

Chelsead

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CHELSEA 59

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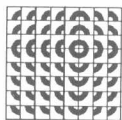
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NATURAL HISTORY

In Block 18 the professor from Amsterdam
traded his shirt for a stub of a pencil
and a school notebook, ruled in sections

for beating, by implement—rifle butt, hose
or hand; transgressions of the Hippocratic Oath;
making people watch death, by kind of death;

making people steal. Not to remember, he said,
but to learn, the way in 1652 Menasseh
ben Israel listed demons—possessors, imps,

snatchers of purses and cats, poltergeists,
dybbuks, child killers—evil put in order,
like Brazilian vipers, inventoried, soon

understood. Before they took him to the KB
he paid Jean two crusts to guard the book. Who
sold it, page by page, for rolling cigarettes.

THE COW JUMPED OVER THE MOON

They found a cow on the roof of the Alexandria Hotel in downtown L.A. A dead cow. A dried out skeleton of what used to be a cow.

They say a group of Satanists used to live in the penthouse. That the cow must have been a sacrifice. Nobody knows for sure.

Think about that cow, taking its first trip into the city from some place like Chino Valley. Los Angeles used to be cow country. Where people from San Francisco came down and bought cattle for their ranches. People like Jack London. The cow wouldn't know that, but maybe she would.

Imagine what it was like for her, first setting those clackety hooves on the cracked sidewalk. Did she think she was the most civilized cow from her farm? The Chosen Cow. For those few minutes she high-stepped it on the poured concrete. There was a handicap ramp, that was dignified enough, a slow crescendo upward into the tiled lobby. Not much different from the hillocks she was used to back at the farm. She was all elegance in the lobby. Maybe thinking how glamorous it was to arrive at a hotel in the black belly of night. The lobby empty just for her. Those nice kids patting her haunches and gently tugging on her bridle. She was the lucky one, escaping farm drudgery and daily mechanical squeezing on her teats.

But when they led her to the elevator, that's when she got suspicious. That's when they had to force her trembling flanks into the tiny cube, a fraction the size of a milking stall. Her pink nostrils dilated and her eyes grew large and liquid. A long, lowing MOOOOOOOOOOO escaped from her fleshy mouth. A curse if there ever was one. She had meant to say NOOOOOOOOOOO. That's when one of the not so nice people shoved a rag in her mouth, his eyes

darting around the lobby, but there was no one. A thick mass of cud slipped back down the cow's throat and practically choked her.

The elevator started with a jolt. The creaking nearly drove her mad. She tried to kick the person who held the bridle, but it was hard to maneuver. Numbers blinked. Finally she got him in the shin. He groaned and yanked her bridle. The door opened, then closed again and descended.

They waited, the boy and the Sacrificial Cow. She was quiet now, gathering strength in the fluorescent gloom of the hallway. For a moment she even enjoyed the way her hooves sank down in the carpet, and she thought of the fields in Chino Valley. She shook her head, trying to loosen the rag, but the boy shoved it back in her mouth, deeper. With that, she hung her head in despair.

The elevator door opened and the other people filed out. They were carrying lit candles, which frightened her. She danced back and hit the wall, bruising her rump. If Farmer Vandervort were here, he'd knock them all flat. Now the kids raised black hoods over their heads and she could barely see their eyes.

One of them opened a door to a staircase leading up to the roof. The cow knew this because there at the top was a piece of sky, city sky, but familiar all the same.

With a sudden burst of energy she rushed toward the elevator and butted the door. This made her dizzy, and stars wheeled all around the hallway.

"Keep it down out there!" yelled someone from behind a closed door. "Goddamn punks. Or I'll call the police."

"Just doin' some band practice on the roof."

One of the kids grabbed her bridle and pulled her roughly toward the staircase. Another plucked a handful of golden hay from a hidden fold. The cow's eyes gleamed. Maybe that was a farmer who yelled out to them and said what to do. Maybe city people just didn't know how to handle cows. Maybe up on the roof was the greatest, softest, lushest green field of all. With the golden hay glowing ahead and someone tugging on her bridle, she entered the stairwell.

The stairs were narrow. The cow's hooves clattered and slipped. People shoved from behind. The golden handful of hay bobbed just up ahead, and in the doorway the sky shone down, bright with city lights. She stumbled. Heard the snap of a bone. Hot trickle of sticky blood. They pushed harder, pulled harder, until finally the cow stumbled onto the roof.

"What a pain in the fuckin' ass, man. Better kill it first."

