

#37–42 from *After the Fact: Scripts & Postscripts*

Editor's Note

The following are entries #37–42 from Bell and Merrill's project *After the Fact: Scripts & Postscripts*, which began as a sequence of sixty paragraphs written back-and-forth over a period of fifteen months during 2011 and 2012. "Having written sixty," notes Bell, "we decided to go on to a second section. Hence the subtitle *Scripts & Postscripts*. We began the project thinking of our work as prose poetry. It was an editor who first recognized that these paragraphs are a form of poetic nonfiction."

While Bell sent his paragraphs from Iowa City, Iowa; Port Townsend, Washington; and Sag Harbor, New York, Merrill, who undertakes cultural diplomacy for the State Department, sent his from Afghanistan, Cambodia, Chile, Mozambique, Russia, the Congo, Uruguay, Uzbekistan, Vietnam, and Zimbabwe.

"Given the nature of Chris's experiences and my predilections," writes Bell, "as the sequence pushed ahead it took up matters philosophical, sociopolitical, and aesthetic. The title *After the Fact*, as well as the original working title, *Everything at Once*, now seem apt characterizations of the international, postmodernist character of a digital age."

C.M.:

Fairy Tale

He collected every fairy tale from the village at the end of the valley except the one he wanted—the story of a dancing bear, a peddler, and a woman, which had haunted his dreams in childhood and dictated his course of studies at the university. Emblazoned in his memory was the image of the bear chained to an apple tree whose roots had curled around the coffin of the mayor; he could not recall any other details of the story beyond the rumor, widely circulated, that it was based on an actual incident, and still he lost sleep imagining the consequences of eating the fruit gathered from that tree; hence his resolve to record the fairy tale in full, preferably in the lilting voice of his grandmother, dead these many years. (He blamed his insomnia on her juxtaposition of tone and subject.) However, his family had long since moved away from the village, the tradition of storytelling died with the burial of the church under a wall of snow, and no one could answer his questions: Who trained the bear? Did a peddler really lock a woman in a barn and hide the key under the altar? What taboo had the mayor violated by selling off the forest that protected the village from avalanches? He died before the last stand of pines was cut down; the whereabouts of his skeleton remained a mystery—which led the folklorist to speculate that privation, not magic, was the true source of this ghoulish tale. What consolation he took in the prospect of an afterlife was tempered by the knowledge that he did not know how it ended. If it ended.

M.B.:

The Evangelicals

The evangelicals came knocking on the door, wearing wings. I said I don't do business on the porch and I'm not a candidate, but the leader spread his cape to reveal his inner being, which he took to be the truth he wished to share, while I took it to be his spindrift armpits. I lived on an island, which caused me to think of sand and mud, whitecaps and anchors, droplines and worms. He had his eye on a planet toward which he was climbing on the backs of converts. He was headed upward while I was going down. He had resuscitated the prophets. He had rolled away the rock to see who was alive in the cave. He had tallied the books and memorized the verses. He had logged the names on gravestones for soul-saving. This is what he lived for. He shouted on paper. He beseeched at the precipice and blew like a foehn. He had broken the ancient code using only coins and yarrow stalks. He was as confident as the slave of a guru. He had come by way of disbelief and was now fervent in the embodiments of the spirits. He was every church and every Sabbath. He had his hands on the gold. His belief blanketed the roofs and washed away the daily paycheck. I had only a government in shambles to match his paradise.

C.M.:

After the Workshop

Mr. Vonnegut, a woman said before the last workshop, *I've never seen a dead body*. The novelist replied, *Just wait*. Meanwhile the janitor, an economist by training, vacuumed the stairwell in the parking garage, cursing the dry wind coming off the mountain, thick with dust and the voices of the missionaries lost on a star-crossed expedition—three old men who could not keep up with the reconnaissance team sent out at dusk to guide the planes dropping humanitarian supplies behind enemy lines; their prayers reminded the janitor of the equations corrected by his thesis director, which were in fact connected to the laws of supply and demand. *Try again*, the professor advised—words the janitor repeated as he emptied the vacuum cleaner. There was nothing more to say about the story of the lost mission—the woman realized that, yes, it was only a sketch, an idea to be developed, perhaps, in another medium—and so the novelist dismissed the class. The students made their way outside in time to see the funeral cortege of a soldier killed by friendly fire begin to circle the block. A trumpet blew, the crowd emerging from the church surged toward the riot police at the entrance to the park, and over the base of the monument to the unknown a priest poured from a silver bowl the blood of the lambs. *Just wait*, he said.

