

Don't Know

Richard Foreman

Hence, the most beautiful flower.
Hence, the certain likelihood of its being plucked.
Hence, that beauty migrates.

Two children sat waiting in the small station. They were ugly. One of them held a beautiful flower. A woman, obviously their mother, equally ugly, entered and sat beside them. She glanced at the flower, and a patch of redness excited itself in her brain.

The next day at the same time, the same family on the same bench. What would happen: was it predictable?

He stopped writing. He had felt the need to write. Then he stopped. A memory flooded, water, the ripples reflecting a low sun. Hundreds, from one.

Something rolled like thunder from the hills. What was it? Thunder. But no thunder—no sound. Just the rolling. It entered him.

A hollow space in the center of the city. Such was alluded to by the walk of the young man towards the north side of the street.

The sun, the sun. An empty hole of brightness that penetrated the city in at least five evocative locations. The way up was analyzed.

A man hesitated at the entrance to a tobacco store, and the young man crossing the street saw the hesitation and echoed it, mentally. Did a bell ring? It was the sun. I saw it (or regretted it): one didn't. Inside the tobacco store, a middle-aged man was smoking a cigar. He looked through the plate glass window that said "Smoke" and saw all there was to see. But he couldn't, perceptually, re-process all that he saw so all that he saw, hovered, full of holes.

The young man continued. That meant, he disappeared, through the use of his feet. But one direction was erased by others. Under the blanket of streets, he motivated his listlessness with beauty. It appeared to him in its various forms, re-energized by a cloud that wiped out meaning.

Here, this perfect, translucent face shone with the glow of a forgotten-not paradise that rolled forward the heavy freight train of easy collisions.

Is this paradise?

Yes.

And I find myself reflected in all mirrors.

Yes.

So, if I unpack my suitcase, and its contents tumble over the floor—

Oh, eventually, it's all . . . re-collected. Are the gods here yet?

Hence, under the influence of April, the roses turned color and eluded me.

The Gods support me, so that I float an incalculable and small distance over the floor.

Therefore, I ask you to be seated.

I think the Gods hover, disturbed, outside the window.

Hence, the window breaks.

Hence, the flowers in the hair tremble.

Hence, the solid apple falls from the sky.

When I'm threatened, the Gods form impenetrable lines of force.

How fortunate for the one so protected.

I'm not protected. I'm . . . distracted.

You mean your enemies are distracted.

No. I have no enemies.

Hence, the clouds part, and an idea vanishes.

Could I remember a story that might make you like me best?

Best of . . . ?

Well, best of all.

(Story from earlier)

Ah.

A hollow space in the center of the city. Therefore, the generation of impulse. Therefore, the foot that defies its appropriate direction.

A young man faces space, which is achieved by looking through a window in the room of his hotel. The woman at his side looks elsewhere, but her heart is with his heart. The light that encircles them both, a motif registered or not registered, that expands, endlessly.

Hence, the smoke rose.

Hence, a sense of direction.

Hence, the stress and strain of possibility, like an ache inside the eye when the eye is closed tight, doubly.

Were you beautiful when you were a child?

I think not.

Was your mother beautiful?

I think not also.

(Pause)

Lift your hand. Lift both hands from the sides of your body, like wings.

I've never done that.

Do it now.

(Thinks) No.

(Pause)

I'm not beautiful.

But that's not being questioned.

(Pause. She lifts her hands.)

The old man climbed the stairs. But there was no old man, and no stairs, just the climbing. And the lights darkened, causing the light to register as something even more intense. The old man was clutched at the railing, but there was nothing but railing—so his hand flew necessarily to what it needed, and in that strength his rate of ascent increased until he had, within his grasp, all things a hand can be holding. The door in front of him opened and a dispenser of wisdom smiled while reading, or remembering. And the old man and the second old man proceeded to turn toward vibrant words. There was no word. There was vibrancy.

An automobile entered the station, breaking an important rule. And the old man entered and smiled. There was no smile, but there was a task, finally, accomplished. Accordingly, when the fire went out, the burning was deep. Accordingly, the animals slept fully. Accordingly, alive and dead, a unit.

