


# THE BEATING OF THE LARGEST DRUM

DUSTIN ACTON



It is dawn and the birds outside are chirp chirp chirping. It's a little known fact that they aren't really chirping, they're just puking up the last dreams of midnight. It takes a special person to see it. I learned it from your grandmother, who read the future in tea leaves and could probably read the future in bird vomit too. Old Ilse, who sucked the marrows from chicken bones before throwing them on the table and turning them into the cryptographic secrets of time and love. Old Ilse, of whom all I've known has been a photograph of the most beautiful ankle in the world and a painting with no shapes. Old Ilse, who brought me and you together.

But now the birds are chirping. Don't you hear them? Look at them there, hanging from the lines of the telephone poles, black-birds-blue-birds-white-birds, a noisy choir playing notes of dreams in vomit and shit. They are the audience, the clientèle and the critics. We are just the melody, the movers who move, not out of will or thought, but because we feel that we must. There is, after all, an audience.



To his friends Arnie had often remarked that it was best for a person to work his way up to great things rather than do it all at once. And so, every six months, at exactly seven p.m., Arnie would methodically lay out a white sheet on the grass outside of a pre-designated building, along with a handy cell phone, a gurney, and a homemade sign advising onlookers to please call the police. This was his eighth jump. On previous jumps, Arnie had accumulated: seven capped teeth, two broken legs, a rib through his left lung, a shattered collarbone, five concussions, some serious whiplash, and two broken tibia—a bone of whose existence, prior to its break, Arnie had not even been aware.

He felt that in his growing catalog of injuries he was gaining as much as he lost. In a secret way, the loss of each new bone's rigid virginity lightened him, as it meant he had recreated it in his own broken image. But it was not the broken bones for which Arnie jumped. He had come upon the notion that there was some sort of religious illumination at the drastic end of every life, and he felt a great pull, as if something was waiting for him there.

So far he had seen nothing. Not even blackness. He would jump and stare longingly at the ground as it rushed up to him, only to awake in a haze of drugs and antiseptic walls in the hospital some weeks later. Arnie did not wish to die. He only wished to know what dying was like.

Arnie smoked a cigarette and raised a hand to shield the light from his eyes as he stepped towards the door of the Chesterfield apartment buildings. A sign outside advertised low rent and spacious rooms: the benefits of better living, if only one could afford them. Arnie waited until a mother with her child exited the building, and held the door for them after they opened it. The woman smiled, and so did Arnie. The kid, however, pulled on his mother's arm, anxious to get out of the gaze of this stranger. Arnie walked inside the now unlocked door and moved toward the building directory, pretending to study the names of the residents. After a predetermined amount of time, he moved upstairs, winked at the lobbyist, and took the elevator to the ninth floor.

Removing a small glass cutter from the inside of his pocket, Arnie worked quickly, cutting the window from its frame. Once he had outlined the frame, he gave one great shove and leaned out as the glass plummeted to the ground and shattered into uncountable iridescent pieces. Good. It landed a few feet before the waiting sheet. Two possible outcomes. A silent pledge. To kill or to love. Closing his eyes in a silent, unspoken prayer, designated to no known deity, no particular god, Arnie ran forward and leapt into the air.



Eyes so green that they were not eyes at all, but pools of effervescent jade, tides lapping and overlapping, covered with something silver and gray and soft like a ghost. Sometimes you see a person, look directly in their eyes, and as an electric shock freight train choo choo choos up and down your spine with no stops and a terrible fare, you realize you've known them all your life. That the only thing you've ever held that's real is what's locked inside that endless gaze. Mirrors reflecting mirrors reflecting mirrors forever reflecting off into some infinite corner. And then you realize. All this time that you've been moving, looking, searching, they've been there every night when you've closed your eyes. The first thing I noticed was your eyes.



It was in between a strange girl's bed sheets that Arnie first realized he was no longer alone. Her name was Bobby, or Billie, or something that started with a "B," and her body was unbearably warm. She was laying on her breasts describing her life as displayed in the pictures lining her walls, but her voice seemed far away, lilting, and somehow musical. She was too hot. There was no space between them. Intertwined, her body became the room as her voice elucidated its features. The heat from her body seemed to consume everything that he had been before and remade him in the broken image of the less-than-but-still-almost-totally alone. Arnie counted the crucified bouquets of dead roses that hung petal-less, upside-down, from the other end of the wall.

There were seventeen.



Of course I remember what you had told me. Of course I remember what you said. The words may have disappeared, like the pictures that you have since torn down, but the place, with the two of us in it, remains, like the bouquets, forever preserved. Even if only in my head. The pictures of you playing someone else, someone happy, dressed and heeled and staged and

spotlighted: free. The flowers hanging upside-down. I remember watching them, waiting for the stubborn petals to fall. The gifts of the admirers of a different you that the present had forgotten. Was it just your leg that broke? Or was it something in your head as well? Either way, no more dancing. No more dancing ever.



