

Eulalie & Squid

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for Isabel

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Detached from the Aggregate

The silver seems to have been handed out by those who think Squid too reclusive. A man who doesn't understand his obligations to the park system. And the volunteers who patrol its borders. They have been reduced by quarantine and apathy. Turned into specters by the things they've seen. Tumblers lying about, cracked and empty. Leaves stamped with the spindly trails of mold growth. Or other otherworldly materials. Pretending to belong to this one. Squid has a lesson at twelve and another in the morning. But suspects he has already covered those chapters and will just be wasting his time. Besides, Eulalie won't give him credit for being somewhere crucial. For creating a part of his life that doesn't resemble all the others. She thinks him shackled to the wasp's nest. Straining away at the scent of alder. But that doesn't mean she'll just wave her hand and dismiss the project. He knows through hard experience she will take copious notes. And try to make him believe something he doesn't actually believe. Eulalie is tricky that way. She is constantly turning over on the floor. Peering up at him as if she has just come to the most sinister realization. And she is waiting for the right moment to inform him of it. To pronounce it in short, clipped syllables.

I think Squid probably should have bought Eulalie the fish tank. He should have pushed it into the corner with a dolly. Rather than just expecting the winds to take care of things. They are almost always arriving just a minute too late. Disturbing sheets of paper. Carrying with them the sound of people trying to do the right thing. It is a sound that tends to be mistaken by the uninitiated for that of someone drowning. So far off shore there is little help, I suppose, available. Though not so far as to fail to register altogether.

The Center Alleges Something Against the Periphery Simply by its Existence

Squid resolves never to dig up the past again once it has been buried. He fears it the way some people fear the breaching of the levees. The inundation that calls out your name. The reasons for this are plentiful, but they are hard to distinguish. They huddle together in the basement of the mind like salamanders. Poorly insulated things hoping against hope for the weather to change. For the sun to find its way to a window. And toss its light on the floor like a handful of confetti. Of course, there are the broom closets to worry about. And the passages cut off from the main body of the house. Passages where you have to crawl on your hands and knees. And even then there doesn't seem to be enough room. Until you exhale so forcefully it's hard to get the lungs to remember what comes next.

The bride reminds Squid of a mountain slope. An avalanche. The kind of terrain that only really exists on film or postcards. That draws men to their ruin without their realizing what is happening. He thinks the energy in the room has diminished a great deal and wants to know why people are still clinging to the walls. Still trying to find there some sort of antidote to the poison that seeps in while they aim their attention elsewhere. Suppose, for instance, you were to find a thousand dollars in a briefcase at the side of the road. And you buried the briefcase in your backyard. But the owner showed up a week later and said he had heard some rumors that concerned you. That seemed to put you in a bad light even when there was no light. When the shadows themselves seemed to have taken over the entire hemisphere. Would that excuse your behavior at the tavern later? The woman in the short sleeves tries to buy you a drink. And you say you don't drink anymore because the taste of it reminds you of death, of the fact that there are places on the surface of the sun that are cooler than others. And if we were to try to find them with the unaided eye, we'd succeed eventually. But at what cost?

Pell-Mell Between Great Events

The bus sits in a gully. Because the parking lot was full, I suppose. Or because the gully is protected on both sides from the wind. Still, there are the floods to watch out for. And the mites that get in under the door and torment your scalp for weeks at a time. Even the medication isn't up to its usual good works. Deciding instead to abandon the battlefield to its enemy and beat a retreat to the sound of fife and cymbals. Squid stops by with a handful of magazines. Heady, intellectual fare of the sort he knows Eulalie objects to. Her first reaction is, as always, something muted. A bending of the corner of her lips. Either up or down, he can't be sure. It is a movement so subtle as to warrant closer examination if you were to record it. But caught in the speed of contemporary events, in the actuality of the here and now, there is no way to determine which movement came first. Which direction the birds take when they are startled out of their slumber on the high tension wires. She follows his eyes to the window where she sees men bent double over the fields across the street. Extracting various forms of plant or mineral materials from the soil. And she wonders if he is trying to re-direct her attention intentionally again. Trying to force her to forget what she had originally wished to say to him. Something about the obscenity of the hour. The inappropriate way he behaves when in the company of other adults. But she can't remember precisely what it was now because her memory is like one of those steam engines that used to pull freight cars over the mountains in black and white films. It functions slowly at first. And only later finds its momentum.

