

Talking to Angels

A Life Spent in High Latitudes

by *Robert Perkins*

To *Rene*

Unbeached Canoe

Emptied this evening
of the stuff of survival
for whom does it dance?

James Merrill

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Humpty Dumpty Ocean (*sampled here*)

“M” is for Musk-Ox

Afterlife

One

Humpty Dumpty Ocean

On April 5, 1968, Martin Luther King was shot to death. Also on that day, the largest military offensive to date was mounted against North Vietnam by South Vietnamese and American troops; President Lyndon Johnson had breakfast with former President Dwight D. Eisenhower on his way home from reassuring our Pacific allies that the war would soon be over; a new Volvo station wagon cost \$3,800, and the most expensive suit advertised in that day's New York Times cost \$150.

In the spring of 1968, I was nineteen and a freshman at Harvard College. I was soon to leave school, without even passing "GO" or finishing the year, to start a journey. A journey I have yet to complete.

**The Ryder painting. At the museum.
Walking around the galleries, musing on the word...**
U see Um. Muse Um. U use um.

The small boat in the tiny painting tilts toward me, a black oval adrift on a wine-dark sea. Something barely discernable is in the boat. Or someone.

In the painting, a moon hides behind clouds, its light diffuse, soft tears scattered on the water. No destination, no visible departure, only a small boat on open sea, at night, under a hidden moon.

Staring intently, I imagine myself in the painting: lean over the stern, hang facedown. Stare into the dark water to watch the marbled fire underwater: pale and green phosphorescence, white flickerings, stars made mobile and miniature, flung across multiple layers of water.

As I look up, the water's edge curls into the sky where the stars, gnat-size, immobile, repeat the water's pale fire. On my back in that boat, I inhabit both worlds, sea and sky, mobile and immobile, and imagine I am watching the surface of the water from underneath.

Inside the frame, the painting is tiny, like memory, no bigger than my two hands held up. The paint is thick and cracked, as though Ryder had wanted to create the waves themselves. He worked his canvasses relentlessly, but no matter how much he painted, he never got his waves to move. Whatever his soul touched turned to paint, still and quiet, almost eternal: a linseed Midas.

People call his paintings romantic. However, if you are there, outcome unclear, destination unknown, you would hardly call them—or the fear you feel—romantic.

I did not know I was talking out loud until a guard came toward me with a finger raised to his lips. I ran.

April 19, 1968. The FBI names James Earl Ray, an escaped convict, as the assassin of Martin Luther King. He is being sought under the alias of Eric Starvo Galt.

The ambulance: a dark tunnel ride and a siren's wail. Strapped to a stretcher inside, I hear it, not the way it would sound on the street, approaching and receding. This siren does not stop. One more thing telling me I have lost my keys. Still, a hard, small point inside me watches what happens.

Unstrapped from the stretcher, released from the straight-jacket, placed in a chair in front of a young man in a suit, I squint. He appears behind a desk, at a distance. I squint again. Two big men, nervous in the face of my chaos, hover behind me. If I've died and gone to heaven, the Suit must be St. Peter and the other two, Angels. I say as much and start a joke about St. Peter and a groundhog. The Suit interrupts, "No.

You're not in Heaven, and I'm not St. Peter. I am an admitting doctor at McClean Hospital. Something has happened to you and we're going to help you."

I say I do not want help. I say, if I've done something wrong, tell me and I'll undo it. The Suit keeps talking. His lips keep moving. I see his gestures, but too much havoc, too much waterfall sound fills my head for me to hear. He motions me nearer, holds out a pen, wants me to sign something. Fat chance.

I spit, or jump, or both. The Angels allow me no second chance. A sharp blow crumples me. Held by each elbow, I am led outside by the Angels, then into a tunnel. Alternately, I slump and go rigid. I don't want to go. As they carry me, the Angels joke to each other: "This is a Live One." One Angel's name is Turnkey. The other is a Mr. Shine. They take me to maximum security—Bowditch Hall.

May 24, 1968. Father Philip Berrigan receives a six-year prison sentence in a federal penitentiary for pouring ducks' blood over draft files at Baltimore's selective service headquarters. France is nearly paralyzed by student protests.

The Voices say, "Come out in the hall." They are the voices of my family and friends. They say, "This is an initiation. We can never say beforehand. Come out. It is your birthday. Come out of your room. Then we'll all leave."

If that's what they want, I'll do them one better. I take off the white hospital pajamas—cotton ones with a pullover top, a drawstring at the waist—and walk naked into the hall in my birthday suit.

Surprise.

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