The word —"enough"; parroting the senses,
 all in the illusionary mode
 when a twist of the sleeve
 wears into its opposite,
 arm in arm
 and you and I part after minor happenstance.
 And all happens again;
 ours, for a precise part
 of mutual history
 that slides into the brightest dawn imaginable,
 the light that
 raids
 my particular heart.
 This collection of idiots
 two by two
 gentle, involved
 operating under the influence of planets declared obsolescent.

Rendezvous, named after a famous mountain
 climbed, in absentia.
 This snow, which drifts
 This adventure in sight, long channeled
 into the results of reason, his or her private theme of themes.

Hence, the flight to the suburbs.
 Hence, the vacuum, mid-way.
 Hence, the brain that uses speed to traverse the implanted letters of an
 uncharted alphabet.

A woman placed herself in the middle of the road. Rain came, and taking
 shelter under the tree at the side of the road—three people now. And the
 descending water forgot. And the three people under the tree, planted

imagination, which bore no fruit because the rain, perpetual, seemed to stop as a function of local happenstance.

Here, a disappearing act.

Here, X into re-X, the sign of a mental system available to all.

Hence, winners and losers.

Hence, death traveled through the city, claiming victory.

Hence, many were confounded, and at the very moment of such proclamation, the city itself seemed vibrant with life.

Hence, the sweet, pungent fact: the most life meant the most death.

Hence, death claimed it was potent in the geometry of things.

Where the mind scans for geometry, the mind sniffs death. So it was that children followed a bright light in the sky. And when the sun was obscured by clouds, the children nevertheless sustained activity. On the small river, pieces of paper were floating, and the writing on these pieces of paper was unread.

Trees inclined. A taxi rounded a corner in the city, and a bat blew—wind at work—into the air. I covered the table on which I had been working with two hands. Two hands did not cover the table completely. What was still visible was an embroidered cloth. Was I pausing, in prayer?

In another city I visited, trains traveled the tracks, bisecting a certain perfume that invokes geometry. Accordingly, the radical lines cut deep, but this was mental. So, who was it, holding his head?

Ergo, I slept. Ergo, this was the previous night. Now only, I relived a dream of railways; and engines that sped along these geometric lines all lied. Ergo, I plunged into the lie, findable, and it turned into particles of energy for my dream.

Elsewhere, on a lake, boats slid forth, and the foam of the waves was so white that one thought a category of things. Lace, snow, deliberate feet tracing a vein of rich ore, mountains echoing the footsteps very much, as the white sail evoked the travel that such floating traced, in a blue that turned to darkest black. Hence, a flat ocean reflected the sky. Hence, attention was called to both surfaces, which made what was beneath both potent. Hence, a ship reflected below seemed above, where it was, in fact, a second reflection. And the dizziness hurt.

I collected the books scattered on my table. My arms hurt from the weight of books, which one by one I deposited on the proper shelves.

In another city, the windows of a library filled with wind, and an automobile approaching the city made it possible to glimpse the city below, as the car rounded a curve and the occupants glanced left. In

that library, hidden from view but not hidden from one who occupied it, odors of food filled-in through the wind that opened windows. Beyond—a whole world. Within—a second world, immobile, waiting to be unlocked. But the windows suffered the closing of themselves as a protective measure, but as in the case of all protective measures, there were losses to be measured against achievement.

Samuel read books, then stopped. Again, he lifted many and returned, one by one, book to gap. The shelves filled in regular pattern. In the same way, something in Samuel's mind bounced back and forth between absence and solidity. Absence as a randomly occurring openness, as in window and wind thought of as something that stayed, but began what was never finished.

A river looked up at the underside of a bridge, and cars piled up to make colors. Leaning on the edge of a stone parapet, somebody who was a friend cast glances that buildings used windows to receive, only they were so occasional in the facade that one half of the equation was noticed while another half was not.

Returning to a hotel made little sense. The room was still whirling—participating in many different lives, and the friend felt lost, amidst so much humanity.

"Can you taste this?" said Marie. She held something, poised, on the end of her finger. Samuel only smiled. Marie meant nothing to him in the moment. On the other hand, he had trained himself into caring—but the stretch of time this related to was longer than the moment. He licked something off the tip of her finger.

