

The Shouting Man · *Vern Rutsala*

AS HE WAS WALKING to class Robinson heard what seemed to be voices in the distance carrying on an argument just on the edge of a fight. He assumed there were at least two men and then he saw a man by himself shouting loudly and abusively at some apparently imaginary opponent. He was tall and thin, forty or so, and carrying two heavy shopping bags. Feeling well that day Robinson stopped and looked as the man walked by, and even wondered if he should call someone, hovering between amusement and concern. The man was obviously in trouble, but Robinson let him go by though he did carry a kind of ambiguous fear home with him. Strange crackups like that seemed so easy; just a little jog out of the normal—only raising your voice inappropriately—and there you were, locked up no matter how much you yelled. He mentioned the man to Barbara and she agreed the man was just crazy.

The sight of the man haunted him that evening. Maybe the man was just drunk or had had a fight with his wife or was only talking to himself as many people do but in his case with the added eccentric variation of doing so at the top of his lungs. As the first fear of him faded the man became a brief private joke and another example to be avoided.

All that fall Barbara always seemed across the room from him curled in a chair, reading or sleeping. The portable radio played and served as their point of contact. They decided together on the programs they would listen to. They had very little to say to each other once past their few shared memories, and the trick of conversation was something they had never quite learned or at least not yet learned. As a result there was a great deal of silence when the radio was off. There seemed no will in either of them to alter the silence. Even so he felt she invaded him. Each sigh was a lance piercing his concentration, each change of position an assault on his earnest attempts to become a scholar.

On an icy morning several days later Robinson heard the man in the distance as he stood waiting at the checkstand in the university bookstore. It was like the approach of a one-man parade. The clerk mentioned the noise to the customer just ahead of Robinson.

“Now there’s a man who can argue.”

“Is he cracked?” the customer said, an older man, perhaps a professor.

“Maybe, but he can carry on an argument better than most so-called normal people.” The clerk winked.

Robinson asked if the man came by often and the clerk said he did, very regularly, in fact every day around noon. He was a local character and had a kind of status with the clerk who seemed to take pride in the man in the way he spoke of him.

The Shouting Man, as he came to call him, interested Robinson, and he began to divide his days in a way that would allow him to be on the street at noon whenever possible. He studied the man in a casual way and tried to talk of him to Barbara but she paid little attention and once flared up angrily and told him to stop all that morbid talk. Then he had teased her about being middle class and she had smiled and said, "Oh you!"

The Shouting Man came down the street just after noon every class day and he always carried something heavy, usually shopping bags, but sometimes he carried what appeared to be portable record players or some other obscure electronic equipment. Whatever he carried was always heavy and kept his long arms straight down at his sides, giving the sense that he carried such things simply to keep his hands occupied. Otherwise he might swing out in his rage and hit passersby at random. Or it was possible that someone put those things in his hands the way mittens are put on children.

He had short light brown hair and his clothes were those of a student of an earlier time—carcoat, slacks, and desert boots. Straining to listen, Robinson could never quite make out the line of the man's argument, for though he yelled his words were indistinct as if smothered by his enormous rage. Robinson could only catch words here and there—epithets that sounded archaic: chowderheads, yahoos, knothead, words his grandfather had used. The man never swore in the usual way and Robinson sensed that he never would, no matter how high his rage burned. The man did not know those words or if he did he could never bring himself to use them. His tirade was pure and old-fashioned. But very regular as his daily passage indicated.

Robinson's initial fear of the man had faded and he tried to see him once or twice a week or at least hear him in the distance. Oddly, he created little reaction in the other passersby. Some would turn slightly and a few would smile, but most of them simply walked on as if they had seen and heard nothing out of the ordinary. This seemed only part of the silence that part of the Midwest is noted for and later when he heard that one of the university football players, a black defensive end from New Jersey, had been kicked out of a theater for laughing too

loudly at a W. C. Fields' movie, Robinson understood something more of the grim addiction to silence that seemed on the verge of violence. This made The Shouting Man an even larger figure, and he began to think of him as a crazy and solitary protest against that pervasive and ominous silence. The other passersby viewed the man as some version of an obstreperous child, a child to be neither seen nor heard—or so it seemed to Robinson as he watched their absence of reaction.

