

Self-portrait in Motion

Every time I succumbed to the warmth of feelings, I became clumsy, almost inert, a piece of dried-up mud thinking I had died. Alas, there are so many ways of dying. Mine seemed to be cut open, filthy, of a putrid smell which had long ago ceased to engage my olfactory nerves into any chemoreception. Dead while the warmth persisted. A perverted annual plant, whose flower dried out and its petals flew apart, decomposing with the first spring waft.

This schmaltz of self-pity ended with an anonymous push down the subway stairs. The morning train was making its way into the station, having stolen my tripping and gasping. Hurriedly—a sheep in the herd—I made it through the emergency door, as the swipe-trough turnstile had been inadvertently demagnetized. Trampling in without swiping the monthly card, reminiscent of my youth in Bucharest, Romania, momentarily elbowed out any mundane worries. Those days, running after and jumping on the stairs of overcrowded trams and buses as they slowly left the station, with no ticket in hand, was a much-revered badge of rebellion, a feeble embrace of anarchist belonging. Now, squeezed in between faceless bodies holding large cups of tasteless coffee, I felt out of place and further sucked in the forbidden territory of my youth. From the hollowed cave of the past, I hollered to my present-day embodiment.

“How terrible of you to have fallen so low in life that you had to marry!”

Surprised, I effaced that misplaced call. Surely, I meant—“Why did you have to stop smoking?”

I hadn’t had a crisp morning wake-up with a tart sense of tobacco soaked in Turkish coffee since I was a virgin, and that was so 20th century. It sounded like an achievement to tell the kids about, only that was a terrible century. It lasted much too long for anybody to remain fond of it. Maybe when all 20th century former lads and gals had melted into thin air, someone would crochet worn-out memories into a historic quilt, so their offspring would feel both nostalgic and guilty the new century didn’t fit the old mold any longer.

Glued tightly into melancholy, and deprived of the rancid aftertaste of 1980s Cuban cigarettes, I got an unexpected jolt of backbone stiffness when a foul-smelling, ageless man in tatters cozied up to me. His reading of my Eastern European, quasi clueless, moon-like face was so off. How could I be a moneyed Russian open to collusion with the underclass? I didn’t sport any Gucci shoes riding my subway train to my office job, did I? No, I day-dreamed of them, though. Faced with his stubbornness, I held my breath between the West 4th and 14th Street stops. The result was remarkable: suddenly woke and awake.

I don’t like dogs and dogs know it. One just got in and veered away from me, pulling along his properly unkempt master. I was nobody’s master, not even a dog’s, so I could entertain opinions on such a pedantic aspiration—almost too 19th century, or even pre-dating modern times. Walking a pet hit me as pure snobbery lacking in subtlety. Of course, I could also hire someone to spend time with the animal, even take taxi rides with it around the city, if the domesticated beast proved insomniac. But then, that resembled the human gesture of hiring an au-pair and my animal risked becoming an undesired version of a mini-me. My head nodded thoughtfully at the dog while chewing slowly at the epiphany about how similar the parent/progeny bond was to the master/pet liaison, including the time constraints and the quick reversal of fortune.

At the next stop, both the dog and the seemingly homeless person abandoned me to a handful of alienated single-traveling adults. The surrounding empty space looked so tight and compact, it gave me solace from the amorphous dearth of everything else. The looming divorce dispatched away all superfluous thoughts. Ethereal and hard to keep on a short leash, they escaped the mandatory inventory preceding all such marriage disruptions. Saddened at the prospect of losing any of them, it dawned upon me that had I needed a loan, as if in the middle of a cold night I would

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wake up terrorized by my sudden poverty of spirit; I would have no collateral. Divorce did not come cheaply in New York City. It left no thoughts outside the barren ones about marital escape.

