

Three homilies for readers without churches

by Noah Gardiner '07

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(ded. to the city of New Orleans and my friend Travis Wrong)

ON SLEEPING WITH THE DOCTOR

*When I cross over
I will shout and sing
I will know my savior
By the mark where the nails have been
By the mark where the nails have been
By the sign upon his precious skin*

- Gillian Welch

The morning after the first night I slept at the doctor's house there off Prytania Street I woke with her head pressed against my chest and her hand loosely gripping my wrist and thought oh isn't that sweet she's cuddling and she's so beautiful when suddenly she lifted her head and glared at me and said, "Your respiration is ragged and your pulse is erratic: Have you been losing weight recently?"

One of the best things about dating the doctor was the constant stream of detailed information regarding my own apparently imminent demise from any number of possible afflictions. It was, in my estimation, the equivalent of working through the Buddhist corpse-meditations, wherein you graphically contemplate your own corpse having suffered a variety of deaths: bloody corpse, drowned corpse, worm-eaten corpse, gnawed-by-wild-beasts corpse, hacked-into-pieces corpse, etc. Granted, seeing her was more enjoyable than the meditations would have been, what with the sex and all, but all the same it kept my deaths where I could see them: emphysematic corpse, hepatic corpse, cirrhotic corpse, vitious or tumorish corpse...

Things past, so-called 'decisions', paths taken, leave their marks on the organs and surfaces of bodies, physical and ethereal, group and individual. Junkies can identify one another on sight, instantaneously and permanently. Once, years clean, I am on a fancy date with a girl and wearing a suit and everything. We are standing in front of the Orpheum Theater on Canal Street waiting to be let in to see the show and an old withered brother waits for the girl to wander off to speak to a friend before approaching in rags. "Hey brother," he says, "you know where it's at tonight?" "I'm sorry man, no," I tell him. Dope is fish-consciousness (Burroughs) and we brothers and sisters in the secret school of fish require no secret handshakes or passwords to recognize one and others (Are we in this world but not of it? Or rather, in this world but never enough of it?). The marks of our initiations are inscribed in the aura long after arms have healed or failed.

All scars are stories after all. They, scars/stories I mean, are the remains of our *gests* and *essays* (both of these words can also mean 'adventures'), though they should not be confused with memories. They are by far more true-ish than memories, more Jewish than Maimonides, more Medea than Sophocles.

ON LIGHTNING STRIKING THE HOUSE OF GOD

Fabled by the daughters of memory. And yet it was in some way if not as memory fabled it. A phrase, then, of impatience, thud of Blake's wings of excess. I hear the ruin of all space, shattered glass and toppling masonry, and time one livid final flame. What's left us then?

- Jimmy Joyce

The neighborhood in New Orleans where prostitution was legal and where jazz was born, or borne forth, by the madness of Buddy Bolden, was called Storyville. The remnants of the neighborhood were torn down, in the 1950s I think, to build the Superdome, that aged sporting-arena which has now gained a measure of infamy as one purgatorial shelter for thousands during the recent storm, and which was once the greatest work of American civic engineering in its time.

By some convention of idiom the brothels of Storyville were called Sporting Houses and Sportsmen's Guides were published which listed prices, erotic specialties, etc. All this is gone now of course, though Michael Ondaatje wrote a great book about some of it called *Coming Through Slaughter*.

Why then are the whorehouses and the Superdome in the neighborhood called Storyville? Who is telling the stories, the whores or the sportsmen or the neighborhood? Or can they each only tell each other stories worth hearing or telling to one another? A phrase, then, of impatience, thud of Blake's wings of excess (why do tears come to my eyes when I recopy that line in this context? Has the storm become the context? Or the sad, mad story of stormy Buddy Bolden?).

I just walked back from the library where I had walked to because I wasn't sure I could remember the Joyce quote quite correctly and now I wish I had looked for a copy of the Ondaatje - I gave my copy to my friend Máriel in San Juan on the island of Puerto Rico and who knows where my various copies of *Ulysses* have gone now over the years. Who remembers where my various copies have flown to over the years, or their becomings in the hands of others? Or am I willfully confusing friends, copies of books, momentary lovers, quotes I cannot quite remember?

("I'm crazy about this city. I walk continually." - Tennessee Williams, writing home to his mother about NOLA, heard just this moment on the radio on *A Prairie Home Companion*)

The Joyce quote is important because it has long reminded me of the tarot card called "The Tower," also sometimes called "The House of God" or "Lightning Striking the House of God" or "War;" though in Sally Ann Glassman's *New Orleans Voodoo Tarot* she called it "Deluge." It is usually numbered as the XVI card of the Major Arcana and in his exegesis of the card the 20th-c. mystic and necromancer Aleister Crowley mentions Rudra Shiva and the fortress and says: "The destruction of the garrison may therefore be taken to mean their emancipation from the prison of organized life, which was confining them. It was their unwisdom to cling to it."

ON WALKING IN THE CITY

If it is true that forests of gestures are manifest in the streets, their movement cannot be captured in a picture, nor can the meaning of their movements be circumscribed in text. Their rhetorical transplantation carries away and displaces the analytical, coherent proper meanings of urbanism; it constitutes a "wandering of the semantic" produced by masses that make some parts of the city disappear and exaggerate others, distorting it, fragmenting it, and diverting it from its immobile order.

- Michel de Certeau

Can texts be walked in the city without leaving a trace? *Vestigia Nulla Retrorsum* (I never retrace my steps) was the magical motto of Moina Mathers, neé Moina Bergson, sister of Henry and famous 19th-c. occultist.

If you practice walking (which many people, car-bound, do not) you can make your own cities in the National Forest. You, or masses, there is no difference; not if you do it right in the groupbody. It was best in NOLA before it disappeared, when it was so hot and slick and black and noisy. Or on Calle Loiza in Santurce or perhaps Caracas best of all. Why is it only seems to work in non-all-white crowds? Of course here in Providence there ain't no crowds, only crowds of students. Perhaps there is the lack of codes clashing. Or the lack of what Bill Burroughs would write, "We have notice of knives, rebirth and singing."

I am 35 yrs old and have never learned to drive a car, and at this point I like to pretend it was a deliberate decision on my part. I do treasure my walks though, and cars frighten me, are usually unnecessary, and prevent one from hearing conversations in passing. Here in Providence - it is a behavior learned bodily from other, rougher cities - when I hear someone running up behind me I still ready an elbow to let fly at throat-level tho' now I know it's only a jogger. One of these nights I'll be drunk or startled and a trackstar is gonna take it in the windpipe and knock the words right out him.

Los Angeles, where the doctor lives now, is all hungry-ghost-sidewalks. In the middle of the day you have the whole massive length of the sidewalk to yourself but crossing Foothills Avenue on foot takes half-an-hour. Striation, my enemy and love's. It's nothing like NOLA where you walked in the streets which crumbled from and into sidewalks, tilted houses and vegetation - and all this I mean before the storm. How and why do you rebuild decay?

Walking the streets (and the streets in NOLA were forests and to forest should return) with the doctor in NOLA would take forever as we had to speak to and taste every herb, tree and flower along the way. By taking forever I mean time became momentous.

This may be, on my part, what Hakim Bey would call "a crude american misunderstanding of a sublime and subtle Franco-Germanic Theory," but de Certeau is correct in asserting that pedestrian occupation of the streets is necessary to operating effectively in any city, as a sorcerer I mean. Wizard-walking it is sometimes called and my friend Travis Wrong, who could not be with us today, used to say we should go out to Nevada to the desert to practice it. Deserts, forests, the noisy black sea. New Orleans was carried away.