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# Radio at Night

Wm. Anthony Connolly

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[thrumming]

Drowsily dreaming lying in bed, warm sun leaking through the sheer curtain, I awoke—my mind struggling with disorientation; where was I? All around me, the room spun in the gloaming, whirling things, places, moments. My body heavy still with sleep, tried to build itself, to reassembly its various parts, its form, that it might give where I was a name. My convolutions, through the reassembling of feet, and thighs; of ribs and lungs, fingertips and shoulder blades, eyelids and ear tips, each conjured from morphing accoutrements; pieces of furniture, smells; light through the curtains, a litany of rooms in which it had one time or another slept and resurrected itself in the midst of the maelstrom dust moats and burgeoning day. And before I could register with my brain any of this, my body catalogues the successive rooms, their bedspreads, the occupants, my brother, then no brother, Man Mr. Nobody, hunching guardian angels resting on bedposts and windowsills; and slowly, it all rose and fell, into me—and I thought I heard an answer to a question I had been contemplating lately come from the radio. The signal is a mix of static and clarity—I cannot tell if it is me or the radio? And it says:

*He ain't heavy he's my brother*

*Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister.*

There are spaces too

[*he ain't heavy* ... I miss my dead brother, my dying mother, my sisters, my brother, friends fading dastardly constellations.

I try to make sense draw up a shape ...]

... of roaring silence, a drone thrumming deep down in my bones echoing an emptying, a filling up; propinquity, but of what? Not realizing it happens like that, until it has happened, and afterwards drunk on the beauty of it so inexplicable and indescribable.

Later, this I write down, my pen digging furrows in a journal. I worry these pages—*these dead me scrolls*. I worry sometimes about these pages falling loose, like leaves or garbage, on the street and being found, being found out, found out for what is found there on these fugitive pages. Leaves of lacunae; exegesis of the soul unrolled for consumption by ravenous dogs and gyrovague sojourners who need the sheaths as blankets. The contents of my head. Last utterances until they become the precursory, proem to more.

In these pages, a quiet madness, an incessant ache to love and be loved; a continual Chautauqua with some unseen entity who may or may not know what is best for me in matters of chess moves and careers. In this accounting, evidence of a mild case of self-inflicted, self-diagnosed autism: My head full of nothing one day, and then crowded with the scents of flowers not yet found, echoes of tunes not yet heard. Head filled with trapped *sparrows*. But mostly yearning.

Now, the answer on a radio, distant, me lying in bed stunned and sleepy, does not say this—it says, in a flutter in the chest, to keep writing it all down, to keep an ear piqued. Something about gravity and grace, and love, always love. The beauty of the world is a labyrinth we are told, and our ache is making its way through. I rise and go into the study. Ever since childhood, I had been a fugitive. I called Kenny N a nigger when he slashed me across the legs with a hockey stick. My horror and the beating he laid on me, made me a recluse and never again, would I face my darkest fears—that I was a dumb creature—I would write them down instead. Ineffable screed. And so, the fugitive needs a record.

On the way to my study, I think of pennies (my brain a Pachinko machine). For all those pennies offered and lost, being unable to say exactly what can be discovered here. I wonder now where all those misspent pennies are in wonky stacks smelling of copper and sweat. Or marbles sunk in freshly dug shallow graves. The young friend with a prized cat's eye. My salad days of schoolyards and summer holidays; running across winter ice, traversing snowy continents, my footfalls the only trace of my existence.

[this is me dreaming]

Taking them back, I remember crying to *Detroit Rock City*, a song about dying young in a car crash. *No time to turn*. Bass line. I remember a friend, whom I had not seen in weeks, arriving on my doorstep and handing me a gift: a knife. Blood stain Rorschach on dark velvet paisley wallpaper. My brother died that summer, on a stretch of the highway undulating from his drunken eyes, but lived another two decades to haunt himself.

*He ain't heavy he's my brother*

*Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister*

*Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother*

*Holy Ghost, son and father*

Back then, I remember defending a gay man against the taunts of my friends—one of the proudest moments of my life. And afterwards, for years, seeing this man and sharing unspoken moments; a nod of the head, a quick hand in the air, a smile as if saying together: do you believe this shit. Such small gifts. It happened long ago, but I can still feel its impact. It rounds up back.