Billie Ryan woke up slowly. She got out of bed, walked past the gear on the table, and moved towards the sink. Hunching suddenly forward, she vomited up something that looked like a jellyfish. It had fluorescent gills that pulsated with life. Was it alive or dead? All Billie knew was that her shaking fingers were too far gone to push it down the drain. She left it there, as it shimmered its colors of metallic flesh against the wall. Sitting on her bed, she tied off one arm with a leather belt while the rainbow spectrum of colors played against her blank face. Only her mole seemed to notice, changing in response. Red. Green. Purple. There is always a sense of activity in reflection. Her tied off arm, however, remained a stubborn pale yellow.

A release then. A release of loosened fingers and needle-from-hole and pounding blood and no-more-brain. Raising her head in relief, she looked towards the one window in her dirty apartment. It could easily be said that her apartment possessed one of everything: one dirty bathroom, one broken mirror, one mattress, one broken leg, one table, one broken heart, one chair, and one small window that opened directly into the alley, providing a view of red bricks stained gray with pigeon shit and feathers. Except for the bouquets of roses. There were seventeen of them.

Add to that: one original unframed painting that contained every color in the world, with none of the imposing shapes. A painting her nearly blind grandmother had created long past the time when her children stopped thinking her capable of anything except for sucking the marrow out of chicken bones. Long past the time when she could no longer read the future in cups of tea. Long past the time when she should have been dead.

A picture of her sat in a frame upon the one table, next to the one spoon and the one syringe. It showed no face. Merely an ankle hidden in a high heel that could have once been red before black and white photography drew out all the color. But it could have been green too. Billie never cared. It's the ankle that mattered, the ankle that, like the shapeless painting, was her grandmother. It was the ankle that brought her and Arnie together.



He is sitting in a wooden rocking chair, she is behind him combing her hair in front of a cracked mirror. (“I thought you said you never knew your parents.”) The walls are the ethereal green of her eyes. (“I knew them, I just can’t remember them.”) The door is open. (“My father died when I was twelve and my mother... Well...”) Outside the ocean extends forever, the lonely corridor of the endless sea. (“There are other ways of dying...”) Little waves rise up over the doorstep and make little pools in the cracks of the hardwood floor. (“After you’ve loved someone for most of your life...”) He sits there in his chair moving back and forth, his whole body nodding and the chair agrees with subtle creaks of music. (“To lose them...”) She is combing her hair in front of a broken mirror, staring at the reflection of the sea. (“All the times I spent staring at the walls, my mother spent staring at the Bible.”) He moves from his chair and lies in the corner. (“I think she saw him waiting for her there.”) Taking a box of matches out of his pocket, he spills them across the floor. (“The most beautiful, terrible thing I’ve ever heard of...”) She stops combing her hair. (“To be so in love with someone...”) He arranges the matches into the shape of a donkey, a volcano, the house where his father was born. (“...that you’d die just to see them again.”)



Giggling hysterical ecstatic. Siren siren siren alarm within my brain. Sounds too loud for the sun and the empty sky. Mouth no longer a mouth at all. Just an open sore, lumps of blood and broken flesh, little rocks that once were teeth floating around. I have no body. I just see. The walls of the building run straight towards the sky and touch it, extinguish at the limits of vision somewhere further than it’s possible to see. The building isn’t vertical, it’s horizontal. A ceiling, not a wall. The sky is something I could move towards, I suppose, if I could walk. Now it is only my sight that walks for me. A corridor, you see? White walls. The building is the ceiling.

I,



I found a picture of us. It was taken so long ago I can barely remember it. We’re sitting up against a wall, and above us a piece of enigmatic graffiti reads: “Robin Hood was right.” There is something hostile in the way I am looking at the camera. As if I am not sure whether I am afraid of it or I hate it. Only that it is there and I do not know how to perceive it. You are the personification of wasted grace and elegance, a Madonna staring at the open inside of her own brown arm, legs folded neatly underneath her. Why am I staring at the camera and not at you?

The picture is unbearably close, and gives off a strange heat. I feel uneasy looking at it, to be this near to some piece of my life that I have forgotten. I am hopelessly ugly. You are hopelessly beautiful. Someone must have tinted the picture wrong. Or maybe the age of the photograph has altered the colors somehow. The circles under my eyes are an uneasy mixture of green and black and blue, as they have always been, but your eyes are brown. Everything else seems right. The paint is black, the bricks are red. So why are your eyes brown?



