



Julien Jonas Bismuth

A Hold

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" Each story is dedicated to a different you (you who know who you are)"

Julien Jonas Bismuth

The promise

There was a man who made a promise to himself. He made it on the first day of spring, which happened to be a gray and rainy day that year.

He had awakened with a distinct feeling of anxiety. His throat was sore, his head was in a fog, and he felt weak and irresolute.

"I overslept," he said to himself, thinking that perhaps the only way to combat his grogginess was to make a strong and binding promise to himself. At the thought of this, he perked up. Scouring his kitchen for sugar, he tried to think of a good resolution. He could think of none. It was only when he was cleaning the shaving soap from his face that it came to him.

"I promise never to use the same word twice," he said aloud, and having said it suddenly realized the folly of his words. However, he was an honorable man and felt that he would have to keep to his promise.

That day, he did not say or write anything. He went out and bought the largest dictionary which he could find and a thesaurus.

Needless to say, he was eventually forced into both verbal and written communication. It only took him three months to reach the point where he could no longer clearly express himself in his native tongue. On that day, he stayed home, brooding.

That night, he slept very little. In fact he did not sleep at all. He lay in bed, straining to keep his eyes shut and thought about his future.

"I could learn other languages, and live the life of a nomad, moving as soon as I use up a language," he thought. Trying to imagine this singular lifestyle, he saw the world as a patchwork quilt, with each country marked in a different color. The quilt became a gameboard, and he pictured himself as a small figurine, holding a tattered carpet-bag, moving from one territory to the next. He tried to calculate how long it would take him to run through all the languages in the world. Pausing briefly, he struggled once more to determine if thinking a word was putting it to use. He dismissed the thought, and returned to his imaginary gameboard.

He pictured the small figurine as it moved slowly from one irregular shape to the next. So as to keep track of its movements, once the playing piece had left a territory he barred that country with a thick red "X".

He was surprised at how easily and how clearly he could imagine the board. It did not dissolve or fade as daydreams are wont to do but remained like a clear projection in his mind. Eventually, the playing piece had exhausted the whole board and was back at its starting point.

"I could learn Esperanto, but that will only last me a couple of months as well. I could learn sign language, morse code and then braille, but are they languages or simply sign systems, and if so, what is the difference?" he pondered as the image of the gameboard disappeared.

"I could invent words," he thought, and smiled at the idea of inventing a new word each day for the same thing. He wondered if it was possible for a man to exhaust all the possibilities afforded by the phonetic system. One could always make longer words, and he smiled again at the thought of a language composed of extremely long words, which once used, had to be discarded.

He contemplated suicide, and then the life of a hermit, and at the thought of the latter, he fell asleep. By that time, it was already morning. He woke up late in the afternoon. Once again, he felt groggy and frail, even slightly annoyed.

"I'll break my promise," he declared out loud, surprising himself with the shrill of his voice. He felt a brief pang of guilt, before letting a warm feeling of relief wash over him. He wondered if all emotions had set temperatures, and tried to think of a way of gauging them.

He stretched and made as if to say something else. Hearing a sharp knock on the front door, he got up and smiled, finally realising that in making his last statement he had already broken his promise

Something to stand on

Having determined that he could not escape his stated obligation to deliver his speech, he then went out to look for something to stand on.

First however, he printed leaflets, or rather only one leaflet. So, in that sense, it was more of a letter or an invitation.

The paper read:

" A soliloquy, to be delivered,
at _____ on _____
of _____, at _____,

in the grand manner,
from a designated one to a singular other."

He only had one pocket, and it was rather small, so rather than fold his missive, he simply held it in his hands, and proceeded on his way (which happened to be a rather precarious and narrow path, littered with jagged refuse, bordering on deep and frightful chasms and putrid quagmires, circumventing patches of quicksand and deep tarpits, winding through the dark forbidding forest, even turning at one point into a thin worn rope bridge which had been thrown across the deep granite gorge).

He first went to the outskirts of town, waiting for nightfall before climbing the fence of the building site for the great war machine. The structure was nearly finished, and the workers had been putting on the final touches of paint. He stole across the yard and made for the dais which had been erected for the inaugural speech.

He paused in front of the white round cylindrical platform, festooned with ribbons and garlands of silk flowers, and stood in contemplation of it for some time. He did not think of himself as a lazy man. In fact he had been known to rise to rather formidable challenges. So it was not simply out of lack of zeal that he decided to pass on the dais. Nor was it out of fear of reprisal or civic responsibility, for such constraints paled in comparison to the urgency and importance of his task. Rather, he found the structure to be inappropriate, a touch too celebratory perhaps.

He turned and wandered around the building site, before pausing in front of a work table, consisting of a sheet of wood on two sawhorses. He gazed at this object for a brief moment, scratching his ear and even glancing briefly at the paper which he still held in his hand.

Glancing up from the table, he spotted two ladders, an A-frame and an extension ladder, and he smiled briefly.

He imagined himself, first standing on the apex of the A-frame ladder, his singular audience looking up at him. Then, he pictured himself on the last rung of the prop ladder, seeing it supported against a wall, then laying against a tall palm tree, and finally freestanding, gently swaying in the air, as he struggled to keep his footing and balance. The ladder tipped sharply in his mind's eye, and he envisioned his spectator rushing to catch at the wood rungs before it hit the ground.

