Metagestures

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When I awoke, the children were pointing at me, their curious heads swiveling to their guardian for cues, and then back again. One of the urchins — a young boy of about nine — was holding a stick. Perhaps this was the source of the dream I had just been rudely wrested from, in which I had been pierced by several arrows, like Saint Sebastian, each one bringing its own form of bliss, deep within the burning. Had I been alone after such a nocturnal transport, I might have even checked my torso for evidence of night wounds. But now this clutch of children, which I counted quickly as twelve rudimentary souls, watched me with a collective wariness, as if waiting for me to provide something I had already promised them, but neglected to remember. I blinked the sleep out of my eyes, and turned my stiff neck to the guardian; a woman of approximately my own age — neither old nor young — who preferred to look out upon the lake, pricked by precipitation.

“Leave him be, children,” she said, without conviction. “The man is clearly wanting for a home this gray morning, and is not likely to be warmed by your gawping.”

I lifted myself to my elbows, as the children heeded their guardian’s implicit advice, breaking off into little clusters, divid-
ing their attention between myself and the scene beyond the open rotunda — a space usually reserved for summer concerts — in which I had spent the night. An insistent rain was falling, which was no doubt why this pensive group had taken shelter here, despite the vagrant snoring nearby. I noticed a martial line of silk parasols — most black, the remainder white — leaning against the railing in a puddle of their own making. The guardian offered a further comment, and the children recombined into a new set of somewhat reluctant groups. Two girls began to play a game involving the elaborate choreography and intertwining of hands, while another watched with envy. A fourth took out a small book from her shirt pocket, no bigger than a matchbox, and attached to the garment by a chain. A pencil produced from behind her ear was then used to record what only she could say, while stealing side glances at me, without excessive judgement. The boys fished in their satchels for marbles, and started to play earnestly, according to rules I was unfamiliar with.

Feeling increasingly aware of my own superfluous, yet heavy, presence, I pushed my thick coat, which had been serving as a blanket, aside, and attempted to unrust myself into society. The guardian grew weary of watching the lake exchanging different shadows of grey with the fog, and made a gesture of request to sit down, as if this sheltered space were my own. I opened my palm to encourage her to do so. She smiled without smiling, and then joined me on the stone bench, which followed the curve of the rotunda for half of its radius. She watched her charges for a while, occasionally offering admonishments or encouragements befitting their various activities.

“Can we catch the ferry today, Miss Lancaster?” asked one of the boys, tiring of marbles through a series of quick losses.

“I don’t think so, Philip,” said the guardian, “The day is against our outing, I fear. As soon as the rain lessens, we shall return to school.”

The children did not audibly groan, preferring to let their heavy heads and slumping shoulders speak on behalf of muffled voices.
As if in response to the woman’s plan, the rain began to fall with greater force, obliging the children to move closer under the humble pavilion, which in turn bound their blood-warmed energies in a more intimate cat’s cradle of lines and hollows. One girl began to re-braid her friend’s braids, while a new combination of glassy eyes began an impromptu card game.

The woman fished a scone from inside her coat and offered it to me. My stomach growled at the sight, and I thanked her sincerely for this blessing; the first breakfast I had enjoyed in three dawns. I noticed that her coat had more than the usual amount of pockets; no doubt for all the objects she might need to cater for the children on an outing such as this. I chewed on the scone with great satisfaction, as the children turned to whispering, as if the rotunda was a temple, opened on to the world. As I licked the crumbs off my fingers, the woman sighed at the state of the weather—or perhaps my ungentlemanly manners—and then produced a pipe from one of her many pockets. It was a large example of the form, made of dark Cherrywood, with an oriental curve. As before, she made a gesture of request, and I nodded my head in encouragement, as if to say “be my guest.” With an expression of imminent contentment she tapped the bowl several times against the bottom of her left shoe, and then cleaned the stem with a piece of wire. A small tin full of fluffy and fragrant tobacco was then produced from yet another fold in her garment, along with a match, which—after bringing all the elements together in habitual harmony—she held to the bowl. The dried leaves glowed and crackled, as she inhaled and exhaled seemingly in unison, blowing out an aromatic smoke which left her lungs to join the nearby mist, adding a shade of blue to its dreary monopoly of the day.

“Are you just passing through?” she asked, exhaling smoke from her nostrils, and looking me in the eye for the first time.

“Well that depends,” I replied. “I’m looking for work, and overheard some people saying that there are some jobs to be had here. That is, for a man who knows his way around a kitchen, as much as a factory.”

Miss Lancaster nodded in vague sympathy.
“Well I wish you well on your search,” she said, drawing deeply on the pipe. “I know how hard it is these days; especially now the South has lost its grid.”

I leaned over to retrieve my pack, from which I produced my own pipe, made of smooth bone-colored ivory, which had been given to me by my grandfather: one of the few objects still in my possession of the many I once owned, and the one most charged with sentiment. The woman offered me her tobacco, to which I accepted also, feeling now twice in her debt. As I began to add my own smoke rings to the occasion, the children, one by one, began to produce small clay pipes from their pockets; all standard school issue, except for one or two exceptions, which had likely been gifted from an indulgent aunt or doting father.

All as one, and with a sense of profound calm, we puffed together, and felt the effects of the tobacco on our nervous systems, as the rain finally began to ease, and the obscured ferries groped their way across the water by way of occasional low, steam-powered whistles.

Then, at a single word from Miss Lancaster, the children tapped out the warm ashes onto the ground of the rotunda, cleaned and dismantled their pipes, before adding the necessary tension to their knees and elbows in order to reclaim their parasols, and trudge back along the lake front.

Feeling my own pipe, sleek and cooling in my hands, I watched these random sparks from the human furnace wind their way into the smudged landscape, until the mist raptured them away into a pillowy silence.