

Steady Keel

by Ann Bogle

He stands. Shoes for dashing, and he could dash, if the audience would stand for it, through one of two exits, beneath one of three wreaths. This year, the year of the Millennium, the wreaths seem dark and Germanic. The stage seems like a Great Hall set for a solitary diner, standing in running shoes not running but shifting and strumming, the old guitar verb, through two sets and one required break. He gives the impression of having learned the songs alone or at rehearsal for an angel. There are two guitars, two stands, a microphone, a little power box, and, from where one sits watching from straight on high—in Batman's vacant seat—one cannot count the strings. One should know by the slats or strats or whatever one calls them which is a twelve and which is a six, and one should know by the sound, but the sound is not a number.

There is only one politically scientific line in the whole performance and that is a line one can agree upon so easily—one wants to shout "Johnny Tremain!" or to join the D.A.R.—that no reviewer's misapprehension takes place. No noting it takes place. No assignation, either. It is a time to look forward, fill with sound, and contemplate the simple figure of a man in the spotlight holding his guitar, his running shoes on. Upstairs, one sees the backs of heads, each different in the dim dark, the low red glare of the upper exit signs, and the little half-moon footlights that run up and down the steps.

He tells stories. One laughs at the stories, at almost every one, except at the story about the seventh-chordist and the waves of the Pacific and the body of the passed-out woman. The man stands over the woman and strikes string on seventh wave, letting the sound hold, long and open until it frays, dissolute, into more air than the actual wave has ever seen. Even in that story, not a funny one, one laughs at the storyteller's wish to back out of the ritual of counting

the wave, before he knows it to be a wave, because he has come to the beach house to meet a guitar player, not for this.

The seventh-chordist's name is Buell.

One does not know what Clara, the 12-year-old interviewer from Madison (by another account she is nine), might think of isolating the wave idea or of Buell or of the body of the passed-out woman or of the beach or the doorbell or of the fact that Buell knows, even before the storyteller rings the doorbell, that the story is about combing and that the combing is about Buell. Her reasoning, the storyteller says, might have stooped Oscar Wilde, although one might doubt that. "A woman who would tell her age can be trusted to tell anything," is how one remembers one of Oscar Wilde's lines, but the real words are: "One should never trust a woman who tells her age. A woman who would tell that would tell anything." The other Wilde line one remembers a friend told one in her kitchen in Houston, "If you can't tell a good lie, just tell the truth and get it over with."

The next year the storyteller is reading Pepys (pronounced "peeps"). Pepys, he clarifies while adjusting a string, encrypted even the most banal information in his seven-year journal about his wife's maid. To encrypt, one feels, would be to trust one's audience more than oneself and to pardon it, in such a case, for failing yet to exist. One is reading Montaigne this year one's self. Montaigne tends toward personal friends as his audience and confesses that he is not a decent liar, not even by omission. Montaigne's hope in late-life writing is to tell everything, but not everything as do "our gushing schoolgirls" in their diaries and letters to each other, but as a convivial observer of his own life's certainties, attempted more within each paragraph than between. On women regarding their age, he writes (after a long career in Parliament), they should think of themselves as beautiful until they are thirty and as good after that.

One wishes to ask or wonder whether Clara has asked about the storyteller's bearing toward facts: Does he stick to them?

One cannot know what Clara might think about Buell or Oscar Wilde, but one can imagine her wanting to know whether the storyteller has a favorite saying. The storyteller might go back to influence then, feeling possibly that "clarinet through the head" has not covered it. He has alluded precariously (perhaps hoping to loose Clara later, in her own retrospect) to another story in which he, as the young storyteller/guitarist/autodidact, when he is still a violinist of eight, meets a man with a cock's crow stuck through his forehead and wants to be like him. One might think that that might be enough information, if not for Clara.

Then there is guitarist Leo Kottke, maestro of two hands, eighteen strings, as many songs as Chinese pictograms, and other, countless stories; he can remember what stories he, as the storyteller, told the year before last, to the same audience or to a similar audience in the same place: There was the story, twice, about the Australian, a man with three lips, who ate soup, and the short and long forms of the story about the two eggs from the egg tree. Two arms, a head, strong voice, ears, and, as one has already noted, the running shoes, attached to blue jeans, jeans with active fit, important even in an instrumental performer.

One is sitting up so high that one is reminded of Italo Calvino's story, "The Distance of the Moon," about the silly married woman who, in her desire and respect for the moon acrobat's talent, climbs the ladder to the moon and lets him flip back down the ladder into the ship, without knowing that it can be only an exchange, and that she must remain on the moon for some time to come, strumming her lyre. Had her husband, the captain, warned her, would she have gone? No, he laughed to see her go.

Her happiness at having watched the moon acrobat perform his tricks is enough, because it has to be—*freed? not freed?*—as she is, on the light side of the moon. For food, she hunts out pods of green milk with her fingers, as the acrobat has shown her how to do, and lets shells and crustaceans from earth stay in her hair. She might not see him again until the cloud that lets the moon close to earth returns, and the moon acrobat or her husband gets to her with the

tallest ladder. At least that is the hope, the sustaining factor, that that day or night might come, and she will see him again. There Calvino's story almost ends.

By then, she might have given up her foolish, happy lyre and begun her own acrobatics. Perhaps her husband, the captain, might be so delighted by her transformation, that he might consider trading places with her, seasoned man though he is. The acrobat could steer the ship, and she could slide down the pole and get her sealegs back, keep them dry or get a little wet (remembering her Hasbro, she might decide to keep it dry), while her husband, the captain, could try his hand at missing her with his lyre.

One can feel the logic of that story in the low, rare light of the upper deck of the theater, where a lot of other people are, paying to be on the moon and fated to be caught in that reversal of culture, unsure of who it is—they themselves or he, the storyteller and guitar virtuoso—who is most desiring or who most desires.

Last year one's nose was full of patchouli throughout a quarter of the performance, though one could not remember having put on patchouli; in fact, one had not put on patchouli. (One could remember—it was in Madison—last buying or wearing patchouli.) Yet there was patchouli, spread everywhere over the house. This year myrrh walks past one to take her seat. One knows the mild scent of myrrh from the beads that were a present from the past.

Besides the many fine instrumentals, including one he hopes might one day be a long one, Kottke plays songs about Louise, Pamela, Corinna. Then there is a song about a clap for a tired sun and one for a flood.

One has not thought of a way to describe instrumentals. One has thought of a metaphor that evokes cooking rather than, as one might hope, instruments. While the cuisine of the house is sleeping and the guests are tucked in their guest beds in their guest bedrooms, the impostor enters the kitchen and takes the utensils of the cuisine, not to use in cooking and not to steal them, but to use in sound patterns. He has picked this particular house and this particular kitchen because he has discerned, after studying the house's Dayton's bill

for 2.97 years (the cuisine has converted to metric), that the cuisine of this place uses only the best equipment. That is how it sounds—as if he is playing with suspended whisks and bowls and lids and knives and corkscrews—sometimes not like "guitar" at all and never like just one.

On the way out of the theater, after the performance, one overhears two men talking. One of them looks like the mariner of Calvino's story. That one says to the other one, "S'Kottke been to Iceland?"

"Not yet," says the other one.

"Open season," the mariner says. "Then."

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