Last Year at Betty and Bob's: A Novelty

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Waiting for something to happen, Bette B pulls a dusty copy of Montaigne’s *Collected Essays* from the shelf. First published in the late sixteenth century as literary “try outs,” these musings, some brief, some extensive, made a long-term impact on the way of the written word, kicking off a new style of skeptical pondering. It’s her lure of the day, exerting a pull like iron filings to a rare earth magnet. The spine cracks as she randomly opens to “On Idleness.” Long ago, she’d marked the page in pencil, underlining words and scribbling marginalia:

> When lately I retired to my house resolved that, in so far as I could, I would cease to concern myself with anything except the passing in rest and retirement of the little time I still have to live, I could do my mind no better service than to leave it in complete idleness to commune with itself, to come to rest, and to grow settled; which I hoped it would thenceforth be able to do more easily, since it had become graver and more mature with time. But I find,

> variam semper dant otia mentem,

that, on the contrary, like a *runaway horse*, it is a hundred times more active on its own behalf than ever it was for others. It presents me with so many *chimeras and imaginary monsters*, one after another, *without order or plan*, that, in order to contemplate their oddness
and absurdity at leisure, I have begun to record them in writing, hoping in time to make my mind ashamed of them.

Surprised by the emphasized reference to chimeras, horses, monsters, and the need to record the absurdities of daily thought, she perks up. Surely this is random browsing at its most effective. Absently grabbing the chipped handle of her cadmium yellow ceramic mug in a flush of excitement, she’s disappointed to find coffee dregs. Making a second cup, she prepares for a bout of intense reading before shifting into writing mode.

Pre-incident, Bette B had been exploring the relation between two broad conceptual themes, the “monstrous” and the “holey.” Her research had produced some stimulating connections. She had been crafting a text, commissioned by an online art journal, with the working title “Precarity and the Monstrous Void.” Post-incident, this subject has taken on a titillating prophetic character. Lurking deep in the holes of the free market derivative, in the objet d’art, in the blow-up sex toy, in the bearded lady, in the elephant man, lay a balm to her unrest. Rhythmically scratching her left forearm, she realizes she must plumb the “concept” as an antidote to her troubles; assuage her somatic anxiety with speculative froth as potent as the ethyl alcohol she immoderately consumes. She must draw a diagram. Connect the dots. She is, after all, an odd duck. An unhinged specimen. Certainly, in all her inglorious singularity she must address a monstrosity’s response-ability. But to whom? To an incomprehensible Society? To a nebulous Culture? To a fascist Politic? To a dying Earth? She’d read somewhere that contextualizing an impersonal Planet enabled a framing of “the world without us.” She settles then on the Blue Marble as the matter of her concern, remembering in after thought the day she stole the Fall 1968 Whole Earth Catalog from a new titles display.
But how might her essay now play out? She is a horse run wild, clomping over a vast landscape of sodden field and lush terrain, pitched against the granular boundary of shifting sand and flowing waters. She licks and glows, listens and sniffs within the measure of her small apartment that is, as in her dreams, ever expanding and accumulating room after new room. Becoming monster, she breathes the collective air, inhaling and exhaling molecules passed through countless generations of animals and plants. Oxygen works its dualistic magic as life gas and toxic waste, again and again.

Emptying her second cup of coffee, she curiously recalls a dream jotted down before the holidays. Opening her journal to her own essayistic scribble, she rereads her account of 10 December’s nocturnal happening.

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A newly discovered Euripidian fragment on the flight of Icarus was generating a slew of derivative theater. One such script had been granted generous production funds from the otherwise stingy cultural pot the entrenched neoliberal government had allotted the arts. Theater in particular was suffering the blow of devastating cutbacks. “Spawn of Daedalus” was set to premier in a few months time. The classical theme apparently appealed to both aesthetes and politicians as each could identify with the fallen ambitions of the central protagonist.

Chosen to direct the work, I decided the play, a monologue for Icarus, would be acted in parallel readings, one taking place in a white, claustrophobic cubic space, mounted on the stage with only one sightline from the central king’s position. An audience of 15 would sit in a neat single row on a steeply raked tribune facing the open façade of the tiny tomb room. The performer would recite the original script, translated to English by Grigorios T.
The performer, an athletic non-actor would purposefully struggle with it. I had signed David Beckham to the role due to his convincing underwear ad.

A parallel production was to take place simultaneously on the roof of the theater. Triangulated cameras would project the action to the audience below. A 15 cm thick natural fiber sailing rope would be hung from the roof to the stage floor like a plumb line, connecting the dramatic spaces. Atop, Imelda Marcos would play Icarus in Anne Carson’s automatic writing “response” to the unearthed play. Creating the gaping hole in the theater roof, through the complex lighting grid and structural maze of rafters would present the single biggest technical problem. This was the least of my directorial worries. An image for the promotional poster appeared with intense clarity.