

A BUTLER DAYDREAM:
IN EARNEST FROM PASTURES TO STREETS?
(That the author should be as brave!)

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Would we ever have a full day of rest or of business, either a holiday untrammelled with the shortest chore or a toilsome day unrelieved by the merest luminous, bracing moment when we could get above our labors? Society's prime producers, knowing that life generally and at best is devotion to one's obligations, by habit designate chains of days as work days, and pause seldom for a stretch or for supper. That is one worthy style for spending ourselves; thus we are disciplined. But I, a loungeur and a honey bee, will not schedule myself. In winter, the season of work for the city-pent, I deviate, I mingle sleep, song and struggle in every twelve hours. If production time gets squandered, my profit is in the pile-up of often-unsettling but often-invigorating revelations that come to the purposeful dawdler. Soon I've got to declare some.

I have lived sour evenings; yet wintry college evenings, various as they were, amount in my head to blessed summations of each day. My small work corner with shelf, glowing lamp shade and two enormous windows was full of me and readings from books for timely courses. Time was rolling, theories weaving themselves. My brain mumbled. "Today . . ." it remarked serenely, "that was for the best . . . tomorrow I'll have to save myself, and there's her, and him . . ." Then I was looking up and all around.

It was significant to see that night's darkness and my quarters' lamp light met as they did at the panes. Clarinets and bells on FM radio made country-afternoon music; leaves clapping, cool sun lashing shadows apart as I had seen these in summer, I saw tonight without eye effort. Beauty brews above us, to slide in rays down for whoever to notice. I'd like to be a brewery of love for that, and I crave chances to distribute it. Wow! but there was splendor in the city, and I had a past which I could cast into the future: forests. In winter at college I re-observed petals in rings on moss, mid-year's coldest gold twilight sun seeping through conifers, radiant wetness, one thrush once in song, licking wavelets, and

evergreen breath. For these things, shares of Himself and also of the universe, God be thanked. With what deliberation these must be authorised, us with them. I had Scriptures on the shelf to read . . .

Look at that red . . . The sock on top of the door . . . prairie bison . . . lovers tenting soon in summer . . . Providence—look . . . I have a warm beige coat; I have ears . . .

Now, what's outside—shall I close the drape, fold this work? Write a note, dial 'Himself' and scoop him out of his evening books and send cheerful diffuse dialogue to make his scholarly train of thought for nought? . . . My shoes—gone? . . . Money—Friday, buy her birthday present . . . in the offing, marching weather? . . . For a moment in the wooden chair I was blazingly confident, all my cares rewards.

Then I must have gotten on my feet, blossoming, slinging my arms from myself. What was moving down below this aerie of my friend's and mine, looking down to the night's frost on snow, to still and colorless cars, walk-ways trimmed by snowpiles put aside by the ploughs and hardened, the street of cement-bottomed ice ruts, and receding apartment fronts? Often men, great-chested, or on lanky legs like stilts, went trafficking down there, grey and pink under the night lights. Who was there this night, this particular one of a billion typical hours?

In the far gutter was someone hulking in dark clothes, with hair boiling around his head. Bowing and still except for the hair that billowed and twined, then sidling with raised hands, he was coming into line with the window here. Headlights laid a shine along the icy median of the street, so that gold spread around his feet and his shadow sprawled half-way back to one of the apartments—or her shadow? The car, an immense one, glided up. The person lunged into its course. I saw that the driver had braked convulsively, for the car's body leapt ahead of the tires as they rolled over ice. The car roared and swerved in an arch around the person who stood with bent knees on an ice bar. The gold flowed away, dark slammed over the person before the reddest rose of the car's tail lights shot him, and trailed away.

I asked myself: "He knew him? . . ."

But there the person waited, face groundward, elbows crooked and hands as limp as if skinned. Then I wrapped my hand around the stem of my lamp and peered without any motion.

When there came a similar advance of car light, and the by-stander sprang with arms like a diver's, and the Volkswagen van veered with loud-grumbling engine, whisking on with a red pair of winks from its

rear, I felt internal bucklings and plungings and radiation. If I had begun to be aghast, I felt juices brimming. If quailing, stilled and dizzy to anticipate a body wrecking, I seemed compelled to go there, as if I were the other pole opposite of desolation and drawn magnetically to meet that on the street. For days hadn't I been launching myself to proclaim things that were true but thrown out, as is the food we waste? Who all made me and showed me my conduct? . . .

