

Simultaneity

*L*istening to Lydia Davis read her father's story about the boys playing war and accidentally killing one of their number, reminds him that these stories are of a type—they are in fact an event, or a series of events, and the thing that keeps them going is that we keep asking ourselves, "Then what happened? And then? Then what?"

He's thinking to distill that approach into a story that might just be called "The Event." There is an event, possibly a completely unspecified event, after which people need to know what happened next. Perhaps he can tell of people coming and reacting to the event, and things happening next, but never addressing what the original event was. Does anyone even need to know?

Ever since, no matter how hard he tried to forget, an image would come back to him, sometimes insinuating itself into his current experience like a face in a crowd, a face so similar to someone he knew that it could haunt him for hours, and at other times startling him, jarring him out of his train of thought, like a grinning fiend pressed against the window of a passing bus, leering out in exaggerated colors, so detailed he can see the wet marks of its teeth on the filmy glass.

It's the long boot, like Lynch's *Angriest Dog in the World*, always straining against its leash. This time a man is waiting for his PC to finish booting. Perhaps like so many today, his PC has just received an update from Microsoft, and it is booting. Booting and booting, like the angriest dog in the world. The slowest boot in the world. "One moment please." The screen glows in some temporary font, and insists it will be done soon. "You

can just sit back and relax,” it says, among other things, a quasi-random cycle of palliative euphemisms that appear just often enough to demand attention within this helpless haze of stultifying emptiness. Slowly the insipid reassurances burn their low-dot-count letter-forms into his retina, where the coincidence of certain pixels common to each phrase leaves a permanent green after-image across his fatiguing foveae. Focus and distraction have both become impossible, and the limbo between them fills his brainpan with scummy, tepid, grey, occluded dishwater.

A pep-talk sales pitch from an outlandish tee-twiddly-hee Uncle Hoohah, apparently talking to a roomful of kiddy-widdies, who are waiting eagerly for their Next Big Treat.

In his story, there is an elaborate machine that cooks up the next thought. A man sees some woman jerking her baby around in the shopping center, and the machine—it cranks up a thought. Slow gears turn, and an iris dilates at the roll-up door on the loading dock. A pink shadow wobbles outside in the dim light, without detail or specificity, just perceptible through the peep-hole. There are no words, just a little color and texture. Also a feeling, but not visceral at all, more like the name of a feeling. The thought isn't verbal, either, not like an actual thought, more like the sound or the smell of a thought, before words, not getting past the rhinoencephalon.

None of that is necessary. The machinery just presents the thing, which then loiters around outside the door, on the dock and out of sight, shifting from one side to the other, restlessly, as if to announce itself without promising anything. If the peephole hadn't irised open a little he would never know it was there. But there it is, available. He has a choice now. Open the door, or move on. He already knows this thought, in so many ways, but will it be worth thinking it? What does it have to offer? Will it make him happy or annoyed, wiser or agitated, affirmed or soothed? The machinery is vibrating very gently, inspiring him to let the door roll up and enjoy the flood and flow of this one, which reeks of relevance.

But he doesn't need any of this mechanism right now, his mind is aglow with silence, full milliseconds since the last one barged in. Sometimes they just march through, little dots in a chain of content, threaded together like cattle on a coffle, and plug themselves into the big engine, and swell up like

weather balloons as the huge pumps and conductors ferry each link up into the bursting business and onto the surround screen, activating valves and relays into every sub-station of the sensorium.

“What a bitch.” The man watches the thought enter his mind, and then he watches it go away. Sometimes, like now, the body is involved, and other more massive and powerful machinery is invoked. Other times, the equipment thrums once or twice and the thought is done. Occasionally, it trips an array of charged mechanisms in other departments and the whole assembly flies into an unstoppable gyration of unwinding discharge that takes hours to dissipate, leaving signs of impact damage everywhere. All this elaboration of connected complexity stands, thrumming, always ready and eager to be concocting another symphony of experience.

He was thinking of a story by Saroyan, and the image came to him of a man who is busy doing something—perhaps just walking—and then stops. The man looks at the path ahead, and senses the surrounding landscape, and the one single thought in his head—that it is time to stop—fades away, leaving only a blank. And then everything else stops, the birds in the sky, the rustling leaves in the trees, the clouds, the bubbling water in the brook, the dog running across the field. And in that stopped environment, something emerges back into action.

Perhaps the man is thinking and observing. The writer found him walking across the terrain, which itself is perhaps still frozen, but the man? Perhaps, like the writer, he sees a slow sequence of scenes which freeze, and for some reason, in the back of his mind, the writer wondered where he had seen this man before. But there is no action anymore, because the man has stopped and has in consequence stopped his entire world, and all that emerges now is the writer’s own thought, this memory of the man, although there is no interest in repeating the dream. The writer, too, has stopped.

It wasn’t until he had lived for a while as a dog that he realized how much faith is required by the simple act of walking. One doesn’t think of a dog having faith, per se, or of ruminating much about walking, and that’s the problem. The hind legs follow after the forelegs more or less automatically, not that any dog couldn’t intentionally move them, with deliberation.

The problem comes to the surface when a dog realizes he has no way of knowing whether one or the other hind leg will trip over something. One never gets to see what is in front of the hind legs — not really. One assumes (or hopes) that nothing underneath one's body has changed since one's front legs stepped over, but this is faith, not knowledge, and it perturbs the mind once attention is put there. A dog does well not to dwell on such things. Being around humans compounds the problem, but what is one to do about that? Humans are a part of canine biology, part of our lives; their environment, full of thought and clutter and self-activating devices, is ours.

And yet, he had felt the moment of exhilaration in the bluebird's breast as he leans forward from the high branch and leaps into space, throwing himself away from stasis and foundation, casting his fate to invisible support and the tiny sufficient strength of hollow wings. He asked this bird, "Can you remember that thrill when you first leapt into the sky?" He said he feels an echo of that explosive moment every time he flies. A dog too must drink in the vertigo, gather his four legs, lean into the wind, over the yawning abyss, and walk.

And now he is recording. He didn't want to. There's a certain finality to recording, especially when you don't know what you're saying. It's been three minutes and twenty seconds now. Nothing is resolved. Time is passing again, as always. A dog barks metronomically in the street. Birds once frozen have begun to fall out of the sky, twisting and turning. Their feathers flutter, their beaks wide in momentary surprise, talons clutching reflexively at empty air. Through the clouds they fall, luxuriating in the cold mist, the white droplets flying past, weightless, while below the dog barks, and the frogs croak, and the crickets chirp. Periodically, something hops, jumps, burrows, nuzzles, furrows its way under rotting leaves. Crunch, and a bird alights upon the ground, and the dog barks on.