

The doorbell rang a second time. I called downstairs asking my wife to get it, but then the pipes bled in and I realized she was showering. I set down the newspaper and walked down the stairs in my socks, noticing as always that the empty spot on the wall in front of me desperately needed a picture or some other decorative object. It was a drizzly Saturday morning and no responsibilities but to the coffee-stained columns of recycled world events, the unexpectedly lurid paperback I'd been reading, and a crisp new deck of virtual cards that Luce and I had finally saved up the cash to purchase.

Ours was an old unit with a door that sported an actual peephole - which Luce will tell you is quaint if you're not looking at her squarely. Through the hole I saw three little girls in identical khaki uniforms standing there all in a row. I opened the door immediately so as to leave them stranded no longer in the arduous desert of their mission. What were they selling? Did it matter?

My first thought as they said, "Hello," almost in chorus, was that they were awfully alike looking, even for such a 'pale' corner of our beloved diverse city. Then one of them went solo, reaching forward to collect an object from beside the door, where she'd presumably placed it so that it wouldn't detract from the vision of three little girls all in a row.

The object was metallic silver and about the size and shape of a laptop, though considerably thinner. When she turned it, I saw its similarities to a laptop didn't end there. Metallic silver described just the back side of it. The front looked much like a lit LCD screen, containing a scene very simple in subject matter and obviously meant to convey the conceptual. Indeed, the sense I had was of conceptual art within conceptual art. The image itself was even free of frills or gimmickry, portraying a rowboat on an expanse of sea whose only other interruptions were three dark smudges in the distance that impressed me as islands. While it seemed reasonably safe to assume the picture was digital, it was impossible to tell whether the work was the product of a camera or a traditional artist - or both.

As though the wall at the foot of the stairs cared.

"And what do we have here?" I said, conscious of my flagrant adultishness.

"We are selling these for our project," said the girl who held it like a sign in her small hands.

"Oh?" I said. "And just what might that project be?"

"Transposing text."

Transposing text?

"Really? Sounds like a complicated project for a little girl." Condescending, I scolded myself. Children do not like being condescended to.

These children didn't seem bothered in the least. The one in the center spoke this time, as she pulled what resembled a business card from a pocket in her khakis: "We only need to raise five hundred dollars and we get a trip to the World's Fair in Los Angeles."

"Its theme," said the third girl, "is 'Our Virtual World.'"

I looked at the card. Though spare in content, it was quite nouveau in design. The words `transposingtext` repeated in a single horizontal line across the card, casting mirror shadows of the letter sequences `tra` and `si` and the single character `x`, so that the reflection read `art is x art is x art is`, etc.

"If we raise the money, we will have our own booth and our own sub theme:
'Redefining Man and God.'"

"Los Angeles," chimed in her neighbor, "is the City of the Angels."

"And what organization do you girls belong to again?"

They pointed to the card in my hand.

Transposing text. Art is x is art.

"How much for the..." - I was becoming slightly disoriented, which wasn't helping fill the empty spot on the wall - "the thing you have there?"

"Picture," said girl number one. "Twenty-two dollars."

At first I registered Picture twenty-two dollars. Then: Wow. Whatever happened to cookies. I fetched a twenty and a five out of my wallet and told them to keep the change. Man and God could always use some redefining.

Closer inspection confirmed that the image could not be distinguished from a screensaver. To me it was a remarkable medium. To others - that would be my wife Luce - it was a tackiness of the order of a velvet Elvis or Jesus, which violations were already sorely remembered in our house through the musical band Felt Pelvis & Christ, which I wouldn't let her expunge from my somewhat extensive collection. No matter, it was what it was, and that was, to fulfill the desolate need of the space at the foot of the stairs. In that endeavor, it was the better of every other work of art we'd tried there, namely her father's Army photo and my artist-signed and -limited typewriter art image of Stephen Hawking looking at what might have been the very black hole Luce would not let him fill.

I had to hang it with two plate magnets, as it offered by way of accessory nothing but the fingerprints of the trio that had sold it. Which of course suited its neo-whatnot conceptual design. Luce would no doubt roll her eyes at that assertion, remembering my obsession with finding a way to keep the picture aloft. Aloft. Yes, that rather captures the sense of it as a floating thing, there on the wall, into whose meaningless simplicities my wife would sometimes catch me staring.

2

I am in a wooden boat with iron oarlocks, rowing. Before me is an island; above me, aloft, an airplane no larger than an albatross, throwing its shadow on the metallic silver water. I am looking for something but cannot remember (if ever in fact I knew) what. Where the image of it should be, there is near emptiness, the suggestion of a line here, a corner there. But the configuration itself, the proportions, remain shapeless. Unknown.

The island approaches steadily and the aircraft above me coasts at little better than my own pace, as if as lost as I. It occurs to me as I watch it lift on a vagrant wind that if it cruised at higher altitudes, it might seem a bird to the casual eye. Maybe that is what it was designed to do, to deceive the eye by flying outside the radius of dependable discernment, to seem a soaring bird when it is actually about darker business. That it glides low for me may simply speak to a malfunction, a random caprice of its mechanics. I

doubt so. There is purpose here, dark or otherwise.