I stamped into shoes my feet had moulded for themselves. "I have heavy work to do—no coat for me. . . ." Flinging my door so it shut behind me, I galloped down this passage and that and these stairs and some more on the way to the street-side exit.

What, though, what do I know to tell, to shout, to connect to him? He will be big; he will be mad. But possibly he feels child-sized and will dart and wrestle . . . What do I know!? How can I swear to him?!

I remembered when I was certain I knew nothing and was nowhere. I could hear but was struck silent and thrashed in bed. There had been at first substance, which could be anything as invisible as oxygen, and opposing this was abstraction, more and more renderings from all the substance I had sensed. One year I had come to school and sunken—where was the hitch from me to anyone, and generally: Why? I later conceived of more than hitches, more than a lattice, but an edgeless knit with tens of dimensions, with a source of course—yet where? Was I ever quite sure? No . . . but between the substance and the bit of abstraction which I recognised in my old era, there have been theories—grand necessities—and biological marvels, part proven, and Scriptural promises, and mystical biddings and tidings. They humble and exalt, thread each to every.

Should I say 'Jesus' to him . . . ? Shock, implore and exhort, in what terms? If he is bitter when we talk, can I insult him so he chases me and leaves the street?

I wanted to speak from my little store, and convince by it. Sometimes before I had barely tried, but my hearer was older and said: "I know." Once, full of ardor, I had tried to budge the foundation of a soul, speaking shallowly as if to scatter a seed or so. Thereafter I had had to leave because the person had said so, and I was as mortified then as a farmer skunked.

On the last two stairs I consulted the past: "How are we when we want to die?" Hold, though—do you know? How are different people's

trips to hell? Looking down, surmising by recall, I could and can propose that, figuratively, we are marooned, upended, and violent at least inside our skins. If we don't hate we are awash in dire hatefulness, our agonies often thrusting and surging. A rescuer might go and plant his feet, call and throw loving signals.

"Do I dare, and can I stand through this?"

In college I was strong on my feet thanks to the forests, so that people laughed when I forgot not to hike in hall-ways, throw doors, or heave at anything whatever. But I always lost in sports competitions. Could I pull a storming body? Going out, I staggered and slithered around the street-side door's edge.

"Hello!" said the air of this winter night, and bit my face. The sidewalk passed here, with a snow bank at the level of the street to my eyes. Where was the person in the street? Spilled, and killed?

Sometimes I have wished I could live out in winter without wrappings, like a satyr.

My cares made me bound to the street where the ice swaths shone below the far-apart street lights, and the cold cars slouched in the gutter full of hard snowballs left from ploughing. A carcass? Possibly hit and thrown onto a lawn . . . A stir alerted me through two bleary car windows, the back and windshield of a parked car. I walked over there. Illogically I called out what I wondered: "Where do you live?"

I neared this figure, male or female, looking as if I hadn't asked the question.

"I saw you jump in front of two cars, and they just went on!"

In sweat shirt and jeans the hefty-bodied someone drooped in the murk before the car radiator. Man or woman? Could I hear its voice?

"I'm cold!" But I wasn't; I was urging. "If I am, you have to be, so come in with me, please?"

"I wish I knew where you came from—"

I meant this introduction: I was quite happy tonight and longed to extend that . . . I have never seen a suicide, nor have I wanted to commit it, but have feared I did, and feared I would, and pray never to see appeal in doing so, though I might, for tragedy in all likelihood is waiting . . .

"I love you"—I didn't say that but opened my lips to start until wondering whether I loved to express myself, especially when the expression would be the antithesis of the receiver's thought. Then I knew I really loved the person, floodingly and almost possessively.

"Come in my building—your hands should be frozen, for one thing! You know where I come from? It's cold there, like this, but I love it! I love the world! That means I love you, and you're wrong, all wrong out on this street getting in front of cars. I understand you're very sad—worse, to be sure! I've felt that way, but it was short. Maybe yours wasn't, maybe all different, but anyway" I introduced so clumsily. The face, not masculine or feminine, was watching now with shady eyes.

I have a multitude of things to say to you, but where are they now? They only move around in restful spells of mine, when I dawdle, or straggle through a reading. But they are glad, nearly-conclusive thoughts that could be phrased for you if only we were off this street and something would initiate—whatever initiates these . . . thoughts of piety? Everyone must have his; perhaps they can't be told, but if they could, I might hearten you. What in the name of grace am I going to do with you?

