

# Unfinished Business

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**H**aving woken at six in the morning, my father and I stood by the side of the road with a pair of binoculars, shivering, listening in awe to the cries of nature suddenly let loose. The park was empty, though later it would fill with hundreds of excited spectators, cars covering the shoulders for miles. For the moment we were alone with each other and the broken silence. With us I could feel the nameless gaze of a thousand observers, invisible eyes hanging in the spaces where cars would pass once the sun was high. I carried a small and probably cheap camera, a present from one of my many aunts. It was meant for a child, someone with indelicate fingers and big ideas. We had waited for sunrise, for the burst of light over the hogback that would signal the explosion of life that now lay dormant with the dew. The disassociated eyes waited too, expectant and observant in their lonely vigils against the coming tourist violation.

It was the elk mating season, and I was recording all for posterity in the form of a fourth-grade science project. At the height of their mating period, elk behavior changes dramatically. It loses its conventional nature-preserve appeal and becomes something lively, brutal, and *loud*. It was for this transformation that we had driven so far, awoken so early, weathered the still cold. I watched through a small stand of trees, hidden from the violence behind lenses and ChildSafe plastic, finding in the bullet-crack of colliding males a natural reality far deeper than I could have ever understood from any number of peaceful brooks and bob-tail deer.

Images fly through my head as the day warms and brightens. Though I eventually find myself engulfed in a sea of eager tourists, the image of empty eyes fills me. Ancient, worn, their copper eyelashes greened and rutted through oxidation, they are all that is left of statues made long ago, statues made by a culture that thought itself everlasting. Once, these eyes were the softest human touch on a brilliantly decorated piece, celebrating, perhaps, a figure of importance to the Greek world. But today they join me, watching the pure stillness of nature embodied in the moving crash of hooved bodies.

It is, I fear, beyond us ever to grasp deeply the momentary vitality that is all we truly have. This *Pair of Eyes from a Greek Statue* whispers in my mind, tells me that I, too, am a statue. I am nothing but a human construction, nothing more than what I see and what I know. Though if I am defined by what I have seen, at least I am unique: and might my seeing, my knowing, not last far beyond the ends of my physical existence?

I remember picking up my photos after having them developed, receiving a curious inspection by the employee who wanted me to know that she'd never seen elk "do...that thing" before. That moment in the mountains was filled with such vibrancy; in the cold, wet with dew, fingers frozen to our binoculars, we experienced a connection with the life of such creatures that I could never otherwise imagine, surrounded as I would often have been by the urban trappings of American society. And around us invisible eyes joined in, seeing in this torn mask of natural behavior a shocking parallel to their existence, empty of corporeal attention and feeling yet filled with passion hidden from the casual observer.

Like us, the elk fight fiercely against the end of things. By passing on their genes they also preserve a legacy through history. Nevertheless, Sophocles imagines through his *Antigone* certain human duties a level beyond those of acting for future generations. "The time in which I must please those that are dead," she tells Ismene, "is longer than I must please those of this world" (73). What understanding must I take from this view of human responsibility? For, clearly, there is more at stake (to some if not all) than simple biological urges. My duty, the world cries out to me, lies above and beyond that call, driving me to act for those who are not necessarily bound by ties of procreation. The question *Antigone* forces us to ask is whether we could justifiably act firmly in defense of principle; and it is not a simple question, for Sophocles himself stands only nominally on the side of the absolute. Even *Antigone*, that fierce defender of divine law and true justice, mourns the death of any possibility that she will ever do those things that make us vitally human; never will she hear "the chant that brings the bride to bed" (812). We all have our responsibilities, obligations far outside any casual or biological need to pass on our genes. It is nonetheless vital that we not forget our origins, those rooted ties that bind us to nature and to the primal urges within us all. There is an uneasy balance, a moment outside space-time, in which humanity and the divine—the natural and pure—exist together. Yet it is forever under attack by our drive to make our own what is out of reach.

*Antigone* vilifies her sister, telling her in spite, "Don't die with me, nor make your own what you have never touched" (546). Though Ismene seeks to

take hold of that which is divine, we cannot truly fight against the choices we have already made. It is far too late, Antigone says, for Ismene to revoke or to relive her mistakes. Life is by its very nature in stark contrast to the death at its end; but the natural world goes on as if there were no end. Nothing interferes with the mating that must occur, not even the growing profusion of eyes and cameras come to see, to document their vitality. Before and after they charge, males give a screaming challenge that echoes for miles, winding its way down valleys and riverways to fill the mountains with sound and fury, with the passion of conflict that for them still stands as the true test of strength and virility. They have no complicity of choice or responsibility. Living within the present and the natural, the elk clash with all that we desire, for it is the inevitability of choice that makes us what we are.

