

LISTING

Scott MacLeod



For as far as I could see before the lights dissolved everything into a platinum infinity, they were standing, applauding, smiling. I felt the clarity of mind that I wanted, the strength in my chest, my legs, my arms. The applause was pumping power into me. The music softened, the people were settling down. I said, "Good evening, ladies and gentlemen..."

It was as unreal, as immeasurable as a dream which covers a year but takes only seconds to happen. There were no clocks in the world, no tomorrows, no yesterdays. I was welded to the emotions of the audience. Suddenly the bond between us was snapped by a tentative crackling of applause answered by a sharp burst from across the room. Another picked it up and it began speeding, gaining urgency, ripping through the stillness like something wild breaking loose, rolling toward me with such force I couldn't hear the music playing or the words I was singing - only that monumental roar growing and finally wrapping itself around me, penetrating until it filled every inch of my being.

It was a momentary refreshment, and in its influence memory began droning of the past. Confused abhorrent images mocked my helpless dreamings. There was a place - beyond - out of these shadows, unattainable. A piercing, vindictive voice was calling me. No hope now. I was damned. In senseless hallucination I began systematically, laboriously, a frenzied search. Leaf, pebble, crawling night-creature - with slow, animal-like care, I turned them over one by one, seeking and seeking.

The feelings of foreboding settled more heavily upon me. Perhaps it was the darkness of the room, the terrible darkness I had learned to dread as a child. Or maybe these ominous feelings came from another experience, an experience in a hospital years ago which still filled me with questions - and wonder.

Nicotine moderates mood, extends attention and doubles the rate of caffeine metabolism: it allows you to drink twice as much coffee as you could otherwise. In other words, the original coffeehouse was a place where men of all types could sit all day; the tobacco they smoked made it possible to drink coffee all day; and the coffee they drank inspired them to talk all day. Out of this came the Enlightenment. (The next time we so perfectly married pharmacology and place, we got Joan Baez.)

The people's flag is deepest red / It shrouded oft our martyred
dead; / And ere their limbs grew stiff and cold / Their hearts'
blood dyed its every fold. / Then raise the scarlet standard high!
/ Beneath its shade we'll live and die. / Though cowards flinch
and traitors sneer / We'll keep the red flag flying high!

I'm stuck in a dead-end job that makes me rich. I play piano in a biker bar in Casablanca. Nobody listens. I live in a ghetto, a suburban one, which has all the same drugs that city ghettos do but no public transit. *I play piano in a biker bar in Casablanca. Nobody listens.* It's like sorbet in a fancy restaurant. But I like it here. It's like I'm saving up all my luck for when you come along.

Liz Phair once said the only muscles on men that count are the ones inside their tongues. I spent months after that weightlifting my food, bending it any way I could. Just flexing it, you know?

I went to the trolley, drew back the rubber sheet from the face, closed my eyes, and rocked back on my heels. She had been sweet and young and innocent - yes, another innocent - and she had been tormented. And she still was. Her eyes were closed now, but I knew that if they were open I'd read terror in them. I could feel those dead eyes burning through the pale lids that covered them, crying out to me in their horror.

In 1919, after Nijinsky had begun to go seriously crazy - after he started wandering the streets exhorting people to go to church - he gave one last performance, in a hotel sitting-room in St. Moritz. According to his wife, he sat down in front of the members of the audience and stared at them for what seemed like a half hour. Then he berated them for having failed to prevent the First World War. Then he launched into a violent solo, presumably improvised, and eventually stopped, whereupon the spectators - some of them "in a state of nerves," according to one witness - hurried off into the night.

The unstinted beauty of nature in a landscape steeped nigh year-long in brilliant sunlight is the delicious surprise awaiting me, the stranger, at every turn. But it is the people who show me the way to savour this delight to the full. In their toil and their arts, in their laughter and sorrows, in their struggles and their endurance without end they have forged the past and the present into a vital chain of continuity. Signs of such continuity are all around me. For nothing in this land has been uprooted, nothing has withered: sources of nourishment are constantly replenished from the ever-flowing spring of the spirit.

I park in a huge, almost empty parking lot that at one time must have held high hopes. Now there are only three pathetic beat-up cars bunched together, real rattletraps, with the rusted-out scars of bitter blizzards and salted roads. A sudden great feeling of freedom and aloneness sweeps over me. I stare out at the deep-gray swirls of clouds against the setting sun. The prairie wind is whipping a rope on the tall aluminum flagpole, making a rhythmic clanking that echoes off the glass windows of the Safeway store.

Propelled by my isolation, my mind was racing through the dark corridors of my memories. I had to control it in order to find peace or the night would be endless. I settled myself and tried to find happier thoughts from my past.

In my swinging bachelor apartment I explored the possibilities of a culture based on the widening horizons of domestic consumption, unabashed pleasure-seeking and less inhibited forms of (hetero)sexual expression. In films, periodicals and popular literature throughout this period my fantasy of the swank, gadget-laden playboy pad figured as a recurring icon of hedonistic masculine consumption in an age of dynamic modernity. My playboy ethos also registered in the spheres of interior design and decor - with an array of stylish furniture, furnishings, hi-fi systems and drinks bars all tailored to my demands and tastes - those of the discerning man about town.