Imagination dwindling, Wordscapes became attractive on my app store. “It built vocabulary,” the ad said, while it did not mention, “and erased ideas”. It was Scrabble for dummies, with easy access to clues for failure to recall four, three, and on rare occasions five and six-letter words. The clues were contingent on watching ads for a single one-letter clue. Some ads promoted games presented seductively as a way to connect to our more successful representatives: the games of CEOs or those who read fast, or the few chosen ones who fell asleep while still leading the masses. Escapism became the distance between the physical subway community and the illusion of working slogans about wasting time. “Wasting-time folks, unite!” Humans worked, and lived, and loved so differently, but didn’t mind wasting time as a community. Overwhelmed by the potential, I started playing it.

At the end of the day, taking the morning trains in the opposite direction, Wordscapes resembled a *memento mori* in Dadaism, Tristan Tzara’s version of the game. Only, Tzara cut off sentences into words and letters and then assembled them at random into poetry. Wordscapes required word-building through letter permutations keeping everyone afloat inside well-determined bubbles of privacy. Too wasted to think, as if having ingested a daily dose of roofie, noting patterns of meaning among letters kept me alert and gratified enough to behave and keep quiet from work to home. Everyone around behaved. Busboys on their way to a dinner shift were pressing earbuds harder into their waxed ears getting ready for their prescription. Prostitutes, perhaps anxious about the whimsical weather, were taking furtive looks into their phones’ screens, administering themselves whatever medication someone provided. Teachers in worn-out suits were falling asleep, burdened by choices: New Jersey by taking the Path Train from the 14th street train station or New Jersey by the newly revamped World Trade Center Path. And it dawned upon me that I could never waste time in style, like Kellyanne Conway during presidential time, or like her husband at family dinners. My Wordscapes felt more like bonding with Sarah Sanders’s penchant for words of escape while performing press conferences in public. For a moment I envied her fluency in emotion regulations: walling them off, but then, like a good Christian, I pushed that sinful thought away and deleted the app.

It was past 9:00 AM when I stepped into my first train the next day. A Facebook alert noted that a Romanian FB friend was intrigued by a domestic film festival recently held at the Bucharest National Theatre, an institution filled to the brim with the local thespian talent. A monarchist when not thinking, I momentarily wondered if Prince Duda of Romania, a thespian youth once, had ever played on that stage. Or maybe he only recorded the intermission gossip, as the Internet blather went. Another FB alert observed that at the ceremony a local band played its own pop compositions and upset many in attendance. Funny comedy of Eastern European circumstances; the Romanian jury bestowed its highest award on a thoroughly regional movie, among strong smells of French perfume and visual displays of Italian brands. Their moneyed carriers felt insulted and hurt to be exposed and mass-envied on waves of native music. Understanding the conundrum, my body shook with the discomfort of addicts in rehab missing their drug of choice. The FB posting exuded intellectual dislocation of a Danubian odor; a tulip dreaming of being a rose and blaming itself for not having chosen to incubate a different bulb, while haplessly ignorant that roses don’t spread from bulbs.

Outside the subway station, the rain drizzled cold and forlorn, spreading impending fear about yet another meeting with yet another divorce lawyer. I walked along following the Google Maps directions and ignoring the closed umbrella clutched under my freezing fingers. The lower Broadway address made my heart beat with dread as I wondered if it were the building where, in the

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fall of 1996, I had worked as a paralegal waiting for the New York bar exam results. Past connections hurt more often than they could help. It wasn't. It was far more seductive in its shabbiness. Asking for directions seemed a lost cause and forgotten custom. His office, at the end of the hallway, I reached through trial and error. As soon as I stepped inside the makeshift office, I knew I would sign the retainer agreement. Was there ever a reason to read the label of any \$7 bottle of wine, if that was your top of the line? Maybe, if you expected it to say "Horizon Organic Milk."

Hidden by the stacks of papers on his desk, the time compressed so much everything to cry about intimidation at 50 had dissipated. That many years ensured two consecutive adverse possessions over one's land; if I couldn't use it to acquire ownership over my own two feet to stand up and walk away, then the fault was in my stars. We shook hands before I turned around pondering if we would ever meet again.