*He ain't heavy he's my brother*

Back then, I was going to be a star. They all told me this. Silver screen. Sunny days, flat prairies, and sky aquamarine. Running faster than most. Hiking through rows of corn as if sentinels at posts. Gasoline in a pothole filled with rainwater. The taste of it, sweet and dangerous; foreign to my hunger. Dad wrapping strawberries in paper towels, in tin foil and plastic, and ice. A house on the edge of an open field burnished in the sun, burning leaves in some sacrifice. Listening to contraband radio under

the sheets at night. Unseen signals from afar riding milk moonlight. Thrumming in the bones. *Blinded by the Light*—the shivering unknowns. Her flat stomach, skin milk, honey, soft, the line of hair leading down. Anita. My fingers: The moaning. Anita. *Another runner in the night*. Making love in forest cathedrals with dawn birdsong and dark basements, with the music loud enough to cover us with dark sides of moons, to give us stairways to heaven, to sing of a farewell to kings. The feel of my bike between my legs as I pedaled, alone, down a stretch of road. Bank Kilimanjaro bent and snowed. *Some silicon sister ... something strong, funky break ...*

[pen across the page, across the years, circling back, ink stain]

All this comes up and goes down. The order of importance hardly matters. Some can look back upon their lives, see the patterns, and give some calculated shape, some exquisite mathematical proof of our string theory lives. *She got down. She's gonna make it through the night*. It is just too hard to tell with me; everything becomes narrative whether or not it belongs to me or fits. It is hard to discern an answer as to why at this age while others bank hours and sell insurance, I find myself in my bathrobe scribbling in a book. Of all the things. How supremely green artists are to the settling of bills and bar tabs, in lining up nests and eggs. *But Mommy that's where the fun is ...*

I could always charm them. I could always outrun them. *No time to turn*. Bass line.

But these thoughts. Piano chords runnel the road. Gnats worry the mind. *She's gonna make it through the night ...* Lines on a page, page out of mind.

*He ain't heavy he's my brother*

*Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister*

*Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother*

*Holy Ghost, son and father*

*Come on people now, shine on your brother ... try to love one another*

*Right Now*.

It is all down on paper, but when they ask, offering copper, I stutter before saying a word. I plod, shuffle my shoes. How to tell them how much I love them; how much I want them to see the wonder of it all. How much I want them to see the color green in an obscure painting, in my ever-changing moods. My stupefaction. Green means stop, stop being a dumb creature.

[pick at the memory s(c)lab with the nib of my fountain pen bleeding purple ink]

About how, when I was very young and playing with friends, hoisting mud into the back of someone's open station wagon, I'd been thrown into a garden shed and locked in there, the house of my dying; oh how I clawed at that stubborn door. The smell of gas, grass clippings, and bird shit. Old wood; thin cracks in the slates, exposing the ferns ablaze in green. That if I wanted to, I could easily place ...

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

Jesus in there with me, both in me and sitting there on the John Deere riding mower, chewing a cheroot, dangling keys. *Want out?*

About how in a quiet moment on a beach looking out over crystal clear water on a hot morning as a young man, I could see at once the pebbled bottom and the rippling wind on the surface. Mother Mary on a hovering jet ski. *Wanna ride?*

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

I wish, sometimes, it was easier for me to make sense of my world in words that crawl across the bottom of a TV screen, to make my way in this life, but it is not and maybe I would not like it otherwise.

I remember old houses on my paper route. The dogs that chased me, their skulls full of yellow fangs. Scars on my hands from broken rubber bands. Plastic horses on wheels. Simon Says. Avoiding cracks, mother's broken back. I remember cold dark nights walking home, my breath fogged. The crunch of snow. The feel of it beneath my boots. The sky pockmarked with stars. If I put it all in order, maybe one thing would link to another like film reel or chains; like hands holding, breathless in the dark. Panels of paint, impasto. The stutter of dirt roads, drunk, and crazy.

But I like the space in between.

The cloud of unknowing.

Gaps.

[*Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*]

That I am a mystery to others, but more so to myself. I am *a million different people from one day to the next*, as are you: *For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

A mystery why this is what comes to mind is put down in my book, when I contemplate an artist's abstract expression of violence, of war. For months, I had been looking for some answers as to why my brother had died and what it meant to me, other than to feel the utter emptiness of his passing, and the lacunae that seemingly formed in his absence, in the absence of what a person of faith might feel for Christ, for God, for their self. And I found myself, as I do when I wander into an art gallery and in that art gallery, being granted a view of what might be, of what ought to be, a view of being locked in, yet free; a vista that is both labyrinth and open field. Of neither the darkest of nights nor the brightest of days. I was drawn to a room-size painting by Cy Twombly. *Lepanto.*

Perhaps because it defies meaning. Or that it hints at other things—mono-myths, lifecycles, and hope in staving off brutality. Inside, the lacunae itself, the stuff that matters, warbles. Perhaps that. Black holes are found by the nearby wandering warbling lost.