When I arrive at the island's shore, it seems I have been rowing for hours, but then, maybe mere moments. The bird enters the tree line beyond the recessed beach as I am stepping into surf that does not startle my naked skin. I am clothed in shorts, khaki, nothing more. The air is neither warm nor cool, the sky neither blue nor gray. There is no discomfort except in the shape that will not complete itself in my mind. I feel I will recognize it when I find it, but where to look? Here, this island?

I walk across the sand in the direction the bird has gone. Only a short distance into the trees - short, long, all such terms being relative - I find a clearing, and within it, the landed aircraft. As I approach the plane, figures begin to materialize around me out of the very aether. People. More specifically, black people. Black people in street clothes, denim bags pooling around their basketball shoes. Gangsta types tapping chests, chillin', discussin' - the rap materializing as smoothly and unobtrusively as the rappers. As with my contact with the water, there is no shock. There is only the realization, and the medium which they and I now share, though it is evident to me that they are unaware of my presence within it.

I have stopped, I realize, as I watch them gather around the airplane. One reaches down and opens a hatch on top of the fuselage and pulls from it a clear plastic bag. I step closer, imagining for a moment it might contain what I am looking for, but no, it is full of cylindrical glass containers of clear liquid. Test tubes are assuredly not what I am looking for, though associations of conformity, of rounded edges, do occur to me as the chatter of my unlikely companions fades in.

"This looks like some good muthahfuckin' shit."

"God damn, that's gotta be a couple ounces at least."

"Break out da pipes, my niggas. We fixin' t'git fucked up on this shit."

Pipes. Pipes in the walls. Fading in. Bleeding in.

Only these aren't pipes in the walls, these are glass pipes, test tubes. The person holding the bag passes out the cylinders one by one to his bloods, who then motions with a lift of his chin to a freshly materializing set of denim sags, who steps forward with a handful of what look like sacrament wafers. The brothers file up, uncapping the tubes, and he commences to crack the wafers over the open bottles, the whitish bits of matter dissolving in the liquid. As the last man gets his dose, the whole gang toss back the revised contents of their cylinders, gargling for a moment or so before spitting the reprocessed fluid back out, some into their empty tubes, others onto the ground.

This accomplished, the chorus lifts its collective head and begins to sing in the voice of angels, a music that strikes me as some soaring contract between Heaven and the 'Hood.

Meanwhile, the man with the crumbled wafers collects the tubes from the choir. He pulls out his cock and pisses into the empty cylinders then returns all the tubes to the bag from which they came, stuffing it in the plane's cargo compartment. The aircraft hums to life again, the chorus subsides, and in the relief, the bewildered voices of its tenors and basses expressing:

God damn, this is some good muthahfuckin' shit.

"And they are brothers, all?" says the insipid white face before me. "No sisters?"

"No sisters." I look around at what is an office. A desk stands between me and the insipid face.

"What does this say to you?"

"I'm not exactly sure. What does the fact that they are gargling angel water say to you?"

Words out of my mouth, just like that. It seems we've covered the story itself, the insipid white face and me, and we're now looking at deconstruction.

"The pipes," says it. "What do the pipes mean to you?"

"Pipes...You mean the tubes?"

"You said they were smoking condoms out of glass pipes."

I hesitate.

"Don't think about it. Just respond. What do pipes mean to you?"

Pipes. Pipes in the walls.

"My wife has a set that would offend God himself."

"Does she use them often?"

"Only when she is in the shower. Or one of her Catholic youth choral nightmares. Or on airplanes."

"You jest," says the insipid face.

"Do I?"

"Airplanes. Let's go back there for a minute. Can you describe the miniature aircraft in a little more detail?"

"I can," I say, wondering why the comparison is only now dawning on me, wondering why I'm speaking in present tense. "It's like one of those search and reconnaissance camera planes that law enforcement got from the military. You know, the ones operated by remote control."

"Oh, you mean like this?" An insipid white hand opens a drawer and pulls from it what looks very much like a remote control, points it at me and with an insipid white thumb, presses -

3

I am in the boat again, iron oarlocks creaking as I row. The plane practically hovers, itchingly so, above me. A new island approaches. The indistinct, amorphous sketch in my mind fails to fill out. Will I find this seemingly so significant, so (dare I say) crucial thing on the approaching shore?

My mechanical companion suffers an elongated shiver in advance of forsaking its painstakingly reflective pace for the island ahead. As it does I look for a camera eye, any sign of deception, but none is to be found in its smooth, metallic silver underbelly. If the machine possesses landing wheels, the seams of their compartments are invisible. Still, it propels fearlessly into the tree line, leaving me to splash blindly in the surf, across the sand, into the trees again.

Where are they? I know they're here. Not brothers this time - others. For in this fresh party voices occur in advance of mouths, flaunting a flippant femininity, with vivacious boas tossed ostentatiously over their sashaying syllables.

"Robbie, if sluts were apples, you'd be the reddest one on the vine."

"I hate to bust your cherry, Harvard, but apples don't grow on vines and your metaphors won't even buy you a quick trip to the bathroom with me."

