

1999

All Names Have Been Changed to Protect the Innocent

In a world of ideas, who would have all the people

Live, work, suffer and die in that idea

In a world of ideas. He would not be aware of the clouds,

Lighting the martyrs of logic with white fire.

His extreme of logic would be illogical.¹

HEY JOE, WHERE YOU WANT TO GO?

Late one November afternoon after the leaves had turned, a couple of days before they shot Kennedy, Terri and I took our usual walk home from school, across muddy fields up to the sycamore tree on the top of the hill. There we said good-bye.

The tree, with its puzzle of green, white, and brown bark was strategic, close, but still out of sight of her farm. We arrived about the time her school bus passed. The bus took a roundabout way and the road to her house was near the last stop. So when we cut across the fields she arrived home almost at the same time she would have had she taken the bus. This gave us about thirty-five minutes.

On this particular afternoon we pressed a penny in the trunk of the tree, where it spread apart into two separate branches. Then I squeezed her hand as usual and turned down the road. I was a few minutes on my way back to town when an old black Chevy pulled alongside me, slowed to an idle, and stopped. Its dirty windows and reflections from the sky blocked my view of the driver until he rolled his window down. The blank white face that stared out at me could have been no one or everyone. I had seen it somewhere before, perhaps in a nightmare—the face of authority. It smiled and said, “Hey Joe, where you want to go?”

I told him I was walking into town, and he offered me a lift. But instead of town, he made an abrupt U-turn and doubled back, turning up a driveway to a house uncomfortably near Theresa’s. I was more confused than angry. He walked me into the house and up a couple of flights of stairs into a large attic. The space was not cluttered in the way one might expect an attic to be. A couple of trunks and a few old lamps set round the perimeter of the room. Two gables, one on the east side of the room and one on the west, let in the waning light. Otherwise, the room was empty, empty except for a chair set against the north wall facing a semicircle of twelve. The chairs were simply constructed with a dark

oak finish, something you might expect from Stickely. It was a perfect night for a symmetrical arrangement, the kind of arrangement one might find in a court of law. The only element of imbalance was the purple light of the west gable in contrast to the dark sky of the east. Shortly, a sullen group of men and women filed in and sat down. Theresa's parents were Jehovah's Witnesses; her neighbors were my jury. They wanted to know what I had done with her, what physical acts I had performed with her on our way home from school every night. They had seen us holding hands on the road before we cut into the field. They wanted particulars. I don't remember exactly what I said. In the end, I admitted nothing. My friend Carl was the only one I told. But I knew that I was guilty. I knew that I was guilty because only a half hour before, the very member that now lay zippered limp in my pants had been inside the body of their divine parishioner.

* * *

Many years before that afternoon, about the same time D. H. Lawrence was writing *Lady Chatterley's Lover*, the Reading Railroad decided to lay a line of track through the same rolling hills Theresa and I had walked that afternoon. Of course, when I knew her, Theresa hadn't yet read that book. She was only twelve.

The railroads had replaced the barges that floated on the canal alongside the Schuylkill River. These barges, traveling south from the coal regions, supplied dark fuel to Philadelphia and smaller cities like Reading along the way. Horses pulled the barges. The canal relied on the river, and on an elaborate set of locks to lift the boats up and down. The railroad was faster and the tracks, of course, could go almost anywhere. But as Freud says in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, peril often accompanies progress. Because of the increased mining brought about by the facilities of steam shovels and the railroad, the Schuylkill River ran black.

Constance Chatterley fled from her husband's coal mines to their gamekeeper. For the Chatterleys, an affair in itself was not a transgression—her paralyzed husband encouraged her, wanting the heir he himself could not conceive. Her retreat to nature was an infidelity to class and culture, something Sir Clifford could not afford.

For whatever reason, the company never finished that line of track. It went as far as carving a single groove in the swell of a single hill before it abandoned the project altogether.

In time, scrubby brush and poison sumac grew up around the slit. Local farmers used it as a dump, and threw all sorts of refuse into it, which lay there and rot. Varied species of birds nested in the branches, bluebirds and brown sparrows. Turtles rumbled through the dense undergrowth at the bottom of the pit, and bees sucked the honey from cherry

blossoms on its shoulders. Of course, we were always scared of snakes. Then one day a farmer threw away a mattress. I came to know that mattress well—white, with various colored stripes running through it, the only bit of geometry in the whole stinking heap. That afternoon, I had cum all over the thing.

