I could not move. I was my only reference point, a center that changed as easily as I moved.

Noticing that my walking disturbed the sandy bottom, I thought at least to retrace my steps following the cloudy trail; looked down; I saw it

leading away in each direction as I looked.
The suns were higher. Only when they meet at noon
will there be one, I thought bitterly. Then I'll know
which way up is. I howled. There was no direction
to howl in, only out of myself. And the sound
terrified me since it had no meaning, echo.
It seemed, how can I say it? proof of delusion
originating in myself, beating its sound
against an unreceptive emptiness of air.

I realized there was no substantial
difference between the sound of my howling and not.
Stopping, I felt the same grating on lungs, windpipe;
the same quaver of stretched neck tendons, and no shape
in the voicing. I was possessed by my own scream.
Scream was my name. Scream was my filament of life,
all that remained. I had no name any more, nor
species, except fear and rage; and enormous thirst.
I plunged my head into the water and drank.
It was as if I drank silence: a salt silence
fish have rubbed their bodies against. I drank
and breathed; heard the scream hiss like fire; drank and
breathed in.

I became puzzled by a bubble. It was moving
along the bottom sand near the disturbances
my frantic splashing made. Larger than the others
it moved as if it had its own will, pushing up
like worm cast or burrowing mollusk. And it grew
while I watched, grew with speed, a dark ovate pressure
hurtling up at me. I lifted my hands and arms
to protect my face as it breached the surface, flipped
over: gray wooden skiff, dingy, streaming water,
a mess of stunned crabs gasping, wrestling with each other
in its well; an old man poling in the stern;
and Tom, a passenger, in the prow with a net.

“We were looking for you,” Tom said. “Maybe you dropped my hand. I recognized you by your feet and voice. It’s hard among all the others. Get in.” I climbed over the boat’s precarious dipping side, sat amongst the crabs, dizzy, gasping at air like them. “What do you mean, *All the others*,” I shouted. “Look,” Tom said. The soft air burned at my lungs and eyes. Through the still surface of the sea I had climbed from thousands of people were walking. On every side of the boat as far as I could see, miles, it was the same thing, women and men walking in different directions, at different speeds, naked; and they never touched.

They seemed not to see each other. Also I noticed they walked at different depths, even next to each other. One woman’s breasts furrowed the surface. Beside her (they did not see each other), a man’s bald head’s top moved solitary as a turtle’s hump. Approaching and passing him was a young girl, only whose ankles were immersed. Such thousands where I had been alone anarchic chaos should have resulted: each kept an utter independence, peaceful and somnolent for the most part, though a few of them yelled now and then, soundlessly, their heads stretched back like chickens swallowing. Some leaned over and gurgled.

I hated knowing I had been in there with them; clutched the side of the boat. Crabs scuttled over me. I got up, sat on the center seat. The old man chewed and spat brown juice over the side, into the face of a middle-aged woman three feet away, who did not pause or blink. “You can do anything you want to them and they don’t take offense,” the old man chuckled, poking at one with his pole, who just veered as if he’d thought of it himself. “Which way now, Boss?” he asked Tom; and Tom, as I craned at him to look, pointed over my shoulder, making me turn again. “But let’s flip over. I’m starting to lose my grip.”

“Don’t capsize us,” I screamed. I grabbed Tom’s knee and begged,
“Where are we? Which direction is land? Those people who seem so real: what’s happening to them all?”
“There’s plenty of dry land above us,” Tom answered, pointing down into the water. “And these people are walking on it. Each is buried as deeply in water as he or she believes. You’re lucky you thought yourself only up to your knees. You might have drowned yourself. These people are living somewhere. Washing here has restored your ignorance somewhat. You’ll find money under your tongue. Pay the old man and he’ll pole us across the water to the shore.”

2.