His life, cracked. A wind closed the crack by passing through swiftly.

At the edge of a stream, a woman knelt down and a church caught her eye. The water was splashed by her hands into her face. Her eyes closed to do this. Because the image of the church stayed placed, somewhere inside her head, and because she knew, science-wise, that it was behind her closed eyes that the interior head lay—she thought of herself as a person in prayer, but this mental image vanished. When she opened her eyes, she felt as if some of the splashed water had entered. And indeed it had, not through the closed eyelids but later, after the eyes opened and wet residue shifted.

Samuel had such an image, for a moment. He went to write such a thing on a piece of available paper. Marie thought about kissing him. He didn't care and brushed away that idea but found it sticking to the end of his fingers. He kissed the tips of those fingers; his pencil fell loose, not leaving the hand, but unfixed from the rigor necessary to form words on the page. He waited for a spark. Instead, there was lightening outside the library—this he could remember.

Death collected from everywhere—windows slammed shut in the wind—but the collection continued. It made inanimate things billow with the agitation of life. Animate things whirled, and the smooth surface on which they skated wasn't smooth, only the binocular eyes available were de-focused, of course, because that was the only way to make things take shape. Trying to read books through these same binoculars—back off. Books vanish. Then they are read. Evenings get occupied and one says to oneself—"Well done." The domestic animals do this in secret, so that masters will not have to re-adjust. No one chooses to cause pain, but it ladles itself like gravy. Tables smear—and domestics say—"It was an accident of nature." How do they know this? Did they read it?

Samuel says, "Enough said," to no one in particular, who sees him dropping his head into his hands—how excellent for his head to have found hands. Cradled, he has no tools left—sticking a pencil in his nose is out of the question; but he does imagine, effectively, what the nose might write. The paper receives this. It is invisible ink. But tomorrow is a heat that develops this—depending on tomorrow's temperature.

Are you who I think you are?

(Pause)

I think you are other than the person who left this room.

You've already said that.

Everything important gets repeated.

(first enters)

Prove to me I'm wrong.

No, you have to prove it.

(No, you have to prove it.)

Why me?

I'm happy with my assumptions, you're not.

(I'm happy with my assumptions, you're not.)

You know I can't prove a subjective impression.

I don't know anything of the sort.

(I don't know anything of the sort.)

OK. I'll go along with this and act like it's perfectly natural.

Ah, that's a sensible life adjustment.

(Double exits)

That's a sensible strategy.

Time will tell.

I'll let you in on a little secret.

(Pause)

Time passes.

Yes. Exactly.

I don't follow you.

Take a little advice. Start from scratch. *(exits)*

I don't know what that means—*start from scratch*.

(Pause)

But I don't have any choice.

(Close eyes, count to ten/Pause/repeat it faster.)

In a distant city, clouds traveled like icons, from the eye into the brain. The shapes evoked were letter writers.

Stores closed. Roadside stands made overtures to foreign belief systems. A lost number was picked up from the mud at the side of the road, written on a postcard. The child who received—recovered—that number, plastered it on his or her forehead like an eye, and that gave ideas to the other members of the party. An idea in the middle of the forehead. One elderly woman loved children. Her face shone from internal pressure. Her fingers tapped the edge of the automobile from the inside, and when food was collected to be eaten en route, she alone said “No.” Was hunger a factor in lives? Certainly—but this was anticipation. As the automobile picked up

speed, certain anticipations fell to pieces. There was always discarded material at the side of the road, but that too traveled, it was a question of changing the frame of reference.

At the edge of a new city—the smoke chased ideas not yet come to fruition. Eight o'clock said the neon clock, and it rattled into the future under Marie's eye. Her hands crossed, planning a not-yet-come actuality. Shall I comb my hair?—that was Marie, participating in eternity. She did. Her grooming improved for the moment, but the next, air re-blew a certain entanglement, and Marie did two things at once. The steering wheel edged toward its goal, un-mediated pivot, but things were controlled enough so that routes cut deep without altering the landscape, which persevered in its blend. The sky drops behind stores took on flesh, and reflected light also chimed, hearable through organs not yet named in the book Samuel squeezed like a lemon. This tastes like no taste, he whispered over traffic.