* * *

DON'T KNOW MUCH ABOUT HISTORY

Then one hot summer day just after high school graduation, a school bus of a deeper yellow appeared. It picked up most of the guys in our gang and took us off to the army recruitment center in Harrisburg, about fifty miles away. My friend Gene had the brilliant idea of wearing pink panties; Dave committed to flunking the mental exam. My own strategy was to take potluck, then maybe go north. We trudged through gray corridors with plastic bags of valuables in hand, tramping from one physical test to another. In a room marked with straight lines around the perimeter, we stood facing the wall bent over, cheeks spread wide while a tight-faced sergeant wailed his asshole checks. There was a long wait while they scored the tests, and compiled the physical data. We knew that on this particular afternoon our fates would be sealed. These old guys really couldn't take what was happening—the hair, the drugs, rock and roll, things they perceived as slippage. So they invented Vietnam as our hell. This was purgatory. When they finally called me up to the podium about three o'clock in the afternoon, they whispered to me, "1Y," a medical deferral. I got a hernia from playing revelry on the trumpet when *I* was only twelve. It had never been fixed; that bugle call saved my life.

That year, the Beatles came to America, Martin Luther King won the Nobel Prize, George Cukor received the academy award for *My Fair Lady*, and Andy Warhol showed silk-screened Brillo Boxes in New York City. Michaelangelo's *Pietà* was displayed at the World's Fair, and Mark Rothko completed his murals for the chapel in Houston. Cole Porter and Gracie Allen died.

In the fall I went on to a nearby college, studied painting, and fell in love with a chocolate-skinned girl named Adrian McCoy. Three thousand people made a "Freedom March" from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama, and the Supreme Court struck down the compulsory anti-birth control laws. Mao called for revolutionary wars in developing nations, and "Crying in the Chapel" was a hit tune. Frank Stella painted *Empress of India*, and Elizabeth Bishop published *Questions of Travel*. Allen Ginsberg coined the term "Flower Power," and Timothy Leary advised, "Drop out, turn on, tune in." Some perceived this as decadence. Sheriff Jim Clark of Selma, Alabama attacked civil rights workers led by Martin Luther King, and the Beatles and Elvis Presley met in Bel Air, California. The Grateful Dead got together in San Francisco, and Malcolm X was

assassinated in Harlem. Diane (I can't remember her last name), an acolyte, incredible in bed—actually, more so on tables, pews, floors, and altars—gave me a book of poems by Wallace Stevens.

But I never forgot that mattress.

That mattress lay at the center of my soul as it lay at the bottom of the pit.

This may be why, as an undergraduate, I was so attracted to Minimalism.

* * *

You see, on another continent, almost fifty years before that November afternoon, Kasimir Malevich painted a painting. It was white with various colored stripes running through it. His geometry would later influence Minimalists like Kenneth Noland, Donald Judd, Frank Stella, as well as Sol Le Witt.

By the mid-sixties, this minimalist faith created a distinct crisis in painting. Painting had corroborated the flat reality that it secretly always had been. With Stella's flat black paintings, Ryman's flat white paintings, and Marden's flat gray paintings, young artists, at least the ones that acknowledged this history, were literally up against the wall, with no place to go.

American Minimalists both accepted and rejected the geometric abstraction of the Russian Constructivists. They accepted the geometry, and its supposed nonreferentiality, but rejected the balancing act, placing one form here, another there—that particularly European mode of composition that Malevich attributed to mystical intuition. The Minimalists transposed balance and tension to symmetry and mathematical progression, what they called “a one-shot decision.” You cut a hole in the center of a canvas and every stripe thereafter reflects and confirms the reality of that decision.

Soon, however, Minimalism became more than an ideology, it became a prison, and Judd in particular was the face of authority in an otherwise figureless milieu. Walk from Wooster to Spring Street, turn left past the Manhattan Bistro to Mercer and Prince where a stack of eight bricks by Carl Andre teeters on the floor of Judd's abandoned loft. Dan Flavin's fluorescent sculptures illuminate the bricks, and flicker like a movie marquee or motel. I was captivated by advance as Stella, Andre, and Judd reckoned it, but I longed for a life of decadence.

* * *

About the time Judd surfaced, I picked up a camera. Thank God! One click and you can go most anywhere. Whereas contemporary, painterly space had become impenetrable, the whole process of photography was *about* penetration: the penetration of light through the lens, burning the delicate silver particles suspended on the film's emulsion. It is possible

my Amish neighbors actually got it right in not allowing themselves to be photographed for fear that something of the *self* might be captured.

