



Art

October 4th, 2012

S-Stutterer

by Bill Beckley

“I-I r-remember twilight t-t-times, b-b-backyard kilns, yellow smoke wafting down the street, and s-s-sucking,” he said, fixing his eyes on the volcano. Marble pillars wreathed with green ivy supported the balcony of the cool café. The banister crumbled to rubble. He spoke softly. There was no other sound, except for the occasional cry of a bobwhite or Neapolitan swallow. The bobwhite was invisible. The swallow dove overhead and then rose to a comma in the afternoon sky.

“Is that your first memory?” I asked. It was time for lunch.

“S-s-sucking and r-red r-ruby r-r-rhubarb p-planted in a p-patch of dirt above the stables, below the peonies. What a smell, dung and peonies! S-s-sucking, s-s-sucking, d-dripping w-white dew squirting on blades of g-g-grass. M-m-me trying t-to catch every d-drop, every p-p-precious drip. The orb, s-s-soft and fleshy, came at me th-through b-blue s-sky. There were n-no shiny carriages or silver dragonflies over the horizon. Night bees never b-b-buzzed, b-b-l-linking lights of red and green. As my f-f-fingers grew strong, I learned to plonk teak and ivory. I liked m-my m-melodies.”

“What tunes did you play?” I asked.

“O-one evening the s-stable door s-sprung. The Appaloosa bolted down the alley t-to the square. Its shoes c-clapped on the c-cobblestones. My uncle R-Rock caught up with it on the far side of town, n-near the old c-canal.”

The waiter showed us to a table. A Vespa sputtered. Inside, a huge log smoldered in the fireplace as if it were late October. The white grotto that sheltered the burning logs was big enough to stand in. Speckled retrievers, black and brown, slept on wooden shelves on either side of the hearth. One sprawled on the floor.

“We m-moved away to a house below a mountain, where a s-s-stream ran pure and bounced on rocks, splashing in the summer and trickling under ice in winter. It let out to a meadow where cows grazed in chunks of mud and sparrows p-pecked at their feet.

“The windows, the white-framed w-windows of the h-house faced south, away f-f-from the mountains. A black pond k-kept t-t-turtle secrets f-f-floating, echoing y-yellow-spotted shells. They mounted rotten logs in m-m-moonlight, when in s-s-summer I snuck out to hum.

“I-I-I was h-h-happy there, especially in September, playing near the baskets of p-p-peaches. Each peach rolled down a rubber ramp. The sweetened air smelled of juice, and I sang of their fuzzy pink skins, some bruised or p-perfect orange and yellow, soft and damp in dark storage.

“They pressed apples to make cider. The froth gripped my s-s-soprano and moistened my tongue. Oh, m-my nose, m-my tongue, my throat—I longed for that juice!”

“Frogs?”

“F-f-frogs are more approachable than turtles. Quick t-turtles sunned on the island, inaccessible. Frogs sat on the bank, easy to catch. C-croaks gave them away. After diving, they doubled back and hid near the water’s edge, where you could s-scoop them.”

“Do you want a drink?” The waiter had come and gone.

“C-c-cowslips grew in shaded springs. Blueb-b-bells filled the meadow in April. Trailing arbutus hid in crannies, and red-winged blackbirds teetered on crackling c-cornstalks. Dragonflies circled the canals at dusk, and firef-flies b-b-blinked before s-supper. I s-sang a song of nights in June. I s-sang a song of withered moons. I s-sing a song, my little s-son, of what I did, what I’ve done.”

The volcano rippled in purple haze. “Any regrets?” I asked.

“The winter would have been pleasant if we’d had toboggans. But we had no toboggans or b-buffalo skins or s-snowshoes, or crampons for getting over frozen drifts, or hearths to slide our feet into, or goose-filled comforters, or hot bricks to heat them with. If we’d had a long-suffering disposition, the w-winter would not have been too bad. The pond froze solid.



“Winter p-pennants are poignant, delicate and in keeping with the ice and s-s-snow that locks the earth’s b-b-b-breast when the sun’s rays are weak and slanting. The sumac’s faded cones were scraggly, irregular branches silhouetted above white-capped stone. On upland pastures and around old orchards, scrub oaks’ b-b-brittle twigs held tenaciously to the corky limbs. In the sloughs the pine oak’s broad acorns in shallow c-c-cups clung to gray-brown branches. In fence corners and around upland fieldstone piles, winter-b-b-bleached goldenrod and silver-frosted milkweed bent submissively. In areas where the wind had s-s-s-swirled much of the snow to spotty drifts, the t-t-twisted, fragile stems of June grass and the upright heathery hardhack wrote s-strange hieroglyphics against the whitened p-page.”