The two quarters I found under my tongue made me think of Washington crossing the Delaware river, dangerous icy crossing between two armed camps of starving men. I handed them to the old man. He put them into his own mouth, testing the alloy by taste, and pocketed them in his jeans. Scrawny bleached man, with grizzled chin whiskers and ragged hair. His lean arms poled the skiff with practical speed, a path remarkably opening for us between the random courses of strolling people. The sun had reached its zenith and was one sun again straight overhead. Our wake radiated to all sides

as far as I could see. Even ahead, it streamed away vigorously. “At your insistence,” Tom said, “we remain under the earth’s crust, inverted. The surface, being convex, not concave as you thought, extends indefinitely, striving to parallel the planet’s outer surface. We’re skating on it as on the reverse side the granite continents

drift on their rafts of basalt." I paid no attention, but did remember what he said. I was intrigued by what appeared to be a land mass, or low cloud, toward which we were heading. I thought it highland, obscured partly by sea-colored mist, then saw the sea sloped

up to it, and we beached on a black gravel bar leading to black rock cliffs twenty feet high. Here there was no sign of the crowds of people. It was desolate: lizards, sea birds. Tom and I got out. The old man poled away. He had not said another word. "He'll spend my money on rotgut," I tried joking. The place defied joking. Sullen waves washed up at it. To my relief my vision was corrected. At least I could tell a difference between one direction and another. I'd learned to have only one shadow. "The money's for your benefit," Tom said. "Do you care if he drinks it?"

Looking around, I doubted the place was worth four bits: black rock seaweed and lichen trespassed on; a glint of mica or fresh water, I could not tell which at this distance, on the cliff face; likely deposits of guano, but no way to exploit that; a wind rising that felt as black and hard as the black rock. I was conspicuous in my light gray pink-splotched skin. Tom, in his working browns, enjoyed protective coloration, like the lizards, who tumbled, flopped about the rocks, and in the water. Some bellowed or squealed like horses. Fighting over strands of weed or fish, they bit at each other; they thrashed their tails.

"We're making for that vertical splash of silver you notice on the cliff to our left," Tom told me, taking my hand and tugging with some impatience, not caring much about the lizards, I figured. I let him lead me: a grown man holding a grown man by the hand, like little kids on holy cards

loomed over by gold sunsets and guardian angels. The gravel shingle was painful on my bare feet and I was obliged to go slowly. Behind us the sun was hot. A cold wind blew in our faces, it seemed out of the cliff itself. I was too tired to inquire what the plan was; if we might make camp.

We trudged along the bank laterally. Even so it was on a constant upward incline, gradual, yet not raising us higher above sea level. I panted and strained like a rat on a treadmill in a testing lab, and I found I was relying on my companion's greater stamina and skill, letting him pull me along somewhat, making me lighter, in effect. Very slowly the gleaming slash seemed to grow nearer, and as we approached there was increased activity of the seabirds: terns, gulls, skuas in the air, wheeling; cormorants and floods of the small birds who run at the sea's edge.

To my eyes it appeared the dazzle in the cliff attracted birds in the same way it attracted us. Their screamings saturated the sandy wind. Arriving at a point perpendicular to it, we turned toward the cliff, up the black gravel, the birds spattering, wheeling, screaming around us, as if we were the welcome arc of fish guts, heads and slop tossed from a bucket over the dragger's stern end. But since we lived and were large, their dives were cut back, disappointed, continually; tried once again with new screams of deluded hunger. I feared for my eyes and vulnerable parts.

Her presence obscured by the chaffy raucous swirl, ancient body concealed in white drapery, a few paces before us, and blocking the blazed cliff face, an old woman swayed. I snatched both my hands over my genitals. Tom stopped still and I stopped.

The old woman came up to us, circled by her chorus of birds.

She swayed, as I said, gracefully and slowly, like an ancient tree, acknowledging both its material presence, and the wind. She bowed under her winged canopy, and Tom bowed.