Coincidentally, the Swiss drug company, Ciba-Giegy had just developed a new color process called Cibachrome. I think this technological development was significant for artists. Not only do the prints last longer than color C prints, they are higher in contrast and thereby allude to the context of advertising more than to the context of the photography of Minor White, Stieglitz, etc. The surface of the prints, moreover, is glossy, like a shiny new car, and the machine-like surface of minimalist sculpture. So these photographic works both denied and confirmed the terms of their minimalist antecedent. In most conceptual photography there were no bachelors. Meaning in photographs was derived from metonymy, or relationships of proximity, rather than from metaphoric relationships that alluded to transcendence. These photographic arrangements may, in part, have grown out of the multipaneled paintings of Brice Marden. And like the minimalist tradition of one-shot decisions, composing a photograph is a one-shot act. The entire composition is the result of a single click, and the print comes up all at once in the developer. This aspect of the medium is different from traditional painting where you start at one place, go to another, then to another, until you decide you are finished. (Interestingly, the recent innovation of digital imaging has brought photography “back” to nineteenth-century compositional practice.)

I made a deal with a couple of guys who were experimenting with the process. Their lab was across the street from the armory, Twenty-fourth and Lexington, where Duchamp and Brancusi created such a stir in 1913. I exposed the paper in my studio on Wooster Street, bicycled it there late at night, and paid them by the foot to process it in their elaborate and toxic processing machine. This machine, still in the early stages of development, had a tendency to gobble up the prints, which were often forty inches wide by ten feet long. One of these works was *Deirdre's Lip*, a homage to my first wife, a beautiful, well-spoken, if possessive, English woman.

Finally the late-night rendezvous with an acid-spewing machine that chewed up half my prints became grievous and Deirdre and I divorced.

We kissed good-bye on Canal Street in front of Pearl Paint, so I went in to buy some canvas. This was an unusual activity for a Conceptualist, albeit, a post-Conceptualist. I also bought a stick of creamy white beeswax and a blowtorch—an implement befitting my state of mind. Later that week, standing beside the naked canvas rolled out on the floor, I fired the torch and squirted hot wax all over the thing.

And I knew that I was guilty. I knew that I was guilty because this was only one of many infidelities—Martina, Gloria, that girl in Paris. Yes, those hotel receipts were for double rooms.

And on top of that I *was* hanging out at the Hellfire Club with Malcolm. Beneath Fourteenth Street, oily fans blew thick air to flapping bodies dangling from the ceiling. Senior citizens circled bar stools naked, cock-in-hand. Even if an attractive young uptown slummer sitting on her barstool was fully clothed, this consanguinity was still marvelous desecration. In a darker room, women and transvestites, in many cases indistinguishable, performed fellatio to waiting hordes. Republicans copulated anonymously in cement-block cells. (Like poor profligates, who suck and bite the withered breast of some well-seasoned trull, we snatch in passing clandestine joys and squeeze the oldest orange harder yet.) Charles Baudelaire, the Marquis de Sade, Jim Morrison, Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, Richard Nixon, Edgar Allen Poe, Claire Quilty, Marlene Dietrich, Jimi Hendrix, Andy Kaufman, Rudy Burchardt, George Bataille, William Burroughs, Kramer, Janis Joplin, Cleopatra, John Malkovich, Little Richard, Théophile Gautier, Keith Richards, J. K. Huysmans, Lou Reed, Uma Thurman, Jerzy Kosinski, Oscar Wilde, as well as youngsters from New Jersey and a couple of old expressionist painters were there. They all wore sneakers.

Malcolm and I were regulars. He often talked about bringing his sketchbook to make studies for an enormous opera. This never materialized.

* * *

Then late one Saturday night, into this amiable squalor—with its cockroaches, urine, an occasional mouse, the thick white haze of Marlboros, dripping candles, the steady slap, slap, slap of paddles and whips, and the ever lingering smell of sperm—stepped a dignified gentleman, tall, well-dressed, with softly flowing hair and a gentle smile, a critic-philosopher, pen in hand, scribbling notes.

He didn't seem to mind the wax. To him it mattered not that the bubbly pocked surface of paint seemed an antithesis to the smooth complexion of photography. In fact, most things that other critics may have disapproved of on ideological terms didn't seem to bother him at all. His approach was, I believe, based on the criteria that a work declares for itself, on its particulars. This is decadence at its best. Like the *Mousetrap* that caught the king, his writing aroused, inspired action, even further couplings.

* * *

Whatever might be swarming ideologically in worlds about, the studio or the room under the street is a locale of particulars, yellow ochre squeezed into sunlight, burnt umber into half-light, or a tray of developer lapping in low red glow. 1. Corrupt the surface by

exposing it to light. 2. Caress it with developer. 3. Stop it with a yellow poison that ultimately turns purple. 4. Fix it so it can never become another, then go take a bath. Ideology is a lawnmower, leveling everything to the same measured leaf. It dictates acts and sometimes provides handbooks, which may be helpful, but in the end it's like an ice cube in a Virgin Mary. Ideologues nurture the concept of decadence through the presumption of innocence—their own, not the defendant's.