"Where are we headed?" Marie didn't say this. Therefore the word "home" was heard, ringing like a bell.

Samuel turned the pages of his memory book. What slid to the floor out of the pages was a map in sugar. I wish I'd had this on my trip, his tongue licked. Then he made a mental itinerary, backwards, and his chair collapsed. Why would such a thing happen? Glue no longer held. But fortunately—habit was stronger than glue.

It was morning someplace, and they got out of the car to breathe. An envelope lay in the grass. When two hands reached toward it, the body followed with a bend from the waist. That fold wasn't paper-echoed inside the envelope. Who else could have thought of such things? The empty envelope clued not, and the question, unformed, seemed whether or not to return it, emptiness and all, to its grass (mostly dirt) setting, or to transport it back into the car which would shortly be moving.

When it moved, the people inside moved. They filled (the car) but sometimes they were inside it and sometimes not.

A store opened. Business began for the day as people went in and out purchasing newspapers and toothpaste and cigarettes among other items. Outside the store, the window reflected as well as transmitted information. But nowhere in that information was the morning itself. In order to contact that, tools had to be set in motion, and they were ungraspable, they worked without thought, greased like ice greases something cold and hard, which doesn't want to be touched. So these fingers did their thing, though no one recognized them as fingers. But the body had its way, and packages adhered to certain definable human beings who came and went. A ribbon was tied to somebody's hair. It read, "Tomorrow, tomorrow,

I will be here tomorrow.” Then the store closed. People still entered and exited and made purchases, but it was closed. It turned to ice, so it was slippery enough to keep being “store” even if it wasn’t “store.” Cars drove past. Nobody noticed anything but “store,” but that was a reflection seen through the window of the passing automobile.

In another city—miles closed and became inches. Death had flowers lined up like collapsible bottles that held milk. So when the bottles collapsed, the milk collapsed. That was logic, and death was into logic like roofs were into sky. There was no contact, but there was a relationship. Samuel smiled and looked up. Just under the angle of his gaze—he missed things.

Children traveled to the end of the pier, viewed boats in the distance, drifting. Smoke also passed, and the children stood for amazing periods of time, transfixed. A small boy thrust his hands deep in his pockets, and when the pebbles underfoot were kicked, he passed time. Nobody spoke, yet there were children, so their speaking was not something well identified. But they did manage to glue onto some other level that understood the boats passing and the smoke rising—when it did rise though sometimes it took other directions.

The plate of water tilted; this would calm down when the speaking was more available as a tool the children were only beginning to handle. One child, in later years, would say or think—“Where does it begin and where does it end?”

No effective answers would be forthcoming to such a silly question deemed “childish,” so it was not, thank God, articulated. It was only dabbed—as a painting is dabbed—yet think about this—it is not the painting that is dabbed but it is the surface of the painting which is dabbed or dabbed at where the individual colors are found resting.

The child doesn’t have to let years pass to do this—to apply these dabs to the painting that finished itself and was finished by some other means—not tools, but tools coming from the outside that never touched the painting. And the child was too busy to cry. Nothing that childish was allowed to touch his or her features, which were controlled like sometimes one can imagine controlling smoke. Who imagines that? Does it work? Probably it’s not even imagined, it seems so far from the ordinary possibility and the ordinary thing about smoke.

Imagine a tall smokestack.

Imagine controlling that smoke.

This is something for a mature person to do.

This is a way to create a picture.

When the golden light lifted, Samuel found his eyes were open; but they were not open. Then he closed them, and that experience was just as shallow. He tried to remember the golden light, but it had gone. He sat at a table. Sculpted in time, he touched something gold, the table, in the hope it would speak to him. Half and half. After a night of drinking, the young man had difficulty starting his day. It seemed like a day already worn out

The street corner was whirled against. Was it caught? A hand put fingers in front of a face, blocking the eyes, but this was not to protect anything, only the head wanted the decoration of some gestures.

Four hands lay on the table and the table felt inclined to tilt.

Samuel imagined that the buildings had all collapsed. What Samuel had was a certain granular radiation from one or two light bulbs in his line of vision. How was this possible—it was morning and no lights were illuminated. Or, if they were, the sun obliterated all knowledge of that. A sandy stretch of soil beneath his feet may have given him ideas. He kicked his toes once or twice in the earth.