His fear faded but did not disappear and would flicker when he heard that garbled voice in the distance. The man's punctuality was nearly as fascinating as the high steady pitch of his anger and the weight he was always burdened with. He became a routine part of his week that Robinson expected but never quite ceased to be startled by. It was like witnessing an accident again and again that no one else paid any attention to, so that the encounters were dream-like. Later that fall a schedule change kept Robinson away from the street at noon, and he only thought of the man occasionally and in a rather literary way. He became a kind of prophet or voice of the street, expressing all the inarticulate anger Robinson assumed everyone felt. He said it for everyone and he did it every day so that he could leave calm in his wake.

Once, however, he met the man face to face as he came out of a grocery store with his heavy bags. The man began shouting as he came through the door. Their eyes met and for a moment Robinson thought he saw the clear and unmistakable flicker of irony in the man's eyes before he passed by. The look seemed to say: We know how it is don't we, pal? But if I don't do it somebody else will.

As he walked away the man shouted, "Liars! Liars! They're all a bunch of goldarn liars!"

He could attach no clear meaning to the man, only images and facetious metaphors. He was simply someone who yelled and did it regularly and seemed to survive, seemed even to have status of a kind along the street. Robinson tried hard to fit the man into a neat category and to believe in the irony he thought he had seen in the man's eyes, but he could never quite make it work. For all his own silence and caution, he felt a bond between himself and the man. But there was finally only the literal image of his lanky basketball player's walk and the long arms straight at his sides as he shouted. He stopped trying to interest Barbara in The Shouting Man. She dismissed him with finality as "creepy."

Through those months of increasing cold, living with the presence of the man, he felt his own anger rise slowly the more diligent and submissive he became. He worked hard and worried about typographical errors in the papers he wrote, and he sat across the room from Barbara as they both writhed in the boredom neither had a name for. The boredom and anger rose as well when he listened to another seminar report by one of his ardent competitors and fumbled with his notebook, trying to listen intelligently while drawing intense tangled lines in the margins. Boredom was giving birth to doubt but the doubt was foreign to him and seemed too massive to face. Nor could he admit to the innocence he sensed within him, an innocence which seemed to allow the doubt to grow massive. He longed for the shrewd belief that shone from the well-scrubbed faces of his classmates as one or another of them droned on, imitating the phrasing and manner of their major professors, larding their voices too thickly with irony or sliding into the style of the bored aristocrat. For days at a time he was able to do this too—or some version of it at least—but then he would lose his hold and fall into confusion. Something was wrong but it could not all be wrong. He hated and distrusted what seemed to him the simple-mindedness of his thoughts. They seemed so crude, so unsophisticated.

As the semester went on he began to stay at the library for longer and longer periods, blinking under the fluorescent lighting and pummeling the books he held tightly. The sliver of the idea of good solid work was still with him and he longed, at times, to do it. Barbara was alone in the apartment or taking a class in ceramics. Her evenings, he could see, were grim but his had taken on a grimness he could scarcely tolerate. She was away from home without anything to do and apparently just beginning to realize that she was married to someone she did not know or particularly care to know. He had a dim sense of being on the edge of a cliff, or actually hanging from it with weakening fingers.

He felt some shearing away had taken place within him but there was nothing he could do but register it, feeling the movement within him like strata shifting. This made Barbara disappear out one corner of his eye and getting back to the apartment at midnight he was surprised to see her pouting in a corner, a huge art book holding her in place.

One day he also saw that they no longer *looked* happy as they had during the summer. His hair was longer than he liked and though there was money he began to feel poor and took on the look of poverty. She could no longer spend much on clothes and though she had never cared

one way or the other this knowledge affected her and she began to look poor as well in spite of the trunk full of clothes that stood in a corner of their bedroom. Some of the changes were obvious but then they slipped away again as he tried to work. His perceptions flickered back and forth. He did come to have the sense that everything was now superficial and banal in their lives together. Walking home from the library one night, he decided that they had married because they looked well together and because others had expected it. No other reason could be found. Others married after graduation and he and Barbara had slipped into it in that melancholy period that follows leaving college. Their wits were as dim as the next couple's and like the next couple they had not been able to anticipate living together and the conflict between theory and practice cropped up fiercely, however silent they were.

At home that night he tried to talk about some of these things but they seemed flimsy and hard to express and Barbara seemed indifferent to them. She moved behind a fog and when he reached toward her his gestures were half-hearted or entirely forgotten midway through. It was not a question of love. Or of sex. It was the fog between them. Soon he began to shout at her and she became confused and angry and he walked out.

