

# Standing Still

LORETTA ROCK

Man lives in the in-between, and what he calls the present is a life-long fight against the dead weight of the past, driving him forward with hope, and the future (whose only certainty is death), driving him backward toward 'the quiet of the past' with nostalgia for and remembrance of the only reality he can be sure of.

—Hannah Arendt

*Time is an ocean.*

—Bob Dylan

**T**wo hours after leaving for New York, my husband turned to me from the driver's seat of our 1985 Buick sedan. We were driving the black highway out of Los Angeles an hour after sunset with the weekend traffic lit up on all sides around us. "I can't believe," he said to me, "it's already been a year." I watched the yellow highway checks race under us, stretch out in front. . . . A year ago we had been on motorcycles riding west from Pennsylvania to marry and settle in LA. The year as we had lived it was long and stiff, like some time-out-of-time sojourn—stunning and unfinished. Now that we were done and headed back East, I could package the memory into a unit "Marriage: Year 1," but I felt its meaning shifting as we went on. I wished I could hold it right there, in the Buick, in the dark as it was, in the moving . . . I wished I could slow time down.

Dean and I had been in love, engaged, and married in a hurried few months. After the hustle of courtship, the suddenness of finding ourselves alone and living together was a sort of drawn-out shock. This is how I remember it, like old video clips of the atom bomb, soundlessly bursting in slow motion out through the clouds—nothing left underneath. The discovery of each other had held us still, almost numb. Up that close, we were strangers—nervous, unsure.

Not just then, but forever the numbness of being afraid to misstep has sometimes thrown my thoughts on hold, and me into stiff paralysis. It's a frightening gap between thought and action: worrying, scary, lost, and gone. And the only way I know to pull out of it is by taking that mixture of reflection and inspiration got from the past and learning, as they say, to move on. This moving always seems to need communication just when speech is hardest. Where are we when we are stuck in our minds, and how do we make ourselves known? Hannah Arendt wrote a chapter once titled, "Where We Are When We Are Thinking." She agrees with Kant that it's somewhere between the past and future, on "an island . . . surrounded by a wide, stormy ocean, the sea of everyday life." And so must it be for the philosophers, whose intellectual speculations follow a line of common historical thought, putting them in touch with the ancients. But this island of thought, caught apart from the company of others, can be nice only if there's a choice about whether one stands or swims. When we don't know how to translate our thoughts to deeds; when we fail to reach beyond ourselves, and this 'land of pure intellect' is the only world we can inhabit, even our thoughts become stunted, tentative. We become an island of one. And sucking along its edge lies the ocean of the living world, the life of action, while we (the unknown, the lonesome) glimpse the shape of its threats and swells but dimly from the shore.

This is how I remember it—that gradually, gradually, the ripples from that first shock of marriage ebbed and calmed over January, February, March; that I let go by fingertips the clutch I'd had on my inner life and let my thoughts (in speech or deed) span that immeasurable space between me and Dean; and that I opened up and lay myself bare to whatever love or lack thereof awaited me.

In the Buick that June night on our way out of town, I searched for some way to answer him back, for words to hold on to the swollen feeling of hope and soft nostalgia. I leaned out the car window and let the fast, warm air sweep my face. "Time flies," I told Dean, grinning.

She [Clarissa] felt very young; at the same time unspeakably aged. She sliced like a knife through everything; at the same time was outside, looking on. She had a perpetual sense, as she watched the taxi cabs, of being out, out, far out to sea and alone; she always had the feeling that it was very, very dangerous to live even one day.

—*Virginia Woolf*

It's a comfort that the loneliness of life and the difficulty of grasping the world is shared, or at least described, by minds as great as Virginia Woolf's. If Clarissa Dalloway has so little faith in her own reflections, how can any of us feel ashamed to be fearful—trapped in our lonesome minds? "All the same, Mrs. Dalloway," I want to chide, "for crimony sakes, snap out of it. What's the use of all this wisping remembrance and sentiment if you can't bundle your thoughts into some kind of cohesion? Grouped and clustered and stuck together, our ideas *must* be worth something." I'd have her know that if this quiet out-at-sea feeling is after all just more proof of the emptiness of things, then I quit too. Why even begin such contemplation if it only launches us adrift?

Why indeed, for there are reasons: one being (as Hannah Arendt reminds us), to find out what really happened. Reflection recalls us to whispers of those old thoughts we almost missed the first go around, it allows us to go thumbing around for truth. With thought, we get the whole human trip—the act of mind—to toe a diagonal intersection between past and future. Clarissa Dalloway's one dangerous day extends the length of a novel. This is the stuff of transcendental movement, which while lifting us high, puts us at risk in the world: if we stay aloft in the realm of memory, the world forgets us and goes ahead. Our task then is not only to find what was real and true for us, but also to keep on with our story, to tell it right. We find the truth about our past to glean our future.

