Last Year at Betty and Bob's: An Adventure

Sher Doruff

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part 4

MAPPING

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INTERVIEWER: But why specifically Beowulf?

GARDNER: [...] Grendel is a monster, and living in the first person, because we're all in some sense monsters, trapped in our own language and habits of emotion. Grendel expresses feelings we all feel – enormous hostility, frustration, disbelief, and so on, so that the reader, projecting his own monster, projects a monster that is, for him, the perfect horror show.

– Excerpt from Paris Review 75 (Spring 1979)

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INTERVIEWER: Well, the mythical Geryon has wings, and so does your incarnation. They're another marker of his difference. What attracted you to this story?

CARSON: His monstrosity. We all feel we're monsters most of the time.

– Excerpt from Eleanor Wachtel, “Interview with Anne Carson,” Brick 89 (Summer 2012)
“Bob darling,” “what do ghosts have to do with it? Have to do with it?” IRB sang their question to Tina T’s melody while snacking on a vegan platter of greens and grains. “You’re obsessed as far as I can tell with the spectres of anthropomorphized monsters. I simply wonder about this crush you’ve got on wing-ed spooks and beasties. Is there maybe some redux to your color theory here? The “spectral spectrum” you used to call it. Or have you cold-turkeyed that addiction?”

Bob chewed on a celery stalk and answered after thoughtful mastication, “Regarding monsters. I dunno. Something I read a long time ago still haunts me. But, you know, regarding color, I got stuck in a surreal fantasy of what came perilously close to an essentialism of black and white. And that was not in the plan. I began thinking from the perspective of additive and subtractive physics, of light and matter, lightness and darkness through a relational lens. I got swept up in a nexus of speculative science and processual concrescence and emergent aesthetics and … well, it’s all very seductive.” He smiled as he said this, aware of the obtuse jargon. He quickly became serious. “Anyway, I forgot something. Forgot a lot of things actually. Forgot it’s not all about western presuppositions. How could I fuckin’ lose sight of that?
And, I forgot about metaphor. All those inescapable little allegories that anyone, really anyone would be bound to construe. Take the concepts of lightness and darkness ... but don’t take ’em too far coz you’re immediately hit with a tsunami of associations, a fucking mess of modes.” He absently whirled a spiral in the hummus plate with his fork. “Holes and knots. Representational gaffs. Hyperbolic meanings. Appropriation. Language going all murky.” “You looking for something scare-quote ‘pure’ my dear?” they asked with incredulity. “Well, uhm, hmm, no, course not, but I, it’s just that all my practices, my research interests, are so charged these days. Every vector needs to be ethically considered. I get that, I do, but it’s exhausting and I miss, yeah, feel drawn and quartered by every expressed and unexpressed implication, every metaphorical association. The impossibility of simply dreaming about color and making useless art and ... I have these fantasies now of sitting down at a wheel and endlessly throwing one pot. Kneading the same lump of clay over and over again. No glaze. No fire. I should stop this oh woe is me rant now. Sorry, it’s going nowhere.”

“But Betty Bob,” they said swiping a sine-wave pattern through the hummus spiral with a carrot stick, “give yourself a break here. No one’s asking you to suffocate your fascinations. Where’s this fear of confrontation coming from? Of making mistakes? My god, look what my parents did to their darling fetus and yet ...” “Precisely,” he interrupted, “and yet what? You happy over there with your red kale?” He looked them in the eye, hoping to see some physical indication of their wayward rods and cones. They took a long sip of water. “Yeah, I am.”

But honestly, IRB wasn’t sure. And wasn’t that the point? They lived a temporally complex “now” and that’s what counted. They were happy as far as they could measure happiness on a rudimentary scale of everyday existence.
IRB worried, though they hadn’t the courage to confront Bob yet, that his present interest in monsters may possibly be piqued by their off-the-charts GenTel biology. Their flesh and blood, gristle, and bone that would be, could be fodder for his monster mash. Was he researching the ghosts of Grendel and Geryon through night-vision goggles? Did he expect IRB to be dragonwise gazing at scorched red earth? Did his rapt attention to these fabulations have anything to do with the “gift”? Their uncanny superpower? They wondered if he hoped to find tiny buds of red wings on their shoulder blades one morning?

Gift. Their associative motor was rumbling now just as Bob predicted. They recently looked up the etymology of the word “precarious.” They do this from time to time when they overuse a term. Betty Bob’s taste for nerdy genealogy had infected them. The OED staff put it this way:

The Latin word *precarius* means “given as a favour,” or “depending on the favour of another person”; and the earliest meaning of the English word precarious relates to the idea of being given something — the right to occupy land, or to hold a particular position — “at the pleasure of” another person, who might simply choose to take it back at any time.

So back in the 17C, precarity was derived from uncertainties implicated in gifting. IRB brought it up over dessert crêpes.

“So this is gonna interest you,” they said, “I know you love wordplay.” “OK, whatcha got?” he queried. “So you know how we theorize precarity through labor and markets and inequality.” “Yeah, course.” “Well I looked up the etymology. Have you done that?” “No.” “Turns out its earliest usage was related to the uncertain — i.e., precarious — nature of a gift from someone that could be taken away. Like land, or a position. How was it written … ‘at
the pleasure of’ another person.” Bob balked. “That’s a whole other take on jouissance! It’s as if it cycled through feudal inscrutability to material risk and back to commercial inscrutability.” IRB smiled and took a sip of decaf espresso. Like Red before them, they liked inserting these liquid pauses into conversations for emphasis. Keep Bob waiting for the coup de grâce. They continued. “So like we do, we dis/continuously quantum leaped to the word ‘vicarious’. Vicarious – experience in the imagination through the feelings or actions of another person – that’s the definition. I’m not paraphrasing.”

Bob wasn’t sure where they were going with this. He checked his understanding with them. “So we’re looking at precarious vicarity or vicarious precarity as dependent on a more than one. Right? Vicarity, if you take away its pejorative context, seems to me a mode of transindividuation. Precarity too, for that matter, but it’s complicated with an economy of usurpation.” Bob rattled on for a bit. IRB listened, feeling they had sown a seed of unknown genus.