More and more the summer spent in a leisurely exploration of their bodies seemed far away, an interlude, a summer romance. The days grew shorter and colder and snow fell in the middle of November. The banal and helpless details added up. A winter coat was needed. Boots were needed. He should go shopping with her—it would be an adventure and if he showed any hesitation she became immediately angry and tearful. And the few movies he agreed to go to were all dull and he usually felt like leaving halfway through but she would insist on staying or agree too readily to go. She said her ceramics teacher was a hopeless snob with no talent and the other students were all farmers who should be milking cows instead of making pitchers. They laughed much less.

The winter brought emptiness and because of her sadness he stayed away from home even more having found Stovers, the grad student hangout. By early December it was clearly a better place to start the evening than home, and he drank far more than he ever had. The money he spent there became an issue and they ground along, feeding on what came to be a mutual but low-keyed contempt alternating with a kind of wildly vicious lovemaking.

While this was going on he was taking in impressions that he found no place for, growing increasingly confused the harder he tried to fit things into place. His work, begun so earnestly, seemed pointless and teaching one class of freshman comp more difficult than he had expected. Like other graduate assistants cradling the keys to their own offices, he had started with high hopes. He was going to do things right and so he scheduled conferences after each paper for the first month or so. The conferences chewed up his time very badly and in the second month he discontinued them though he felt guilty in doing so. Basing a conference on a single paper he saw soon enough was impossible. As if his own confusions were not enough, he knew that he could easily spend years chasing the problems and distortions and pathos found in a single freshman theme but there was rarely enough there to merit a fifteen minute discussion. In the rawness of the papers he caught glimpses of what seemed to be the students' pastey and dismal sense of life which, if taken seriously, would be enough to drive you into a cave for the rest of your life. He could never retrace all the false steps—a thousand-mile journey of false steps, each more false than the last, compounding the first one to some infinite power—all the misinformation, all the lies that had encrusted the moderately clear perception any student had brought to the first grade. Cynicism was the option and he saw that most people took it—those professional comp teachers who collected howlers had come to terms with the madness in their bleak way. Others just rammed through, scarring the papers with red and making a religion of grammar. Most went through the motions, telling themselves that once they got their degree they would really start teaching.

These realizations were always there as he struggled to write papers of his own. Barbara tried but could not understand his sense of futility when he talked about teaching and studying. She felt lonely. She did not know anyone. And this added to his feelings of guilt. Knowing how lonely she was and in an effort to improve their lives, he invited a graduate student he had met at Stovers and his girl friend over for an evening as a feeble remedy. They came for coffee and dessert, a properly academic thing to do. The evening weighed on all of them and though the conversation flowed freely enough it went nowhere except into the backwaters of the trivial. Barbara enjoyed the evening. It approached her idea of what a married couple did when getting together with friends. For that matter it approached the idea that Robinson had as well, but he had not liked the evening. The desolation he felt later that night

seemed endless. A future of evenings like that, mixed with teas and luncheons! It was too much. No one should have to enter that particular circle of hell, he decided. But he was glad that Barbara had enjoyed it.

His early seminar reports had gone well, or reasonably well, but rather than giving him confidence they seemed to increase his anxiety until he awoke one morning in a cold sweat. He had a report to give that day but somewhere along the line he had lost the thread, tenuous as it had been, that held it together. All sense of grammar and coherence went as well. At that point he became frantic and began, for lack of anything else, dittoing information to pass out to the class. But what he had to work with was pitifully small and in desperation he began throwing in definitions and lists which passed for chronology and bibliography. He wound up with enough bulk to hand out to other people in the class, but he knew it was all ludicrous, that it made no sense and only looked like a report but was not really a report. Yet he was stuck with it and decided to try to push it through in some way.

That morning he was sleepy, his usual condition in the morning, as he walked his customary route to class, listening for The Shouting Man though he had not seen him for several weeks, and feeling his anxiety increase as he neared the campus. He scarcely noticed the well-fed adolescents who passed him, and he had no desire, as he often had lately, to clip any of them on the sides of their heads with his heavy briefcase. Rage was being melted by fear, that special academic fear everyone carried.

He walked toward what promised to be his first minor execution, feeling as he had felt as a child when he was late for school and remembering too those times when he had not done his work and had been seemingly miraculously saved when the teacher failed to call on him. Maybe this time, he hoped. Then he was in the cold halls, amidst their almost ingenious ugliness where the drinking fountains never worked and students were huddled around the large radiators just inside the entrance. But they huddled happily. They always huddled happily while each time he stood there it was only to cut the chill of what seemed an increasingly profound unease.