The ability to appreciate an object through its particularities places the critic in an intimate and decadent relationship with the artist. This establishes a bond, more than ideological, with ardor for soft hair at the nape of a neck. When, perchance, the possessor of this hair is unfaithful, confronted with the idea of leaving, even though you know he or she is someone you cannot live without, you go if you are an ideologue. If you are a lover you stay.

* * *

Like good critics, the storytellers of Sade's *One Hundred Twenty Days of Sodom* stimulated the action of their operas. The implication is, I believe, that story is a springboard for action in the all-consuming narrative of life.

Atop Sade's symmetrical society stand four libertines, four faces of authority. Beneath them are four storytellers, eight fuckers, and sixteen boys and girls who the libertines kidnap and bring to the chateau of Silling for the purpose of debauching. The libertines establish a complex system of rules more stringent than most in any so-called normal society.

Any deviance from the strict adherence to the rules of Sade's autonomous society would be a slippage, a falling away, in the direction of *good*. So it is easy to see how decadence is a phenomenon not necessarily connected to any particular morality but, like Judd set forth through minimalist confines, an abstract applied to an agenda. As Gilman wrote in *Decadence, The Strange Life of an Epithet*, "both 'progress' and 'decadence,' the latter even more intractably, are metaphors that express both a wish that the world would move one way or another and an assumption that it does."

* * *

*Now old desire doth in his death-bed lie,
And young affection gapes to be his heir.²
Canaries in the morning, orchestras
In the afternoon, balloons at night. That is
A difference, at least, from nightingales,*

*Jehovah and the great sea-worm. . . .*³

Then one day my old friend, Carl Dunlevy called me up out of the blue to ask if I was coming home for the class reunion. With a line from Elliot, some CDs, and a shiny new car with a key that opens from a distance, I used the invitation to return to the scene of the crime, to finally escape from my story. Actually Carl wasn't going to the reunion. In the sixties, his mother had owned the only lingerie store in town. Just before graduation, they caught him dressing up in her inventory, so they yanked him out of high school. I hadn't seen him since. In fact, I heard a rumor that he was put away for awhile.

It's a straight drive from Manhattan on route 78 to the Hamburg exit, about a hundred and twenty miles west of the Hudson. From the exit ramp you turn left on Confer. There at its junction with Fourth, where the old Russian peanut shop used to be with its ten-foot twirling peanut, I picked Carl up.

I didn't recognize him at first. Thirty years later, he was more robust than I remembered. The outfit he wore had obviously come out of what once had been his presently dead mother's closet—a cream-colored leatherette handbag, an old dress of faded violets, flesh-colored nylons, shiny red-patent-leather high-heel shoes, and some sort of tiara—a yellowed plastic ring of forget-me-nots. He wobbled to the car.

We passed two traffic lights and drove up the hill. To my surprise, there was little suburban sprawl. It still was a country road. At the top you turn left past the high school, continue for about half a mile, then make a right, and a right again. Park the car by the side of the road. Go into the field. We passed a new tower for cellular communication, a bit of technology that might have come in handy that old November afternoon. The sycamore tree was still there, but I didn't see the penny Theresa and I had scrunched into its crotch. The tree had grown and consumed it.

We retraced my steps down through the fields to that site of what once was, in my innocent time, new fucking. At some point, someone must have put an end to the dump, because the pit hadn't changed very much. The evidence was still there. The skeleton of the mattress that long ago allowed at least the possibility of new life still lay at the bottom of the pit, its springs bare and rusted.

Guilt is the afterthought of reason and the foreskin of decadence. If we think in terms of "new fucking" and "old fucking" we can skirt the dichotomy of decadence and advance, because either way, it's fucking. This levels the moral field somewhat and scatters guilt like so many ashes in the wind.

. . . for in human things reasoning is employed, not as of greater certainty, but as easier from use.

But when we come to divine things, this faculty turns away; it cannot behold; it pants, and gasps, and burns with desire; it falls back from the light of truth, and turns again to its wonted obscurity, not from choice, but from exhaustion. . . . So, when we are hastening to retire into darkness, it will be well that by the appointment of adorable Wisdom we should be met by the friendly shade of authority, and should be attracted by the wonderful character of its contents, and by the utterances of its pages, which, like shadows, typify and attemper the truth.

4

In the face of some ambiguous authority, not the shadow of the now-mortal face I remembered rolled behind the Chevy window, I stood with my friend looking down at the bones of the mattress. Mud covered my wing tips. Carl's tiara was askew and his heels were sinking. Otherwise nothing moved, not a leaf on a single tree. Nor did we speak. It was a moment of stillness filled with songs of descendents, offspring of whatever birds remained to nest in the trees that winter.

JOE

New York, November 22, 1999

Notes:

1. Wallace Stevens
2. Wallace Stevens
3. William Shakespeare
4. Saint Augustine