There was no grass, but right then the cow didn't mind. She knew she looked splendid in the moonlight, up there so high above it all, higher than any cow had ever been. The city lay beneath her, glittering with promises. Her coat shone white and the black splotches fairly swirled. She held her injured leg daintily on the tar paper and raised her magnificent head. As she did, there was a sharp stinging across her neck, and her eyes swam up to the moon.

The cow fell to her front knees, then back knees. Sharp smell of incense and burning candles made her nostrils quiver. The cow's belly hit the roof, mashing her udder. Scraped teats flared out beneath her crumpled body like bloated fingers. The tar paper was rough, there was gushing all around.

A sharper sting came from the side of her neck. She saw something silver flashing in the night. Drums were beating, they couldn't keep up with her heart, she vomited up the rag, the cud, closed and opened her eyes. There was another sting, her stomach flew up and out her throat and perched on her ears like a silly veil. The moon was clapping, the drums were pieces of her skin, every beat broke another bone, and she was something unnameable, something mysterious and overwhelming.

"How the fuck long does it take for a fuckin' shit cow to kick?"

"Gimme that knife."

The stings came from everywhere. The sky was in her lap, the greenest grasses lay heaped on glinting silver trays, the roar of the city poured splashing and shouting into the milk can, a thousand cowtails swatted away flies, a thousand cowslips brushed against her hide, and the night shade from the beating down Southern California sun was so delicious the cow thought she might just, maybe just, take a little nap.

But first, she rose to her hooves with a remarkable lightness and dignity, raised her immaculate white neck to the sky and lowed out a clear and plangent, NOOOOOOOOOOOOO.

Then the cow leaped over that big, beautiful dazzle of a moon.

TWO STORIES

SELLING GOD

We were too scared to disobey when our parents forbade us to go near them. No one knew where they came from though they spoke the native language and enough English to paint a crude sign by the road. Since we were foreigners living there, that was even more reason to mind our own business.

They sat by the road every day beside a makeshift table. On the table stood a row of glass jars, filled with a translucent substance. The crude sign said, *Ten Ounces of God \$1.50*. The locals said the stuff was flammable. Rumor had it that some local people burned to death, having poured it over their bodies during a ritual. A few foreigners like ourselves said this was God's punishment, and believed the ones selling the substance would be next. They will be punished for using *his* name for personal gain, they said.

We thought it took a lot of guts to sit there advertising God like that, but we always walked on the other side of the road a good distance away. We thought whatever was inside those jars might be more than mere fools' play. The jars did take on strange shimmering colors in the sun.

When we didn't see the people selling the glass jars anymore, we didn't think much about it. We figured they were somewhere else on the road, maybe further down, and we breathed a bit easier. So few

cars passed this way it seemed likely they would move to a more lucrative position. The real highway connected with our road a few miles off. I never counted the miles, and didn't care how far it was, since our parents didn't travel much at that time. On our road were barefoot women carrying bundles and babies, pickup trucks, and old cars that looked ready for the junk heap. There wasn't even a real town nearby, just a cluster of shacks, a general store, and a bar with a neon sign that was definitely off limits.

Sometime later, we heard that the people selling God had been arrested by police. In another version, they were seen bursting into flames. The only things agreed upon were the strange smell by the side of the road, and a strange glowing light that hung in the air at certain times of day. But that's not all. Something happened to the birds when they came near. They seemed suddenly confused. They would hover, then fly back the way they came. Insects behaved strangely too. When they flew too close, you'd have sworn they'd banged their heads against a wall.

Someone finally decided to rope off the area, which to this day no one will go near. If not for the ropes, we might have forgotten. As time passed and many things happened in our lives, the ropes were always there to remind us, even after the smell went away and the birds and insects returned to normal.

WITHOUT FEAR

That morning as they drove through the desert, the curator pointed out grass trees, some three meters high, some a thousand years old, but the woman couldn't care less. She was tired of the desert, tired of the heat, the empty road, the empty sky. She acted as though nature put this desert here to tire her.

Then suddenly there was a town. Before she knew what happened, there were streets, houses, shops. There was a beach, a quiet bay. Suddenly there was something to see beside the desert. There was something to see, but there wasn't much. There were just enough streets so she knew this was more than a stage set, more than a mirage. But not much more. "This is it?" she asked, looking at him in disbelief. "This town has a regional branch of the museum?" The curator tried to stay calm. He was doing his best to keep from throttling her.

After her lecture—which was well-attended despite her conviction that no one would come in this heat—an art student approaches the woman. She is the wife of an engineer. "I really enjoyed your talk," she says. "It's such a treat to have an artist from New York here. How do you like Australia?"

