

## Auguries of Circumstance

“They know how to deal with snow here.”

The remark, brusque and practical, highlighted the differences of nationality between us; between my childish English excitement but also wariness about snow and Edward’s East Coast-bred, West Coast-adapted nonchalance. He was right, I knew. I had heard the snow ploughs at work during the night, shovelling, salting, gritting. I could feel the irritation building inside his head at my unnecessary fussing.

“Yes, I see,” I said meekly, and we came together again.

We loaded the luggage into the boot and I settled Washington the Meerkat, my mascot, on the dashboard while Edward eased himself into the driving seat.

“Washington can look out for us,” I said. “He can see through fog, snow, driving rain.”

Nutcase! I could hear Edward thinking but knew that he was enjoying my nutcasery. I was giving us space in which to be a little fantastical, clearing a light hearted pathway out of our adult concerns. I had been observing him for days now, igloored in by his anticipation of the unthinkable. Now that it was happening our only escape was through my absurd flights of fancy, my power to release winged thoughts that lifted his spirits.

Edward reversed carefully out of the drive and I looked back at his house, the magnificent icicles hanging from the porch, the blistered stripes and snow-dotted stars drooping from the flagpole, the stocky round tower of snow on the patio table.

“The snowcake is big enough for a dinner party,” I said, turning back to Edward. From his eyes a thought stepped out towards me – an invitation to dance:

“We could make a Baked Alaska.”

“Anchor it with frozen sponge fingers.”

“Tinkle the ivories with flaked sugar frosting.”

“Offer the guests icicle kebabs.”

“Go figure!”

His exclamation interrupted the dance and our mood changed.

“Hot ice and wondrous strange snow,” I murmured.

“What’s that?”

“Shakespeare.”

“Ah.”

Progress was slow at first, the snow coming down ever harder. We spoke little, peering ahead and paying careful attention to the SatNav, the Bossy Lady, as we negotiated unfamiliar routes. Once on the Interstate driving became easier and visibility improved as we began to descend. I gazed out at miles of ponderosa pine, the heavy laden branches pensively drooping. At five thousand feet the snow suddenly became rain and within minutes our insubstantial white world was blotched by the hardy colours of earth - browns and greens and ochre yellow. The rain gusted down but sometimes between bursts we could see across great distances to mountain ridges, huge ballooning clouds sinking below their peaks. We both love that sight. Sometimes on journeys we would play *Hamlet* with the clouds, seeking camels, whales and weasels. Once we identified the face of Lincoln in wisps of cirrus, and in a bulging cumulus, Teddy Roosevelt.

“Do you ever get this sense of space in England?” Edward asked. I thought of Dartmoor, of the Peak District and the Yorkshire Dales.

“The emptiness, sometimes,” I said. “Between one summit and the next. But not on the same scale.”

That word kept recurring as I learned to know his country. A few days before we had driven out to the High Desert, where I experienced flatness on a scale never imagined before. Flatness and also silence. With no trees or grasses to rustle, no birds to cry or flutter, the silence was profound. The land itself, I felt, could speak to us, two latter-day pioneers standing free, ringed by the flat horizon.

Washington lolled suddenly sideways against the windscreen.

“He says we’ll be fine now,” I said cheerfully. “So he’s going to sleep.”

“So is the Bossy Lady,” said Edward, switching off the SatNav, “So we’ll have some peace and quiet.” The radio, at this time, was not an option.

“Ouch!” I said. “My ears are going ‘pop’.”

“We’re descending fast here. Later it’s more gradual.”

“How far is Phoenix from Flagstaff?”

“A hundred and forty five miles. And six thousand feet lower.”

“How long till we get there?”

“Another couple of hours. I have to be at the university at three. I’ll drop you first at the Musical Instrument Museum. It’s vast. No chance of you getting bored there.”

Only lonely, I thought.

In Edward's absence my mind still clung to his thoughts. Inside my head we walked the museum together, exploring its spacious continental galleries. Here was sonic America, laid out in a heterogeneous display of instruments: Appalachian fiddles, as rough hewn as a farmer's tools, and teardrop dulcimers, fretted and strung with wire and twine: *Edward in my head asked if we could play these, he on the dulcimer, I on the fiddle? Of course, I said. The music of your country is mine too.* I boggled at a Grand Jumbo Sousaphone, magnificently engraved with marching musicians, portraits of composers and American eagles: *Edward's eagle eyes and my composer's frown stared back from the gleaming brass bell. "This gorgon toured the nation," he said. "And was exhibited at the Chicago World Fair," I replied.* My thoughts drifted to the university, where by now he would be rehearsing Charles Ives. Cocooned by his colleagues, absorbed in the music, he should be fine yet I longed for his return. I wandered across the room. In a fine mahogany cabinet stood a Violano Virtuoso, designed by Henry Konrad Sandell. I read the name idly, then the date - 1917 - with more attention. One hundred years ago a Swedish immigrant mechanic designed a coin-operated electrically driven self-playing combination of a violin and a piano. His invention became popular in ice cream parlours. *'Here', I said to Edward, 'is the meticulous craftsmanship of the Old World reinventing itself in a land of opportunity.'* The words sounded pretentious addressed to him - Edward can so deftly knock me off my perch - but he only gestured across to the Appalachian instruments: *'And the rude genius of folk art also'.*