The terrible dog was on the verge of appearing from behind the mirror. Water always fell from the glass, or it wasn't water but something pourable—which was why the face of the dog, shining with a terrible light, seemed to float in front of Samuel's eyes. He reached out no hand, but the effort of the total arm seemed to release a certain brain fluid. On this rush, he could embark in the name of adventure. And so, stranger to himself, he was able to plant the stalk of his expectation in the most fabulous territory of all.

A game of tennis ended. The courts turned to clay, and white lines seemed to bisect what nobody was there to notice—a planet of meaning. Soon, one of the young women was on her knees, tracing the lines with a device of her own invention. Did it measure inches, or degrees of variation from some absolute direction? But the indications of direction were contradictory, which was perhaps the reason the game of tennis had been abandoned. An empty glass of what was once water stood on a small metal table. This, too, echoed like a thunderstorm in those random tables to which her measurements alluded. Called to task, she folded her device, and the young men, dressed in white, lifted her on their broad shoulders in imitation of something—was it a bird they had seen flying north?

The lawn in front of the large house widened. It must have been the devil.

Soon after different experiences, the woman let her hands fall inert to the sides of the chair.

On the other side of the ocean, a child put his ear to the door. Nothing changed. The ultimate sky stayed ultimate, and when the birds wheeled in circles, no circle was established. Yet the sky con-

tinued to spread. The night came and went. And the things that fell down, ultimately out of the sky, decided to name themselves in the midst of such falling, which meant, categories of thought accompanying nothing, floating light weight in the air that did not fill them—but they were filled, in the brief experience of that fall to earth.

In a small room, a lamp gave the only illumination. The one with his hands in his pockets turned to the wall. He had something to say. He tried to remain silent but, unfortunately, soon found himself speaking. This was the uncontrollable part of himself—the part of himself that dressed well to go into the streets. The part of himself that took long walks to the edge of the city—un-self-discovered, like a branch broken from some tree that tries to bend in the wind when there is no wind.

Children ran through the garden, and a bird howled. Sticks were dropped, then retrieved, and perhaps they had dreamt of avoiding the fire but it was not to be.

A trip was proposed and then abandoned. After regret had had time to acclimate itself; the house seemed smaller. Inside the regret, tiny rooms slowly established themselves, copies of other rooms. This doubling had a name, long forgotten. And so the film over the brain, full of holes, had no holes. That was the official belief. It was sad, but only in the moment of transition from the something before sadness to the sadness, only then was there a brief; momentary shine of the delight that had long since left his life. And Samuel said—“It is very important to know that before the sadness there was something else that was not interesting. A kind of sleep.” “But you woke from that sleep,” protested Marie. And Samuel nodded his head in irrelevant compliance. But he was glad to nod, knowing that sometime later that tiny act would lead him to new adventures.

Samuel lost his shoes, and lifted his hands to see them. This was necessary because the hands in their lower position sometimes obscured the feet. But Marie said, “Put your hands down,” and Samuel did so, believing that one error of judgment was enough for a single day. Then she cocked her head at an angle—this was Marie—and cried at something. It was a secret. But so many things were secrets that one could just categorize them as such and feel OK.

In another part of the city, a bar opened for the night. It had been closed temporarily, and at the moment of opening, no patrons were in sight. Later on that evening, there was a reasonable crowd.

At a food market near the river, vegetables were being sold. These were exchanged for money—but the amount that exited from pockets and handbags was not replaced directly by the item purchased. Said item filled other containers, bags of paper or plastic. So a gap

there had to be jumped by the mind that did the purchasing. That was an exercise of a sort, but the question was what part of the mind achieved, here, benefit. But a deeper question was—was there a pail to the mind, or was it a whole and non-dividable thing, and was that why it was so easy to make the connection between the produce purchased and the cash paid out to insure that? Pockets and handbags emptied fast—especially taking the perspective of longer periods of time. Brains matured. Bags of paper and plastic were eventually discarded.

Something on the surface of the lake, floating, as was expected, and Samuel fished it out of the water saying—“This thing was floating.” What was it? No one knew.