Ultimately, it might be because it is a child's drawing, an individual's attempt to wrest uncertainty and chaos to its knees ever so briefly; to say this is what I saw. This is me dreaming. This is me with twelve panels and buckets of paint.

*Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother ... another runner in the night ...*

A brother's death. A life of lacunae. Man Mr. Nobody holding shards from smashed China plates.

[Lepanto]

- Cy Twombly, American, 1928- , *Lepanto 1-12*, 2001; acrylic, crayon, and graphite; 12 times 85¼ x 122¾ inches; Udo and Anette Brandhorst Collection (Brandhorst Museum, Munich, Germany)

So get up close, as near as you can get without setting off alarms, you begin to see, perhaps feel ...

So when I say, that if you move in real close to Cy Twombly's *Lepanto*, move extremely close to the first of the twelve panels and see in the upper right hand corner a sliver of green, and that the green impasto is God, you would just have to take my word for it. For what is found there is what is found in all of us—mystery, and too much love sometimes to contain, and radio, radio at night. Unseen signals from afar. *Blinded By the Light*.

Solar eclipses and God blind us. Looking directly means not seeing at all, it is blurry and scary. The only way is through; we can see the moon cover the sun, God incarnated, only by projection—onto boxes, into music, off walls, and in people's faces. Through these slivers and memories, through witnessing this, this is how I come to stand before a daub of paint and see the deus ex machina. Someone has found this, and this is what is found there—

*We're one, but we're not the same*

*We get to*

Someone has razed the house and hung its walls vandalized by a tormented resident. Standing back affronted, but scrutinizing the display nevertheless, twelve panels come into view as if roof, hallways, furniture, and floors of this dwelling has been shunted. These are walls, scrawled upon and dirtied by a frenzied hand. These are projections, gargantuan biographical Rorschach blots, of a mind swarming with bees. To the dwarfed witness scanning this work, it appears a suspended miasma, partly due to its immensity, but also because of violent and chaotic streaks, smudges and smears of strange tonality. One wonders if the gallery roof has leaked, or crazed activists have broken in to defile the canvases with water and lye. Splotches of red and black cankers arise to adjusted sight as if open wounds from the predominately bone color of the panels. Closer, paint drains like horror movie blood streaking over stark crimson and tangerine flash splattered stars; light Aegean blue dimmed with an underpainting of skim milk white obfuscates like smoke; over-painted dark lines borne perhaps from a graffiti artist's bold black Sharpie riddles canvas after canvas and conjures an armada in an odd, orderly formation being savaged. Given all this, still the human eye here is a weakened instrument.

Drawing near, fearing as much the clichéd moth's demise, and examining the first of the twelve panels, there along the upper right-hand corner, lays a sliver of Kelly green, nothing more than a cleft of paint. (Out of eyeshot: akin to Icarus' scissor-kicking into Brueghel's drink or the JonBenet crawl beneath Larry King; a symphony's conductor, culling a four-beat measure, moving the baton in the sign of the cross). This is a green fissure, an identifying stamp, perhaps from the resident of this dismantled house. This green streak, blooming as it does amid the immensity's chaos, seems careful and full of intention. It says it was madness in here, but there was still presence of mind; that in all the hues of brutality, hope remains that something anew flowers from catastrophe. The color never reappears. As one works their way through *Lepanto*, the chosen palette takes on an organizational pattern arranged in