The Hermeneutic As If

Pick through the seaweed. The platters full of liverwurst. But know that I love you. It's not enough to request a place on the Board. You must earn it through hard work. And the regular manipulation of other people's bodies. Sometimes they appreciate this and sometimes they tell their relatives that you are not who you pretend to be. They suggest you were abducted by your babysitter and this trauma sits like an amphibian on your diaphragm. You can't chase it away with minerals, though there are plenty on the shelf that promise to bring relief. To allow us to put the pencils down and contemplate what it is we've been writing. These moments never lead to anything spectacular. But they don't mark us as potential victims either. We just keep moving in the same direction, all together, like a flock of parrots.

The Term “Unmarried Adult Male” Applies as well to Tarzan

Eulalie examines the conclusions, tries to place them together one after the other just as though they represent something she knows they do not represent. Parts of a coherent entity. Armor forged of a singular substance and signed by its forger. A squiggle and an umlaut over a portion of it. All just barely discernible on the left heel. But reminding us nonetheless that you can't send your creations out into the world without some sort of recognizable identity and still expect them to come back to you at some point the way the pigeon is said to return to its roost even with the goshawk hard on its tail. And the magnetic fields disrupted by some arbitrary whim of the sun. I imagine she wants to know what Squid's name actually represents. Whether it is a real part of him or whether it has been attached by someone who had no clue, at the time, of what he would become. And who has since refused to find out.

It's like we don't even know where North Carolina is. And if we were to look for it on a map, we'd find that long, comforting shadow at the far edge and assume it is the place we are looking for and start our journey. But there is no one waiting on the other side. Just the same old expectation turned into grief and inanity. A dull throb that turns sometimes into terror when you find yourself hoisted several hundred feet in the air. How is it possible to continue? How is it possible to come down? Probably best to just remember things at that point. To conjure them in your head and ogle them as if they were riches the likes of which no one has seen since the time of Blackbeard. And his associates. Since the time the lights reflected like swordfish on the surface of the water. But then we remember where we are and that there is no escape. And we refuse to belittle the situation further by unlocking the imagination. Because, after all, what is it exactly? How do you know what to do with it, how to utilize it, without accomplishing what a million others have accomplished before?

A Most Spontaneous Élan

Eulalie remembers a time when Squid got so far out into the woods by himself, she was afraid he might never again return. And she chuckles at the memory of her relief. That sense that she was somehow off the hook forever. That she would never again be called on to submit to someone else's scrutiny. She liked the freedom this afforded, the very real sense that you could climb the stairs as far as they go and not have to act as if you are having trouble catching your breath. Of course, all that was in the past, the way Fluoride is in the water. And there are people now who would tell her to abandon those days at the pier. At the waterfront itself. Where someone else can be trusted to draw faces on the planks. Can illuminate them with candles and risqué lyrics and start a career that might last longer than a few days.

What right, she says when she is pulling the socks from her feet, what right do you have to inform on me that way? What right have you to include my friends in the list of potential enemies and then publish it in serial form? Honestly, sometimes I wish I had found your brother instead. Eulalie refers, of course, to their first rendezvous. The tension in the air like a handful of locusts. At most a dozen. There was no swarm. And she was disappointed by this. The way we are disappointed to this day that no one has managed to unearth the Ark of the Covenant.

