



Stephen Baraban

as a noose concentrates the mind, but weirdly

a memory I
unaccountably much returned to
as I endured my
solitary, sobering fiftieth b. day:
I think maybe fifteen years ago
an African American busker on
electronic keyboard in
Grand Central Station
playing with nimble assurance and
inscrutable face, shuttling repeatedly between that
irresistible if mawkish
song of young revelers
anticipating they'd
"fight and never lose"
in the fine, winding
paths of futurity;
and the 'hava nah run nah nah'
section of "Hava Negilah",
granting us gathered listeners
delight in these tunes'
unexpected near-identity.--
shall we revere beyond sanity
such Moments within
the blighted Daze,
and why not, oh scattered
Friends?

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or a howl or a scream

Surprised during my downtown
pleasant, aimless stroll--

across the misty Manhattan
avenue, I spied

poet whose particular strain of
post-avant brashness I don't

admire, and whose po-biz success
I envy,

but what else but to smile,
when I saw her wanted headgear

which has been a strange-fraught, laughed-at
retro symbol for decades

in far-tilted majesty,
capping

her stupefying
paleness,

her air
of goofiness,

and then charge of
tingling

persistence,
so my thought

was, on some
heads, a beret is

still
a bray!--

A Story

I remember a college friendship
with a student of science and visual art,
the sincere thoughtful daughter of
improvident hard-drinking parents
who *borrowed* money from *her*.
She struggled bravely against adversity,
but was also possessed of a fierce inertia.
She was sparing of her words, but spoke with a striking
freshness and scrupulosity.
I thought of her as both a firm bridge and a searching,
disappointed seabird.
Someone who knew her well
described her, with an air of finality,
as a "good kid",
perhaps because of the way
she sometimes cried out
with a pained youthful
fervor for decency,
straight from her bloodstream.
Often she was so intense yet so self-contained
she was like sunshine
sans its prideful fatuity
grown firmer.

I remember her most vividly—
her strawberry-blond hair clipped short—
in a green football jersey with white numbers.
I don't now know where she is.
We could've well been lovers,
but my mind threw up impediments,
as it always did rise up against
any possibility of union:
I wasn't tidy like her, and I didn't know Science.
She was so sensitive,
I was afraid to hurt her.
I thought her artwork was mere dreaminess.
She shared my attraction to Bob Dylan and I Ching,
but not my "higher" English Major interests.

I let my avoidance of the
Entertainment Industry's social conditioning
harden into frightened snobbery,
for once I was exaggeratedly perturbed
when she spoke enthusiastically
of the city's new rock radio station.
I made no comment except a polite mumbled reply,
but I was—how should I say it?—let me say: knocked silly,
by this innocently offered endorsement
of W-We-Got-It-All-Pal
's clever top-forties buzz and clatter
of Bubblegum strut & Heavy Metal swagger,
segueing into loudmouth spielmeisters with their booming
listen-up-baby/better-not-miss-this
contest promotions—ah! gee-whiz-and-a-half...
Alright, so after that fateful conversation I'm tuning in string quartets
and disconsolately picking over my bookshelves—
I wasn't totally focused on this strange drama
but there was a new vertiginous torment

planted within me,
as much as there was a new barrier of
heedless contempt, standing so as I might forget
she was Seabird, Bloodsquawk, brave Kid, firm Bridge, scoured Sun...
A few days later,
the dream was I was in my bathtub,
when she entered the room,
and tossed a transistor radio into the water.
I appreciated this as a
stunning image of my fear of the
annihilation of the
life I strive to lead.
I was confused what the answer was,
but I didn't consider the sexual auspiciousness of
oneiric electricity.
I should have seized the moment to turn
from my habit of casting out desire
for fear of the loss of my bathwater.

Mid-Manhattan Library Vignette

I spoke briefly to the
bag lady as we left the elevator
and I thought she would be assisted,
but from across the room
I saw that the Library Scientist
was prepared to
stand and speak with her, but would not stride
to fetch or guide her to
a volume of Longfellow's verse,
which was what she was requesting.
After stuck minutes of
piercing hesitation, I walked to the shelves
to browse and select one for her.
I presented it to her,
and accepted her gratitude and praise.
Shortly after, I gazed at
her lit and enchanted face; and would ask
that she be granted
intimations of her worth
by day, sharp twinges of
the midnight pride
of the unrevered.

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