He briefly glanced at a chair that was lying on its side, and considered using that as well. Then he took in an overturned bucket, a steel beam, a tractor shovel, a drum barrel, a wood crate, and a pile of bricks, trying each time to weigh the effect that they would have on his presentation.

He felt that he was getting nowhere as images of him placed on a pile of refuse covered by a tarp, or balancing on a pole, or sitting on a rock, or standing on a trampoline flashed through his head. He let himself imagine a speech wherein the speaker would be bouncing up and down on the elastic cloth of the trampoline as he delivered his oration. Smiling gently or gently smiling, he turned and left. He had decided to stand on his own two feet, and to stand his feet on the ground, which was, after all, his native ground.

As he was cautiously making his way back on the precarious path, sweating profusely at the slightest sound, for he knew that at this hour the forest was riddled with murderous roving bands of highwaymen, he realized that he had forgotten something.

He had nothing to fall back on. He stopped in his tracks, suddenly oblivious to the threatening surroundings, and proceeded to sit on the side of the road.

He thought of using a bucket, a pond, a mattress, a blanket, a fog, a tub, a pile of fur pelts, a puddle, a stretched tarpaulin, a bean bag, a pile of ropes, a sandbox, a stuffed animal, a jar, a tire, a bedspring, a crate, a toolbox, a couch, a wedding cake, a mound of peat, a pillow, several pillows, a hammock, a net, a line, or a low table. He even considered tying himself to a support with a rope, so as to only fall part of the way, but that seemed inappropriate, a touch too comical perhaps.

He quickly crouched behind a tree as he noticed flickering lights in the distance. Hiding under a pile of leaves, which he also took into consideration, he waited breathlessly as the criminal band galloped past him. Once they had passed, he stood up and made his way back home, carefully keeping to the trees. He had decided that would fall back on the dirt, and preferably on his own two feet. He steeled himself against the possibility of falling on his back, or worse yet, of falling on his face. If it came to that, he would rather drop his notes and catch himself with his hands.

A Big Opening

There once was a man who ate a lot. In fact, he probably ate more than anyone ever has or will. He was a very small man which was remarkable considering his appetite, but then again he never really consumed anything.

The first thing one would notice about him was his enormous nose, and particularly his immense nostrils. Yet, that was nothing compared to the size of his mouth. When he slept, it was a thin trembling sliver. When he awoke and yawned, however, it grew to the size of a cave. As with a python or a boa, the jaw was composed of a myriad small bones which would slowly unfold to form an immense opening. This operation was slow, and ostensibly painful. He often cried from the strain of slowly stretching his skin around the imposing armature of his jaw. When he had stretched his mouth to its utmost limit, he would pause until the bones had snapped together with a sharp click. This operation was always performed in the morning. He would first soak his face in lanolin and then wrap it with hot towels, so as to loosen the skin. Once he had completed this task, he would simply keep his mouth open until he had finished eating.

He ate only once a day, in the morning, but you could also say that this meal lasted all day. Every morning, a caravan of bull carts filled with food would make their way to the meadow on the outskirts of the village near his house. First, they would circle and parade in front of him, and then a small procession of cooks would bring each individual dish before him so that he could slowly and carefully smell the food. This process was stretched out over a couple of hours. During this time, a team of young boys was responsible for mopping up the gobs of thick saliva which poured from his mouth.

Oftentimes, especially on overcast days, an older woman from the village came and sang the great songs of the Independence Wars to him as the dishes slowly circled his trembling nostrils.

When it came time for him to eat, the bull carts would line up and rapidly, almost carelessly, dump their contents into his mouth. On average he would consume twenty-five chickens, six suckling pigs, twelve roasted lambs, twelve sides of beef, two-hundred and fifty sausages, one hundred and forty-four oysters, fifty fillets of fish, fourteen portions of game fowl, at least one goose, five ducks, eighty loaves of bread, thirty gallons of rice cooked in seventeen different ways, fifty-five gallons of pasta cooked in thirty-four different ways, one hundred and thirty sticks of butter, a half-ton of assorted vegetables, forty gallons of soup, and a cartload of cheese. He would top this off with the same volume in desserts, and then the same volume again in liquids, i.e. one part coffee, one part milk, one part water, one part wine, half a part of syrup and half a part of liqueur.

When they were finished, he would stretch his mouth in order to crack his jaw which would then instantly collapse. His thin translucent skin would close over the food like a net.

Then, there was a brief interval, lasting approximately twenty-five minutes, during which he strained to keep the food inside, sweating and crying profusely. A low wailing moan often accompanied this effort, and more often than not he dug his fingernails into his skin and kicked at the dirt with his small feet. Meanwhile, the carts and the animals were removed, and a large copper vat (four feet deep and thirty feet in diameter) was brought out in front of him. A group of twelve men with an imposing wooden hoist would then slowly lift him up, and shove pillows under him so as to bring him up to the level of the receptacle..

Then, while a small marching band played a series of folkloric tunes, he would begin to chew his food.

Something which I forgot to mention, but which certainly has its importance, is the fact that he had no stomach. He simply had a deep recess in the back of his mouth. So when he chewed, he simultaneously spat out his food. This is why I said at the beginning that he never consumed anything. He would move a portion of food to the front of his mouth and press it towards the grinding molars, slowly rubbing the food into his tongue so as to taste it before spitting it out. Meanwhile, his huge nostrils would flutter vigorously, absorbing the dying scents of the comestibles.