In a Hastily-Penned Cartoonist's Balloon

Eulalie fills out the report and considers sending it in to the proper authorities. But she's not entirely sure who they might be. And what would they do with the information that hasn't already been done a hundred times before? File it under a new symbol? Talk about it amongst themselves in low whispers? And eventually yield to the temptation to illustrate it with faintly erotic stick figures? No, the time has come to abbreviate every other word. To find her voice in the voice of the blue jay. Eulalie stands at the window, straining to hear. Straining to distinguish the high notes from the panic that seems to come out of nowhere. That seems so pure, in fact, it has no audible existence. It can't be reproduced or explained away as waves. And this she finds almost intolerable. The kind of thing that sends you to bed at night without the covers, without even a stole to keep you warm. And the next morning you are strangely thankful. As if the austerity of the experience was the whole of it. Was both meaning and insult wrapped into one. Like that story of the man who always managed to trip up his foes. While simultaneously banging away at something by Liszt.

Squid thinks the attention of the heart paltry. Something that moves from one place to another as quickly as a cold front. Registering along its path neither the fact of its own movement or the disruption caused by its presence. But convinced all along that it is a one and singular thing. Without cracks or boundaries. Without division inside or out. And following the instincts placed within it by some providence much like itself in make-up. A barrel with objects in it. Pickle brine. Left over umbrellas. Eulalie, for her part, thinks he is without substance. A diffuse and undifferentiated thing that wanders about the mountainside at night when she is sleeping. That tells complete stranger tales that have no point. Tales that suggest the world is one kind of thing and then turn around and suggest it is something else entirely. And the two views are not necessarily contradictory. But they can't stand in close proximity either without a fistfight ensuing, the sort of dustup that usually ends in violence being done both to the psyche and the mechanism of the elbow.

As the Total of the One is to the Total of the Other

Someone's going the wrong way. It's inevitable. The sooner we accept that the bargain is not really a bargain at all, but a decoy, the sooner we can get back to the tales that nearly always begin in Bulgaria. We can grab up whatever celery is on the plate along the way. Just as if we won't know what the climax sounds like without such assistance. Without the ladders threatening to fall over at the slightest provocation. Eulalie throws innuendo over her shoulder like salt. And the fact that Squid does not lunge ought to buy him some respect among those who knew him when he was a boy. Who thought he would never find himself in this situation. The sedan stuffed to the roof with steam trunks and cans of albacore tuna. The radio tuned to whatever doesn't have any tympanis in it. This should tell us all we need to know. And if it doesn't, if we are still searching beneath the mattress deep into the following morning, that doesn't mean we are disabled in some crucial way. It just means we will not be given a place on the life raft, should matters come to that. Should the oceans start spilling over the sides of their containers. And running through the streets like domestic animals loose from their trailers. She finds his silence suspicious. The kind of thing that one wraps the body up in just when the body has become most vulnerable. When it is most likely to succumb to scrutiny. The heat of the Idaho sun. And if she is going to position herself correctly, she knows she must first determine where Squid will be at any given moment. Next to the rollaway bed. On top of the statue of himself that was erected secretly, in the middle of the night, downtown. And when the reporters came to ask him about it, to all but accuse him of arranging the project himself, he scoffed in a voice that left little doubt of his guilt. But no one could put a finger on exactly why. Sure, there was the timbre of it. Weak and watery. The sort of thing one expects to hear from the tailpipe of a Buick. Or the mechanism of the pen when you are just about to sign your name. But you hesitate for a moment because you're not quite clear which line is the correct line. And which is liable to get you sent to the cabin in the piney woods. From which, it is rumored, no one ever comes back again. Where they ply you with soda crackers and fragments from the illiterate poets of Greece. Until you can no longer remember exactly why you turned your back on the old life. Why you lampooned it so cruelly in the pages of the phonebook.

But just try figuring it out without the assistance of the woman you love! Try scratching at the bricks on your own. It won't be but a matter of weeks before you are slinking back, defeated, into the corner of the garage. Hunting up the gas cans for one final inhalation.

