



(fig. 1)



The eruption at Pompeii was such a blessing, archi-ally speaking. So maybe that'll be interesting—seeing what all is preserved by our ribcages, what they happen to curl around in the blast. It's not hard to believe in time travel when you look at the course of history: as if someone had trawled their finger over your spin art before it was dry (fig. 1).

The prevailing thoughts and attitudes of the day were liquefied in large, churning vats and distributed to The People as a snack made to the shape of their mouths. These required neither chewing nor sucking; they simply soaked and dissolved. There were those for whom the metaphors came easy and the world broke down into parts. For the rest, there were the snacks.

The Thought Leaders were asked once a month to return to the vats, and a new batch was produced. One month brought an uncommon measure of humility to many proceedings, the next a rash of small larcenies in the working districts. It was unusual that any one combination of suggestions should be extended to the next month, although some were said to hoard the snacks in the folds of their robes and mix up the doses, remaining willfully out of step with their neighbors.

In the sky, a garish grin, the holes necessary for parasailing cut through it (fig. 2). In the road, the bird's body, flattened and folded against the ground like a napkin.

R. had worked many years for the Transit Authority but still lurched as he traversed the length of the bus, for his service had been to the trains.

X. worried aloud about falling in love with him.^[1]

O. tongued the open sore of her mouth until it turned sweet. She likes worrying about her friend, but she doesn't have any idea of what she should do.

¹ "The first thing," X. said, "that happens in a civil war is all the good men leave."



(fig. 2)



I'll miss the sound of people walking—like horses—on the streets. I saw a horse the other day with a plume of purple feathers on its head. As if it wasn't enough, being already a horse.

Leaving the Palace, The Drivers sucked their teeth. The Inquiry had been nothing more than a questionnaire. Something was said mostly to expel the thought.

The buses were as they had left them, wedged into the emergency access road. Limbs wagged out of sleeves, ringing the heat. Some wondered if this was the real stuff or a fiction, but none wondered aloud.

One worked to rattle a toothpick from a coffee cup. One coughed. He saw his bus was miserable with sweat. He touched it on the neck to calm it.

“Cold water / one dollar,” a girl sang from the street corner. They bought that, and some mangos.

T. had been born on the same day as R., 24 years later.

E. finds the father and the son pleasantly interchangeable, forgets their names, and addresses both as “sir.” “Don't call me *sir*,” they reply every time, grinning, “I'm no officer. I *work* for a living.”

The Postal Carriers wore the same stripe as their bags and as their boxes (fig. 3). A lot of good change has come to the Service, but their tailor remains an odd and cruel man against whom a series of familiar complaints are filed every year.



The false alarm active shooter scare at JFK was apparently caused by a group of viewers reacting to Usain Bolt's gold medal victory in the 100-meter dash during the Games in Rio.



(fig. 3)

At the Museum, in the Garden, around the Fountain, The Dancers stroked each other as if they knew too many people who had died. They seemed willfully comfortable in chairs designed only for the eye. The Fountain gave a spit. In the moment of its splattering, a new era began.

Both felt there were once good parts of this world. Both got the sense, that morning, of something permanent having been done in a dream.

One of them had been finally invited to contribute his notions at the Temple later that week. The other had teased him, folding despair into the thicker parts of his gut.

P. never looked at the others before the flash and didn't know what kind of picture she was in.

Y. entered a train car full of first communion. He thought he recognized a child who played at lunches amidst the empty bike docks, but she looked wilted in her frills.^[2]

O. chased the stray feeling of unease through her many reasons for contentment.

² Later shown at another angle to be a different child.



To live in this City is to be not in control of your life, but to be in partial control of something besides your life, to be a cog or a wrench in the machine that makes the world.

Every day in this City is, strangely enough, another day. They are counting these against our total.

Near the end of their lives, the Thought Leaders would go to the Confessionary (fig. 4) to be forgiven their trespasses on the basis of their Genius. Their diaries were checked against the diaries of others. If the ends of their Madness were those they had foreseen, there would be a difficult moment of justice in the world. If not, not.