two-three-three sequences throughout the twelve parts. Each panel represents a particular, shall we say, camera angle: bird's eye, mid-shot, panoramic. While these angles are repetitive, here color is king. The repetition of color gives *Lepanto* voice. Sometimes surd, sometimes susurrante, this voice all the while cants: History repeats itself. As one becomes more accustomed to the work, like slowly regaining eyesight in bright sun, Cy Twombly's *Lepanto* impacts like a grotesque triune, consisting of three panels in each section, segued by three sparrow's-eye-view panels. In each section, the story is repeated by way of signifying colors. In this way, *Lepanto* is a twelve-part loop of Acrylic, wax crayon and graphite grouped in three repetitive chapters. If folded back in on itself, the resulting structure would be a mausoleum to war, an ossuary of violent bones. In these times of discordant moral rectitude, some might then secure materials to reattach a roof, establish hallways, bearing beams, and install a suitable door to be sealed—forever pleading ignorance to the drone from within its walls. The installation does depict horror; this is true. It does so by addressing our fragmentary and vapid attention span, borrowing conventions—the shaky camera Dogma 85 edits—from movie houses, home to our most passive form of numbing inoculation. But, for that green, that wondrous green daub of hope. It is telling us something, if we focus, if we slow. To ignore this detail, to mock it or blink to dismiss it is to assist the sextons with our own burial plots. We cannot walk past without pause.

First, *Lepanto* is the story of a 16th-century naval battle between Turkish imperialists and Christian isolationists, delineating in history the Ottoman Empire's demise. The alliance of Papal States, coupled by Spanish and Venetian might helped to vanquish the Turks. Eyewitness accounts of the October 1571 battle said the waters turned red with blood, smoke obscured the sun, and ships burned gold and crimson against the night sky. The installation reads like a film reel. The work appears rudimentary and haphazard, perhaps even stained or damaged from afar, but closer examination shows the genius of composition in re-creating the conflagrations of combat at sea. This is a tortured soul writ large, circular, and rhythmic.

In one respect, the vessels and oars Twombly creates harken back, pay homage to the Lascaux cave paintings. Those Paleolithic paintings—found in the 1940 by a group of young boys and their scampering dog in southern France—were drawn on the walls of underground caves and were characteristically large and crude. Moving forward through time, the *Lepanto* painter takes on another watershed of art. The painting drippings and blobs found in most of the panels might find progeny in the likes of Jackson Pollock and Willem de Kooning, although Twombly's hand appears less taut, more childlike. The impasto, where brush strokes are visible, suggests Twombly's signature of departure from those 1940s–1950s abstract expressionists, whose strokes were more aerial in orchestration than grounded upon surface. In another respect, the recent past is evoked here too. Jean-Michel Basquiat, New York's art wunderkind who died in the 1980s, could have easily scrawled Twombly's boats on the walls of lofts in the Meat Packing District. In a way the artist uses the history of his medium, pulling the viewer from 15,000 BC through to modern times, to illustrate while an idiom changes, what it speaks of does not. An age sharpens or dulls a work of art by its implications. Whatever is derived in service of this goal, the impact is original and revelatory. *Lepanto*, like Homer's *Iliad*, speaks of a point of history, but also voices contemporary concerns. Both are implicated by what the viewer brings to the work of art. Art instructs outside of time. A viewer's experience serves to re-create the initial impetus, the creative response to an external stimulus. Since this is a nation at war, to say *Lepanto* is a direct dialogue with the U.S. citizenry is not overstating the case. It was created in the year America was attacked. It does strike me as peculiar yet universal. Neither ugly nor beautiful;

neither a relict nor prophesy. It seems ancient in its song cycle. Therefore, those mad bees might just be inside us all. This bedraggled house might be our very own. Those burning ships, our flotilla far from these shores.

But of course, not everyone can live with this, to live within those walls or even cultivate an understanding of such a structure. Abstractions tend to speak a highly individualized lingua franca. What one hears might not be what the other hears—or sees. The soldier will invariably be drawn to Twombly's panels of destruction as if in the inertia of duty. The engineer might be inquisitively drawn to the vessel formation and calculate the number of oarsmen to gauge propulsion. Those seeking the substance of things hoped for might be drawn to open spaces or skeins of green. In this light, *Lepanto* can be approached in two ways: seeing is believing or believing is seeing. Abstract art is more about the viewer than what is being viewed. This meaning, this projection finds its source in personal psychology, undoubtedly, *my brother is dead*, but also surely within the psychosis of a society ... this is a culture of violence.

... *Another runner in the night* ...