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The real Edward returned subdued. The drive had been slow in the pelting rain and time spent alone allowed his mind to drift to the unthinkable. Distraction! I thought. We sat together in the car looking out at the flood-washed cacti in the museum forecourt. How surprised they looked, I thought, as if they were entirely unprepared to meet water.

"Has Washington behaved himself?"

"He's had a good time. But he missed you."

"And I missed you."

Edward fiddled with the SatNav, trying to wake up the Bossy Lady. Around us in the car park people dashed to and fro from their cars, jackets piled up on their heads to protect them from the liquid needles.

"They don't know how to deal with rain here," I said.

"You'd be the expert!"

"Of course. But look at them! Not an umbrella in sight."

"They hardly ever see rain," said Edward, then added, "Three feet of snow has fallen in Flagstaff since we left. It won't be safe to drive back tonight."

"So?"

"I've booked us an AirBnB in Gilbert."

"Is that far?"

"Part of the great urban sprawl that is Phoenix."

"Shall we go now?"

"I said we'd arrive 10 pm. What would you like to do?"

"There's a contemporary art gallery," I said, flicking through a tourist leaflet, "With open night on a Friday. And it's free."

"Sounds good. Where?"

“Scottsdale.”

“Ok, Bossy Lady,” said Edward, tapping the SatNav. “The Scottsdale Museum of Contemporary Art.”

A cheery young woman greeted us. Since we were the only evening visitors we benefited from her full irrepressible attention. She waxed lyrical and elliptical about an architecture exhibition, *Everything Falls Into Place When it Collapses*, about Nina Katchadourian’s *Monument* and above all about the outdoor installation, James Turrell’s *Knight Rise*.

“It’s a wonderful shape!” she said, sculpting the air with her hands. “Like a huge egg lying on its side with an oval cut out of the ceiling. It allows the viewer to see the night sky without the horizon!”

“The advantage of that being...?” queried Edward.

“Well, normally when you lie out star gazing, the horizon is all around you!”

In the space between my throat and Edward’s a gurgle was hovering, trying to decide whom to inhabit first.

“And then in daylight, the sun’s rays are diffracted by the edge of the oval. It’s a wonderful installation! You just *have* to see *Knight Rise!* ”

It was 8 pm on a January evening and bucketing down. We looked at each other and our thoughts engaged in a tumultuous tango. ‘You speak,’ sidestepped Edward. He loved to hear my polished English politeness.

“I don’t think,” I said gently, “that we will be able to appreciate either of these phenomena just at the moment.”

“No, but!” replied the woman enthusiastically, “You will probably be the only people *ever* to see the exhibit actually *in the rain!*”

We grinned at each other and put our hoods up.

“We must take advantage of this unique opportunity!” said Edward. Inwardly I blessed the woman for her small gold nugget of unconscious absurdity. Humour would always save Edward.

Maybe humour has its own horizon though, a point at which its frothy surface meets the cold grey line of reality. To be shielded from that horizon might indeed save us pain, I thought, as I tipped back my head and showered my face. The oval-shaped rainy blackness had brought me that one insight at least. Edward huddled himself against the covered sides of the structure, attempting to straddle his feet across an artistic puddle, and allowed me the full freedom of my English eccentricity.

“Does it taste the same as in England?”

“The rain?”

“Yes.”

“Different. A rare delicate flavour.”

“Like Wendy’s Burgers?”

“Oh yes! With fries!”

“Well, let me now when you’ve had enough. My feet are soaked.”

“Very well. The Knight has Risen and drunk his fill.”

“And all across America the Night has Broken.”

“What’s that?”

“My own original.”

“Ah.”

On our return from observing the sloshy inside of the hollow egg the woman was curious to know our origins.

“I’m from London, UK,” I said, assuming that it was my accent that had intrigued her, “But I’m staying with Edward in Flagstaff.”