Nearly to the classroom where the seminar met, he realized he no longer had his briefcase with him. He began running, panic suddenly churning in him and he felt his mouth go dry the way it had once when he thought he was AWOL in the army. He ran without any idea of

direction and then realized when he heard the bell that he should go to class and explain. But explain what? Ridiculous. Ridiculous. Suddenly he had become The Fool. The classroom was only one floor above him when he discovered that the briefcase was missing, and he now ran up the stairs, already exhausted, and burst into the room and ran or hopped or staggered to the professor saying, "Wait, I'll be right back. I really do have my report ready. Just wait a minute. I'll find it. I lost it. Just wait."

As he spoke—too loudly, too quickly, too desperately—he saw how ludicrous he was, how craven, how silly, but he could not stop. The professor laughed and following his cue the members of the class laughed too, not loudly and not too derisively, but they were plainly ready to dissociate themselves from him, alert for the next cue.

Pulling off his overcoat he ran out of the room, blushing and swearing at himself, and then finding himself in the hall with the coat in his hands he ran back into the room and threw it on a chair, getting another laugh, a spontaneous one this time from his classmates. The professor called as he ran from the room, "Steady, friend, steady. We'll be right here." Cheap bastard, Robinson muttered.

The professor's chilly and cheap benevolence followed him down the hall and Robinson could see that yellow smile curling around his face and then stopping with perfect timing before it had been taken up completely by the students. He gave and he took away. He would not let the class feel too righteous.

He ran down the stairs, clipped around corners, trying frantically to order his thoughts. Midway down one hall he stopped to light a cigarette and then ground it out furiously. What the hell was he doing? Then he ran back, picked up the flattened butt and dropped it carefully in a hall ashtray. At that moment he remembered where he must have left the briefcase—beside the radiator near the entrance. It was probably stolen by now, he thought, but when he got there he saw his steaming briefcase slumped docilely against the wall. Picking up the case he stood still, catching his breath and remembering the case's pathetic contents. He was a goddamn fool and his silliness had carried him deep into a ludicrous hysteria. What was he doing there? He lit another cigarette, still anxious about the lost minutes but willing to lose as many as possible now. He longed for a cold beer and the warming quilt of a jukebox.

Each of his stupid blunt nerves asserted itself, seeming to push against

his skull. He should leave, walk out now, leave the professor's yellow smile, the students' smaller, meaner versions of that smile. Fuck them all. But he ground out the cigarette violently hoping to burn the floor and grabbed the briefcase that held the small animal of his failure. A cold beer still taunted him but, feeling the last juices of dedication coming back as his breathing eased, he went back to the classroom.

The professor smiled as he came in and the more secure members of the class—people he had talked to, people who were in some sense *his friends*—also smiled from the warm corners of their superiority, ostentatiously enjoying the comic relief.

Glancing around the room quickly he tried to cull one sympathetic look but found none, such blossoms grew elsewhere. Here everyone tended his own garden where the smiles of derision ignited by the professor's cue were put on like chapstick. They no longer bothered him. They were simply there, parts of the frazzled bits of that chaotic and ludicrous morning, inevitable. He could not even damn the people. By now he was too weak for curses.

Everyone had waited for his return and he imagined they were anxious for him to begin, knowing that his inevitably bad showing would surely make their scholarly little nasalities seem the utmost in accurate and articulate research by comparison. He dimly sensed such eagerness as they leaned forward just as he could nearly feel the professor's irony building up like saliva behind his yellow smile. And for an instant he had a vision of the professor describing him at lunch, eventually working the story around, polishing and revising, until it would become the anecdote he would tell at faculty parties that year. Such evident disorder and panic would delight his colleagues because it was such a precise burlesque of the graduate students' manner. Yet what could he do but let himself be ground into the fine powders of a cocktail anecdote? He was helpless but acutely sensitive and could see that he was already written down, laughed at, and sealed away in dozens of cardfile minds.

There was no way he could carry it off and he writhed with feelings of hate and humiliation. But the report went on somehow without laughter and the dittoed material startled the other students with its bulk and elicited several questions which he found he could answer. Clearly, they knew less than he did. Even the professor seemed to take him seriously though he did say, mildly, that the relevance of one or two items seemed in doubt. Robinson wondered if the professor also felt a

pang of regret at the lost anecdote. But he knew how stupid his report was and left the room with a feeling of contempt for everyone there though relieved that he had survived. He felt strangely free as he breathed in the crisp winter air.