Chilean Sea Bass is Really Just Patagonian Toothfish

Squid thinks the lateness of the hour means something other than what he has imagined in the past. When fatigue crept up on him like an alligator. And there was a real sense in the air that what we experience is simply a delicate crust on the outside of something enormous. And mouth-watering. Or at least aromatic. That Eulalie goes to bed early is a sign, he supposes, that her patience has worn thin. Or that she is so fond of dreaming, she can't wait to get back there again and discover something about the dresser drawers. Something hidden and earth-shattering. The stash of diamonds an ancestor left behind just before she disappeared into the wilderness. A receipt for twelve gallons of gas. Ah! If only we could conjure those hours again! Those exquisite sounds by the bank of the river!

I know what Squid's up to, why he hauls the catfish ashore as if he is handling some sort of industrial poison. But really, the thought of holding one's nose before a cadre of women, and then expecting them to remain interested, to ask you about the tattoo on your forearm! It's too much. I remember once stumbling on a pair of scissors tossed aside for no reason, it seemed, on a trail that snaked its way over the ridge of a mountain. And ended abruptly at a cliff. Below me there were buzzards circling in the mist. And you could just make out the tops of some evergreen trees. I always wondered who had been there before me. Who had decided it was no longer necessary to cut up scraps of paper. And leave them on the ground. It's the same sense of wonder that grips Squid when he hears Eulalie whispering on the phone in the next room. When he catches her looking off into the distance when they are out for a drive. Which way is she going, forward or back? Which would be the most delicious? Which cause him the most pain? They are questions Squid never tires of asking himself. As if they had appeared first in a sacred book. And his discovery of them now represents nothing short of an initiation.

Before the Ceremony Took Place

Our minds do not belong to us. We are not responsible for what occurs there most of the time. And if this should cause others melancholy, well then, we ought not to admit that it causes us some trouble too. Because once this secret gets on the wind, it weighs it down. It turns the wind into something that doesn't know where it is going. Or why it wanted to go anywhere in the first place. Perhaps all indecision is a blessing handed down from the heavens the way dinner rolls get sent from one end of the table to the other. Everyone knows where they originated is more important, ultimately, than where they wind up. Of course, we don't know if Eulalie's eyes are open or closed. And if they are actually in-between, just slits showing the slightest bit of color and some of the sclera, then perhaps Squid is right to sulk after all. Because she is choosing to eliminate all but the minimum of sense impression. Just the vaguest outline of his head and arms. And her motivation is the same as it was when they met here previously. On a Tuesday perhaps. When the weather wasn't as fine, but the sense of possibility was much more acute than it is now. When they knew no more about each other than does a pair of snails. If only everything kept to its proper order like this, obeyed the chronology written out ahead of time, we wouldn't be so afraid to step out the front door. We wouldn't march to the post office with our hearts in our throats. And the manuscripts of our autobiographies tucked up under our arms. We'd let the world infect us with whatever nonsense it has kept brewing in the back room. And unleashes only when it is certain the time is not quite right for it. That its recipients will all but be destroyed. Squid sees Eulalie's outline in the ice on the window. And knows then that even mistakes can go terribly wrong. Can make you long for the contests that used to pop up in the back pages of the magazines. Promising deliverance from a life with no boundaries. With just a few wide open pastures to hide in when there was no real reason to be hiding from anyone. Only a bland, inimitable sense of the futility of all things.

Laid on the Tongue, an Irritant

Eulalie digs the number out of her purse and repeats it to him five or six times without his ever exhibiting the first sign of comprehension. And isn't it always this way? she thinks as Squid pulls her to him. And wraps his arms around her head, mock-aggressively. As if to suggest that he might some day, if he were feeling like it, pull her head from her neck as easily as one separates the wrapper from a piece of candy. First, the arrival. And then the administration of certain pleasantries designed as much to fill up space as to communicate anything noteworthy or valuable in themselves. And if he is in a hurry, there will inevitably be some sort of monologue. A treatise on the spirit without his ever using the word spirit. Or seeming ultimately to know what he would denote by the term if he were to use it. But she understands anyway. The way you can understand what is happening in the steel towns two counties over without ever having to go there personally. Or pick up a newspaper. Sometimes these things just have a habit of getting on the wind. And dispersing themselves about in the atmosphere. So that those who live in Mindanao find themselves uttering phrases current as well in the city of Portland, Maine. With the only difference being one of translation, of course. And perhaps a hint of menace or barbarity found in the one but not so much the other. Due, I suppose, to geography. Or the promise of a Sunday thaw.