“Bastard,” she yelled, shaking her fist in the slow rhythm of her formal solitary dance. “You bastard, you think you’ll slide in again now, do you?” She paused. “It’s not who you think,” Tom said. “It’s Tom, with a man who’s looking into starting his education.” “My eyes aren’t what they were,” she faltered. “I can’t see anything but a white haze. You want to go in?” She turned, beckoned us to follow. With the massed birds it felt like a triumphal procession of heroes through animated ticker tape. Stately music I could not hear informed the woman’s waving arms, the tilt of her head, twisting shifts of her body.

She led us to the opening in the cliff face, rock so polished by the passage of wings it shone silver; a narrow opening that looked blasted purposely, not like a natural fissure. I saw she had a hut made of planks and driftwood next to the opening. She stood there rocking, waved us to pass. I looked past her through the opening, barely wide enough to drive a car through, and saw it led to an open space of gravel, beyond it sheer cliff again equally high, higher. The space was open to the sky, not, as I had expected, the start of an underground tunnel.

Within it was an enormous crowd of people dancing, naked like me, in rhythmic gyrations, patterns of great complexity, and without resting. They vaulted one over another, bowed, made arches

of backs or legs for others to tumble over
or to pass under without breaking pace. The very old,
the young and even children mingled in the dance,
their different paces and strengths interacting.
One strong woman carried an old man on her back
and vaulted like the others, her hand pivoting
their weight over a boy's bent back. Their bodies flashed,
gleaming with sweat, through cliff shadow to sunlight.

I stared in at them. Now the old woman started speaking.
"Under my veil he'll find the seven deep burn scars
of the seven stars I wore: in my uterus
the seven scars my children fell from, the first his.
After I'd led him through my dancing ground safely
he ate the meat of my betrayal, savior
turncoat, one of the seven men and seven women
tribute. He with the blood and hair of his victim,
and my own secret blood, on him: snatched the tribute
and myself, who delivered my secret to him:
and dropped me, drenched with his holy sperm.
Go in. The place is vacant now, but for dancers."

3.

"The maze has twelve rings. Each is larger than the last
until you reach the center ring, stone prison lair
of the god who is beast and man, who has been killed.
From each ring twelve corridors branch out, each of which
except one leads into a maze of twelve concentric
rings, from each of which twelve corridors lead, and so forth.
You have crossed the first two and are now entering
the third. When the savior comes again, as he must,
I'll show him back to the center and leave him there.
Let him feast alone on the bones he abandoned.
Or I'll wind the strand of yarn marking the escape
into a ball, and neither of us will return."

She began wailing. Her eyes were blind of tears. Not for a moment had she paused in her weaving slow gyrations and gesturings. While we stood there a young man walked out of the water, stunned as a sleepwalker, holding his hands and arms out, and made his way up the beach past us; bashed full tilt into the cliff, and caromed back like a pool ball, forward again and straight into the pocket, where he stopped, rubbed his eyes, exclaimed at the circling dance joyously, found a partner and commenced dancing, disappeared leaping and tumbling as if all his life he'd practiced for this moment. I was confused, shy.

I am no dancer myself. I can't make my ears, feet, legs and torso coincide in any set pattern, and am too self-conscious and too clumsy to abandon myself in front of an audience. "I can't do it," I said to Tom, hanging back. But Tom dragged me, struggling, into the passageway where the wind stopped dark as if a knife had cut it, and to the edge of the plain filled with the dancers. I stood like a non-swimmer on the high diving board over a tank filled with sharks. "I can go with you or leave you here," Tom said. "You are free to decide;" fighting against new terror with the old terror.

I stared out of the quiet passage. Since I'd seen the young man blunder out of the sea and join them, letting his blundering become subsumed by dance, my hesitation shamed me. I was afraid, too, to be left here in this corridor. But my will and my imagination had not been informed of the steps, the routines, the interacting leaps, somersaults and tumblings. "I'll jump in then," I said, "but you'll have to catch me when I stumble or I'll be trampled and crushed to death by the mob." "Go ahead of me, then, and that will permit me to watch you," Tom said. I closed my eyes and stepped in.

