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Gus Blaisdell

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SPACES

Gus Blaisdell

She said *can't*. As yet she was unwilling to say *won't*.

He answered by removing himself to one corner of the room and rocking his chair against the wall. He wanted to think about what she might have meant without having to ask her what she meant. But, as usual, he thought only about what he thought about rather than about what she might have meant, about what (possibly) desperate thoughts (feelings) might have prompted her to make (utter) a statement (proposition) in which *can't* was the single, the central, the essential four-letter word. Besides, *can't* was a contraction.

Exasperated, she asked what he thought he was doing in the corner even though she knew that he was meditating with fascination on his own presence in his own thoughts.

Inventory! In a conical hat. On a high stool. I used to clean erasers after school. That was punishment too. I would clap the bottoms of the erasers together. Up puffed choking clouds of chalk. I coughed. And I coughed. But how I beat their whitened bottoms back to black!

* * * *

Opposite the corner where he sat looking pompous, seriously sullen, and metaphysical, was an object. It came to about a man's hip. It was a dome of reflecting glass with a skirt of red fringe around the base. There was an electric cord at the base and when it was plugged in, a blower inside made the skirt flutter. It might have been an enormous Christmas ornament or a scientific model for something. Whatever it was he thought of it as windowless and called it Danom.

* * * *

The eyes are not the windows of the soul. You cannot look through them into the world beyond. Your own reflection in the eyes of the beloved, the beholder, is a model, nothing more than an imaginary reconstruction based on inference and scant images turned rightside up while on the eye the image is still upside down. What happens in between? After the eye's register but before the mind's correction? What

sorts of spirits pace that space at the speed of light, moving, at the speed of sight, through the tangled fibers of the optic nerve?

* * * *

The domed mirror distorted the room, elongating the space, vibrating the stationary air in the space, cartooning the occupants submerged in the cubic inches of the space. Threw back images of ceilings bulging inwards, windows curling up high like waves rushing in, and the areas of the room receding to multiple vanishing points, sucked into Danom along invisible coordinates strung throughout the room like so many fibers of a spiderweb. The middle distance curved out of existence like a plane parallelogram mapped onto the top of a great circle: 2-space into 3-space, n-space into n-plus-1 space. No way in or out: only inside out.

But in Danom they lived in a castle of white plaster, of dark beams, huge tables, great doors, high windows, and shadowy ceilings. Blowing wind was ocean. The deserts inside and outside were momentarily forgotten as the space between shrunk while the middle distance expanded and expanded.

She was beautiful. He was stark, gaunt in some sense of handsome. He intensely disliked watching her grotesque reflection even though the changes of his own features were an endless fascination. He went through his changes between surfaces of mercury and glass all the while trying not to let her go through hers. But walls, sides, edges, known proportions were beginning to fold up and in upon themselves, coming and closing together slowly. Gastrulated or blastulated, a squeeze in any n-space (where n is greater than 2) and any cube becomes a sphere.

* * * *

The letter from his only remaining correspondent read, in part: "Your last letters have been so odd that I thought I should mention it and hope that you could explain them to me. Your world—I guess this is the way to put it—seems to have become completely discontinuous. At least I can't make the connections, the transitions between paragraphs. They just sit there on the page as obdurate as stones, as if you put them there to keep your letters from blowing away. Nothing connects, nothing hangs together. What's happened? Too much Descartes, Leibniz, Spinoza? As usual? But what I don't see is how you can take their worlds so seriously. They are just alternate fictions, a little more elaborate, a little more bare than the usual schemata. . . ."

He wrote in reply: "The life I hope for, struggle for, sacrifice for—not the one I have been trained for, not the endless daily blather and busy work I am paid for—no: the one within, the inside one: It only comes in bits and pieces, at most in segments. Flashes of insight? Consecutiveness like a string of beads?

"I am a fractionally awake monad to which parts of a universe are presented.

"Now do you understand? No thing connects, you write, and you are right. No thing hinges in an other thing. Yes. Right again. Things do tend to fall apart. It's their nature. But there are real, necessary connections between my late afternoon beer, my recalling Mallarmé seeing himself nonexistent in a mirror, my reimagining Descartes staring at his hand for days and sniffing beeswax, my seeing Spinoza's lungs turn as crystal as the constellations, my pondering Wittgenstein playing planets with disciples. . . . God, man, all these hunks, all these little pieces, all these bits are parts of my experience, parts of what is present to me, parts of me—things I bind together! I can't go on and on, on forever, soaring to Andromeda from my backyard, and from Andromeda through the Coal Sack, and then on and on until I get to the farthest geometrical point in the universe, and rest—which finds me seated in my chair, in my study, a note pad on the desk before me, a pencil in hand, and everything, including me, reflected. . . .