He was a man who lived not on food but rather on its smell, its appearance, and to a lesser degree, its taste. Those were his sources of nourishment. Nevertheless, he had a great appetite. In fact one could say that he was greedy. Seeing as taste, smell and appearance are rather light, he needed gargantuan portions of food in order to feel even partially sated. Moreover, he was picky. He liked and demanded variety, yet the food he spat out was wasted to all but him. The villagers first tried to consume it, then fed it to their pigs, but his pungent saliva gave it an offensive bitterness. In the end, it was simply discarded or used as manure.

The most incomprehensible part of this narrative may be that he was tolerated and catered to by the community for such a long time. Part of it may have had to do with the fact that he was a very agreeable man, and had a beautiful tenor voice. He was well-liked. On a more materialistic note, he was also a famous worldwide attraction, and contributed largely to the wealth of the small community. He also died at a young age in a tragic and senseless accident.

Host

...but when I arrived he was already there. Just as I had been called upon to play the part of the host, I could tell by the look of him that he had been asked to do the same. He had doubtless received the same anonymous invitation card in the mail, with the time of arrival inscribed discreetly on the inside of the envelope. We both stood there, staring at one another in our dinner suits, wondering what sort of hosts we both were. Needless to say, this had never happened to me before. I always knew upon arrival at the hall whether I was the host of the house or at the house of the host. Like everything else in life, or rather everything else that I can think of at the moment, it was just a matter of time and place. When I was the first to arrive, I knew to welcome the others as their host. On the other hand, if someone greeted me at the door, I gladly took on the role of their grateful host, surrendering to their good graces as one does to a warm bath.

We looked around at the familiar grounds of the reception hall. I played absently with my hair while he brushed some gravel off the landing with his shoes. Neither of us dared to speak for fear of the consequences. Neither of us dared to ring, for though there was a faint chance that a third party was already inside, it would have been an absolute disgrace for either of us to knock at the door only to later find out that he should have been the one opening it.

It was only a matter of time before the others would arrive. I looked at my watch to see if I had perhaps arrived a bit late or early. I was right on time, and as I looked up, I saw that he had done the same and had

come to the same conclusion. It was then that we first smiled at each other. Soon we had started a conversation, firmly avoiding the matter at hand and talking instead about those other things one talks about with new acquaintances. It was he who proposed that we go for a stroll and a drink. As the clock was ticking so to speak, I accepted eagerly.

We left arm in arm, taking a back-road so as to avoid meeting anyone, talking all the while as we walked briskly in unstated agreement towards a discrete watering-hole of ill-repute which we both knew all too well, though we feigned surprise and ignorance when we came upon it. It was only then that we realized that we had probably crossed paths, and not just once, but on several occasions. As it turned out, we had many things in common. It was strange, almost inconceivable, that we had not met before. Feigning to believe that our meeting was either a mishap or a coincidence, allowing ourselves to forget our previous engagement, we talked late into the night and early into the morning. We should have known better of course. Our encounter could only have been arranged for a specific purpose, and it was doubtless up to us to rise to the occasion. However, the pleasure we took in each other's company distracted us from such thoughts. There will certainly be a price to pay for this indulgence of ours. Yet, even so, I know that the memory of that delightful night will remain intact, regardless of its consequences. It is like a scrap of film or a clipped fragment of music that we can pull out and play for ourselves at any moment: not a distraction, but something else, something we can lose ourselves in, the paradox of a memory that allows us to forget the rest of our lives, however briefly.

Contract for a passerby

Two persons are passing between two points from two opposite directions. Just as the one is about to pass by the other, this text falls between them and they run into one another in an effort to catch it. This would have to be staged in advance of course. The first thing this paper asks of both parties is that they arrange precisely such an encounter. In today's world, given the climate, the shape of things and of things to come, in light of recent events and taking into account the way things are and the way they have been going, nothing can or rather should be left up to chance, though of course something always is in the end

There are two parties: the one and the other. The two are not interchangeable, nor are they equivalent, at least not with respect to this text. Having run into the other, the one promises out loud and on paper, on the back of this very piece of paper, that from that moment on, he will absolve the other of any and all debts. In other words, a declaration is made, signed by the one, that as far as he is concerned, the other owes him nothing. Previous to this encounter, the one may give the other anything, everything or nothing at all. The two do not even have to meet, they may even organize their encounter by way of a third or even a fourth

party. As for the other, he may do as he pleases throughout, he may even decide at some point that the other owes him the world. Yet, regardless of what the other does, he will never be in the one's debt, at least as far as the one is concerned. The other may choose to think differently.

A scene:

Two parties are about to pass each other by when a piece of paper suddenly falls between them . They look down at the piece of paper, turning towards it instinctively, their gazes suddenly shifting upwards as they literally run into each other. They fall and pick themselves up the ground, muttering apologies and curses, brushing their suits and collecting their things. Suddenly, the one grabs the piece of paper off the ground, turns it around to its blank side without reading the text, lays it on the other's chest, writes something on it, then signs it and states, " You owe me nothing!", holding the other by the arm, looking the other in the eye. There is a moment of silence as the the other looks his other in the eye, then the two fall back, bend forward and sideways and go their separate ways.

