

BRIAN LENNON

Notes on a Hunger Strike

We do not by any means forget the dead, even after months and years have gone by, but, as they say, 'the departed one grows more distant each day.'

—Kenko*

THIS BEGINS WITH A CALL from New York to a mobile phone in Istanbul—carried by she who (as someone else put it) cuts a street through me. On the last day of the year, it is dark early. In desk lamp primus, through cordlessness, uncountable switches and relays to you, *flâneuse* in another World City, and consummately en route. On the line, “I” can hear voices, ambient traffic; meanwhile, here Broadway is desolate under two feet of snow. Because I feel that I am always on a train—my gut irradiated by signal—and that writing aspires abjectly to film (for I would love to begin over again, in the movie), real life halts on the very pitch of happening, frozen in scenes: traffic at night, words exchanged in a hallway, closing time in a bar. A man, a woman, and a small child in a restaurant—who made me think that some things were possible after all, even as at the same time, that man and woman, that restaurant, stood for class war. But it is a lovely day for telematics—ominously so, like Musil’s adumbrating barometric low: in this case, a love letter lost somewhere in Hotmail, though we didn’t yet know it was that, and “I” waited in vain, through an eerily mild August, before all this occurred. And—that was then. As much as it is History, time is something within one’s self; telepresence, the here-yet-not-here, fuses the present as mode of alternative. It offers a view of oneself in future anterior, as ancestor-to-be—which is unbearable.

THAT WE SHOULD TAKE OUR PLACES in that so readily—what questions. Let’s leave them be, for the moment. Because I had been thinking about impediment: the attempt we make, in love, to clear

*“Nothing is sadder than the time after a death.” *Essays in Idleness: The Tsurezuregusa of Kenko*, trans. Donald Keene

it all away, or to refuse or fail to. Which is one way of learning to live “in the real”—burning not with a gemlike flame so much as the terror of clutter. In New York, for the moment, I have had it with “vocation”—so much for so little, blasts of the void that help you fill up time for time’s sake. In its pathology, which for a time meant sleeping only every other night, I went out into the streets fearful of leaving this city again, of what might happen in the silenter world. There were days of long baths. And of the question of *living wild*—for oneself, or for (or through) another. A question for a sepia-toned hour, one thinks, fighting one off. For it is a truism that Dream Lover is forever beyond one’s reach, even when present, even—and perhaps especially—when “possessed.” But on the night of which I speak, I was thinking this in a speeding taxi, the West Side Highway a tunnel of blocked shadow and apertured light; the river to one side and the taillights of the avant-garde bleeding red streams. This set expanded all around me until it dissolved. Then, I was antlike under the Iowa sky, feeling escaped, returned, escaped again.

An hallucination, you say. And it was that.

IS ONE MOST CAPABLE OF LOVE when dying? The trick, then, being to simulate death, through and throughout—I mean this apart from the usual drama. As Kafka says, no one fasts professionally any more. All of which is shorthand for: “I have been waiting *for you*”—since you told me your loneliness, in a glassy blue dawn, which recalled (the telling, the blue) for me my first years living in New York—always asleep. That you should come from *there* and me from *here* and, in a matrix of accidents so indefensibly pale—find that point, on a sidewalk in May. How many humans have lived out their lives without leaving any record of what it was like? Grief, buried.

SAY THAT I COME FROM nowhere. Or, that is my fantasy. During the Great Waves, farmers named Cantagalli, D’Addario, Lannon sailed to New York from Rome or the Abruzzi or County Roscommon. They worked on the subway and street trolley construction, and for Consolidated Edison. My great-grandmother Maria (Mary) D’Addario, who one suspects did not care to be here, spoke no English, which embarrassed her daughter, whom she also tormented for being left-handed. And yet, we still eat *pizelles*, the

Abruzzi cookie, at gatherings more diluted by globalization, time, marriage, America. New York Italian, the food words of which my mother inherited, drops end vowels (the *mozzarell'*)—but only my textbook-taught sister and I note it. And what of the family North, where we have rife, early Irish mortality—Annie and Cicilie Lannon failing to make it to 35, an age at which I will have been lucky to settle on anything? What of Greisch, the Austrian X factor? No one knows. Love itself relays us, station to station—but there's no terminal, save the one. Say it with me.

MY GREAT-GRANDFATHER JOSEPH D'ADDARIO, who arrived in the U.S. in 1902, returned to join the Italian army during the Great War. On the audiotape, Anne (Anna) Daddario remembers the Arabic he brought back from service in North Africa, along with the shrapnel in his arm. It ends the first side of the tape, and my grandmother's phase, with this figure: words as fragments borne from a Far Away closer to "home" than "home" is now. And that is how—as you yourself put it—the bridge comes to have more than two ends. But Dominick Cantagallo, my grandfather, entered the Second World War as a U.S. soldier. When "Dom," who with Anne Daddario had helped to raise me, died in Florida in 1996, I was living in Iowa and couldn't, "death discount" notwithstanding, afford the flight from Cedar Rapids to attend the funeral—or so it seemed to me at the time. I wrote something instead—a token for the futility of writing ever since. How many things can you do before you die? "Dom" had had a recurring dream, all his life, of being chased by the skeleton of a dog.

