

Head of a Man
John Gilmore

REALITY STREET

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For my sister, Sharon

Now, being a man, I could not help consenting.

– Homer / Fitzgerald

One

First, a room. There must be a room. Spare and still. With walls thick to keep the sound out. Some sounds I'll allow. A woman washing clothes by hand in a courtyard. Water splashing in a concrete basin. Sweeping over stone. Women's voices in the distance, in an open space, in a language I do not understand (but not in anger). One car, in the distance, quickly gone. Chopping, even hammering, or a chisel on stone, when it's at the pace of a man's arm, slow and steady and drawn out.

Or, in. Walls thick to keep the sound in, too. A room to go to pieces in, without someone on the other side listening. Like she used to, at night, reading on her bed, her feet elevated on pillows. Reading and tapping on the wall for me to stop. Be still. I am now, or I try to be. I sit motionless at the table. Close doors behind me carefully. Seek out others less and less. (All these years.) This stillness gets me nowhere. There will come a time, I'm sure, when the words will rise and the story be told. But first, a room. There must be a room.

□

I came to this room on the path that curls up around the rim of the valley. It's the last house on the way out of town. Trees press down the mountainside to the edge of the path, lean there, and sometimes topple. The other side drops away quickly, edges weakened by rain.

□

The shutter in my room swings out. I unhook it in the morning. It's roughly made: four boards edge-to-edge and a zed holding them in place. The nails are bent over, thick and rusted and pounded in deep. I reach out and pull the shutter closed when it's time to sleep. Many palms have oiled the sill smooth.

□

There's only a narrow panel of valley I can see from the window, on the left, down below. (If I lean out, then I see more.) Another house blocks the view. A wall of rough planks.

□

It is good to have this room. I have arranged things the way I want them. I have moved the table in front of the window. Not right in front. A little to the right, with space around it. That way, sitting on the straight-back wooden chair, the panel of valley is widest. But the ground drops away quickly beneath the house, and the only part of the valley I can see while seated is the lip on the other side.

□

The bed I haven't moved. It's against the wall, opposite the door. As soon as I come in, I'm beside it. When I lie there in the afternoon, all I can see is the wall of planks next door. There are no windows facing mine.

□

The travellers who come here are young and carry backpacks. The ones who have been travelling a long time are tanned and hard. They arrive every day, on foot, in the late afternoon, dropping heavy loads in the hall outside my door. They come on the bus from the capital. It lets them off in the square. They come to see

the valley and the terraces and to escape the lowland heat. They stay a few nights, and then move on.

□

I spend my days here, waiting, the door closed and the shutter open. The room is lit with a dull, grey light that varies in intensity as the clouds thin and shift and congeal overhead. They rarely part. Sometimes I lean out and look up, at the lowness. We are high up here. At night there are no stars.

□

She lets me take water from the kettle, to make myself tea. Tea? Her eyes brighten when I enter the kitchen with my cup. You? I offer, always. She shakes her head, always, laughing, pointing to the deep basin full of muddy clothes they give her to wash. Worrkk. Her drawn-out inflection a playful rebuke. I go back to my room, careful not to spill a drop. She wipes the floor clean every day. I go back to waiting. Later, I hear her singing.



It is my natural state, waiting. Sometimes my waiting is indolent. Sometimes attentive. I am attending on. Preparing myself for. To be ready. Still and ready. I can be. If the room is right.



Every day starts like this. The cracks in the shutter dull. Only her moving. Only us. The water filling. Daylight filling. This short time of hope.



Sometimes, when I awake, I have words. They are given to me in dreams. Francis mantra praying. That was last night. The I's stones. I don't know what they mean, but I like them. I keep them. I wait for more. Sometimes, real dreams, too. Stories.

□

She sent me ahead. She said she would follow me. But when I arrived, only our luggage was there. I pushed open the door and stepped into a foreign world and went in search of the room that had been assigned to me. (B-something. I don't remember.) I carried the bag across a muddy yard, past low barracks, around wide puddles. (The rain had stopped.) I found my building, and the door at the end of it, and the steps leading up, but the way was blocked by a pool of water. I didn't go in. It didn't matter. I knew what I would find – my room, a cubicle, one among many identical cubicles along a narrow corridor, the others crowded and overflowing, with women in thick skirts and sweaters, and boxes tied with cord and wrapped bundles. Whole families in one small room, eating, talking, feeding children, waiting. Everyone talking in a language I could not understand.