"Remember this: A conceptual scheme is an idea that orders sets of other ideas."

Unfinished, unsend; but jotted on the back:

"My mind, my letters, my feelings, yes, even my life. All parts of a shopping list. No connection between one item and the next except that they appear in the list: each will be purchased. That's all that binds things together. What is there that binds things together? *I? Me?* A list is even less than a recipe. At least a recipe shows you how to concoct, connect, how to put things together, how to order things and make something else out of them, something new . . . I shall begin reading dictionaries. Alphabetical order is a low form of order. What about my language? What about my love? *Inside?*

"**OUTSIDE!** The way out is the way in."

Wind blowing. Seeking grip, leaves claw ticking across icy pavements. Now this way, now that, swirling left-handed, circling right-handed, coiling up into eddies. Somebody's picture of the freedom of the will. Wrong. Wind stops. Nothing creaks. Snow falls down. Under eaves still windbells. Why? Down and in, vortexing and spiralling and fun-

nelling to a center, closing in on the wizenning pupil of the eye beholding. In, always in. The way one person is said to come in to another person's life? Doubtful. Something sounds.

"Space and time are points of recapitulation. And it's all in time, and time kills!"

* * * *

The longer his hair grew the blanker his mind grew and he slept for longer and longer periods of time. He went to bed right after work so he would not get fired. That was his first strategy.

By the time his hair was over his collar and into his ears he realized that he was in trouble. He was sleeping thirteen hours at a stretch and on weekends he seldom bothered to get out of bed. So he began sneaking back into his office after closing hours and curling up in a bedroll under his desk. That was his second strategy. His office began to smell odd.

About this time he thought he might take a crack at reading a novel if he could stay awake long enough, if he could figure out a way to keep his hair from falling in his eyes. But to figure out a way to keep his hair from falling in his eyes he would have to stay awake long enough to figure out a way. . . .

For the past few weeks it seemed that his chairman was hesitant about asking him a very important question. Was his chairman purposely avoiding him?

He began casting the *I Ching*, studying the result. His children called him a hippie. His wife called him a nut. The neighbors continued to gossip about that weird couple next door. And when he stopped smoking and drinking he discovered that a mere hour felt much longer than just sixty minutes. His days and nights began to improve and to shorten and to lengthen. His world waxed and waned as a whole.

He cast the *I Ching*. He liked the way that it too was founded upon unconnectedness, that it too lived in the moment and was as distraught as himself. The *I Ching* and its principles perfectly reflected him and his strategies. He tossed and cast away. The *I Ching* was distraught but it was also fraught with meaning, which is what he most wanted, which is what he wanted to connect his words to himself with, his words and himself to the things outside both his words and himself—to connect and fill the gap between things, between all the different sorts of things that were obviously intimate parts of the universe presented to him, who was even now only fractionally awake.

The chairman, working late one night, distinctly heard the sound

of money hitting the floor. He walked down the hall and noticed that there was a light on in one office and that the tinkling seemed to be in there. On opening the door the chairman noticed that the light was under the desk. He bent down. Not only was there a light under the desk but there was a man under there with a book in one hand and three pennies in the cupped palm of the other. And as the coins rang out on the tiled floor, the chairman noted the wild visionary glare in the dark eyes blasting above the light that was flooding out from under the desk.

* * * *

There was a small circular park nearby. He walked through it on his way to and from work. His path was always the same, a diagonal. On either side of the diagonal, trees formed a long colonnade. The length of the diagonal was one hundred thirteen steps, and there were nineteen trees on the left, eleven trees and a stump on the right of his path. In all, including the trees lining the diagonal, there were seventy or eighty trees throughout the park, and from certain angles, and in certain moods, the park recalled a clump of trees verging on a field.

In summer the park was full of children. Families picnicked. Lovers knotted necking together on blankets or drank beer. The park was empty during the winter and it was unlikely that he would find any spilled change in the dead grass. But, at night, love persisted in the cars parked around the park, windows fogged and engines running and exhausts smoking in the cold air. The only sign of life in winter was when a window rolled down and a beer can clattered toward the gutter, louder than usual in the unmoving icy air.

Each year, usually in early spring, park attendants piled up mounds of manure in the park. It might sit for weeks before a crew spread it evenly throughout the park. In anticipation the bare trees would begin to bud. A cycle that never stopped started to begin anew.