Taking the train to bring my pre-teen daughter to an afterschool event, I was finding the middle letter of various words spelled inside the car, impervious to the subway moving as slowly as death through my domestic tormentor. Did I really want to go home? A panic attack engulfed me like quicksand; the third one in two days. From movies, I knew to stay still. I skipped a few breaths but when a couple stood up to exit, instinctively I ventured for the warmth of their seats only to find a stranger's presence relishing it too, next to me. We smiled in recognition, both embarrassed at our daily excitement. My breathing went from none into imperceptibly low. Sensing recovery, the quicksand regrouped and pulled me down with renewed strength. Eyes wide open, I raised my gaze to look around at my commuting fellas. Could any of them throw me a lifeline? Insulated in their individuality, haplessly, they remained distracted. Ignored, I was drowning into anguish. I diagnosed the trick. Amorphous, the agony would become unending torture. Confining it to a category was my only chance to outpace it. Sucked in, I had to hurry. Which one would I choose? Unmatched expectations: the self-imposed disgrace of having let down those who depended on me. The angst amassed under that dome! As a young assistant professor, I slept with a former high school classmate out of the guilt I bore for his broken marriage and alcoholic debasement, whose start I located at the prom when I refused his invitation. Or even years earlier, while just out of high school, still a law school student, I went so far as to accompany an older, obviously impotent professor to his tryst place, so he could brag about us and the neighbors would see us going in, only to apologize after the prerequisite minutes while we prepared dinner that mom's train had arrived and I was due to pick her up.

Recollections listed, I waited for a few moments. Alas, this specificity did not reduce the fright of facing what once was home. Pain became my walking. Distraction could only come from the fossette of introspection. I turned it to the maximum.

Disappointing those who placed their trust in me had long been my Hades. How to avoid slipping down there defined my life. The anguish at the thought that, being the klutz I was, I would eventually trip and end up there anyway had grown steadily throughout my life and become a treacherous two-headed monster. One skull contained the excruciating terror of flawed parenting growing out of my contorted reaction to the vacillations of a spouse who wouldn't stay and wouldn't leave. Seduction dissipated into painful anger at the stubbornness of life preventing him from staying, convoluted in a volcano of rage at the final resolution which came with a choice: the dissolution of life itself or that and more—the added bonus of sacking beforehand a misguided marriage. Unable to stop our marital walk toward nothingness, covered in so much past for so little future, death seemed suddenly neither cold nor callous in its impatient, but fickle, call. Blindfolded, he was wobbling with a butcher knife pointed at us, and I, positioned in front of my daughters as a human wall, did not run for cover. Was I the hero or was I the valet in this story?

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With no luxury to philosophize, I quickly visualized my dread of parental and matrimonial fiasco situationally: two welded edges of the same block of fear. The opposite ends of a seesaw, having co-created the condition, they were mutually responsible for its existence. A seesaw with compatible partners balanced the beam. Facing each other, they promised to be alert at the other's intentions. Fairness required they would take turns and push off the other with the precision of a pendulum while holding tight so no accidents would diminish their joy. Eventually, the repetition brought respite and the respite pleasure, building trust.

I had blamed myself for having closed my eyes in abandon, powered to the heights. Had I relied on the rules of the game, though, not on trust? Watching me, "Carpe diem" must have overcome him. He shared his seat with a third player, because of, or in spite of, his growing weakness and powerlessness. His gambit: to preempt me. Opening my eyes, I saw his begging me to forgive his need to feel alive, even if all he could struggle for was ruin: everyone's. Standing up, they readied themselves to watch me fall all the way down. The kids in the playground shouted instructions on how I could break the fall with my legs. Arrogantly, I ignored them.

Day-dreaming that reckless moment, the conductor announced that we had reached my station. I stood up and walked out in amazement: no scratches on my calves. The train delivered my body, a piece of damp cloth exactly 8 minutes away from home. Rhetorical questions pushed and pulled at me, doing double duty as both accelerator and breaks. Would it be possible to imagine the upcoming divorce gently pressing the water out of me and have me dried-out flat? Or should I expect twists and wringing spins? I used to be good at Physics.

The following morning, a stranger's question interrupted a feeling of meaningless dread:

"Are you from here?"