“You’re surely not heading back there now?” she asked, dismayed. Edward explained that we were staying over, returning the next afternoon, by which time the roads would be clear.

“If you’re taking a slow drive up to Flagstaff,” she said, “You should stop in at Arcosanti. It’s just off the Interstate. Really cool place! Building designed like an artichoke.”

I was tempted to ask whether they blocked out the horizon for you there, but she went on, “Created by an Italian in the 70’s as an eco-architectural experiment.”

The 70’s, I thought. The backdrop to my childhood. Cold War. The Troubles. Glancing at Edward’s face I wondered what he was thinking. Vietnam? Watergate?

“It sounds fascinating,” I said. “Do people still live there?”

“About a hundred,” she said. “And they have a café open to the public and guided tours. You should make a stop there. Wait, I’ll write the details down for you.”



Edward had already made a move towards the exhibition gallery but I stayed behind. The woman scribbled the directions on a piece of paper and handed it to me, then gestured in the direction Edward had disappeared.

“The Katchadourian *Monument* is through there.”

I followed, expecting to see a statue of some kind, but the only statue in the space was Edward, standing rigid. He was facing the near wall of the gallery, along which was displayed an array of imitation election placards, familiar slogans presented in the design styles of contemporary advertising. In primary colours and the rounded font of a school poster I read, ‘Vote TOM JEFFERSON! America needs a change!’ On a red background in white lettering, ‘Franklin D. Roosevelt, Fighting for US’ and on yellow, ‘Re-elect Herbert Hoover. Prohibition. Optimism.’ The presentation was not sequential. A portrait of an 18<sup>th</sup> century gentleman, ‘ADAMS in ‘92!’ rubbed shoulders with ‘McCain, Palin’. ‘WINFIELD SCOTT, Vote Whig!’ with ‘Bush, Quayle, Experience counts!’ My eyes searched out the exhibition legend:

*Nina Katchadourian’s ‘Monument to the Unelected’, a commemoration of the presidential candidates who did not make it to the White House, allows viewers to imagine alternative American histories.*

And then I saw what Edward was staring at. A small sign, shiny new: ‘2016 - I’m with Hillary’.

My feet gripped the floor, as if they had sensed a quake. I wanted to reach out to Edward but was too frightened to move. I seemed to see his mind opened up like a kaleidoscope, rotating the alternative American histories, the what ifs of the past; the distant, the half forgotten, the vividly remembered pasts. All the pain he had been carrying was spinning through those historical alternatives, coming back again and again to the unanswerable what if of the recent past. A few feet away from me he stood on the fundament of a different

land, the land I had been seeking to know, in its sounds, its landscapes, its attitudes. In that moment I understood the distance between us, the gulf between native and newcomer. During one of our discussions I had argued that the present catastrophe was not national but global; ours, not his. Now, looking at his stricken face, I regretted having said that. It was his country's past laid out there on the wall, not mine. History carried in the head does not ache like history living in the bones.

Edward turned towards me and our thoughts glided silently across a deserted ballroom.

"Let's go," he said.

We splashed our way out of the arts complex into the crazy dystopia of Phoenix, a city rising out of the flood, absurdly at sea in the wrong element. Back in the car, Washington looked grumpy. I wanted him to cheer us, to tap into that pool of mercurial tomfoolery I use to soothe Edward, but it seemed he could only reflect my mood and fiendish impulses had been accumulating inside me.

"Let's be Night Riders!" I suggested. "Zoom around the city disobeying the Bossy Lady. See if we can totally confuse her!"

But Edward was tired, and I realised I too was tired. We came together in tiredness and heartbreak.

When I woke the next morning Edward was already up. I could hear his footsteps in the lounge and the wake up song of his laptop. I opened the window blind and was astonished to see empty blue sky. An incredible brilliance lit the scene of a garden next door, where pyjama-clad children bounced barefoot on a trampoline. One strip of lawn was waterlogged but most of the grass stood rampant and sparkling, and by the far fence orange and

grapefruit trees lent vivid rainbow colours to the picture book page. I walked backwards out of the bedroom so as to behold the image as long as possible.

“What a charming morning!” I said, in my best BBC period drama voice.

“Gorgeous,” agreed Edward, “But there’s no coffee machine, so we’re going out for breakfast. The omniscient Google says there’s a Starbucks 1.6 miles away.”

“So we can walk there?”

His hilarity exceeded my most hopeful expectations.

“No, we’re not going to walk there! This is the U S of A! We drive round the block!”

“But a walk would be delightful,” I said, “In the sunlight, under the grapefruit trees.”