Came a new voice (if one could be distinguished from the other): "Keep talkin' like that, Robbie girl, and you're going to get your dose of this cock before the shipment even gets here."

"Like I'd let a diseased gorilla like you rawdog me - well, speak of the Devil with a tube dress on!"

I close my eyes, open them again and there it is, the whole masquerade party right in front of me. With lavish loquacity and luxurious lashes, they flock to the aircraft, popping open the hatch as if it were a fresh can of mod and holding the baggie up into the limelight filtering in through the leafage above. This time I don't bother hoping for discovery as I move to better view the dispersal of the bag's contents. I do because I do, and the wonderment comes extra.

The tubes are smaller than before, in vial form, like those that contain Holy Water.

My wonderment does not end there as the silks and the stockings slide off and the boys splash their cocks with the sassy sacrament and head off into the trees in pairs and sometimes threesomes, leaving one aching materialization to plant the next baggie in the plane's compartment.

"'One pass to heaven'? Isn't that a bit obvious?"

The insipid face, with now a freshly vapid expression.

"I've said nothing about heaven," I return.

"Haven't you? How do you feel about heaven?"

"Heaven to me is some sexless guy with a restrictive collar."

"Sex. That is an interesting word."

"So is sexless."

"Do you believe that priests, in today's environment, are sexless?"

"I personally have not had sex with one."

"Let's go back to the restrictive collar, shall we? Isn't that a description you used for the three little girls?"

"I said they were wearing khaki uniforms buttoned to the collar."

"But you do have a fixation with priests," says the face. Vapidly. "May we say that at least?"

4

Priests. That is what they are, certainly; virtually a coven of them as they loiter about the aircraft as over some first sacred text delivered from abroad. Not one among them seems willing to open the hatch, but all tremor with anticipation, relish. I drift close this time, for the image in my mind has begun to gel, still without proportions, but with phantom effusions of matter. Dark matter, as I think of it at this particular moment. Still in sketch form, but with conversely ominous and wonderful possibilities.

I watch them as they open the hatch, the bag, then turn to the wilderness as if waiting for the stimuli. I cannot put an exact name to the bag's contents nor an inexact face to the potential stimuli, though the former have harder edges than previous cargos. The priests cross their breasts with trembling hands, their eyes on the forest not the strange bottles they hold. These, the coven of them, are incarnations before words. Strangled whispers from choked throats. Extended hands into nothingness.

I can almost see. I can almost see what it is that's withheld from me, but the very idea that it is withheld obscures its being. I find myself lost suddenly, without cranky oarlocks, without vapid faces, without even the brine (did I describe the brine?). The coming unfolding, the folding uncoming, does not involve me, even as the witness. It is its own occurrence...

They appear, maybe the children of other ages, other dimensions. They do not reach to accept the bottles poised delicately in the divine witches' hands. Instead they gaze shyly, one behind a set of glasses with a cracked lens, another the choral angelics that audibly and visibly cradle his head. But the witches extend nonetheless, with what are perfume bottles in their magic hands. Come, say they, and they heal with a spray of their perfume, the cracked lenses, the speakers through which suddenly I hear rock music - no, more like crack rock music, flavored with a bit of battery acid. Felt Pelvis Christ upon the scene, sirens open.

Indeed, what pipes for the children as they bewilderedly recall their heavenward glances for their earthward ones, then ashamedly slink away with the collars into the trees, already retching from the intake.

The pipes in the walls. The noises bleeding in as though to catch Luce jerking pictures from parchment walls at the foots of stairs. I know her, and I know that would be much of her. Then where? Where is the thing that inspires such...

"Surely you see," says it. "Surely such cautious wings have not misguided you. What flavor, your wife's voice, as she sings in the walls? Angelic? Demonic? Sweet? Sour?"

The sound of oarlocks as I press behind collared witches and children into the trees. Ahead, there are structures. Compact, rectangular, upward structures as though heaven just there. I watch doors close, leaving only peepholes into the doings within. As I approach one, I wonder, is this an eye at last to what I have been seeking? I peer inside, imagining for a fragmented second three little girls, but then witness the witch offer the boy a golden nugget as might be used in a glass p -

The small circular window cracks in response.

I look through the triparted hole and find in one fragment a brother's lips around the stem of a glass pipe, a melting condom in its bowl; in another, a sister's hands tying pink bubblegum around the perforated card stock she's wrapped around her cock, the words One Pass to Heaven disappearing in a spiral that might be a tongue around a pipe, a boy's eyes as he beholds the luminously golden nugget that is being presented him.

Promise of something that delights when inhaled, that numbs when exhaled, that dissolves when regarded. Indeed, what pipes for the children as they shyly, bewilderedly recall their heavenward glances for their earthward ones.

"Promise. That is where it begins," says the face as the hand pulls from the drawer the what. And in that moment the proportions fill out, the angles and the curves manifest themselves... though the thing itself is only a lump. A formlessness of clay.

"What will you do with it?" the insipid face asks.

"I will sculpt," I tell it.

And set about fashioning three little peddlers in khaki uniforms...