*Foreshortening is the process of applying linear perspective to the figure. It is a way to create great depth and drama to a drawing.*

—Ralph Larmann

In the tiny painted picture on the mantle above my TV, a wrinkled old man reclines away from me, his stringy arm folded to prop up his head. The sketch, by Eleanor Dickenson, is half-filled with paint, the beige knee jutting up close while the rest of the man drifts back. He is squinting up into the sky like some naked philosopher, his head so far away that the top of it almost dissolves. This is the kind of foreshortening I like—this is the old man sketched from a linear perspective, made nearly unreal by angles. I like him as he is, exaggerated and incomplete.

So too do memories stretch backward: undone and dramatic. From my Brooklyn apartment on a late fall Sunday night, Los Angeles and my husband appear foreshortened, their odd bits drawn out in wild detail like long skinny

shins up close. I try to get in my philosophical mind, try to make these memories shrink back to their real proportions, to figure out what they mean. Not seeing things right at the outset, it's best to start from the point of distortion, to recapitulate slowly and let the thoughts come in urgent whispers over the top of the scenes. *Think, Loretta, think.*

My marriage to Dean Rock began officially on Sunday, August 23, 2004 at 9:45 AM. By ten thirty we were seated in a bar on the Old Strip in Las Vegas, drinking beer and pretending to blend in—frothy and dizzy and nervous on the inside. *This was the way we were trying to be nonchalant about marriage.* Around us, casino staff in their black-vested suits were vacuuming up the night's detritus. Old overweight men still sat at slot machines, their baggy eyes trained on the promise. Dean and I were watching the women's Olympic marathon on the TV in the corner and buying each other beers. Every now and again we spoke, guessing which one of the women would pull in first. My heart was in my throat. The race was in Italy that summer, and it was hot. The announcer kept saying "ninety-eight degrees," so that we could really imagine how miserable it was. The camera angle kept switching. Sometimes it would show super up-close the bones and baggy skin of the runners (red on their faces turning into sun-burned shoulders) and then it would rear back, far away, so that the women were just little X's caterpillaring across the horizon—hardly moving at all. They were working so hard at not-moving. It seemed so human and sad. The woman who crossed the finish line first went to her knees to vomit and then got up, quivering, to hug the other runners who came after her. Her face was puckered into a grimace and covered with tears and sweat and spit. "Oh my God, Oh my God," she kept sobbing. I wanted to be that happy.

Dean and I were stuck, those early days, with "until-death" doom but with no history to shore us up. Our pasts were individual and un-span-able, our future nebulous. I wrote him once, climbing out of the bed I couldn't sleep in, anxious about a fight we'd just had and struck with the fear that marriage was a mistake. The email reads, "The first time I knew I loved you, I was awake all night crying. You wrote me first thing in the morning. Tonight I'm up in tears again, afraid to death I don't." Dean was breathing in the darkness behind me as I typed.

Coming home the next afternoon, I wordlessly hugged him and cried. "Relax," he had written back. "This too, in time, will pass."

Clarissa had a theory in those days . . . that since our apparitions, the part of us which appears, are so momentary compared with the other, the unseen part of us, which spreads wide, the unseen might survive, be recovered somehow attached to this person or that, or even haunting certain places after death . . . perhaps—perhaps.

—Virginia Woolf

I woke up this Saturday and rolled over in my bed, which is too wide for me now. Dean left last month on business, and since then I have been sleeping diagonally across it, bunching the three pillows around me where he might have been. The missing-him wears off sometimes, but the empty bed reminds me. I reached at the lamp. Blinking beside it was a phone message telling me to check my email. Dean. He misses me. The diagram he drew of his psyche in Power Point had Mental Telepathy, *Sensus communis*, Will, Heart, Logic, Speech, Creativity and Intuition, floating in a periwinkle thought bubble. “There I Am,” he wrote below it. “There’s everything.” I went back to bed and let my eyes close. Dean says he was writing from his *nunc stans*.

“The *nunc stans*,” says Hannah Arendt, is the “standing now”: the internal arena of reflection. In this “gap between past and future,” the tangible world drops away and temporal boundaries are stretched as we let infinite concepts catch our consciousness. “It is,” she says, “the only domain where the whole of one’s life and its meaning . . . can manifest itself as the sheer continuity of the I-am.” This is Kant’s island, the locale of pure thought, divided from and looking onto the sea of the daily world.

*I saw Eternity the other night, / Like a great ring of pure and endless light, / All calm, / as it was bright.*

—Henry Vaughn

Standing now, awake in my thoughts, reflecting and unafraid, I can see the dramatic slant of life, and feel the edge of the world stretch it longer. I am like Clarissa, ageless and old, and I am, like her, spread out over time. From here, the empty early months of marriage appear like a stand-still moment of origination (like a moment . . . like a pause). It was the gap not just between past and future, but between my mind and this life I was too scared to live.

I wrote Dean yesterday to say that I miss him too, that it’s quiet here, and that three more months of him in Bombay seems intolerably long sometimes. The apartment is too empty, and my thoughts are far out at sea. I’d like to at

least hear the sound of his breathing, and let the wash of everyday life calm my mind—repetitive, perpetual. But in his absence I'm thinking . . . sometimes it's for the best to hold on to these long lonely moments, standing still and watching, before we're swept back into the waves.