1 The Golden Man

Music must give up the attempt to design itself as a picture of the good and virtuous, even if the picture is tragic. Instead it is to embody the idea that there no longer is any life.

Theodor W. Adorno, Philosophy of Modern Music

Es ist der Tag, wo jedes Leid vergessen

Emanuel von Bodmann

THE GEESE make two arrowheads – one towards the east, one going north. Behind them, western bands of silver and red, raw into a bright twilight.

They seem all wrong, the birds, can't be turned round, into nature. Into the night they go, trusting, balancing, coasting. Don't look down.

She stops me at the door: 'Don't leave this postal district,' says my aunt. 'It's the gangs.'

I say, 'Maybe I should wear my uniform. Why do you live here, if ...?'

She says, 'It's always something, somewhere. You can't trust the journalists. Your uniform may help. Or it may not.'

I say, 'It's become quite limiting, restricting. These – just punks. It's like you want to take off, away.'

'Just stay in the district. They'll know you live here.'

'But I don't.'

'You were here last night. Sometimes innocence helps. Just don't worry, don't take it seriously. It's destiny.'

She – my aunt – says sadly, 'They're tearing down these tower blocks now,' and I say,

‘The bigger animals have suffered most – now they’ll start in on the butterflies. Extinction – nothing less satisfies.’

‘You’re really in security?’ she asks. ‘You’re really paid?’

‘Well, I’m a volunteer for now. The uniform is mine.’

‘Security’s a dodgy thing – you get it, and the others die.’

I talk about the elephants. My aunt, my Tia, says, ‘Well, you can’t blame the Spaniards for that. Nor Mongols either. Nor Neanderthals. The English made them work, the elephants. Those empires – for security, I guess,’ and I say, ‘Let’s not exaggerate – the climate and the calories, crossing the land bridge, it was all a risk. For everyone.’ She says again,

‘Their towers, imperial – thrown down. And me – coming, barefoot, across those seas and empires, scum was everywhere – above, below, on either side.’ She pauses, and with a beady eye she draws a bead on me – ‘I’ve crossed it all – and if it’s gold you want, the lakes of gold, the glaciers, golden rain, I saw it all, if that is what you want.’

To shut her up, I say, ‘To live in these towers – you must love humans quite a lot,’ and it strikes her.

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘we, the people, never really got that far. To that height. Liking. Scum. And noisy too.’

I’m in the street now – and there’s a bunch of dodgy little guys, and now I’ll run, waggle my elbows – they’ll know the sporty ones don’t carry cash. And here’s some bigger guys. Another bunch. For safety, better dump this coat. I rip it off, I tuck my pant legs so it looks as if I’m in the training gear – but these are boots, high-laced. I must lose those, and now I’m barefoot, like my aunt, and I forgot I have no shirt, I’m almost naked, and I run, I’m bleeding now, there’s quite a crowd, I think I’ve quite a madman’s look, and so I take a pole, a stick, a spear, and make myself a safety distance, pink some guy that’s getting close. Just like I studied.

I’ve crossed the postal line, there’s quite a different type of gang that’s active here, they motor up and down and use those little telephones. I shed my pants, they’re burning hot, and in my shorts I run and sweat.

Back with my aunt, and I'm a savage, red with flight.

'I just want to go on the High Road,' I say. 'Not gold, I don't want that, I want ...'

Complacently my Tia, morganatic aunt, says, 'That's all we all want.'

I say, 'You'll have to watch it, if those gangs get power, higher up. You know how they love property, in you they have no friend,' and she says calmly,

'I have possessions, nothing more.'

'I know all that,' I say, 'I want to walk, is all.'

From above, I guess it's Japanese, they sing and shout, the head, the thorax emptied out to make a resonating chamber, to sound deep cries of pain, mouths stretching out, like carp.

'The motor of history,' I say, 'that's still fascinating. Snake and ladder, brain and falling. The people – yes! If they can stand each other.'

My Tia, aunt, says, 'You were always interested in motors – though I don't believe you ever had one.'

I tell her, 'They say one in five here – watches TV all day, or else goes out with a knife

to cut and earn and trade. That's a lot, one in five, something's got skewed. All those banker guys, all living together, like chessmen in their box. What can you do? About it all? Go forward, blind.'