He stared at me blankly, then glanced at the waiter bringing rattling refreshments.

“The c-c-color of a green frog’s skin is the r-result of a c-combination of pigments. Specifically, blue and yellow. Like a-albino b-bachelors, it is possible for f-f-frogs to lack either p-pigment. Since a frog’s pigmentation consists of t-two colors, there are a number of equations. If both the y-yellow and blue pigments are missing, you have a white frog, which is unlikely. In the absence of blue pigment you have a yellow frog, and, likewise, in the absence of yellow pigment you have a b-b-blue frog. There was a blue f-frog, blue as the sky. It sunned late on summer afternoons when the sun l-l-lit the grass on fire. The l-l-long shadows of the willow trees lay flat across water disturbed only by the occasional touch of a d-dragon. Unlike most frogs, which croak regularly, the blue frog sat quietly in a shaded spot on the stone wall at the edge of the canal while, in the f-f-fading lemon light, p-p-pale greens and g-gentle oranges turned p-p-pearlish gray. On a clear day, we could s-s-see the mountains f-f-far to the north. These mountains, topped with snow, glistened g-g-old in morning. By m-midsummer’s noon, a haze blurred the distant p-p-peaks and they disappeared into the horizon. M-my dad told me springs fed the pond and promised we would find them someday.”

“Shall we order? This looks like some kind of salmon, I think, and herring, and these are little fried fish. You eat the head . . .”

“The b-b-boatman was a round, thick-s-s-skinned fellow with a broken nose. After boarding the t-t-teetering boat, he took us around to a floating box office to buy tickets. Then, one by one, we entered the t-t-tight opening of the pitch-black cave. There must have been ten or t-t-twelve boats already inside. The boatmen were singing, each a different song. We heard their voices with the l-l-lapping and slushing of the water. Then the boat t-turned. As it did, the paddle splashed and sapphire droplets fell into a pool of a-a-azure blue. The water glowed, illuminated from the entrance. After a turn or two, we drifted back toward the white light of the hole, which had become, in the few minutes we spent in the cave, h-h-harsh reality. The boatman’s thick fingers grasped the chain above the h-hole, and we t-t-tucked our heads down in the boat as he pulled us into the bright light of day. It s-sufficed as a facsimile of b-b-birth.”

“Well, maybe this melon and prosciutto, or this soup. I’m not sure. It’s a kind of.”

“Our g-garden was an island. It s-sloped to the s-s-sea. In ancient times it had been a v-v-vineyard. The tiers of rocks that lined the slope, overgrown with grass and thistles, would have been constructed with patience. Twisted olives and figs now grew there instead, and d-d-dahlias, oh the b-black d-d-dahlias!

“My primary concern was with several varieties of p-peas that spread among the tangle of thorns, the s-s-scrubby underbrush higher than my head. I split open the pods to find the tiny orbs buried inside, and filled my pockets to give them to my m-mom.

“Though the garden was overgrown, nothing was remotely classifiable as a weed. Weeds were unknown to me. In this tangle of g-g-green, yellow, violet, and red (the red of hot peppers and poppies) lived Persian-patterned insects of various varieties. Some looked like pencils, some like pink erasers with pairs of s-s-spindly legs. Some locked together in the morning in what later I would learn was f-f-friendship. They preferred rose-petal cushions.

“Snails played hide-and-seek in leafy green ivy that grew on the stone wall. Regattas, tiny specks in the sea, s-s-sailed between the island and the main. Dark cacti rose like gloved demons. I was not afraid of the tiny d-d-dragons that roamed the sunny walls or of the s-s-snakes or spiders with fat sacks. I had my mahogany s-s-sword. Dilapidated shacks, almost invisible in the thickets of underbrush, sheltered tools, rakes, shovels, and hoes. Gardeners had long since sought employment elsewhere. M-mosquitoes inhabited the damp arrondissement around a cistern but n-n-ever attacked, at least not on our territory. Nor did the bumblebees that lived in the hollows of bamboo stalks in the groves where we often ate lunch.

“Of the different kinds of downy white seed pods, d-d-d-rifting parachutes, some were difficult to blow. One, the size of my nose, resisted all p-p-puffs. Black ants, bits of ambling pepper, speckled white lilies. And the mouse, the m-m-mouse I thought was sleeping by the side of the path, never, day after day, even after the sun set beside the distant island that floated in the sea, moved—even when evening rain fell gently on the hillside.