I. gave a show of floor sculptures in Feb. They filled most of the gallery and forced the reception attendees out-of-doors and into the street.^[3]

B. looked around the table at the drinks instead of their people. She used to be an alcoholic, but now she could drink again.

W., her daughter, sat at her elbow, sulking. She had turned herself in before she had thought of all the ways to run away.

And didn't the drink sit uneven in the glass?

In consciously attempting to soften their features, The Beautiful often hardened them into the shape of something round. Those for whom they had intended an expression of undivided attention were unconvinced and wondered instead after the amount of air in their cheeks.

Still, it was thought, *The Beautiful may have some right to their vanity.*



(fig. 4)



I do not wish to make these People better by virtue of their having been dreamed up, developed, written.

They should also be thoughtless, harried, late, impatient, frequently short on remorse, vain with their own suffering.

I'm afraid that having people otherwise would make us look for their counterparts in our own lives, where we may find we know only tired, distracted, irritable people.

Well, here are some more:

M. thought there were certain words that should retain their British spelling: labour, rumour, humour...^[4]

Q. has lost her French, but she's sure she could redeem it if she returned to France.

S. consented to see her friend but decided in advance that she would barely speak, for the events of that weekend would be exhausting to recount.

J. was attracted to those who were free for only so long as it took to hunt and capture them. She had a habit of getting to the bottom of a person without having found their center.

V. imagined himself to possess some great ability with animals but, regrettably, without much opportunity to produce proof of this power.

C. was passionate about Painting (which contains the word pain), had too much love for that physical struggle which produces symbolic results.

There were The Workers who carved indicating grooves into the operative knobs and dials of anything that might be used in the dark. Some days, the light pulsed and dimmed, reminding them of the ends of intermissions. Now it was just after that time of night when everything was cleaned, and everything was wet.



Are the rooftops as windswept as the plains? From one, the sky is much bigger, seems to point at ever more sky. From the other, the sky hangs low, seems to gesture at the signs of life underneath and extending to the horizon in every direction.

We thought that each of the five boroughs of N.Y. City looked like a precious material: Manh. was diamond, the Bx. was bronze, Qns. was gold, and Bkln. was copper. We didn't know what S.I. looked like, but we imagined emerald for this purpose.

In the history of the painted room, there had never been a shade which could not be described as White, even if there had been some tepid Blues. There were three overhead lights in the room, but all of the bugs had died in the basin of the centermost, perhaps having tried to save one another.

The building was large enough that—even at day's peak, with walls of windows on either end and an open floor plan throughout—the light from the front could not advance far enough to join the light from the back, and there was left a darkness in the center where the boys met like lizards to plan torments, the glints widening in their eyes.

And lo, from our planes, privy to the planner's grid, they are the blocks of Buildings and People that come to seem like a bad crop, crumpled and dead in their beds (fig. 5).

I used to have a pretty little view, but now someone else has it, having built their home taller than mine and closer to the view.

⁴The u dignified their meaning on our coarse tongue.



On the train home: everyone is very hard on the beautiful boy who has begun to seem crazy. They would be more sympathetic, for sure, if they had first noticed he was crazy, after which time he had begun to seem beautiful.

H. prayed, uncertainly, imagining the face of G-d trying to explain something.

A. paused, at first for effect, and then because she had forgotten what she had been thinking.^[5]



(fig. 5)

Certain of The Audience had been very affected by the old pictures in which audio and visual had fallen out of synch, The Actors betraying their own words with expressions delivered split-seconds earlier. Some, perhaps under the influence of stale snacks, became convinced that this was the Real.

They began to move too quickly, to understand every gesture as a shadow of some future utterance, eventually began to run Mad through the streets, down which their screams followed by a matter of yards.

We remember that there were those who ran screaming from the theaters where a picture was shown in which a train barrelled toward the foreground.

We remember next that this story is certainly a hoax. We move our fantasy of sophistication to higher ground.

⁵When old friends fall silent, the conversation may be restarted from the beginning. When the same happens to mere acquaintances, a true break is possible in which new information might be revealed to the other, to themselves.