MARCO CANTAGALLI, TOO, returned to fight for Italy in the first war. Alessio, his younger brother, remained in the United States; "Dom" was one of his and Flavia's three children. Cut to the present, and to the local Italian simulation, where the cooking has sunk lower than a Rome tourist trap: my mother (whom I have only now asked) lets me know how her marriage to a non-Italian (and on my father's side, *to one*) was regarded leerily; this is hard for me to parse at a time when—and in a city where—religion, race, age, choice of career hardly offers a clue, and every improbable conjunction seems, if not to flourish, at least to survive. Or so it is that I project my hope. For, it is the easiest thing in the world to be

American; and *du mußt dein Leben ändern*—but where, how? “Travel,” conceived as escape, is not the answer; nor is genealogy, the biggest scam on the Net and its most poignant infopathology. When I was still a child, we left Queens, where my grandparents had lived next door and a stoop culture of stickball and Tupperware, of “the block” as cosmos, mimicked in a kind of happy grotesque the *passeggiata* of the old country. Not “consciously,” of course; which describes also how we entered the *real* suburbs, in Nassau County, where family was a private affair and that was *all there was*; neighbors one didn’t speak with, streets one didn’t walk on, the huge silence of the night revoked only by the honks of the commuter trains.

OF COURSE I LEFT. Of course I was glad to leave, for the antifamilies of middle-class U.S. college life—for that is what bourgeois children of conscience think they must do; and travel was the last thing on my mind, once I’d unfound my home. Italy, when I went there, was an hallucination of where I’d been—once, never??; then, realizing I *had no claim*, of second order alienation, homelessness folded over, into itself. The temptation is extreme—to identify superficially with what is, and yet is not, one’s past; if there is anything to say about “America” and history—is there?—it is that this double figure describes both luxury and pain. In the global department store, the spannings of travel and tourism, place and commodity, collapse; “here” versus “there” is a function of salary and paid vacation, and one is not a person changing locations so much as (as Ruskin put it) a parcel shipped to its destination—distant, baroque, eotechnical.

RELIEF FROM THE CALCULATING BRAIN. The pocket computer shows me: 7 AM in Istanbul, sine wave of daylight in the display. And other places: Broadway, Astoria, my own Manhattan; the highways at night; a projected “last walk” in a favorite street. Happiness is knowing the city you want to die in. But I’d woken in Rome, and Iowa too, knowing that New York was no more home than anywhere; that telephones and ghosts obviate and imperil the node points of “here” and “elsewhere,” of one’s self and another’s. Which is why genealogy is so brutal, and so banal—history in extremis, infinite to one subject. And that is how “the media” have come to rule our lives: a movie, a calendar, a bowl of fruit on a table,

the Adriatic. Is there no Paradise, no sacred home where origin locates itself? I was thinking of all this, from an impossible age, or time sped up in both directions. And then I thought: What would “Dom” say? At this point on the tape, a telephone rings.

I WOULD HAVE TO GO BACK, you said, and I would wish then that we had never met. Our midnights were hours apart, zones off a world time where it might have *been real*. But when I was traveling, I turned always, out of necessity if not for lack of pride, to my companion. For I had to (I needed to) ask what I was seeing, what it was saying; behind the critical mass of this dependence there lurked the hysteria of who we were, who was she, who was I. Would I ever see her again? I wanted to say: Life is a moment, you cannot cling to it. When you are frightened, picture the earth from space. Instead, I looked out at the runway, from which a passenger jet rose violently; it was afterward, eternally too late, that the huge hollowness came.

SO, MOURNING: HOW IT IS different now, and how it will never be like that again. I am out of time, at a fondue party. There is strained conversation. The host does not seem really to want us there. Off in a corner, keying the codes to your voice, I feel that I am fully alive at last, and also that there’s (nearly) no time left. Speeding away. How could I have said: it was beautiful? Not because you were so far away—walking that favorite street. We were standing in pure abstraction, the *agora*, about to be separated for a long time. I asked if you wanted something to eat. And then it was Houston Street, Manhattan, crossing Allen, heading east for the evening, the packed Turkish cafeteria a homing device, a night where we nearly missed each other, over and over in that blank sea. Where on this New Year’s Eve, having lived one more year, I stepped from a taxi whose driver was fitfully sleeping. Over and through the snow, a car sluicing into constellations. Would he die, would he kill someone? I’m starving, you said. But I was alone. At some point in all this—an evening, a year, a life?—I had to say, “I love you.” Even now, in an uncertain future, it seems to me that you looked back.