M.B.:

Luxury of Circumstance

He began to believe he might not have been present when the revolutionary army came down from the mountains to occupy the island capital, since the age of naiveté was by now so far past that his saying he knew nothing of the situation when he went there for the erotic exoticism for which youth pines now seemed like fictive music for an imagined life. In those times, a revolution lived in difficult terrain, launching forays into the cities only to confirm the desperation of the populace. Victorious rebellions, whether velvet or sandpaper in character, were but seeds in the soil of mass graves of dissenters. The arts were a lilt and a laugh, government by catharsis. Thus he was at hand when the army was ordered into the streets, and, when the tenant across the hall was dragged off by soldiers, he caught the last plane out. How could he, of all people, have been in Cuba, in Serbia, in Nicaragua when the earth shook? He seemed always to be appearing at the edge of some precipice. As when, in a seaside village of southern Spain, the members of the Guardia Civil, posted at the corner with Uzis, ran their fingers through his son's hair in delight while the landlady asserted that Franco was already dead but didn't know it. One must acknowledge that native revolutionaries do not commit suicide. It is the soldiers of the invading armies who take their own lives. How had he been an army officer during an improvident war, and the soldiers volunteering for a lost cause? He thinks he betrayed his mind by trying to make other people's sense. Comparisons are odious, and ignorance is bliss.

C.M.:

From the Vineyard to the Sea

Now he knew that he would be counted among the vinedressers to whom the landowner sent his servants and his son to collect the fruit; if he was not the first one to pick up a stone, and his aim was as wayward as his heart, still he threw it with all his might, with predictable results—a crime translated into parable. Nor was it a complete surprise to learn that he would have followed the crowd to the governor's palace, demanding the release of another prisoner, raising his voice at the approach of the praetorian guards. He would have named names if he had been called to the inquiry (he sometimes wished he had), for he had built his house on a bluff where everything was permitted; its cornerstone was his conviction that he had done nothing wrong, harmed no one very seriously except himself; necessity was the flag he raised on his front lawn. To give up his accountant's peculiar methodology, his brother's escape route, his wife's dark secret—these disclosures were of a piece with his decision to melt down his silverware and hide the bricks in a well: a matter of self-preservation. At dusk he walked along the trail that curved around the bluff, his eyes fixed on the horizon, where a boat with black sails was coming about. He was muttering to himself, making a list of everyone for whom he had done a favor. And all for what?

M.B.:

Forensics

The apparent objectivity of objects is merely a useful facade, their visibility a deception like that of a citizen planning an escape even as he carries a flag to the obligatory show of support and wears the lapel pin of blanket patriotism. The hidden silverware retains a picture of the one who scratched at the dirt with a fork to bury it before fleeing. The discarded bricks took a handprint with them to the bottom of the well. If one were to reanimate the seemingly lifeless and inert objects around us, one would see how exile, insurgency, paramilitaries, preemption, and intervention trouble the mirror and the goblet, how turmoil takes the seabed, and the massed bodies point toward both those accountable and the marked who survived. Were we able to christen the knuckle of a tree or the imprint of a shoe, the vinegar of a dead crow, a slice of bread... I offer these examples only to reveal the enormity of the task. If the chimes were a weather vane, if the arrow were a wing, if the calendar were ancient graffiti... The guilt of the survivor undoes the efficacy of a fallout shelter. To picture a life without friends is to be bereft in advance. The Apocalypse, don't miss it. Count on it. Take it to the bank. All objects are *objets d'art*.