A Table for Two

The table is suddenly brought into the center of the room. The two waiters (one deaf, the other dumb; one a broad colossus, the other a small, taut egg-shaped man; one old and bowed, the other middle-aged and sprightly; one dressed in a yellow smoking jacket, pink bowtie, black pants, a carmine vest and black patent leather shoes, the other in a standard white waiter's tuxedo, with black pants, a black vest, and black tie) set the table down and pause.

Breaking the silence, the round manikin unfurls the white tablecloth which was previously draped over his arm, and lays it on the table with a precise snap of the wrists, nervously tugging at it with quick birdlike motions so as to center it in relation the tabletop. Meanwhile, his companion has rapidly exited the room and returned with a white vase, which he now proceeds to place on the table.

They stop and pause once more, as if to admire their work, then leave abruptly.

After a long lull, a third server comes in and closes some of the windows in the room. He returns with two chairs which he places on opposing sides of the table.

Later still, and this time the interval is even longer, he returns. He drags the table to one of the corners of the room,

and brings the chairs over to it. Both chairs are backed up against an opposing wall, thus following and recreating the corner of the room.

When the two guests arrive, they are quickly seated, and an ashtray is immediately delivered to the table. The speaker is smoking, and the white exhalations form with and around his speech. One imagines that some of the words are held and carried inside the small white puffs, briefly borne up by them before the smoke stretches and dissipates .

The miniature clouds slowly dissolve over the mouth of the plain white porcelain centerpiece. The vase is empty, it holds nothing. As the thinning smoke quietly fills the room, some of the more important words, words of promise and entreaty, slowly start to gravitate down towards the tabletop. Catching the rim of the vase, they roll around the edge of its opening, then swirl down its walls like metal beads, gradually picking up in speed before spinning to a halt at the bottom of the vessel.

Two ships crossing

-It is for both of them the launch of their maiden voyages. Their paths cross just once as they both leave the harbor and set out towards opposite corners of the horizon. In keeping with certain conventions I should and therefore will only follow one of them, as if I had sailed alongside it from the start. I will set the other vessel aside for now, bearing this single parting snapshot of it in mind. As it sails past us towards the darkening sky, a shaft of dying light briefly illuminates the towering figure of a man on its deck. He seems to rise into the light, his body poised to unfold in an expansive gesture. His chest swells and his arms start to expand as if he were about to sing out, but just then he abruptly slips back into the incipient night.

Sailing softly, swiftly cutting through the night, this other boat, our boat, fairly sings. A tight ship running in a loose sea. Tight or rather tightening, as if it were being slowly but steadily brought in upon itself. The sea on this first night is a dissembled plain of swells and eddies, yet the ship fairly cuts her way through it, holding its course along the crests and peaks of the ever-growing breakers.

Its journey is not the tale of a single night, it is rather a story that unfolds over time, that takes its time, but gradually gains in speed and haste, as if its time frame were also being reduced in size. It is like an object viewed through a lens, which, as it gradually comes into focus, simultaneously reduces and simplifies, as if it too were focusing in on itself. To picture it you first have to imagine a nice ship, a proud craft, and a sailing vessel at that. It can be a brig, a bark or a schooner, but above all it has to be new. It is unmistakably, brazenly, and eye-catchingly new, smelling of fresh timber and varnish, its sails blanched and stiff, its ropes and cables cutting the flesh of working hands with their stiff and unworn bristles. The crew however is far from being green. Instead it is a rough and mixed crowd of weathered sailors, each bearing the stamp of personal experiences and idiosyncrasies. In contrast to this motley assembly, the captain is so plain-featured as to be almost inconspicuous. The cook is thin and gaunt, the first mate is stern while the second is jovial. There is a distinguished guest on board, a man of science, and he looks the part. The darting presence of the cabin boy links these elements together by criss-crossing the various parts of the boat. Armed with rags and polish he scurries to and fro, cleaning and buffing shoes, doorknobs and railings with equal fervor, and always picking up this or that thing and putting it back in its place.

In those first heady hours of travel, the ship and its crew slowly settle into mutual understanding. There are countless small incidents and the usual bout of mishaps

and accidents. Certain things have to be fixed or adjusted, and yet what with the pace of things and the diligence of the crew, the vessel soon attains the tenuous and unquantifiable harmony of an improvised routine. This state of grace, of "things running smoothly", is only given the chance to make its appearance before it is swiftly and irreversibly interrupted. It is an interruption felt by all, one that gives rise to manifestations of shared outrage and indignation. A pall is cast upon the scene by the incident, for this sense of trespass is coupled with the distinct scent of irreversible damage. One could say that the ship is suddenly gripped by an attenuated sense of gloom, and I say attenuated only because of the incongruous presence of a subtle and yet profoundly comic undercurrent in its midst.

The cabin boy is impervious or rather oblivious to this development. If anything he doubles or even quintuples his efforts. His efficiency increases, his movements attaining the cool precision of clockwork. The captain on the other hand grows increasingly somber and sedate, sinking deeper into his chair and staring fixedly at his vacant tabletop. Meanwhile the cook mans the kitchen like an overtaxed engine, his frenetic movements locked between the four walls of the small kitchen. As for the others, it is hard to say. With few exceptions, they simply go about their business in the usual manner, participating in the general movement. The only difference is a detectable anxiety on their part, and an exaggerated giddiness in their speech.