“Washington would feel neglected,” said Edward reproachfully. “And then, after breakfast, what would you like to do? Another museum?”

“Let’s go to Arcosanti,” I said. “It intrigues me. Italian design, eco-architecture. Something different. And there’s a café. For lunch.”

Arcosanti was, as the girl had told us, a short distance from the Interstate, along a dirt road which curved and swerved and seemed to be going nowhere. We eventually reached a space where cars were parked, surrounded by cacti and by artwork resembling cacti. A faded sign said 'ARCOSANTI - an Urban Laboratory' and pointed towards a complex which suggested a cross between an Italian castle and a large scale child’s construction kit. We followed a raised path around several corners, up flights of steps and almost imperceptibly into a building. A gentle tinkle of bells teased our ears from within and without. There was no door, only a space where one might have been, if a door could be

entirely round. Another intangible division, I thought, like a vertical horizon. We passed through into a large open plan space filled with plants and sunlight. The ceiling was high up above us but at the half height there were suspended platforms from which were hanging clusters of bulb-shaped wind bells. On the far side of the room an enormous circular window looked out at a vast spectrum of blues, darkest high above and lightest close to the earth, where a distant range of snow-capped mountains lent a faint line of white. I stood still for a moment, captured by emptiness, then memories of the night before flooded my mind: Let me taste America in its sunbeams! Let me understand the message of its skies! I crossed over to the window, Edward following. Below us, close to the building, was a small grove of olive trees, ringed by cypress. Underneath them the columnar cacti with their aggressive spines appeared tiny, thrusting themselves upwards towards an unattainable state of grace. We had climbed high, I realised, and were looking down as from a fairy tale tower.

A sudden rush of flight swept across the window. Birds – auguries! I thought. Birds bring omens, warnings, prophecies. In troubled times we look to the auguries of circumstance. But these birds did not flutter or cry or fly bewildered into the room. Silently they alighted on the cypress trees, perching themselves between the hanging wind bells. For me, at that moment, enlightenment could only come from within.

“The inside is outside,” I said, “And sideways is above. Edward, this is *inverse* America! The antithesis of urban sprawl.”

“My inside is empty,” said Edward, “Whatever America’s may be. Let’s find some lunch.”

I pointed to a circular sign which said ‘Café’ and led the way across the room to a counter with salads and vegetable dishes. A man in white catering garb smiled invitingly.

“How much?” asked Edward.

“Ten dollars. And take as much as you like.”

Edward paid, handed me a tray and we filled plates, collected cutlery and glasses, then seated ourselves at one of the small round tables. The food was delicious. I took a sip of water and afterwards studied the glass reflectively.

“Even the glasses look more circular than usual.”

“If, as they claim, this building is designed like an artichoke,” said Edward, “Will these artichokes taste like a building?”

“I think we’d better behave,” I said. “Look at the people around us. Not what I expected in an Urban Laboratory.”

In one corner of the room a man in his fifties was knitting, a complex pattern requiring curved needles. His hair was swept back into a pony tail and his forearms were covered in tattoos. In another corner a man and a boy were playing circular chess, while on the other side of the room an elegant lady in a crocheted garment sat at a spinning wheel. In the centre a woman stood at a loom, her arms moving in gentle spiral movements as if she were swimming in a small pool of air. Her long fair hair swayed in sympathetic movement behind her. When I leaned forward to look more closely I was surprised to see that her face was quite wrinkled. Edward’s eyes had been shifting from her to the man knitting and back again. He leaned forward towards me, solemnly formal.

“Something tells me,” he said softly, “That we have entered the realm of the aging hippie.”

I spluttered on the water I was sipping and brought the glass clattering down to the table, unfortunately catching the edge of my plate, which sent it spinning chaotically across towards Edward, who, mercifully, caught it at the last moment.

“I think you’d better behave,” he said. “This is a serious Urban Laboratory. But I’m so glad we came. I wouldn’t have missed it for anything.”

“Nor I. To know that such a place can exist. In the middle of - “

Edward got up.

“Time we were on the road.”

To see the world through a pane of glass; the nature of power in a cactus; faces of fame in the shapes of clouds; America in thirty six hours.

We left Arcosanti in radiant sunshine. Back on the Interstate we began the climb, subtle at first, then ear-poppingly steep. At five thousand feet we were once again in the chilling white world we had left the day before, snow heaps deeper, pines heavier laden, mountain sides plumper. Flagstaff greeted us without protest, the roads now clear and flanked by towering crystalline walls. In Edward’s garden the icicles were the size of kindling. The snowcake was large enough for a ceremony of thousands.