Tia says, 'Don't talk to me about love and transparency. Your uncle was a tart. So sex didn't matter to him, was just part of life. Didn't matter to me either, though I came from a lower social order,' and she stares at the nothing beyond the window.

'Well,' I say, 'the social had orders then,' and suddenly she connects and laughs.

'Marching orders too! And got looked after by the gents, and those earned gratitude that way.'

'Not in your country, Tia, though everywhere it's much the same,' and she says,

'Yes, those wars brought us together, killing and making up, doing down. Just like being married,' and she makes a bitter face.

'Now it's all global,' I say, vaguely. 'Uneven misery. Learning one's place anew,' and she smiles,

'Yes, if you're sure you've got one.'

Now, she looks at me. ‘Ah yes, you find it hot – I shan’t make you put on more clothes.’ She pauses, then, ‘Are you convinced they’ll pay you?’

‘Maybe a shirt, or pants,’ I say, but she is rushing on.

‘I may have told you how I came barefoot. Down, down, right at the bottom. There I began. The land of fire, Tierra del Fuego. Follow the star, from bar to bar, and dance and dance, table top to lap and back. That awful dance, the tango, like two tin figures, tin dangling on sticks, twisting to that tinny jangle – could you get off on that, my dear?’

‘I wish I could have all that experience,’ I say; lost for sense, I improvise, and think, yes, the experience, but not the age, decrepitude, a cage of years until your view blots out, and she follows me, and says,

‘Yes, yes, of course I’ll share. Experience – you shall have all mine, and keep your youth – youth relative, of course – it always is.’

And so I feel it, a tide that pours its weight, its salt, its bits of shell and weed – my aunt’s experience, her years of silt and sand, and

walking till she finds a bar, someone who fancies her, a night or two at least, the joint is filling up, the band is maybe sober, and what's this? not Bo Diddley, that's for the end when everything is smashed and passion's surged and spent, there's someone lifeless in the gents – what's this, you want some cash? Just give me love, your love will do, it's better than the cash and – 'No!' she screams, my aunt screams 'Fuck you! I want my pay! You think I'll screw you and the night is done for free? You must be crazy or an optimist,' and so she wanders on.

*

'Well,' says my aunt.'Since you've no clothes, no pay, and really want experience – I've given you all mine. It doesn't cost, but takes an act of concentration.'

'Yes, aunt, I know,' I say, 'but I don't want the fleshy part, the sex, tired feet, all that,' and she says,

'Experience is done and finished, stored somewhere up above your eyes. The flesh is absent – pain and pleasure, sensations – those you

don’t recall, but only stories, mine, or stories that you’ve told yourself. And now – all yours.’

She says experience enters through the skin, that’s best, and so I spend some months, maybe, there in that tower, apartment borrowed, squatted in or just left derelict. Naked as a nail, I sit and walk, and walk and walk, up from the land of fire, and there’s the goddam tango, waiting like a serpent in the dark, and now we’re out, there’s money now and Portuguese, and coloured slums, and auntie says, ‘The best is yet to come,’ and she is right – come endless plains of salt, the mountains like they’re carved from chocolate; and booze, and jaguars ...

‘Yes,’ she says, ‘the jaguars are the most important part,’ and now we’re into cactus land, mescal, the bars are smaller, even noisier, and auntie’s body coarsens up, here’s goddam hot, the bread here tastes of sweat – there’s shooting all around, there’s always been, but now it seems just folklore, and at last we get to ride a bus, it’s full of chickens – as they’ve always been, the buses – but we haven’t found the golden infant anywhere, nor yet the silver or obsidian one. And now she needs a modern gent to take her where

the treasure lies – beyond the frontier! USA! And he is found. My uncle, I suppose, and I ask her,

'Doesn't experience teach you – if so, what?'

She says, 'I never found it so, just walking place to place, and dancing on the table tops – what d'you expect to learn?' and I'm convinced. The meeting's over, and I'm glad I don't take on stale flesh with all the memories, that don't amount to much, but those are all she has, it's quite a vibrant life, if you don't look too close.

I find some pants, a shirt. She says, 'And as for sex – you're in security, unpaid – there's not much to expect.'

I go outside. I shoulder aunt's experience like a peddler's pack, it's almost weightless now, but there is remembrance, flits like postcards in and out my eyes.

To read more
purchase the full version
of Soft Landing