"Not much," the woman replies.

"Maybe you haven't seen the right places," the student says. "I have some time. I could show you around if you're free."

"Sure," she says, with a shrug.

The curator breathes a sigh of relief when he sees her go off with the student.

As they walk toward the beach, the student says, "I have two small children. It's hard to find time for art school. My husband wants me to stay home with the kids."

The woman is about to reply, when her attention is diverted by small groups of aborigines cooking their midday meals over open fires on the beach.

The student is pleased to see the woman's interest in the aborigines.

"Before we came here, my husband had a job way up north," she says. "There I found aborigine drawings on the rocks in the desert. Finding those drawings opened up another world for me. That's when I started making art. I feel connected to the aborigines because

of their feeling for the land. That's what I love about living here—all this land!"

"But it's so empty!" says the woman, looking out past the town.

The student says, laughing. "You're used to crowds in New York. Of course it's empty to you. But there are very special places here. I could show you one of my special places." She looks at her watch. "Then I have to pick up the kids."

"Sure," the woman says, but she feels less than enthusiastic. She doesn't expect much from a student in a small town.

Two aboriginal men wearing only loose trousers walk past them. The woman from New York meets their eyes.

"Their eyes are so alive!" she says to the student, as they head toward her car.

"No one here understands the aborigines," the student says, sighing. "People complain because they can't hold jobs and live on welfare. They don't understand that the aborigines aren't like us. It's hard for them to adjust."

"I heard that aborigines in the city tear up the floors of their flats to use as firewood in winter," says the woman from New York.

"Our world is alien to them," says the student.

"It's not alien to all of them," the woman from New York says. "I met an aborigine at a party. An aborigine with pale blue eyes. Someone whispered to me that he was only five percent aborigine, but he seemed to be making the most of that five percent. The hosts called him an *authentic aboriginal novelist*. He's married to a French woman and divides his time between Paris and Perth."

"You won't find aborigines like that around here," says the student. "These aborigines want their land back. A few years before I came, they staged a riot and looted the town. You won't see them playing didgeridoos on the streets like the ones in the city."

As the student starts the car, the woman from New York still sees the aborigines' eyes. Looking in their eyes, she saw something. Something like a spark flying, something like a sliver of life that passed from their eyes into hers. It was scary looking in their eyes. It was scary seeing people so alive. She's not used to seeing life up close. She's not used to being part of it.

Beyond the town, there is a smattering of farm houses, wheat fields. Here and there, strange trees grow sideways. Trunks curve like

backs of bent old men laid low by the weight of the sky. The road curves too. The desert looks like a slow undulating sea.

The woman feels more alive, but feeling more alive isn't always feeling better. Feeling more alive is being present to whatever one is feeling.

This time the desert scares her. The desert is so big, so impersonal, so indifferent to human beings. The desert is alive with a secret life buried under sand. She feels the secrets without knowing how to name them. She doesn't want to name them. She doesn't want to feel that secret life.

As they round a bend, a gutted stone village, abandoned by settlers in the last century, stands like broken monopoly houses in the vastness of the desert. The student points out a ruined church.

"That church is special," she says. "I often go there by myself. It's so peaceful and quiet."

"You're not afraid to be alone here?" asks the woman, looking at her with curiosity.

"Oh no," the student replies.

"I'd always be looking over my shoulder," says the woman. "If you happened to run into some crazy person here, you wouldn't stand a chance."

"It's perfectly safe," the student says. She pauses. "Years ago, a man killed several farmer's wives with a butcher knife while their husbands worked in the fields, but he wasn't from these parts. He was passing through. That's the only crime I ever heard about."

"How would you hear about a crime?" asks the woman, looking round her. "Who's here to report it?"

The student grows impatient. "We don't worry about crime," she says.

A few miles past the church, the student turns off on a narrow track, lined with twisted trees. The two women drive in silence.

"This is the place I wanted to show you. It's sacred to the aborigines," she says, as they approach through the trees a solitary mountain of striated rock rising high above a natural pool. Through the foliage the woman sees leaves floating in murky water. She is about to say that the pool looks anything but sacred when she raises her eyes and gets a jolt. Looking at the mountain is like looking in the eyes of the aborigines, but this time she sees without fear. She could swear that the mountain is alive; she could swear that it is vibrating with life.

"We can swim here, but don't put your head in the water," says the student as she disrobes. "People say you'll get meningitis and die if you do."

But the woman isn't worried about meningitis. In fact, nothing could be further from her mind than the fear of meningitis as she undresses and follows the student into the water.