“We s-s-skipped stones in the s-sea. I remember traveling for days along a different coast before we came at last to this retreat. Rocky shoals and green vineyards surrounded the holiday sea. The waves roared, and the w-wind was up.”

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The café filled. Two girls giggled at a table close by. One had light brown hair, which flopped to her shoulders, and brown eyes. The other had short hair. Both wore thin, layered skirts that fell off mid-thigh. Patches of light danced through translucent cloth as branches swayed gently in the afternoon breeze. He cast them a familiar glance as if he knew them. They couched their giggles in an old dialect of Mesopotamia, which, he explained, was the language of the silk routes.

“These are Nebuchadnezzar’s p-pronunciations. The king b-built hanging gardens for his w-w-wistful wife.

“O-once a yellow-breasted chickadee, larger than an a-apricot but smaller than a peach, f-fell from a mulberry tree. It chanted *w-wuck w-wuck*. Mulberry trees are the traditional habitat of the silk w-worm. They were common in Mesopotamia at the time of Nebuchadnezzar. The worms eat only the leaves of this tree, and chickadees eat the w-w-worms. The young chickadees are quite tender and taste like walnuts. They can be eaten whole because their bones are s-s-so soft. Of course the feathers should be p-p-plucked. Tart goldfinches sleep late. I d-do not think there is any r-relationship between s-sleeping habits and taste. The finches are yellow, with b-black-tipped wings and tail, and sleep quietly anywhere but in p-palm trees or p-pine. A barn swallow once made its home in the c-cellar beneath our kitchen. It attached its white nest with bodily excretions to the rough stones that formed the arch of the ceiling. Quail prefer the pigmy plum, a small juicy fruit about the size of a cherry. The bobwhite—s-size unknown—I mention last, because I have never seen it; I have only heard it s-sing. The bobwhite is the least tragic of b-b-birds, for his brief song consists of two whistles, the first low and even, the second accented with an upper lift.”

“More wine?” the waiter asked.

“L-l-look at the sun, so bright in the sky. It warms our skin as it warms the dirt. We take them for g-granted, the d-d-dirt and the sun. Look at the reflections in the g-g-glass, the way the wine light flickers on forks. For a moment, the sun hides behind c-c-clouds. We could dance to the flickers to bring it back. Then, after everyone stared, we—you with your fumbling feet and me with my wine—could rest, having celebrated our sun. We would have known warmth that will outlast our knowledge of warmth or of t-t-the s-s-sun, for that m-m-matter.”

At least he hadn’t danced. I thought the two girls had overheard and were making fun. They glanced our way a couple of times, smiled at each other, amidst their Mesopotamian mutters, then turned and blew casual smoke in the direction of the hills.

“It d-d-doesn’t matter what color the s-s-stones are, but they should be perfectly round and flat like a tiny d-d-discus.”

“Discus?”

“The water should be calm and s-s-salty. Then the stone will s-s-skip ten times a throw, though each s-s-skip, of course, is weaker than the one it follows and s-s-s-stronger than the one it p-p-precedes. Finally the stone f-f-falters, then sinks to the bottom, where it lies in r-r-repose, r-r-rocked by waves. Any deviance in measurement or s-s-shape results in a c-c-clunk.

“When I found a stone that fit the criteria, I had to decide whether to s-s-skip or s-s-save it. Once on a s-sunny afternoon, when the water was calm, I found a perfectly sh-sh-shaped stone—round, flat, and white. It came alive when I held it to the sun. Its milky translucence revealed fissures that s-s-s-swirled round and glowed with the delicacy of a f-f-fractured rainbow. I lingered, s-s-squatting in the sand, and held the stone to the sun t-t-to admire—”

Someone tipped a glass. It rolled, clanked, and smashed on the marble, creating a stir. An elderly waiter appeared with a dustbin and brush, bent down on one knee, and swept the glitter away.

“T-to admire its s-s-subtleties. Then I laid it on the sand to savor its s-s-shape. I s-s-stared for a long time. In my m-m-melancholy, I did not notice the clouds that drifted across the water. When I held the stone up again, I found the sun g-g-gone. The stone, now dull and gray, lost its glow. The storm brought threatening w-waves.

“My mood dropped with the dip in barometer. Any attempt to resist would result in inevitable f-f-failure. The only trick that worked was amnesia through distraction. My feelings of attraction froze in these depressions. I asked myself, ‘Can I allow this to continue?’ Before I could answer, in a little pool—warm, temporary, and dependent on the tide—a fish jerked then p-p-paused at a right angle to its previous self. That was enough to free me, though it c-continued to r-rain.”