This shift in events acts like a sudden jerk on a lever, abruptly setting an implacable process into motion. As soon as it starts, it is clear that there is no stopping it. It simply follows its course, coursing through the beams and planks of the ship. It holds the ship in its grasp; it grasps the ship in its hold. It takes in everything and everyone. Though unnamed and perhaps even unnamable, it gives rise to a growing form of superstition among the cast and crew. The slightest disturbance or change is read as a sign of a simultaneously vague and terrifying doom. Yet amidst the terror an element of levity persists, imparting a certain buoyancy and flightiness to the speech and manners of those on board.

This unspeakable thing tightens and tightens in on the ship. It narrows its passages, it tapers its ends, it pulls in its corners, it splits the costs, it slashes the expenses and expenditures, it trims the loose ends and cuts off the dead weight. It puts everything in its place, it scripts the traffic, it sculpts the postures and chore-

ographs the movements. It put everything, again and again, in its place. It does this repeatedly, it does it incessantly, it is unflagging, merciless, and exacting. It never abates, it keeps going, in fact it intensifies. It even starts to encroach upon the movements of those on board, their actions suddenly appearing scripted and rehearsed. In short, it is as if a pressure were being exerted on the people and things of this boat. There is also a helping hand at work alongside it: a hand or rather a young pair of able hands that brings everything closer together by criss-crossing the various parts of the boat, armed with rags and polish, always picking up this or that thing and putting it back in its place.

In the space of an instant, the tightening takes another turn. It turns first to a literal reduction of slack in the ropes, then to a tautening of the sails, then to a shrinking of the gaps in the planks and floorboards and finally to a tightening of nerves and voices. In short it reins in anything and everything that can afford it. When this has been carried out, it takes hold of those things which can not afford it, and what with the mounting pressure of things being tightened and brought closer together, the boat suffers a sharp climb in temperatures, singing the water as it skims across it. Its sharp keel takes to riding on the crests of swells, using its mounting speed to zip along the lip of a wave, barely touching the foaming blade of water yet somehow keeping to a ever-straightening line.

The boat almost reaches a breaking or boiling point when someone, it seems to be an idle deckhand, one can't be sure from this distance, remarks out loud that some things are missing before suddenly vanishing himself. Next to go are some scattered objects that have no place to call their own, such as two spare coils of rope on the deck, an extra barrel of tar that would not fit in the hold, and an unclaimed pipe that had been forgotten on a table. These disappearances swiftly increase both in number and frequency, first taking those things that are not in use or in motion. Two sailors lay a wrench and spare bolt on a table only to see them vanish into thin air. They are taken away almost immediately afterwards, followed by a third sailor who had been stopped in his tracks by their sudden disappearance. Soon the rest of the crew and the passengers start to go. Meanwhile, the ship reduces to a thin narrow hull with a single mast and sail. Only the captain's cabin, the kitchen and a small hold remain. The boat comes to resemble a thin skipping stone, and it does in fact seem to skip across the waves, riding the breaking crest of a swell before lightly hopping to another foaming peak.

The ship shrinks to an even tighter fit. The craft is now like a small bark, whose hold is the kitchen, and whose deck holds the captain's cabin and the single mast with its triangular sail and crow's nest. Only four people remain on board: the captain, the cook, the cabin boy and the sailor keeping watch on the masthead. The cabin boy moves with

incredible speed, one that is all the more impressive given the restricted space of the vessel. He zaps about like a shaping, polishing, scrubbing, ordering, sifting, pushing, prodding, aligning, guiding, breezing current throughout the vessel. The other three keep to their roles. The captain is just as lethargic, the cook just as frantic at his static post. As for the sailor, he dozes on his perch, his feet dangling out of the shrinking basket in which he sits. This last character is the first to go, along with the anchor and the rest of the buoys. Next in line should have been the captain, but he resists heroically. First his cabin reduces to such a degree that it can only fit his seated body and his table, crowding the remaining objects (a chest, a chamber pot, a pair of boots and an empty bottle or two) around his legs. The table legs collapse against the wall, pressing his limbs against the wood planks. He suffers through this in stoic silence, groaning one last time when the ceiling falls on his head. It is then that he or rather his corpse rises to the occasion. His body starts to swell inexplicably, inflating to such a size that it strains the cabin walls. It immediately starts to rot at an accelerated pace. Three contiguous planks break in the cabin wall, a swollen purple knee popping out of the opening. The cabin widens visibly, and it looks for a second as if it will explode. Suddenly, the ship straightens and comes to. In a single heroic effort, just as the top-heavy craft is about to slide down the face of a wave, it tightens in on itself, first eliminating the cook and his kitchen with a sharp deflation of its hold. Then, with a shrill pop, it squeezes out the captain and his cabin out of the picture.

The boat is now a blade-like fin. All that remains of the mast is a willowy flagpole holding up a triangular sliver of cloth. The slim figure of the cabin boy slowly dances to a halt on the sharpening edge of the deck. He teeters briefly then catches his step. The last we see of it is the blurred image of the craft turning into something like a floating cork, or a round bowl. Then... but we would do better to stop here and return to the other craft, the one we had mentioned ever so briefly at the beginning of the story.