An impulsive nod encouraged her to show me her Google Map screen. I recognized the route and directed her gaze to various stops where she would have to change trains. I could have said:

"Follow me. I'm going in the same direction."

I didn't. Would that be the reason I was being sued for divorce? I made sure I stepped into a different car.

A homeless person with a speech impediment got in. Determined, he shook his McDonald's paper cup clarifying the purpose of his incomprehensible tirade. How much change would generous people throw his way had he spoken a foreign language, as impervious to understanding as his gibberish, but properly enunciated? Should I start begging in Romanian reciting the *Iliad*? Would a stutter open more purses?

The weekend arrived and passed by without one single subway ride. Monday morning ushered in hundreds of emails I had longed to read. I was curious to see if my Romanian friend had been allowed to read my Securitate file. Not a word. The fear of irrelevance veered into another panic attack about the bottomless mediocrity my life had been. In high school, I exhibited the traits of a great young communist presiding over 1000 high school students. Then, at barely 18, I passed one of the most demanding college admission tests in the first try. I graduated first in my class if you discounted the two ahead of me, who benefited from an extra 0.50 because they were leaders in the Student League of the Communist Party, and now, there was nothing I could brag about.

I changed trains and sat down. This Monday morning didn't shape well. I tried to read the ads on the walls of the car. Nothing to hold my gaze. Alas, my phone vibrates. A friendly face all the way in Cuba replied. Earlier in the day, having read the BBC news that Charles and Camilla were going to visit Cuba, I remembered other once-disgraced royal couples, Carol and Elena Lupas of Romania, or George V and Wallis Simpson, who visited La Habana early last century. Having stayed at my favorite hotel there, I had emailed a friend for ironic relief:

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“I just read Charles and Camilla are coming to Havana. Please tell me they are staying at Hotel Nacional de Cuba!!! Abrazo.”

His reply filled me with hope for the human race:

“Who are Charles and Camilla? I do not know them.”

Joyful, the crust of bitterness melted away, and I looked around as if to share the bounty of happiness I was basking in. A colleague, who until then had ignored me, took my shining face as an invitation and started a conversation about where I stood with my oldest daughter’s college application. Out of it, I didn’t reply, although I had meant to. A quick life assessment time-traveling back to my youthful resolve to do well in school and then time-traveling forward to the present, into fiasco through lottery-confusion, the philosophical pillar of my adopted country, I coughed hard into his face, so he could flee in horror at my lack of proper conduct. No luminous point of my past shone so brightly that I could use it as a magic baton to guide my daughter with: “When I was your age I did this and look where I am today!” Today, I recoiled; I was as far away from my dream as ever. My excuse? I never really had a dream to accomplish. I only fantasized the possible: escaping my confining birthplace, where marriage unions were bartered at birth with cemetery lots thrown in for padding the deal. Growing up never healed my doubts about my abilities to become a remarkable writer. Looking at my colleague, my lack of quantifiable personal achievement, the badge of honor I used to let my girls enjoy the freedom to successfully surpass me, had vanished. Faced with my silence, he was addressing me slightly louder and slower, probably thinking, a foreigner, I didn’t comprehend the basic words he was employing. Tolerantly, he eventually stopped. If, since birth, he could barely drudge his way through English, how could I be expected to know *his* English, that of a comfortably situated bureaucrat? That we could communicate was merely a sign of his tolerance. Only God knew how many mistakes I was making while he refused to care or spot them. When a tall guy stepped on my toes, I stopped paying attention. I remembered the first time my toes had been crushed: feeding an apple to a calf in my grandparents’ farm, she stepped on my toes. I started crying, but did not move, and the calf started licking my face. This time, I moved when everybody in the car stood up and hurried out.

In the evening, the train arrived as I was swiping my card through the turnstile. Would I make it? Such an exciting moment, like the opening of a \$5 lottery ticket: mostly you won nothing, and on rare occasions, you won what you spent so you would buy another ticket. The second one was a guaranteed defeat, but the thrill of spending gains overcame the loss. You remained with the feeling of success. I ran downstairs and followed immediately after a young man. So nimble and slightly out of breath, I felt everything was possible, and as I made my way to a seat I knew what I would cook for dinner: his ethnicity, fish and chips.