Too Much Faith in the Captain's Plan

The rowboats block the exit to the bay. Something smells like dogs after there has been a race from one end of the continent to another. Though the dogs themselves do not take part. They bound around at the periphery. Hoping to get noticed by whoever lingers there. Whoever has stacked the rocks on top of one another and refers to that structure as a monument. I doubt there is any material here for reflection. Any leftovers of the wedding cake. After all, the whole world has learned to do without romance. And the sore knuckles that accompany it. Eulalie recalls the rear-guard action they took, the seemingly endless banter that turned out to be just so much grasping at tuning forks. And scratching outlines into the soft flesh behind the knee. It's possible other people think in terms that have no correlation with the outside world. That reduce it to some sort of plaything. Like the rubber pomegranate in a baboon's cage. But when pressed to explain why they need this secret code, this longing for hiding places with faux-Etruscan pottery and ergonomic furniture, the most they can muster is a croak of some sort. A bleating like that you'd expect of mountain ibex. When they are far from their mountains. Perhaps this means we will see the likes of them again some day. In the garden section. Running their thumbs over the hoses. Perhaps we will forget the whole thing ever happened. And lower ourselves discreetly behind the blind before the waterfowl approach and the insults ring out. Or maybe Eulalie is correct in claiming the bottom of the feet are no place to start experimenting. You have to begin at the top of the head. And work your way down. If you wish to avoid the plight of the young wife who sees her husband adorned with the leaves of the Gamb'u tree. A sure sign that he has been visiting the garden of the Vidyadharas. Hoping to secure there his basest desires. But then, who hasn't taken a detour now and then? Searched for some replica of the month before? But found instead a tingling in the earlobes? A pain in the coccyx that can only be described as tolerable? Better to let the bouillabaisse simmer. Better to address your concerns to the man on the balcony who is playing his oboe with a reckless, primitive abandon. Just as if he were trying to conjure himself from the surf.

Teach the Dominies

The librarians turn up for their session. And you forget why it was you thought you had a chance in this world. That the foreboding that used to hang about your shoulders when you were a kid was anything less than a message straight from the source. A kindness done to you as a favor by someone who has no real need to grant favors to anyone. He is in a position, of course, to know why the storm drains are placed at regular intervals. And what the future looks like when the future looks like anything at all. Porcelain jars, for instance. Or the cracks in the sidewalk that appear out of nowhere one night after a thaw and the ground has become saturated. That's the point at which the crickets decide, apparently, that they have had enough of announcing their presence to all and sundry. And yet, at the same time, they aren't too sure of their options. They can't even agree on what silence is.

Squid had hoped Eulalie would recognize him anyway. And pretend that she was frightened. Hold her hands up before her face. And let out one of those screams they seem to have perfected in the silent films of the 1920's. What we wouldn't give now to have grown into our mannerisms that effortlessly! As if they had originated somewhere in the body. Had grown and matured from something no larger than a grain of sand. And the process was so mysterious, they don't even speak of it anymore at the seminary. They lower their eyes. And shake their heads. And they walk off toward the garden gate. Where they will re-convene, of course, in the evening. And make their feelings known through gestures of the hand. And a mute imitation of the swaying of nearby trees.