□

This house has a big room where the travellers sit, on wooden benches, at long wooden tables. Passageways lead out on all sides – to the showers, to the kitchen, to other rooms. And there are large windows with no panes overlooking the valley. Openings everywhere. It's two steps down, to the wash basin and the fire. I go there to get water. Tea? I ask, always. Worrkk, she always answers. And then I turn and step up and cross the big room again and come back here, and close the door. This is my room. I

take one step forward and stop beside the chest of drawers. I put the cup down gently on the mat, and open the top drawer carefully (it sticks) and take one tea bag from the torn plastic bag and close the drawer (again, carefully) and lower it by its string. And then I take the cup in the fingertips of both hands and step forward again, three steps, and place it with outstretched arms on the table, on the right, near the back. And I sit. And the dull daylight illuminates the table, and the sounds and odours of life outside come in the window, and they are there. And I am calm to know they are there. The dampened thud of a hoe in wet earth. The trickle of unseen water. I am at rest. A tongue at rest. Waiting.

□

Her back to me. Always, her back to me, her hands in the deep basin. Always water, running, somewhere. (Over and over, this.)

□

Once when the door was still open she knocked and stepped inside. Showed surprise. Pleasure. Seeing the room like this for the first time, mine. There was a postcard on the chest of drawers. She stooped, close, then suddenly straightened. My boyfriend! His city! She turned to face me, eyes lit. He say beautiful. Very beautiful. Very cold! Laughs, excited. I go. Husband. How you say? Rubs her ring-

less finger. Engaged? Engagé, yes! She looked at the picture again, and smiled deeply, then stood up again and turned and stepped one more step into the room, looking around her. – And me, stepping back, turning too, turning her, by looks and turns myself, spinning circles through a waltz hands clasped arms uplifted spinning circles through a room. But this was slow, and I did not touch her. She stepped into my space and I turned and stepped out, to another space. And again. And again. And all the time I wanted to put my palm on her shoulder the brown sweater a bulb of promise, turn her cupped in my palm until she stood and faced me and both of us finally silent and motionless and the dance over. Nights I wait for her to come back, tap softly on the door with the fingers of one hand.



There are days I wake in this room, I forget why I am here. What it is I am waiting for. The door is unlocked at the front of the house and the bus for the capital leaves every day from the square. But there is this story of which I am a part. The one chosen to wait. And there is this fear. Here is the room, everything as I want. Here, the world seeps in, in increments I can control – the shutter, the door, the exact placement of the chair. Her voice I cannot control, but because I do not understand what she is singing I hear it only as a presence that soothes me. (Her fingers on my temple. The afternoon light.) Over and over the days like this. The sound of water splashing in the basin. Her singing. The others pass quickly in and out, clumping on heavy heels, talking in deep voices (they are almost all men), talking in throaty voices, northern languages. I like it best when it is not my language. Then they are

as a brute force passing quickly and gone. They are away all day on trails, and in the evening, in town, drinking beer. Occasionally one stays behind, usually a woman, sleeping or writing postcards by the window. I do not mind. On those days her singing soothes us both.



I cannot explain this. This gazing into absence. I cannot find the words to say what's not there. I can say, robbed. I can say, drugged and robbed. I can say, befriended, betrayed, abandoned in the night. But it's not enough. It's the gaps. I can't see into them. Things rise, but I'm not sure what's real.



I sat up late one night with an old traveller, a solitary man at loose in the world. It was his last night. He had brandy from a stall. We straddled benches in the big room, the long table between us. We sat at the window, looking out. He said he was circling back north after a season on the beaches. (Many pleasures, all a dream.) He talked of a winter retreat, the monastery he was going to, the hard mats they had to sleep on. I tried to explain, but the story would not come clear. (Words again, fallen through.) He said he knew the place they'd taken me. City of angels, he called it. Sailor's rest.

Men wake up there all the time, he said, everything gone. A rain had started, and we watched a single light moving on the other side. He poured again. (Her door was closed). You've got to see it for what it is, he said, nothing more. You were just another gringo. To them you were. Another GI Joe. Fucking Americans, they think they own the world. We clinked cups, bitter pause. The wind came up, a sudden squall, and we slid back along the benches, dragging our cups between us. It's here, he said. The rainy season. Time to go home. He portioned out the last drink and we sat without speaking, listening to the thrumming on the roof. A curtain of water poured off the eave. Then it stopped, just as sudden, and there was only blackness again, and the distant light was gone. He got up to leave. The bench scraped on the floor. Here, he said. He pulled off his sweater. Keep it. You'll need it up here.

□

(The Lord bless us and keep us.)

□

Sometimes I think: ledger. The cover black, the spine stiff and stitched and black, too. It opens wide and white and without rules. I make lines across the untouched parts, parallel lines of cumulative impact. Each line elicits a response, in turn another line. Each

succinct, spare, efficient. Each indelible, striking, cruel in its calculation. Other pages blot a flood of words, breaking through, rising fast. Unstoppable. And all between the same black covers. A single ledger, to be closed and left on the table at night. The spine aligned with the perpendicular.