[violence]

First coined by Jungian Marie-Louise von Franz in her 1978 volume, *Projection and Re-Collection in Jungian Psychology* “projection” is the process by which a mind, faced with perceptions about itself that it finds unapproachable firsthand, buries these perceptions in the unconscious. The unconscious, then, being indisposed to such reticence, finds some other way of dealing with the material. Slyly it then projects this repressed perception onto some external person, thing, country; it could be a wall in a cave, a wall in a suburban home, foreign power, a canvas to be hung in a gallery, the words found in an essay. By externalizing, the mind can then address the material in a disguised form of objectivity, resulting in either some overt form of action; this might manifest itself in homophobia, racism, or warmongering. Fittingly, *Lepanto*, composed in 2001, came in an era of heightened fear, of terrorists, and extraordinary carnage. A time when foes are found by length of beard; we finger enemies by color of eyes or how many times they fall to their knees.

In Twombly's retelling of this historical battle, empires puff up their chests and pay for their hubris; witnesses say the sea turned to blood; the point of view changes, but the story remains the same. Nothing remains that violence cannot put asunder until it defiantly grows to battle anew. Violence is always responded to with violence. When terror hit American soil, force was dispatched to its supposed source. But fat with vengeance and a penchant for half-truths, the U.S. government continued its push to ferret out those who would do her harm. With zealotry, it proffered Black or white stories about the gray world. The administration drew its sword on false charges, and continues, to this day, to torment its denizens with packaged rationale, which rains like so many veils. It is an administration the Ottomans would have been proud of, an administration after its own deceitful heart. The cycle never ends. Death is supremely victorious. Truth is its first victim upon which the darkest curtain falls.

It is perhaps important for a viewer to concentrate on the installation, paying close attention to panel number six. This panel, this wall of the house dismantled, is cleaved. There is a duality here, at the very least, a sense of “before,” and “after”—a demarcation of sorts. Moving left to right, a third of the canvas is distant and foggy until like a sudden storm cloud the right portion of this scene intrudes.



Dark blood and sores are exposed; yellow flourishes and Blackness reigns in a shroud of paint. Viewers might be drawn here, swaying side to side imperceptibly, trying to come to grips with this marked implication. There is a time before, just before the veil comes down, and then it is through the dripping darkness we go, until as *Lepanto* shows, we circle back and find ourselves once again on the doorstep of this strange house. If only we stopped to contemplate “the real” green. But it is just a painting, albeit a large one, composed by an old man who does not even live on this soil.

*He ain't heavy he's my brother*

*Hey sister, go sister, soul sister, go sister*

*Oh she loves me, loves me like a rock, my mother*

*Holy Ghost, son and father*

*Come on people now, shine on your brother*

*Everybody get together*

*Try to love one another right now,*

*& forever.*

*We're one, but we're not the same*

*We get to*

[trust]

*Lepanto* then becomes an ironic entity of an age, an age the CIA could describe as a “wilderness of mirrors.” This is the term used for when operatives lie, and their lies are piled upon lies making the truth all but inaccessible for its wild thicket lair. Everywhere we turn, reflection upon reflection produces discombobulation and nausea. Here, truth no longer matters. Here, what you see is what you get: Yourself staring back. Oh, then it all must be okay. *I trust that person*. Of course, who supplies and polishes these reflections? We do; we, the people unwilling to speak of what some see in the horrid canvases hung for us nightly and broadcast. To say the house first must be dismantled, put on display for others to see. There must be blood and explosions; there must be uncertainty and carnage. There must be a chronicle of torment, a drone in the skull. Still, it is open to interpretation, but at least what is viewed, ugly and scary, will be more than our own façade. It is a viewing inside that Huber hive of the soul, where masks are removed. The personal unmasking that *Lepanto* guides, answers these queries with devils, disturbances and, for some, deliverance. It depends if one notices Twombly's deus ex machina, that sliver of green. It depends if one listens to static for slivers of silence.

*[Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly]*

So when I ask, when I plead on my knees to come closer, to get closer to anyone, to seek in the eyes of others that impasto, a little slivered green—you'll do it, because when my brother died, all I saw were holes, and when you come to know that inly, there are no distinctions; the lacunae is filled by others ... and you will see and know, we are all a little drowsy, mad, and miraculous listening to radio at night.

Or in the immortal fiat of Chrissie Hynde (Mother Mary on a jet ski): *Now the reason we're here as man and woman, is to love each other.*

*Take care of each other ...*

Everyone has green eyes, sparrows trapped inside ...

*Carry each other.*

*Carry each other.*

*Round and round it goes where it stops no one knows.* Save that cleft of green. Green means stop. Save dispatches from afar, save the secret scar. *Inly empty, outward; inward, filling inly*

*♫ I say you.*