And looking deeply into myself, I realize that I, too, aspire to a purity beyond my ken. Jealousy—the deep whispers that, unlike those of Babel, we could successfully climb to the divine—goads us towards a violation of the balance that preserves us. According to Richard Rodriguez in “Late Victorians,” San Francisco exists as an outgrowth of that drive within us, the “idea of itself as heaven on earth,” drawing groups from around the world to celebrate the highest successes of man over his primal boundaries (494). “Don’t the Americans know?” his friend Cesar asks. “Teenagers will crash into lampposts on their way home from prom, and there is nothing to be done about it. You cannot forbid tragedy” (495). To Rodriguez, this is necessary; his words are filled with a dualism of purpose, exploring both the “circus of final things,” which encompass the human canon of overreaching towards the natural, and straining in search of the divine. For these transgressions we are punished, not necessarily divinely, but by the very fact of our desire. Yet Rodriguez also suggests that this is a vital part of what, or who, we are. Seeking transcendence, which can only come by achieving that which is inherently beyond humanity, forces us to flock to purest nature and photograph it, dominate it until it becomes our personal domain.

There is no unexpected tension, however, in what happens during the mating challenge—all males fight, and those who succeed breed another generation of elk to fill the parks with their cries. Antigone, even so, cannot refute the inherent tension in her passions. “Life was your choice, and death was mine,” she declares to Ismene, recognizing that in her honor and pride she chose the path leading straight to Hades (555). There is a higher law she recognizes: the natural ways, the ways of the Gods. The truth in that simplicity, the *rightness* of godly law, is in the elegance of a charging elk, the purity of lonely ever-open eyes, bodyless, observing the world. These are the absolute

and the inhuman. They are that which demands worship but can never be truly understood. In rejecting the base ways of human life, they force me to question the demands placed on all of us by society and by ourselves. Perhaps it demands that we respect competing values, for in that which is inhuman and godly is also that which inherently rejects the savage humanity within us.

And I can't think of spending time with my father without remembering the day that my parents told me of their divorce. Eyes looked upon me, inconstant observers of a life that sometimes feels far beyond my control. Manifesting themselves in the haunting gaze of a Native American on horseback, in the glittering metallics of a portrait of my grandfather, they watched me from the walls of my shrinking room as I retreated from reality into the depths of my tank-like bunk bed. Surrounded by dozens of stuffed animals, mementos of my brother's early childhood, I came to realize that bright, dead, morning that sometimes nothing we do, no social convention or human construction, can change the unfolding of natural acts. Some day, I might look back on my childhood and see only this rift between *now* and *tomorrow*, no longer the pure *forever* of childhood. Life, suddenly, was a fleeting creature, a passing phase. My father reminded me that once he and my mother had loved each other, that the worth of their life together was not in its end but in the together-hood it had once possessed, and in the memories that it had engendered. "Especially," he said to me, "worthwhile for having brought you to us and us to you." And yet I looked back into the eyes slipping through, peering from my wall, and wondered.

The native on horseback is an original tribal painting. A Navajo work, it postdates the arrival of Western pioneers by over fifty years, and in it there is a sadness evoked by the passing of something great and beautiful. From behind his eyes come, into my room, the sightless gaze of a thousand fates remembered, the look that had seen what there was to be seen and given up. And yet it retained dignity and honor, peace amid the squalor that was even then coming to dominate all before it. A pair of disembodied Greek eyes: these, too, are the eyes of fate remembered and dignity preserved. As I hid among plush crocodiles and a worn pink CareBear, those eyes sought me out.

Is this just more unfinished business? Will we, too, eventually melt away to nothing, to become mere eyes, images on a wall, watching another age of humanity hurl itself in all futility at the divine? Perhaps I wish, like Rodriguez, to challenge the optimism of a world abrim with Towers of Babel. This world we inhabit now, overwhelming as it may seem, is nothing more than a passing moment in the life of the world writ large: San Francisco stands as humanity's "tragic conclusion," one of many metaphorical towers

reaching for the heavens; but I must wonder, though we may fall again and again, whether there will ever again sound the bugle of elk on the San Francisco Bay (494).

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32 - MERCER STREET