I could hear a vast, grinding engine of the bus type. When I faced east I saw a bus, and drew stiff.

"I would like to take you somewhere with me to a warm place, because for one thing I have a multitude of things to say to you, and you would feel better, I prom—I swear—"

The person stepped clear of the car and set his or her feet to stand nearer but apart from me—to gaze or appraise or challenge me? Should I say that I have thought that nobody not physically and incurably ruled by pain wants to die? But this person might be cancer-ridden or somehow doomed . . . He, or she, was shivering like me, frenziedly. Now the eyes had truly constricted, the brow forming a downward arrow. Laughter, deviltry, or exultation? Who'd brought about what?

I warned: "Step back for the bus."

In a stride the person, wavering on the ice, swept to me and pressed one arm across my back and walked us out into the bus's lane. I heard the grind and the frozen stuff smashing, felt cloth and fat and the furious tremors of us both. It was a soft impelling arm enwrapping my cold back, and its sensation not just claimed me but excluded any consideration except, with a sprinkling of humor, that I could savor so fatal an embrace until the death which the bus would deal to us.

Yet the grind sank in pitch. The wobbling light stabilised and ice-popping ended. My dazed eyes stared and registered a pavement with the sheen of a hockey rink out from beneath the bus that had stopped to wait.

My companion had my wrist and directed me, in the yellow light falling down from the windshield, to the curb side of the bus where we boarded. He, or she, stuck money in a ready slot, and then, up the steps and down a dazzling aisle I traveled with the eyes of all the riders and of the driver ogling. I was bound to be for a little while with this stout stranger, not man nor woman, as matters yet enthrallingly proved. No one phrased his wonderment, and the driver must have shrugged, and then drove.

We took seats. Onto the long black window my leader wilted in tears. If passengers, forward and backward, were examining us, shivers now consumed us, and anguish and blinding tears and other elements perhaps quietly gushed as if from all his skin—or hers—occupying me too. The thick, sleek arm on the denim knee slid off to hang, then was replaced, and again dejectedly slid off. We sat pushed into each other to warm up, but were chilled all the way in, it seemed.

"I'm sorry, sure sorry that I tried to kill you with me."

"I—" I breathed to my buddy eagerly, "I wasn't afraid with your arm around me as you had it. I don't know why but it kept me calm—"

"I didn't have my arm around you. Or did I—I don't know. I don't know."

"For a while you sure did."

"Oh, well, I been trying to die; I'm a waste, my memory—"

"I held your wrist."

"Then we were getting on the bus."

"Yeah."

I squashed myself against the back rest in hopes of pressing some sort of warmth from its inside to me. What a providential bus and situation! I might clench my arms and ponder there, and would set off a rising of eloquence by which I might brighten him, elate him—or her—or plant a sort of root-stock. This would exercise me as it benefited him or her, and so the bus had come . . .

"The bus stopped like I never saw one do—"

"On ice."

"Yep."

"God!" sobbed the sufferer into his or her folded arm on his window—or her window. "I guess it stopped for you."

"No-o-o, no. It stopped for us."

He or she cried languidly.

"You came down for me, and the bus stopped for us both—I did not expect this; I'd have said 'impossible.' . . ."

"Where do you come from?"

I said what I first thought, a line of high ambiguity: "I come from many places." Then I went on: "You come from lots of the same. We know some of the same things—"

My tired and flaccid neighbor nodded.

"That means," the eyes looked across the bus, despite mucous and a fatigued blood tinge, with a green-blue lustre, "that you and I combined—and this bus picked us up."

"I have a lot of friends—I don't know some—" I strained.

"I thought I was without."

"You—broke off?"

"I-I would have."

"Disaster."

The passenger bowed and we shook with our chills, which needed time to be shaken off. The other people now appeared to drowse, snuggling on shoulders, panels and cushions.

"I'm going back to the parish."

The bus that night went down to the city's heart. My comrade took coins from a pocket to pay my way back uptown, whereupon we saluted, I to her or him—that pale, drenched and unspecialized figure—and she, or he, to me. Aboard a northbound bus, I listened to mental scrolls of eloquence unreel for nobody yet but me, as I rode to re-join my various mates of before.

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