

From a Street-Lit Dark Room

by strannikov

In a street-lit dark room I wish to see older ghosts, their decrepitudes. (We have excuses for getting things wrong, so much wrong preceded us. Steel your soul silent, so deserving a fellow as you, in your grave.) My hunger cringes, skeptical and mistrustful of my appetites. Then my head tilts: whap! whap! whap! I've slapped myself, I'm my own fresh coward! Now I bray: style is the art of restraining silence.

Nothing need be said, so don't permit yourself to think: in fact, don't say it. No, but cringe at the sturdy echo: "With time to see and no time to say"—pausing only for breath:

"With time to see the worst, to see what would be the worst. Because we no longer imagine it, the worst must be something behind us, something we've seen so often it has achieved transparency; or else it waits entirely ahead of us, what is worst waits ahead, waits as what we won't recognize even when it appears: the worst, it would show itself only when too late to avert it. Always too late, ever too late . . . and what could be done with a single moment added to the revelation of the worst that would fail to show itself too late? that one moment would bear at least two complete infinities beyond it, at least an eternity of dread or an eternity of answer, it would call us by name or it would engulf us silently, removing us from all sound forever."

(Are we able yet to distinguish silence that comprises an answer from the silence of some mere oblivion?) Look into the dust, confirm an old suspicion to tell where's the wind. Science still gives us things to hope for—but nothing to believe in much.

Certainly not stories, no nein nyet, certo.

Never were stories here. Stories never existed. Stories were never told or narrated, never catalogued or chronicled, not

recollected nor recorded. No protagonists ever faced any conflicts, because 1) no one was alive with any story to tell about facing conflict—much less triumphing over it or succumbing to it; 2) anyone who could have been a putative author was otherwise occupied throughout whatever brief period when storytelling remained at least a theoretical possibility (alas, the utter lack of theoreticians was itself a telling indicator that storytelling would never even receive theoretical exposition); 3) nothing ever happened anyway, nothing to speak of, that is. Whenever trees or limbs fell in isolate forests—well, no narrators were ever to be found, not even beneath the larger tree trunks or under the fallen limbs. Whenever a small band of nomads successfully forded a river without a single drowning—well, come on, they'd merely crossed the river, so what, people cross rivers every day, and we know their stories are never told! Whenever someone died all alone, he could not very well dictate farewells to a local amanuensis scribbling nearby, dying all alone is a subject not commonly taken up by amanuenses themselves, amanuenses require patrons, after all, or at least agreeable subjects, and dying persons are generally disagreeable, whether they're lucid enough even to be capable of dictating a farewell to any amanuensis.

So you see: stories have never even been told. Reports to the contrary and stories about stories are therefore all lies, so we see how quantitative analysis shows plainly that lies precede and outnumber stories.

We may say, then, that the necessary conditions for stories do not even exist! Even if the necessary conditions existed (theoretically, I mean, which is to say "fancifully", "as if" . . .), stories would never have been told or narrated, heard or listened to, remembered or repeated, collected or published. Paleontologists have never recovered the fossilized remains of any story, and they've been looking earnestly for decades. Astronomers have never beheld stories in sunlight or in starlight, nor even in moonlight or during any kind of total eclipse (an eclipse itself constitutes no story, ever, for anyone). Microscopists have never yet observed page-turners on

their slides or under their lenses or in the specimen capture chamber of any electron microscope. (We are not soliciting the views of scatographers or scatologists at this time. Coprophogists and coprophographers likewise need not apply.)

No, stories are as fanciful as the minotaur and the unicorn, as mythical as—but why confuse the extinction of sound with death necessarily? Life is not all noisemaking.

Even if stories did exist, even if they could exist—but they don't, and they can't! No!—no stories, no narratives, no narrations, no narrators, no genres, no literary structure, surely and certainly no plot, no semiotic or hermeneutic applications (these zany tales of the existence of stories: who can believe them?).

Nope, no story has ever been composed, read, or related, and what has not been cannot be recited or remembered and has no claim on us at all. No stories can tell us.

Just look at all the problems that disappear once we properly deny the very existence of stories! All that literary babble about "conflict"—poof! "Protagonists", "antagonists"? Pft! "Plot"? BOOM! —You see: there were never any stories at all, their supposition was all mirage, with no appeal whatsoever. Everything else is out there still, to this day—but no stories, come on, you're making me repeat myself!

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(By next morning, this grafitto was drying adjacent to the arched entrance of a pedestrian arcade:

Efang looked glumly at the unlit street. Four murders over the past year didn't make his odds so bad, except that the last murder recorded occurred just under three months ago, although final stats wouldn't be registered until the following Saturday and probably wouldn't be released until the Monday just after. Only lately had he come to feel good about conducting business even in daylight hours; but Meridora had assured him it would be safe tonight, he was terribly keen for a small jar of local honey, after all, and it was a bright night under the full moon, the streetlights still worked in the main, but then there was the hundred yards and more of unlit street

between the final streetlight and Meridora's house. Efang could outrun anyone when his life was at stake, so it had come to seem, and the comparative darkness pervaded only a hundred yards or more of Yarrowstick Road; and although her house boasted no front or back porch light, Meridora's yard boasted a thriving bee parlor, surrounded by its acres of clover and wild mint, and Efang had waited long enough to get a good supply of peanut butter set in, and now he was ready to lard up on Meridora's honey.

But there had been these four grisly murders on this very street, Yarrowstick Road. Truth be told, some of the bodies and their heads were found under the streetlamps, on at least two occasions. No one even recognized the heads. Four complete strangers found decapitated in just under eight months, never identified, multi-state searches revealed nothing. [Not that public hygiene was not being acutely violated otherwise, but these decapitations were not at all clean slices, these were as gruesome and hideous as they come, not the kinds of heads Efang was keen to trip over in the dark, could you imagine hanging a toe in one's mouth, you'd be sure to rip your toe off trying to get your foot loose! Or what if your toes landed in the pulpy stump! —another mess of a different kind and equally horrible to contemplate; but such is the nature of risk in the contemporary world.]

He paused after a few steps to lace up his steel-toed boots a bit more tightly, tying them off at the ankles, in case he had to kick heads in a hurry. Modern world or no modern world, Efang would have Meridora's honey tonight!)

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