I'm writing this as a visual artist who wishes to find a place, a way of inhabiting and navigating the city. As an artist I'm constantly looking for strategies to represent my existence of urban space. I'm a user of psychogeography from outside academe looking for any connection that will serve in my search for what it is that still makes the position of the contemporary flaneuse at once so edgy and so interesting. I address these questions in the light of my own continuing struggle to map the often unmappable; the experience of the pressures and flows of urban space, where so often desire collides with architectures of authority and power - and sometimes finds them permeable....

An order of this kind can endure, not forever in a changing world but for a long and beneficent period of time. Security and liberty are the benefits which such an order can provide. They are such great benefits that whenever I have enjoyed them at all I have rallied to the authority which provided them. To establish and maintain order, this authority must be consolidated and perpetuated. If this is done, the new order will rest not on sentiment but on enlightened interest.

There will be lots of tough problems ahead. I am not ready for freedom, nor can defend it, the day after tomorrow. I am neither so foolish nor so fainthearted. Character is only the expression of principle at work from within. It is in this interior sense only that the Free will have Style.

If I understood the eternal principles of my own human nature and could use them according to a faithful sense of their fitness to purpose, I should certainly arrive at forms and a Life that had true Style.

Style is a desirable circumstance but a style is, always, a danger.

One has an inspired feeling that anything may happen. But what is actually happening?

I let my life turn round and round about me. I have neither the taste for nor any sense of collective life; nor have I any feeling for personal destiny. This is the source of the sadness I often feel: this world full of generous promise crushes me; and its splendor soon appears barren. In order to lose myself in pursuit of an object, I find myself without an object at all.

It is the contrast between my secret fragility and my proud constructions that makes me so pathetic.

A guy goes into a bar and orders a martini, telling the bartender to pour the gin and just whisper the word 'vermouth' over the glass.

The bartender does as he is told. Later he asks the guy, *How was it?*

The guy says, *OK, only next time, not so loud.*

Someone went to Miles Davis once and said, *I don't understand what 'Trane is playing.* So Miles said, *'Trane had been working on that thing for 25 years, and if you can understand it in five minutes, he ain't doing nothing.*

At least that's how the story goes. Who can be sure exactly what went on back then among the drunks and the idiots, in a Saint-Tropez with all its clichés and our fantasy that a small bourgeoisie could fill this fishing village with a life that was free and fun and lived minute-to-minute, hair in the wind and toes in the sand.

There was, of course, no bottom to the abyss, once I had been drawn into it. The fall was slow, luxurious. The disintegration gathered speed and I grew dizzy. Inside the dark vault of my consciousness there was an endless entry into hell, where cities toppled and crashed upon me. I died slowly, time after time, imprisoned at the bottom of the wreckage.



With the whiskey's acid flame flickering in my stomach, I forced myself to breathe slowly, regularly, but the possibility of being seized and paralyzed by my own nightmare was never far off. How many times had I forced myself to turn over in bed in an attempt to dispel the coagulating tornado of dreams?

I was aware of the outside world rushing away, retreating before the onslaught of a vast sickness that welled up inside me, and I knew that soon there would be only the obscene reality of myself, trapped in the solitary chamber of existence.

They're primitive people. Give them a bed and they put it out for the chickens to roost on. Give them money and they're drunk for days.

Looking at me, ruddy and beaming in the candlelight, she thought with faint repulsion: all men are brutal with young girls.

She had peroxide-blonde hair, a huge, jutting bosom, tremendous hips and a look that said: *I got no time for two-bit sharpies, fast-hand slicksters, or any kind of leeches, fakers and freebee artists; get cute with me and you'll wind up with new teeth.*

With me it's everything for kicks, the cool-easy kicks that ask for no effort at all, the soft-easy style that has me smiling all the time with my tongue in my cheek. It's been that way for a long time now and it's worked for me, it's worked out just fine.

Now, at thirty-eight, I was still a professional, but in a different line of endeavour. It was all horizontal acrobatics on a mattress, my body for rent for three hundred dollars a performance.

Then why am I drifting back? Why pick it up again?

Well, just to look at it. Won't hurt to have a look....

Won't hurt? I'm kidding, right? I can feel the hurt already, as though it's happening again. Just the way it happened before.

She seemed to be playing a complex role, part salesperson and part guardian of a shrine, and part something else. I couldn't help wondering if the undefinable part was an angry widowed sexuality.

I went in the dining room and took a drink. I took another one. I started mumbling to myself and took another drink, trying to get so I could talk. I had to have something to mumble. I thought of the Lord's Prayer. I mumbled that, a couple of times. I tried to mumble it another time, only I couldn't remember how it went.

Once again I am in a place of magic, a wonderland where I step in and out of myself, where memory and fantasy race into each other at full tilt. The tips of my fingers tingle with excitement. I feel my heart race. But I stay very cool. I am the elegant stranger who has ventured in out of curiosity. Will I step through the looking glass into a kingdom of illusion? I don't know yet.

Stepping outside, I lean on the railing and look around to reassure myself that the outside world is still the same as it was when I left it only a few moments ago. A second look confirms that there is a real silver cloud in the real blue sky. I am fascinated with myself. I am determined to undress myself figuratively as well as physically. What kind of lover am I, what kind of gaudy diety? I imagine that that I must have liquid mercury for semen.



THE END

Notes

This was originally a unique book hand-made by me for Margaret Crane, in 2005 or 2006. Each page was a custom-cut piece of card stock & the pages were contained in an orange Hermès scarf box.

A later & different version of this story, titled LISTEN, was published in August 2007 by Kevin Killian & Dodie Bellamy in Mirage #142.