Last night there was a bear. It wandered in and out of rooms, and outside again. I could never get the right combination of doors closed, with me on one side and the bear on the other. There was a woman, too. It came up behind her. I told her not to look back.



The table in my room bears the imprint of words. I cannot make them out. A child's first letters. Practiced, pressing. Intaglio. The wood remembering.



And then there are rooms that connect to other rooms, interconnected, arched, endless, with people wandering through. Some rooms are dim, and I don't stop as I move through. I cannot turn to them, offer myself. Momentum propels me on.

□

(Footfalls.) (Many words.) (Forgotten the rest.)

□

Wind this morning. And one bark, from below. Just one. It, too, listening. Behind a door. Head cocked.

□

Waiting to be taken over. That's one way of saying it. The speaking through. The voice of. The done to. This is the room in which I prepare myself. Rituals in solitude. Creases smoothed. Lines aligned. Words rubbed against words.



I eat in my room, the extra towel she gave me spread on the table for a cloth, the door open behind me. Lately I have taken to leaving it open, just a little. I do not turn when she passes to and from the other rooms, cleaning, sweeping. But I hear her passing, her sandals shuffling on the bare wood. I do not look back, but I think she looks in and sees me sitting here, sees my back, and my head bent, and my stillness. I hope she sees my stillness.



I am a poor host. I should step into the hall when I hear her passing and insist. Lead her in and seat her in my chair, at the table, and take her pail from her hand and put it to one side, and there, gesturing, I want you to, please, put the plate of nuts and biscuits before her on the cloth and touch her lightly on her shoulder, just with the tips of my fingers, on the plait of her sweater, so lightly perhaps her skin will not register my touch, and laugh (we would both laugh), time for lunch in Canada. And I would touch her again with a different meaning this time, stay, don't get up, and then hurry to the kitchen and pour another cup from the kettle and bring it to her. Tea. Your tea. And I would take my cup and sit on the bed, on the foot of the bed (the covers are straightened and pulled tight and neat, I make it carefully every morning she can see it in passing a man who keeps his room neat) and I would laugh and gesture again

and show her again leaning over reaching out taking a nut for myself and a biscuit.

□

Though it is only just after noon, I want to sleep again. Close the door and lie on the bed. Close the shutter, too. Extinguish consciousness. This is my consciousness, this extinguishing. The going down into darkness. (The story, after all.) But this darkness is more than sleep. She is not in the next room, sleeping lightly, not there to come to me in the dark quickly when I cry out. This darkness is the going down darkness, the obliteration of time darkness, the pinned under fathoms darkness, the end of all motion darkness. Here there is no waking to an urge or a touch. Here the door is bolted, the glass of water by the bed untouched. From here, one does not come back with stories to tell. From this one does not awaken in wonderment. From this, one returns with nothing. Only dread.

□

Beautiful dreamer, dream unto me.



Here is one beginning. I am thirsty for revenge. The brown river is dry. The river bed has cracked and curled and shrunk, the way paper curls and convulses on the log an instant before it ignites. I walked the streets of the capital like that, dry inside, tasting the need, the thing craved, the absence of it.



Here is another. There I went out a thousand tides ago, in a warring time, on a cresting surge. A storm lay upon the sea and the isles, and the river was in full flood when I landed.



Not in this room. Far away. She can be a stranger, or we meet as strangers and this becomes our friendship. She seats me on a hard wooden chair as soon as I come in, and ties my hands behind the chair. Then she lies on the low bed before me, undraping herself, languorous, showing me, watching me. It thrills her.



Or, I let myself in, and slouch into a deep armchair, and hook one leg over the arm. She comes in and sits down across from me, on the sofa. She removes nothing, only parts her thighs a little and presses with her fingertips under her skirt. I can see nothing of her body but her bare arms, and her long, white neck when her head falls back, her mouth open, convulsing.