The following morning I rode a Citi Bike as if slicing a piece of the Manhattan loaf of bread: not perfectly across, and gulping down the crumbs, I made my way to the commuter train. That loaf had been out of the oven for a while. The temperature was barely 40F and I wore no gloves. Somehow, having docked the bike and going down the stairs to the subway, I thought I had just reached the high point of my day.

How miserably misplaced that thought proved, almost like protected intercourse with a condom made of recycled paper products. A colleague left a message inquiring into my behind-the-scenes leadership saving the students involved in a 2016 sit-in at Columbia from unwarranted expulsion. Relieving my moment of glory, I went through the day ignoring the dread, until I found myself across from a mother deep asleep with her 8-10-year-old daughter, dead tired and laying down on her, with Balthusian abandon, while her 10-12-year-old son kept himself alert by playing a video game. Instinctively, under the weight of my inquisitive inspection of her kids punctuated by assiduous typing, the mother woke up, a lioness ready to shred me to pieces if I proved dangerous to

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her kids! Embarrassment slowly sipped into my veins. “Migrants in the time of Trump” had replaced baseball as the national sport. I.C.E. chased migrants until they became exhausted and frightened like animals and the rest of us fattened up. My life’s irony was a husband-savior surviving to see his claim to fame slowly disappear: having helped me escape Romania to grow roots in this terrorizing place of the meek immigrant.

The rain forecast for the following morning remained the guess I had suspected, and my decision to wear suede was just right for the early morning of March. A ride behind a young man with a full head of hair, an unzipped black leather jacket and a fit figure squeezed in black jeans made my blood warm up, every inch of my body making it arch-ready for the day ahead. He turned left after a few minutes. I continued ahead, taking in the public bathroom smell in a city devoid of public bathrooms. A woman waiting for a bus or a Via share spat in the street in a gesture of gender security I hadn’t seen since I used to accompany mom’s hubby and my dear dad, a much-encouraged state-endorsed relationship, to his soccer meetings. That was the only environment soviet Romania stomached closeted gay men publicly engage in friendly banter and rare shoving. Macho, my dad added a twist: spitting and blowing his nose in the street.

When I docked my Citi Bike at the 13th Street and 7th Avenue station, I was out of breath and slightly aroused by the ride-provided friction, as if I had been in a cycling class. A younger man must have smelled the emanating hormones and smiled invitingly. I smiled back in a nice farewell to life above the ground.

The train was in the station and one seat by the door shone its dirty orange at me. I grabbed it as an email announced CNSAS had accepted my request to search for my Romanian Securitate files. The script logline slowly materialized: the star of the 35th high school reunion was coming home from America amid preparations to hail her as a local heroine. Briefly, the heroine viewed herself as quite the opposite—a failure. Her ambivalence only fomented local gossip, with friends and family taking sides: some admired her for having left behind an academic future for an insecure future abroad; while others wondered whether her assumed high-ranking membership in Securitate, reasoned as a prerequisite for her early meteoric success as much as her scholastic excellence, continued abroad. Contrary to their suspicions she had no Soviet collaborator past, having been unable to interest the organization, she believed. Indeed, Securitate had never attempted to recruit her. Unbeknownst to all, her high school lover, and Math teacher, had also been assigned to evaluate her Soviet worthiness. He vetoed her recruitment. Was it love? Was it envy for her success? It was all a mystery she did not even suspect.

Distracted by the 4-bar Internet access and the news my iPhone bit and spit up for me I read:

“Kentucky governor signs bill outlawing sex between people and animals—Kentucky had been one of the final few states to not have a law banning bestiality, alongside Wyoming, New Mexico, West Virginia, Hawaii and D.C.”

Smilingly, I imagined Mitch McConnell taking it from Trump in his home state of Kentucky. The law didn’t seem to care if different bestial species, a hog and a dog, put it to each other.