As you will recall, someone on its deck was about to make an expansive gesture with his arms. His mouth had opened as if to sing out but just at that moment, just as we lost sight of him, just as he was about to force the air out of his lungs, it appears that the boat and its contents suddenly came undone. Everything came apart and flew to pieces in a mute blast, the minute particles dissipating into the night air like a sneeze. It happened so quickly that all we felt (for there were several of us on the scene), all we ever captured of it was the spray of its parts against our faces, and then the curious sensation that even that vapor was further dissipating and dispersing, glancing off of our skins in ever-shrinking increments.

Our Enthusiasm

We live in a sham town, a shantytown at the edge of a vast sprawl of built things. Like everyone else, we have our ways, we have our speech, but most importantly, we have our enthusiasms. We like to say that we have kept our enthusiasms alive.

I say enthusiasms because we have always had more than one, more than several in fact. We have always had many, we have always had so very many of these, how should I call them? ... spurts or sprints, sudden lurches in our all-too common stride.

And I say common because we are. We are what they or you would call commoners. And I also say it because we walk together, we move as one in other words, in other words we somehow work together. I am not saying that we do everything together. I don't mean to imply that there are never any divergences or differences, all I mean is that even those who stray from the fold fit our common purpose. I like to think that even our differences hold us together, as if that too were something we had in common. "Like you, I am different," I like to say when I am arguing with someone.

Allow me to give you some examples of these, of our enthusiasms as I call them.

Some days for example we descend upon the fairgrounds, you just passed them on your way out here, they're just outside of town, and we raise the thousand and one flags of our interminables. They're the thousand and one flags of our interminable plans, interminable endeavors, interminable strikes, strifes, ploys, joys, etc., etc... Actually there are a thousand and three. I am letting you in on a secret here. There are a thousand and three because I added not one but two flags of my own. It's my own little joke, my way of, I don't know, I don't quite know why I did it, but it always brings a smile to my face. I am sure that some of the others did it too, and if they had who would have noticed? It's not like anyone would ever bother to count them anyway.

Other days we sneak out under the light cover of nightfall (as opposed to the dark container of night) armed to the teeth, as if in to defend ourselves from.... or as if on the prowl for... or as if we were mounting a silent attack against...

Like you I'm sure, we are fond of leaving such sentences unfinished. Or we crawl and hide fearfully in the many crevices and recesses that we have dug

up in our homes on those long winter nights whose beauty we also sing on long summer days. We hide for at least a day, if not more, and if there is one thing we excel at, it is hiding. Our hideouts are nothing short of perfect, and over the years we have mastered the art of living silently, furtively, as if the enemy were in our houses and homes, as if they were looking for us (and how we tremble at the thought of them picking up our scent, finding our trail, and burning us alive in our holes).

When two or more among our friends and neighbors decide to come together, we leave them alone for at least a week. Then we shower them with attention. We beautify and beatify them, we indulge them with sweets and ribbons and showers of sequins and sparkles. A weak passion will not survive it. A strong one will seek refuge, and if we sense that they are ready to elope, then we like to confound them by fleeing as fast as we can and leaving the township as we call it in their hands for at least a month. Some say that a month is too long, but that is our custom. We run off into the woods or make for the seaside and there we while the time away with endless meals and interminable rounds of storytelling. Slowly we filter back in, if only to provide for them discreetly, leaving things out for them. Then we slowly resume our lives, and though we are polite with them and let them have their way, finding a shack for them and all that, we are very discrete. It takes us at least a year if not more before we suddenly 'discover' that they are together and then a small committee will roll out the banners and dust off the banquet tables and gather the minstrels and songsmiths and marching bands and put together a moving feast for one and all.

We are easily moved. We like to keep things moving and we are often on the move. As you can see, when we like a word, we run with it as they say. We live by these word games of ours, these simple extensions that we draw or tease out from a word serve as guides, as, what do you call those sticks placed alongside a plant on or along which it grows? A tutor I think, or is it called a stake?

For example, there are times when we empty our houses of absolutely everything, moving everything into the large empty barn that you see in the distance. For days we camp out, subsisting on nuts, fruits, berries and crawfish. Then, late one night or early one morning, in what we like to call the gray hours of the day, we gather in the barn and move everything back in. We like to do this in the most impatient

and disorganized manner. Needless to say, things often get misplaced or displaced, and there are those who find that to be the most rewarding aspect of the whole exercise.

Like everyone else, we also have our moments of excess. We too have had dark moments in our history. I will not deal just yet with the problem of crime, for it is one that we are still in the process of developing. Suffice it to say that we are well on our way. A cursory glance at the papers will convince you of the richness and diversity of our criminal life. I don't mean the newspapers, for we have none, but the pieces of paper that are circulated among us. You will see stacks of them in the pubs or on the street, or even on your doorstep if you choose to live here. Some of them are pure fabrication of course, others are encrypted slander, of the kind that spreads the most horrible rumors in the most indirect manner, never quite telling you who is being targeted, and thus implicating everyone and anyone. Just the other day, reports circulated of a fraud so incredibly horrific and appalling that most of us simply do not want to believe that it ever happened. Likewise, there was a terrible double murder recently. According to the paper, both parties assassinated one another simultaneously, so that both were victims and culprits in a common crime. Not only did they die, but they were so completely obliterated by one another that there is little or nothing left of them. We would have forgotten them completely had it not been for the report, and even now there are those who have their doubts, for no one remembers them. I mean they are not named of course, they are not named in the report, we don't like to, we never like to name names, but you would think that we would have noticed the disappearance of two of our friends and neighbors. Which goes to show you the horror, I mean the depth of the horror of this crime. More than killings these were eradications, both victims having been erased so that nothing of their passage or their passing remained.