Today she came to me of her own accord, knocking at the open door behind me. (Leaves, suddenly airborne.) I turned on my chair and met her eyes, meeting mine, a moment only. Then she looked down and smiled and her head dipped almost imperceptibly, settling into the space left by her falling breath. (Something inside me has been made visible now. I cannot call it back. It is done, my coming here.) One step into the room and her two arms rose with her next breath, lifting a clean white cup towards me. Tea? Her eyes rose with the rise in her voice. And she looked at me again, hesitating, then stepped again, once more towards me, standing before me now, her arms still offering, as I stood up. And it was my turn now to avert my eyes, looking down, taking the weight of the cup lightly on my fingertips, our fingertips touching an instant before she let go. This simple act. Thank you. Thank you, nodding. Relieved, she stepped back, one step, out of the space we had shared, then turned in silence and regained the door. There

she turned again, sure now. Big room. No people. I finish clean. Beautiful, yes? You sit? Look? Thank you, nodding again. Thank you, turning where I stood, my feet fixed, turning with my arms still raised in front of me, holding the cup, turning towards the small table. Here is good for me. But thank you. Here is good. You sit? I indicated the chair, pushed away from the table by my rising, the angle of it open. You sit? She smiled and shook her head quickly, just once. Left quickly by the open door.

□

That which stalks me circles me, seeking flesh, stepping into the space I step out of. My hand finds my own flesh, a comma. (You are a flower, I said, kneeling. A flower, beaded.) But not this morning. This morning I am the hunted and the hunter. I am the tiger. I am the destruction and the night. Her eyes lowered, waiting, holding forth the cup. Make no mistake. I am the tiger. She steps forward. I am the claw.

□

She is singing again. It is long past the hour I go to her for water and the house is still except for her singing and the splashing in the basin. I want her to go away today. I cannot live in her house today. I cannot bear the sounds she makes today, the closing of a

door, the shifting of a bench. She is waiting. She knows I am here. (You have the silence I am guarding for you. You have my caution and my caring.)

□

(She followed me here. As the story followed.)

□

Curled with my curl, belly to my back, she rose and left in silence, went back to the basin in the mid-afternoon light and we were alone like that, in the house, alone. She-sounds, gentle she-sounds, rushing water, and me waking into the stillness, alone. Then rises my claw she is gone. Then rises my claw she comes to me again, and again she slips beside me silently murmuring stifling me murmuring to accept me.

□

I do not want this woman beside me take her away. Take away these voices one voice after another voice. (And mine eyes. And mine eyes.) And good there is a wall, and a headwall, too. This the embrace, into this will I empty. Out of chaos, eros. Out of eros, voice. My resurrection is my word, but my story is shattered, my root blasted, my tongue torn. This going down go down – the incantation of forgotten words. My song is no song till she sings it.

□

Their faces move about me in the dark. Hushing. Fluttering. Erasing me. (It starts like this.)

□

(Sipping. Sipping. Gone.)

□

I woke later and she was gone. (Help me in this.) The house was silent. (Help me in this.) My jaw cracked. I am certain: here is no one.

□

The room was lower. (Dream the dream on.) They gave me this room.
(Dream the dream on.) Here you will sleep. Don't worry. No one.

□

Always these voices, always. Hovering, in shadows, waiting. As I
wait, to be given.

□

Darkness comes early here. The valley fills with darkness, dripping
in. Sounds drown. (An insect giving up.) Now is the time. The
smell of cooking on her sleeve. The glow of fire on her skin.

□

She is there. (Breaths.) (In sedges.) (Waist deep.) (In moonlight.)

□

Something is moving, circling where I cannot see it. (Not far.) I register everything as it was. The door. The window. My jeans limp beside the bed. The sticky heat rising. Their voices rising, softly, beyond the door.

□

This I know: They were waiting, all of them, waiting. Seated around the table. They looked up as I came out of the room. (Action!) The old woman rose and went to the stove, and stirred the milk. The boy was in the same place, at the table, resting on an outstretched arm, a cautious smile, watching her. All eyes watched her. Come. Sit. You are tired. We don't want wake you. (Water splashing in a basin.) The bowl is waiting at my place. There is bread in the basket. She speaks again. We finish, but we wait for you. Come, sit. Drink.

□

(Come back.)

□

I immobile. Lying on my bed. Watching the light fade, the darkness grow. Listening to them coming back, stamping mud off, recounting adventures. Listening to her working, a pot scraping on the steel flange. Her hands in running water. A body, too, (faint), in the shower, slaps of water hitting the floor. Then footfalls, whispering. Doors closing, extinguishing. Then stillness. Darkness. I immobile. Forgotten. Left. Unnoticed. (Please don't.)

□

Sometimes an impulse so strong it leaves the blank skin trembling. These walls are not thick enough. I turn in, shredded. Words rub against words. Dry rasp.

□

She didn't knock. She slipped in alone and shook me. Time to go. You sleep all day. You very tired. We don't want wake you. We go now. The car is waiting. They were talking, moving to and fro, making preparations, hurrying. Looking in at me as they passed. She was right, the night air was cooler. A good time to travel.



There is no edge, no border to step over into trespass. There is only the blunt, dull weight of darkness. You step into it, and down.