The Sunday morning commute started too late to work out smoothly. I had planned baking a brioche for breakfast. Turned out to be a rock. I did my shopping at Whole Foods, further accumulating a delay, and the *Balthazar* baguette was softly bending in my bag. Everything followed in that mold except him: a naked, chiseled upper body playing sensual music, eyes searching for a buyer. The old, good-enough-to-pay had just received a new spin.

“Monday, Monday, ...” the song went. What a happy Monday morning on an electric hybrid Citi Bike in the crisp morning air of this year’s Fools’ Day! Maybe this month my editor would tell me the book on irony is a hit. Maybe the publisher of my book on a new way of doing legal research

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would celebrate its quick publication. Maybe a screenplay of mine would interest a producer. Maybe my 30 years post-college would make me professionally proud. Or maybe this was exactly how April Fools' Day was supposed to play out.

My feet hurt badly throughout the day. Small shoes. Wide feet.

I got all fancy to attend a ceremony at the Museum of the City of New York celebrating the work of public high school students on the history of New York. My daughter's teacher had invited me during the parent-teacher meeting a few weeks back, and I had mentioned it to my daughter. Nothing more was said. I arrived at the museum and while a guard was checking my bag I read her text asking me not to show up. Just then my bunions pushed through the boots' leather as she had pushed out of me more than a decade ago, when running-around doctors missed to administer the epidural.

About three hours later I was attending Tim Blake Nelson's *Socrates* at the Public Theatre, a play about being true to oneself. Had I stayed and attended the ceremony, ignoring my teenager's wish, I might have been forgiven, especially that she won first prize. Watching *Socrates*, I evaluated my true nature: I relished my strength in giving her, her dad, and her sister, the freedom to choose and then respect their choices. "Bullshit," someone should say. My daughter had no idea I had already arrived at the Museum when I read her message: her desire might have evolved had I told her where I was. My true nature? As my bag was searched, I read the names of the students invited to attend, and my high school daughter's name wasn't listed. For a moment I thought she bragged. Then I thought the list contained the winners, and we would both be embarrassed later on.

Did I stay true to my nature? If that meant negotiating the myriad of changes molding it. *Socrates* understood that and chose to submit, probably tired.

In the sharp morning, hair floating above her head, she was standing by the side of a seedy street, her midriff exposed like sun rays warming up the dump barren land below. Was she hitchhiking? Why didn't I stop to offer her a ride across the city on the back of my Citi Bike? Moments like this, when I noticed the gym-abused bodies of youth, male and female, I had confirmation of my fluid sexuality. But then, among the neutered subway crowd, I wondered if survival was an option.

Like the People's Republic of China, the Subway Republic of New York was filled with hopeless faces continuing a despised routine which put food on their crafted table in a mortgaged apartment in the center of the Wall Street universe. Only the roofied and the weak of brain didn't understand their cell-limited, uniformed life.

That evening, a uniquely protruding belly stopped barely an inch away from my sited face. The only thing remotely similar belonged to various co-working librarians. Concentration dissipated so dramatically that I had almost missed my stop, thankfully noticing his disappearance. I got out and wondered if, by chance, he would accompany me in the next train. A depressing nimble thought strolling along uninhabited by its nakedness.

No. He didn't stalk me; he had been stood up. Returning to the subway after shopping for dinner and my pre-teen daughter's weekly school lunch, I ran into him standing inconspicuously by the turnstiles and staring at his phone in a post *coitus interruptus* manner: the interaction seemed to have been one-sided and abruptly interrupted. His facial hair, so neatly groomed, showcased his head so inappropriately well it looked badly photo shopped. Was it fun being him? -- unexpectedly crossed my mind. I couldn't tell.

Was it fun being me? Not in the subway. That agitated underground space unnerved and distracted me, simultaneously sending me into spiraled depths of agony. Luckily, like a badly wound-up clock, it always spat me out into those warm, pleasant-to-the-skin zephyrs. Outside, I would inhale with zest. So many days of spring left to conjure!