I did not remember the stones, though I vaguely recollected a rocky cove or inlet, a small overturned boat with a blue-painted bottom, near a concrete battlement just behind the beach. There was a plum tree. Its fruit fell on a dusty road. We batted the plums with Ping-Pong paddles late in the afternoon.

“My l-l-l-l-lips, m-my t-t-t-tongue, m-my throat. One is rarely conscious of one’s tongue, unless it is swollen. Mine was not. However, I am ashamed of my l-lips. They are too l-large. Mozart had full l-lips. They did not h-hamper him.

“Once a bartender made fun of my l-l-lips. I was y-young and impressionable. So I ventured onto a nudist beach. Painted phalluses pointed seaward. In the old days sand sufficed, with water, sun, and naked bathers. No nudists. They had not yet organized. Cézanne understood this.

“At puberty, pictures transformed me. One was stashed on the shelf of an apothecary. The other was

a page from the Renaissance. From the look of the leaves, it was a shattal tree the former depicted, with boys standing stiff on each side. A b-bare breasted girl dangled from a branch like an opossum. My p-penis swelled—a phenomenon absent from my experience of the Titian.

“Because Tuesdays are less suspect than Fridays, I hid behind rhododendrons and buried the book below frost. I tucked the daguerreotype under my mattress. There it remained, shifting nightly to my pillow. I do not know if history is mildewed, w-w-worm-eaten, or if I was in love. Can you be certain of streams that meander in meadows as hazel signals the coming of s-s-spring?”

During this dissertation he sat calmly. But without provocation his manner changed. He turned his eyes from the horizon and in a vexed tone asked, “Who are y-y-you?”

“Why did you c-c-come here?”

“You have asked intimate questions.

“Are you a b-b-b-barmaid?”

“I don’t need a barmaid, and in any case you are not nosey enough to be a barmaid.

“Are you the thin man who shovels my driveway? If so, you are dependable. Every time I come home I can open my door. But here there is no need for shovels. It is hot as h-h-hell. Perhaps you are you the m-man who brings oil to my lamps and coal to my fire? I don’t think so, because the man who b-brings coal to my fire is a midget. He is p-p-p-plump and has warts all over his nose. You are neither f-fat, short, nor thin, so you do not qualify for either occupation.

“I have a chimney. You may be my sweep, or you may be my m-m-m-mother. I fell in a stream and developed a fever. She kissed my forehead. Nevertheless the fever rose, so she bathed me in salts then gave me m-molds, into which she poured plaster to make a r-r-r-rabbit, Alice, and a man with a top hat. When I recovered, I became obsessed with white r-r-r-rabbits, and then, of course, with A-Alice, who is vegetarian.



“May I have some M-Montrachet?”

“You fought in the battle of the Marne?”

“At Gettysburg?”

“What side were you on?”

“Cheyenne’s or Custer’s?”

“Are you Henrietta? If so, I would not have invited you. Once she stopped b-b-by my home, hugging a sponge. It was larger than a f-f-football. She had dipped it in plaster and spray-painted it ultramarine. But on the way over she dropped it and it s-s-spilt, a-and she thought I could just stop whatever I was doing and glue it back together again, like Humpty Dumpty. I said, ‘Why don’t you b-buy another s-s-sponge?’

“I cannot do that,’ she said. It came from the lagoons of Tortola, where the sea shimmers c-c-cerulean blue.

“She liked the idea of taking a sponge that had spent its life surrounded by cerulean and painting it ultramarine. I asked her, ‘Do sponges nap?’ She told me sponges do not nap because they must remember to breathe. I asked, ‘Do they have eyes?’ She replied, ‘Sponges have no organs at all.’

“Since it is apparent that you are n-n-not Henrietta, then you must be a man. This narrows the p-p-possibilities considerably. You cannot be my m-m-mother. She died of dementia years ago. The last time I saw her she was in a wheelchair, wearing deerskin slippers. They put her in the c-c-corridor to give her a change of scenery. The wallpaper was atrocious. They abandoned her next to a closet of bloody b-bandages and severed l-l-limbs. Her silver hair lay flat and matted. She looked up at me and smiled like a child hoping for a kiss.

“My fever d-disappeared though my m-maladies linger.

“But I am not one to c-complain.”

Press in Paris this fall.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

BILL BECKLEY's narrative photo works are in the public collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Whitney, the Guggenheim, and the Smithsonian American Art Museum, and many private collections including those of Sol LeWitt and Jeff Koons. He shows with Galerie Hans Mayer in Dusseldorf, Rosenbaum Contemporary in Miami, and Tony Shafrazi Gallery in New York.