And each year the piles of fertilizer disturbed his walk, his idle musings, his otherwise imageless, inhuman thoughts locked tightly on the bones of some philosophy. They were graves. Of hastily buried, quietly but brutally executed enemy soldiers. Nor were they deep. The corpses lay shallow. Inches below upthrusting grasses.

A strong gust of wind!

A scratching, sniffing, rooting animal;

A heavy, driving, ceaseless rain!

A hand with a stopped watch loose around the bones of a wrist. Exposed. Were there as many as ten mounds? Maybe twelve, fourteen?

Surely no more than fifteen! Say there were ten mounds piled here and there in the park, each humped up at the base of a tree, and underneath the manure warming the decomposing corpse, the dead were adding theirs to the cycle.

The enemy soldiers, hands behind their heads, uniforms torn and shoes broken open with ice and mud, were marched into the park in single file. Some limped as if in pain. One crawled, dragging a flopping leg. And others were proud and erect while still others supported another between them.

Once under the trees each captor chose his enemy and then picked out his tree. (The exposed watch as a historical object, and, as historical objects, the bones of the wrist still in articulation with the watch, proved that the captors had not stripped their personal enemies, also historical objects.)

Each executioner smoked a large cigar and on each stubbled chin was a brown dribble of juice as if locusts drooled and struggled out from smoking mouths. They puffed and puffed, pulled and pulled on their cigars, and their puffs were larger than usual because each was composed not only of smoke but of excited hot breath amplified by the cold dome of unmoving air enclosing executioner and victim.

He trotted through, eyes on the ground, coat flapping, shoulders rounded, head down, and clenched hands deep in coat pockets, the air closing tightly in around him with a snap like water freezing.

The field beyond was full of mirrors through which he broke, sloshed, legs trying to hold back running feet, and cold feet stomping on and on. How the roosters along the shelled fence swelled chests like bellows and screamed, and screamed, and screamed. How they heralded his approach and his flight till he stopped in the road and flung his automatic weapon at them and then threw himself into the drainage ditch vomiting and crying bitterly. Broken ice pecked at his submerged head. His sobs bubbled to ice in the freezing water, and as they froze and rose he wanted to hold a handful. The roosters cocked their heads and rolled their eyes and clucking looked down at the ditch.

Love clattered toward its gutter. Under a shattered crystal a season stopped forever at 5:01. A.M.? P.M?

* * * *

He wanted to live inside something round. Right angles and cubes partitioned space in the wrong way. One thought vertically in cubes, and horizontally, coming to believe that a straight line was the shortest

distance between two points in any and every space. While it was not even true in the normal, common spaces through which one passed. A linear trap. Navigators knew that it was false but then navigators were free.

At such times he desired her comforts and the sullen releases she could offer him. But the areas between them could not be crossed. One had to reach toward the other. One had to touch the other first, had to risk exposure across several linear feet of floor, had to pass through some thousands of cubic feet of unmoving air, which was all they shared now besides their two ghostly presences, each of which displaced so much space, staking some kind of claim. One would not come within several feet of the feelings of the other. Round. They moved round one another. They prowled and stalked, circling. From any point of view an eclipse was plainly visible. Streaming with darkness, their overlapped shadows lay tensed, quivering between them—not mutually exclusive but mutually occult like stones which point to their homes.

* * * *

Langorous, indolent as Baudelaire's unkempt and hotly dreamed of women with coarse black manes into which a trembling man could plunge his trembling hands and BE! Yes, BE—a long time unremembering. Un-re-mem-ber-ing. But Baudelaire had named that poem "Lethe," and his women had all been giantesses monstrous and mad. Did he hear oblivion's hum? The windy uncoiling of total annihilation?

He died converted and absolved.

The animals were not emblems or symbols. There were animals being themselves

uncaged
with their
freedom
and their
sinuous
being.

Yet they held an undue fascination, intimated a power beyond their mere actions. He dreamed, and in the middle of his dream

rhinos crash forward
humping, a cheetah sprints
away, leaving spots behind
smudging the fiery air
bands of mandrills patrol

the only waterhole
a python unhinges its jaws
pink to fit over silence.

He dreamed himself inside and now watched himself struggling to break through a shattered mirror's webbing. Different points of view came into existence as quickly as he created different selves with differing requirements—he was surrounded and enveloped by countless of his own reflections; he was immersed and fighting upwards through total darkness; winds curled and curled and curled round him; again and again he smashed his fists against the endlessly varying surfaces. Fibers stretched; cracks increased, expanded and spread outward in rays from the weakening, crumbling center of his attack.

He woke in the middle of his screaming. He thought, "Can't," but as yet he was unwilling to surrender.