To turn these impulses of the hand into words rather than into images. The hand did continue when the brain did not—or was it rather that the brain did not report upon its continuing?

So words, they made things in spite of the effort being denied to the making. Why should the word want to continue? It did, after all, have a life of its own, just as did the hand have a life of its own. And what conditioned that drift of those separate lives if not something outside of and more powerful than Samuel himself?

Should Samuel have been more powerful; tried to make himself more powerful? Or was power available to Samuel in the form of a wave he could ride, and was that ride a ride to allow or a ride to end? And if Samuel left the ride of this wave, could his physical body be controlled in a way some idea of things might call desirable?

The moving hand and the moving word were controlled by life but they did not create a picture of life. What they produced was therefore evidence rather than relief. And if there was no relief, then the mental process built, and who knew what would be the end of that mental process—self-destruction from the inside—or transformation? Nobody knew.

They entered the cathedral and somebody said, “Kneel here.” But Marie looked toward the ceiling, and felt ready to cry.

A child held a bag of roasted nuts. Shaking the bag produced noise.

Wind was like an echo. If there was nothing to say, could there be an echo that echoed that. What kind of ringing in the ears was forthcoming?

Everybody felt, or heard, that ringing in the ears. Everybody. That was something, at least, to celebrate.

A hole opened in the sky, but nothing filled it, and it occupied time past as well as time future. Men climbed a specific mountain in order to see into the hole—this hole they had no idea of—its existence like the hole in front of the eye that moves when the eye moves.

So these men—better than blind—shuffled in their shoes over the rocks, and balanced on the final uppermost rock, and fell at last onto the hole of which they knew nothing, and nothing changed.

A newspaper flapping on the front of the newsstand: flapping because it had been clipped to the wall and now the wind was blowing. A newspaper reported some things and forgot many others. But that is to say it was the newspaper that was doing these things. The newspaper was printed by people who were under the command of other people who assigned other people to write things up. One of the things that was written up was what was happening now to the newspaper fluttering in the wind. That is, a tiny edge of it, loose from the things that clipped it to the wall, only that tiny edge was fluttering. But when there was no wind, it lay there totally flat.

The clocks were climbing the stairs. What stairs? The ones at the end of the hall—but isn't that all stairs, don't all stairs come at the end of a hall? Isn't that where all stairs are located? There are just a certain number of exceptions, but these exceptions don't prevent us from stating the obvious, because what is obvious is generally the case, about stairs particularly.

This knowledge empowered Samuel. He stood with confidence, ascended with confidence. Time, which stretched out in front of him like it stretched out in front of everybody else, held a certain number of surprises for him, but he was prepared for these surprises, because he knew they were coming. Yes, he was upset when they happened, some of them, but he expected to be upset. So his expectations were fulfilled and there were no surprises. Sometimes, he had to check his watch and usually, often, he was never extremely surprised or upset, because it was approximately the time he imagined it to be before checking his watch. But he checked his watch just to make sure.

In a small room, a cabinet held things inside. People who passed through that room, or did things in that room, occasionally saw it open. People who entered the room very infrequently, or just once in their whole lives—many of those people never saw it open, never saw its insides. But they did not doubt that it held things. It was, therefore, acceptable as a cabinet

When flowers erupted throughout the city
the encrusted walls
screamed
heavy with weight
and the hordes
mingled
with those blossoms
that perfumed all striving.

so the quality of activity
 changed
 and the city produced confusion as before
 but now
 such confusion was valued,
 cherished even,
 and what brought itself to a shine
 between blossom and stone
 was a ricochet of thought
 that, never before
 so clear,
 broke therefore into its thousand proper pieces;
 city of each fragment,
 city in each turn of a corner,
 where stability
 no longer felt tight
 and the icon-like quality of each moment of evening,
 flashing from face to face
 music'd itself
 and the city entire
 vanished
 into the source of its own twisting
 from that lost map
 trying, tired,
 to echo.

And while one spirit said these words to me,
 the other wept, so that—because of pity—
 I fainted, as if I had met my death.
 And then I fell as a dead body falls.

—Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto V:
 139–142 (the end of the Canto)
 (trans. Allen Mandelbaum)