

Robert Gibbons

THE DISASTERS OF WAR

Terror goes a long way, spawning trauma at the depths of living. However, transformed in that dark undercurrent, in dire circumstances, at the bitter end of a long ordeal, the whole enterprise can turn around, reverse the fear. Two examples come to mind from *The Disasters of War*, which didn't see the light of day for thirty-five years after Goya passed away. In "What Courage!" a young woman climbs over battlefield dead to light the cannon against relentless onslaught. In "They Do Not Want To," an old woman's dagger is the exclamation driving home the point written quietly in pencil at margin's edge. Perhaps it's just that man has to earn courage, woman's is more innate.

GLASGOW FREEDOM

Yes, that's what we'd do, sometimes without turning our heads each other's way, whisper, grunt out, or simply murmur barely audibly the lone word, "Freedom." Grounded on Whitehill Street from the first morning at Tapa Coffee & Bakery, where the Norwegian woman welcomed us in before they opened, "Freedom"; Drury Lane outside Whitehorse Bar, "Freedom"; or the day after yet another ugly hole decimated the Paris of the Middle East, Beirut, traipsing into the Lebanese place on Gibson Street in the West End, nearly empty, but for a single family with grave concern evident on their faces, & a group of text-messaging men in a corner within view of Al Jazeera's live reports, "Freedom."

THE TONGUE OF PEACE IN A FEMININE VOICE

There is war. There is the girl in the yellow slicker riding her bike in the snow with her faithful dog on a leash looking up to see what to do, where to go next. There is always war, we must know that by now, which doesn't lessen the need to halt this latest. If powers of perception saw the moment's movement, the new. Two white houses across the street just changed color in the snow. Rhododendron exhilarating the universe, while war wounds unfathomably, to depths out of reach of photosynthesis, where everything stays white in darkness. Sounds familiar. Bullet in the backyard sounds, while war exterminates music. When I saw Miles perform in 1969 his anger was silent in blue & black. When I heard Munir Bashir for the first time on his Baghdad six-string ud, it matched the tongue of peace in a feminine voice. In her book, *Rootprints*, Helene Cixous says the world will ultimately forgive everyone, but war criminals.

ONE WORD DREAM LIBRETTO

What aspects led to it, how exactly the dream occurred the way it did in terms of imagery, sequence, sound, dénouement, & ending will remain mysteries, but surely, isolation on the island the day before, & knowing nothing of where things were or where we were going, other than following the paved road as directed by the first people we asked after disembarking, until the fork a few miles later, all contributed to the scene, but could never explain it fully. When we sat on the wharf level with the glistening Atlantic, I told her it felt like a dream, & then an unspoken comparison to both heaven & death shot past me faster than language. (For aren't sex & death & heaven beyond language?) We lolled there in the middle of time, time as slow & weighty, as to no longer be time at all, but living only, breathing only, sensing Nature having something beyond history, beyond any possible prediction for the future. Rock cliffs, stands of pine indecipherable as the expanses of cloudless sky, & depth of ocean. We must have stopped trying to figure things out: that night music filtered throughout the dream, solo stringed instrument, notes spirited, not droll, nor monotonous, almost jaunty in its rhythm, surely taken from some folk dance motif, when suddenly a lone word sounded from a male speaking voice: "Dachau....." Whereupon the music ceased immediately, & a silence became as palpably extended as those hours spent on the shell-sand cove at the furthest end of the island.

THE PAINTING SPEAKING

*Thought is
made in the mouth.*

-Tristan Tzara

Sun & ash. It's not that I refuse to allow the painting to speak for me, the painting which speaks for me, nor that, at this point, I am happy to be unknown. No, "Thought is made in the mouth," said Tzara, so out here in the open...

The politician pulls up to the meter, Jefferson takes a nosedive. Girl in red skirt outruns it in fear of what it may reveal. Child cries, inside. It's a morgue, then instant funeral. Someone mentions something about something hotter than the sun. I once had that dream about the monument long before seeing a photograph of it commemorating those lost at Treblinka. Blue sky filled with invisible particles. Clear blue? In front of Anselm Keifer's, *Sefer Hechaloth*, made of oil, straw, metal, & burned books on canvas, I was stunned that ashes had rained down from eight books onto the bottom frame jutting out for just that purpose. Upon return, months later, depths equally plumbed by the fact that some curator, or maintenance man, had swept them up, cleared the ashes away, apparently, without the least bit of ritual or ceremony. My vision automatically brought forth a row of open metal oven doors (mouths) of a crematorium, the painting speaking.

EVEN IF HE READ THEM

For the second time this week the newspaper landed on our front lawn by mistake, as if trying to tell me something. Right now I'm as close to exiled from that world as I was in a small boarding house room in the center of Mexico City in 1974 waiting Nixon out, refusing to return here until that four-o'clock-shadow of an obstacle to Peace, that sinister thieving threat to Freedom left the grounds of the White House, straight up, forget the salute goodbye, commander! It happened at just about the Time I predicted it would, when a month earlier I practically chanted in the car we were in in Mitla with Manuel Avila Camacho, after he told me he & President Echeverria planned a State visit a few months later, "What? Nixon out in another month, Nixon out in another month, Nix..." Saying the name still grates on my nerves. Manuel looked at me like I was crazed, which I could have been, but wasn't, other than like a fox fleeing the hounds of a Republic that lost its bearings under two terms, under thumbs of thugs, under rugs. A Good Time. To be away. Certain presidents fall into this straight line lineage of bumlbers, cads, ruthless bastards who read mass deaths as statistically as stock averages. So today, when the paper arrived with all the usual bad news I went straight to the sports, the comics, even read the horoscope I give no credence to, heading to the headlines last. But something of importance lurked on the bottom of the Obituary page below the society woman, who divided her time between Palm Beach Gardens, New York City, Dark Harbor, Maine, & charity work in Africa, below the former beauty queen & the Boston officer, across from Estelle Axton, Stax Records co-founder, there was Stanislaw Ryniak like a found poem with something to say. Warsaw-AP. First person imprisoned at the Nazi death camp of Auschwitz. Buried February 20 at the Osobowicki cemetery in Wroclaw. No death date given. Arrested May 1940 in hometown of Sanok, southern Poland, accused of being a member of the Polish resistance. Arrived Auschwitz June 14, 1940 on first train of inmates. Numbers tattooed on prisoners' arms in order of arrival. First 30 numbers given to German criminal prisoners who would serve as guards. Ryniak's number = 31, making him the first inmate. Weighed, upon release in 1945, 88 pounds. Doubt our current president was proffered these statistics by his aides in the daily briefing this morning, holed up in the House he bought. Numbers that wouldn't add up to 1.5 million (people) dead, at Auschwitz alone, even if he read them.