When the wind is really blowing, and it does blow quite strongly at times, we like to string up a great big sheet of cloth and watch it flap violently. Sometimes we'll even paint a simple symbol on it just to animate it a bit more. Or we'll stain it somehow while it's up and flapping about and watch the wind spread the stain.

On days when the sea is unsettled, we also like to watch. Sometimes we even

throw things into the sea, like loaves of bread or empty bottles or small weather-beaten skiffs. We cast them out from within a small sheltered lagoon and follow them with our eyes as they are slowly drawn out towards the open sea. Then, diving behind some rocks or hiding under our cloaks, we tremble as we imagine them being pulled out by the current then bashed to pieces against the rocks by the breakers.

Several years ago, we waged a short yet terrifying war against our enemies. Some, I am sure, would accuse us of merely having put on a show, but the truth is we have been left alone ever since. On the first day we gathered a great deal of stuff, logs, planks, posts, joists, beams, roundwood, doors, trestles, felled trees, canvas, nails, lead pipes, tar, paint, bolts, hinges, plaster, cement, rocks and an incredible number of small wooden stakes. That night we celebrated until the early hours of the dawn, then headed right back out to the work site with all the tools we could find. We even brought out some of the cutlery from the communal banquet table for good measure. Someone lit a match to light a candle but an angry hand snatched it away from him. Though the match was snuffed out, the mood suddenly shifted. From a festive crowd we were suddenly turned into an angry mob until someone grabbed hold of a megaphone and reminded us of our duty, of the solemn pledge that we should have taken to give our all for the war. Yet something, a vague idea of sorts, had been sparked by the match, and it had taken hold of us. After some deliberation we marched back as one to the town and came back with a great many matches, an old newspaper, and three bottles of paint thinner.

For days we labored on the construction. There were some who were working on building a fort, and they got as far as making half of the outer walls and two of the guard towers. Another group labored day and night to build a Trojan horse, and having finished it, they set to work on an elephant and a whale. A third party started building tall thin towers in and around the partial enclosure of the fort. A man and his four sons built a drawbridge off to the side, while two renegade groups worked on a skiff and a small fleet of canoes respectively, the latter group spending much of their time coating their primitive vessels with thick coats of tar.

After a week or two, we decided to call it a day. The same unnamed idea was still with us, yet we left the matches and the newspaper and the paint thinner behind and went back to our houses. On our way back, we were suddenly gripped by fear. Actually it was I who first brought it up, but the idea took hold immediately. What if we were stepping into an ambush? Could they have snuck in during our absence, could they be waiting for us? I will spare you the details of our siege, the siege of our own town, suffice it to say that on the fifth day, after having laid low for days on end, the enemy somehow managed to get past us and escape into the night. Right there and then, we knew what their next move was going to be, and the idea that we had been carrying within us all this time, like a live coal kept alive in a banana leaf, suddenly took shape. We turned on our heels and marched in a wedge-like formation right back to our sketch of a fortress on the horizon. It was still night, and as we got closer, we grew increasingly cautious. A scout was sent out, but he came running back, thinking he had heard something.

For hours we sat in silence, until finally one of us, a younger man who had always wanted to do something heroic, leapt up, grabbed a torch and ran towards the fort. He had been too quick for us, for by the time we had gotten to our feet, many of us it is true had been sleeping, he was long gone. We could only sit back down and wait, but we did not have to wait long. Soon enough, huge flames leapt up in the distance, and the dark plain was filled with his shouts of victory. We ran to the fire as one, truly as one, in a single compact square, and spread out evenly in a circle around the fire, dancing and yelling and hooting like drunken owls. It was an exhilarating moment, unforgettable, truly unforgettable. In fact we get together on a regular basis just to remember it, to remind ourselves of it. We sit and listen to one of the elders as he recounts the story of the war from start to finish, often adding in a few timely observations as if to show its continuing relevance for our ever-changing times.

Nor have we forgotten the morning after the battle, when ashes clouded the whole plain, when it seemed our mouths were filled with a gray paste. On that day we mourned, not for them, not for our enemies, but for the rest, I mean for everything that had been. We wept for the loss that we all felt, for we all felt a loss. Or maybe it was more of a fear, as if we had come up to the edge of a precipice. It's not something that we delve into, it's just something that is still with us, that we carry with us to this day. And there is also the horror of it all of course, the horror of destruction. Death and destruction for us are always so clear-cut and intractable. We never engage in forensics for example, we would rather turn our backs on the whole thing and move on.

