

Don't Cross the Bridge Before You Get To the River

by Diane Vivona

I saw a man with a tie that held up by itself. I mean the tie was vertical — it rose like a vine off his chest and into the air. I think it was starched or wired or had a mechanized something. He was at a gallery opening. Maybe he was the artist. Or maybe the artist was the guy with the super combed-out Afro. But I think it was the tie-guy. Yes.

“I gotta take a picture,” Robbie pulled out her cell phone and clicked. “He looks like he's in a tornado.” I thought about Pig Pen — the boy Charles Shultz accessorized with a personal dust cloud. I thought about Francis Alÿs, the artist who walked repeatedly into dust storms with a video camera. I thought about Dorothy and the Wicked Witch.

“I don't know. Seems like he just wants attention.”

Robbie had moved on to look at a video work where four guys were shoving each other around in a dancier, choreographed way. The scene took place inside a white industrial space, and the young, lean men slipped in and out of each other's arms, pushing, sliding and tossing their bodies in tangles of weight. A smaller frame within the frame showed a second film of identically clad workers moving heavy boxes in and around a factory. Tie-guy could have created this. The sense of purposeless movement might be a theme carried over from his art to his couture. There was a logic to it.

There's always a logic, something that makes sense later, once you've read the wall label or talked to the artist. Once, over a year ago, I heard Francis Alÿs talk about a work. He said he didn't know what he would do when this piece, a work that involved children and an ocean and tiny sailboats, had to be terminated. His plan had been broken. Force Majeure: an unexpected storm. Five years later he found a place for it.

I'm waiting. I watch Robbie look at each work and then she disappears. I imagine her behind a wall, in another gallery.

Waiting looks like this:

description: recycling image

After a while—and a while more that could have gone on—Robbie is there beside me, placing the gallery press release into my hands. I focus on the page. Scan, scan, scan...blah, blah...Robbie points to what she has selected as the defining statement: "He puts the personal on display and yet renders it impossible to decipher." I smile at her.

"Let's get out of here."

I grab Robbie's hand and lead her out into the street. The wind whips up the avenue from the river. Her hand is warm, and she is laughing, chattering about the plaster cast trees and the crazy molded collages of plastic toys and hyper-green AstroTurf. Life could look like this, or you could walk into a tornado. Whatever it takes.

We walk toward the river and it gets colder. The wind makes us lean forward and put our heads down. I think we could be twins, our hands hitching us together like paper dolls, our parkas making blobby round balloon shapes as outlines for our bodies. I imagine each of us holding onto someone else, and the line continuing on from there until we have a chain of balloon bodies, crossing the river. It makes me happy — all of us together against the elements.

It's dark down by the water. One streetlight and, from a storefront, a small spill of light leaking from a neon sign in the store's bay window. Robbie opens the door of her car. Inside, we wiggle around in our seats, rubbing our hands together, breaking apart and reorganizing as individuals. My breath fogs up the window. I use my finger and etch across the frosty surface:

Description:
tornado-
th.png description: small tornado

I open my mouth wide and exhale, erasing the lines. I start again.

“Let's do this again.”

“Do what?”

“Go out together.”

I'm waiting. It looks like this:

Description: tornado-
graphic.jpg

Charlie Brown: Don't think of it as dust. Think of it as maybe the soil of some great past civilization. Maybe the soil of ancient Babylon.

Pig Pen: I have affixed to me the dirt of countless ages. Who am I to disturb history?

I want to disturb the way things are, the way things have been for ages. Robbie — my best friend, my ally and, now, this awful wish.

I turn the radio up. "You know, we can bring Tom. He's into art."

Robbie rolls her eyes and parts her lips, leaning over to change the radio station. I take that for a yes. Cross the bridge before you get to the river. Don't cross the bridge. On the far side, a single white light beams. I blink a few times. It stays steady.