In high wind the passenger in the balloonist's gondola feels no friction of wind, for the wind and the balloonist are racing at the same speed, one force embracing the other so perfectly there's an apparent marriage of forces: marriage within which the balloonist chooses altitude, chooses to enter or settle down; and maintains control of the burning that inflates the fragile bulk, keeps its brightly painted shape filled out to round against the pressure of the air, from the inside. My fall into the dance was like such a rising; my strong resistance fully embraced and carried.

My movement was a balance of my will against this sweeping force. I was anything but graceful, but so intrigued by what was happening, it made no difference. All of those in the dance were passing in different directions, like those I had seen at varying depths in the sea. But here we saw and sought each other; made room; balanced a leaper's foot while meeting the somersaulting dive of another. We were of every human kind, all ages, races and shapes, perhaps classes too: everyone being naked, it was hard to tell.

Everyone here was silent. I myself could feel a physical interdependency, also the grain of grazed skin, slip of sweating shoulder, rump; slashing of fragrant hair across cheek or ankle; hear twang of compacted energy in muscle; smell effort, speed and anxiety. But I should say the feeling was not frantic, because the energy my willing leaps defied, thrust in the same directions. I looked under my shoulder, saw Tom, incongruous in his clothes, taking quite a beating. He slithered over and under the mesh of dancing people like a tough snake through a stampede of cattle.

The route I chose and that seemed to have chosen me directed me widdershins, and toward the steep cliff I'd seen from our point of entrance. My catapults and flips made it hard to keep my bearings on it, so it flickered like something in an old movie. I noticed a fissure opening in the rock and attempted to twist my course toward it. Breathless, Tom, back of me, panted, "Not that way. All of them look alike. The one we want should have a pink string trailing out of it. That's the marker she laid out before she lost the use of her eyes." No sign of string; but a number of dancers danced through that passage.

It never occurred to me I might call them back. My breath was coming with great difficulty now and I was alive with perspiration. Despite this, the rate and clumsy accuracy I was managing did not falter. Exhaustion was simply one condition choreography included but did not hesitate for. How long we were engaged in this searching effort of dance I can't say, since exertion blurred my sense of time. We made exploratory feints at three more doors before we saw the trampled ribbon; a pink strand leading out of a rock hole so low we had to stoop.

The urgent dancing left us immediately we stooped into the darkness. The sound of people dancing calmed and receded. I held on to the string and to the tail of Tom's shirt also, the passage being narrow as it was low. There was no light. "I'm glad you know the way," I said, gulping, bumping the back of my neck on the roof. "I have never come through here before," Tom said. "That's one reason I had such a time following you in the dance." Can you imagine the gaping hole in my guts when I heard him admit this? My guide was a stranger here for the first time, who followed a blind woman's trail.

“A nice time to tell me,” I said, choked with anger. “But in a way it’s amusing, don’t you think so?” he countered. “Oh, here’s a place the yarn’s been knotted. You can feel in your fingers the next yarn’s thinner and softer, like what you’d use for a baby blanket. If it leads to a place where there’s any light, let’s try to guess what color it might be.” Frantic with fury at his teasing irrelevancies, I sulked, and felt the fear settle all around me and in me again. Meanwhile the rocky tunnel had narrowed to where we had to crawl on all fours all the time slightly uphill. Then I realized

various tunnels began branching away and our course jackknifed down and hard to the right through a waist I could barely squeeze my shoulders through. Panic rage and despair blinded me so, darkness was unnecessary. And Tom still kicked his feet as if the dancing had caught in him forever. I was helpless again, hated the silly string, my reliance on it, and on Tom’s careless trust which could lead us to smother in this hard cocoon. I grabbed his foot and went limp. I let him drag me, twisting over onto my back, feeling his kicks send currents into my arms and through my body.