In January he began to walk at night. The moon was out and he walked in the freeze, moved by the greeting-card beauty of the landscape. Once he walked out after an argument with Barbara without shoes in an attempt to punish her by getting pneumonia. He got nothing but a strange look when he went back and his feet itched and stung for an hour. Other less melodramatic nights he simply studied the amber glow of windows, an imaginary voyeur, thinking of the countless television families sitting around warm fires with popcorn and earnestness. But he liked the windows and the snow and the bare wiry trees. With nowhere to go his thoughts would settle and if it was not too cold he would stay out for an hour or more, studying the streets of that college town, imagining the interiors of houses, the complications overlooked at dinner tables, enjoying a deliberately sentimental version of family life in which all the serious questions were answered by Pastor or Doctor. Dogs were the only problem on such walks, but he began to appreciate their seriousness too after his fear subsided. They were just being dogs as they understood their role and barking at strangers was part of it. One or two that he saw regularly became nearly friendly, forgetting his alien danger in their desire to be generous spirited. Usually though the dogs were inside with their families and he imagined them intrepidly carrying slippers and newspapers or sitting up and begging for their dinners and feeling thoroughly sick of their roles but going through with them out of a sense of duty. Through amber windows he saw fragments of living rooms—the corner of a picture, a lamp, a gun mounted on a wall, a man standing and gesturing, and in the winter silence it all seemed calm and just. He would walk along fueled by these impressions and return to the apartment ready for sleep. Barbara might be asleep or if awake she might have some story to tell about a nut in art class.

Just before spring vacation their arguments erupted again. He was tense and confused, feeling harried, trying to finish a paper on Melville and read a group of themes he had gotten two weeks earlier. Barbara, who was feeling well for some reason that day, kept talking as he sat at his desk trying to assemble his notes. Each time he thought he had

a thread, a thin sliver of coherence, Barbara would say something or break into song. Finally, he picked up the cards and threw them into the air, yelling, "Oh Christ! Can't you see I'm working?" Barbara looked confused and then her anger flared. They raged back and forth and he threatened her. She offered to brain him with a frying pan. Then he ran out of the house without a coat and walked through the cold night, settling at Stovers where he could not make the beer alter his mood. When he got back to the apartment, feeling apologetic, Barbara was gone.

There was a note saying they needed to get away from each other for a while, and that she was going home to begin the vacation early. If he wanted to he could join her when he could get away. The empty closet and the drawers gaping open filled him with a kind of ecstatic relief. He savored the silence of the rooms and sat down to finish the six-pack of ale he had brought home. His move, he knew, was to call her back—he had seen those movies too. She may even be sitting in the bus station, he thought, but as he sat drinking, the ale sharpening his sense of power, he knew he could never call her back. It was too standard. Too vulgar. Too mad. Why go back to what he had felt earlier that night?

His feelings the next morning had changed and he nearly called Barbara's home. Then he decided to write her but there seemed nothing to say. That she had gone now embarrassed him but it also saddened him and with the help of his hangover he achieved a rather large depression by evening. The rooms all spoke of his regret and failure. He slammed the drawers shut and closed the closet door and sat down to wait for Barbara to show up—after all it was up to her to make a gesture too. Several times he toyed with the phone, but by then the only bone in his body holding him together was a kind of slimy pride and he could not give in. He felt the competition was on and he was not going to lose, running after her like a bumbling Jimmy Stewart, hemming and hawing his way back into her favor. So he did nothing but suffer the vacancy of the apartment.

The next day he felt better and managed to write a first draft of the Melville paper. Barbara was not going to come back nor was he going to bring her back and he decided to get a smaller place. That would be his gesture and with a miraculous quickness he found a new place—a one-room apartment closer to the campus. It seemed emblematic. There were three letters later on, but it was over, so wanly over it surprised him, and Barbara started divorce proceedings before the term ended.

Everything had by then settled into a ghostly mist in his memory. He would remember Barbara—how she felt, the soft hair, the skin of her thighs, but that was all. It was, he thought when he felt well enough to be cynical, his service stripe.

Throughout the spring he became a bachelor again and even enjoyed it for a few weeks, still operating on feelings of spite. Soon enough that fuel ran out and he was just alone in that ugly room fumbling with notecards and feeling his throat go dry, ready to begin shouting.