He is sitting in a wooden rocking chair, she is behind him combing her hair in front of a cracked mirror. (“Listen, if he exists, I have to do it.”) The walls are the ethereal green of her eyes. (“If there’s anybody up there, I have to do it.”) The door is open. (“You know I have to.”) Outside the ocean extends forever, the lonely corridor of the endless sea. (“It’s not just my dad.”) Little waves rise up over the doorstep and make little pools in the cracks of the hardwood floor. (“What about your grandmother?”) He sits there in his chair, moving back and forth, his whole body nodding and the chair sighing with subtle creaks of music. (“Shouldn’t he pay for her too?”) She is combing her hair in front of a broken mirror, staring at the reflection of the sea. (“What about what he’s done to us?”) He moves from his chair and lies in the corner. (“I was born to be damned.”) Taking a box of matches out of his pocket, he spills them across the floor. (“But there is no excuse for what he’s done to you.”) She stops combing her hair. (“I want an answer.”) He arranges the matches into the shape of a donkey, a volcano, the house where his father was born. (“I want you.”)



Arnie awoke to find himself walking down a corridor with endless corners. He had no idea how long he had been walking, nor where exactly he was walking to. He only knew that walking was the right thing, the important thing to do. After all, who had ever heard of a corridor not made for walking, or one without an end?

After a time, which was no time, with no idea how many steps taken nor minutes gone, Arnie realized that he no longer knew how to walk. Certainly, there was a locomotion in the steady piston-like movement and the rising and falling of the legs, which was simple, yes, nature. Yet the more he thought about it the more he became sure that he could no longer walk properly. The fault did not seem to lie in him, but in his legs themselves. They moved too quick here, pushed too hard there, at times seeming to be pulled downward by some great weight that he had never

experienced before, other times propelled weightlessly upward as if he was a man on the moon.

His legs began to walk themselves. Moving uncontrollably, he turned the corner and saw at last a door and a window at the end of the hall. Legs no longer working. His body mutinous. Movement underwater. The crackle of internal warfare, neural rockets and synaptic gunfire. Did he know already? Ears rebelling as well. A sound filled him, a silent humming of the electric grease that worked that engine. And now the eyes too? Arnie saw a reflection of his own startled face balanced between the shutters and the glass of the window up ahead. Behind him walked a woman with no face, moving toward him with every step he took.

Arnie studied that empty face until he realized it was not empty at all, simply a clump of hair with a comb in it. Shoulder blades where her breasts should be. Then he understood. The woman was walking backwards. Silently they moved together, Arnie walking with steps too big and too little, the backwards woman moving as if tethered to him, gracefully floating across the hallway. Walking with ease, the woman stopped when Arnie could no longer move. Then, without speaking, without looking at each other, the two stood there, standing within the windows reflection, waiting for the beginning to start.



Nothing much happens on the news. Nothing much happens anywhere anymore. Electric blue light of television, every pixel magnified and reflected on Billie's face. Reaching with one languid arm for the remote, she accidentally pushed it off the arm of the chair and onto the hardwood floor. Raising her hand to her face she realized it was not a hand at all but the end of a giant finger. Standing up on precarious finger-feet she moved toward the broken mirror with the decaying jellyfish in the sink below. Staring at her cracked reflection, she found no face, no head at all, only a giant thumb and nail sprouting from the neck of a blue T-shirt. Without pause, she moved back to the chair and turned off the TV. As the picture turned white, contracted, and withdrew, it reflected again, brilliantly, against the thumbnail that was now her face. She looked to the one window only to see a giant eyeball staring directly at her. As the eye surveyed the room its eyelashes rubbed against the walls of her apartment building, making a terrible scraping noise and dislodging a shower of pigeon shit and white feathers.

It blinked and the room with one of everything was gone.



The digital clock above the door says it is 12:30 but if you unlearn symbols it says something different. Becomes just straight lines half-etched out and repeated. Absolutely meaningless. IVs. External plastic organs filtering drugs through new metallic veins. That means something. That is the only thing that means something. Taste of someone else's hair in what was once my mouth. Body replaced with bandages. Everything two dimensional. Only one eye will open. What will happen now? I am afraid. The walls are straight, the beds are made, others lay like me in the waiting of defeat. I failed. Couldn't find him. Or you. Neither death nor love.

Doctors speak with mouths opening and closing, flapping and moving and I nod in agreement, yes, yes, of course they are right, though all I can hear of their words is a ringing sound with a certain pitch. How can anyone hear anybody talking with so much ringing? But it doesn't matter; I have no mouth left to speak with anyway. I feel pain, yet it's what I can't remember that hurts me the most. When did I last see you? Your grandmother, Old Ilse. How did her ankle bring us together? Why were your eyes brown in that picture? Who have I come here to see? And will her eyes be brown or green? The ringing sound is growing, no, no, now it is receding. A new sound. An insistent thumping. The sound of some great drum played at a terrible tempo, first barely audible, then so impossibly loud and painful it hurts my ears and makes me afraid. Soft and hard. Fast and slow. Endlessly beating.

My heart.