From Golgothas of Ordure and Rust

Eulalie leaves the back door open just in case he is planning to surprise her. To show up wearing the poncho she stitched together by hand. But she knows her chances are getting slimmer by the minute. Squid will never grow substantial. He will never abandon the periphery where he likes to blend in. She thinks we are all some sort of fiend when you get right down to it. When you peel back the layers and the disguises we have picked up along the way. As if they had been no more than pieces of scrap tin thrown into a heap in the corner. And we fashioned them into whatever seemed necessary at the time. But strikes us now as unnecessary, I suppose. Or necessary, but not entirely so. Like socks on a warm day. Or the postage stamps that have a picture of someone famous on them. Or notorious.

Eulalie spoons out the last of the gelatinous mass from the bottom of the container and holds it up to the light to try to determine once and for all whether she has been wasting her time waiting for someone, anyone to say her name when she is sleeping. The signs are in the substance, where they always are. But she doesn't know how to read them. And she can't bring herself to invent the science of it here and now. Can't imagine anyone trusting the conclusions she comes to no matter what they are based on. She knows Squid will simply hide behind that face he has constructed from the same materials as his real one. As if the one were somehow identical to the other even though they display diametrically opposed features. And why shouldn't it be so? she realizes, with a start. Why shouldn't he lather up the inside with his tongue? And find that it stings a little. It gets frightfully warm, and even begins to taste like the back of one's hand. The same miniscule pieces of grit. The hint of apricot coming, no doubt, from the lotions one applies in the morning.

Titter at the Mention of Lamartine

She must fight the malaise that descends whenever she approaches the bed, must remind herself there are reasons we can't succumb. But these reasons are never readily apparent, and when he touches her ear with his mouth, she recoils without meaning to, almost as if there is a nerve center there originally created to warn one of the presence of adders. To ensure an immediate response and therefore at least another day of life. He considers her body the sort of thing one should thank Heaven for and wets his fingers in preparation. But all along, there is a place in the back of his mind that remains unconvinced, that chews noisily on a piece of glass and considers the unstable personality of Tiberius. The fits of melancholy. The intermittent loss of reason. If only we knew where the switch is, how to throw it in a timely manner and still find a way to make it seem as if we were in the other room. She follows trails through groves that haven't been named officially, but which carry the names given them by children and others in the vicinity. People who spend great quantities of time exploring them or just passing through in search of some further grove where they can expect a moment or two of solitude. Maybe a run-in with a stranger. Something memorable before it even happens. Something arranged ahead of time in the mind where each detail, each caress and dumb-show, is worked out, tested and refined, by that entity responsible for forming the world out of the raw materials sent its way on the nerves. It delights in anonymous pleasures above all else, relishes the arcane and the unseemly as if it had been raised improperly. As if it had been privy to all manner of inappropriate conversations at the dinner table when it was growing up. And I don't wish to suggest by this there was a more respectable alternative. That we may blame bad luck or faulty circumstances, the poor decision making of a nearby adult. No, we elicit the effects best by imagining the cause, but have no desire to prove it this way. In fact, to further illicit the impossible, we might wish to understand the methods of this reservoir of bad taste, this conductor of flesh buried in the flesh itself, by analogy with the seashore. Or the armies marching overland from their base in the mountains a thousand miles away. But what's the point, she thinks, as she inches ever closer to that place where she will move her hands a certain way. And will be no more conscious of it than one is conscious of breathing when nothing is obstructing it. Even here, the malaise is both unmovable and unendurable, the curse and shanty of her life. And if she escapes it momentarily through the insistence and the prodding of that part of him that resembles the unadulterated will itself, it is only by magnifying it until the boundaries themselves become unending. They stretch to the furthest corners of the room and refuse to slow their progress even then. They run for the empty cosmos in all directions, like light.



Charles Freeland lives in Dayton, Ohio. His books, e-books and chapbooks include *Through the Funeral Mountains on a Burro* (forthcoming from Otoliths), *Grubb* (BlazeVOX books), *Furiant, Not Polka* (Moria), and *The Case of the Danish King Halfdene* (Mudlark). His website is *The Fossil Record* (charlesfreelandpoetry.net) and his blog is *Spring Cleaning in the Labyrinth of the Continuum* (charlesfreeland.blogspot.com).

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