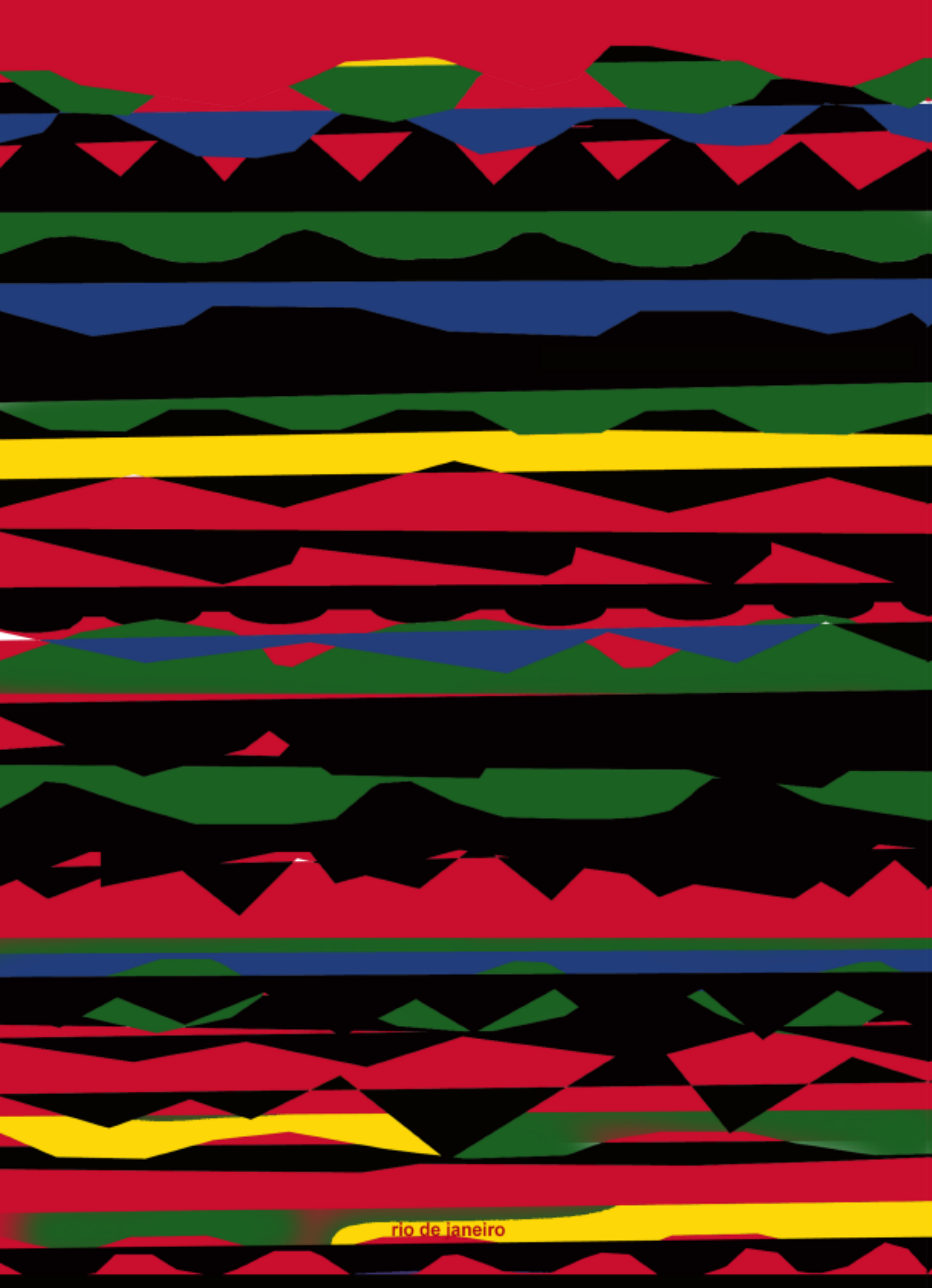
Sometimes we wish we lived on top of a hill or mountain, so that we could roll things down, sending them packing so to speak.

Once we went to the shore. A boat that had been in the works for some time had just been finished. We came prepared, each of us brought a small cartload of stuff, and as soon as we got there, we started to load up its hold. Some of us brought dirt and rocks for ballast, others stocked it with food and clothing. A small group set about arming it to teeth. It was strung up with ropes and strings of different thicknesses and weights. Each mast was equipped with a striking variety of sails and flags. We worked on it for days and weeks. Then, when we had reached our limit, we pushed it out onto the bay, tying it with a rope to a tree.

We left it out there for some time, reveling in the satisfaction of a job well done. It was as ready as if it would ever be, it had been readied for almost anything. Yet we were hesitant, we spent our time debating and delaying its launch. A dozen different crews were formed, then scrapped. A thousand different itineraries were mapped and then inexplicably dismissed. In fact, some were proposed more than once, for in our haste none of us were keeping track.

It was all over before we knew it. Someone or something unexpectedly cut the ropes behind our backs as we sat huddled in council. To this day, we have not discovered the culprit. Not that we really investigated or even looked all that hard. Instead, we all ran to the water's edge to watch it drift away. A few spears were thrown, some arrows and firecrackers were released. Once it was safely out of range, we even fired our rifles and shot the big cannon at it. All in all, it was a formidable event, a rare treat as they say. If only you could have seen our enthusiasm on that day, it was as if we were gripped by the same fever, each and every one of us felt that same sort of undescribable swelling and almost bursting sort of feeling. We were electrified by a tingling that set us on edge, but in a nice way, in the best way. We all fell into doing the sort of silly things one does to release excitement: hopping, whooping, dancing, singing bits of tune, kicking bits of wood, slapping and twirling one another with glee. Day went into night and still we danced on the shore, our brightened eyes occasionally turned towards the hidden horizon, our feverish minds conjuring up the image of the magnificent vessel fading into the distance.

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