Bronze Voice

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Abstract

Out on the island near the sand spit tip of Saint Thomas Point, two lone figures with long dawn shadows walked slowly eastward...
OUT on the island near the sand spit tip of Saint Thomas Point, two lone figures with long dawn shadows walked slowly eastward. They were a man and a woman, their white clothing blue-shadowed by the new light that spewed between the clouds.

Hand-in-hand, they sauntered along the flat sands that swell landward into hillocks. A lace of grass and sedge draped these dunes, and wind-bent junipers were placed carefully here and there. Waves stumbldcd rhythmically onto the beach, to grasp and pull at the sand with water fingers and suddenly relax and sink.

Two silent terns wafted toward the couple, searching for carrion along the strand. They slipped and wavered through the warming air, with wings trembling and straining. As they neared the two people, the terns swooped down and hovered, nearly touching the frayed edge of the sea. With a few deft beats then, they swept across the beach and rose up over a dune.

The couple looked after the terns and heard their screeing ring back over the sandhills. The woman frowned. “What do you supposed they’re calling about, John?” She turned to him.

The man still looked back to the terns’ vanishing, his eyes darker in the darkness of his face. “Hm?” He looked to her, then eastward, to the sun. “Oh. Oh, I don’t know. They must have found something that frightened them, I guess.”

“Oh.” She glanced back again, then looked out to see what the man was watching. Nothing, only the sea and the broken-clouded sky. She breathed deeply, sighing, and pulled her trembling hand from his to straighten the shoulder of her white dress. They walked on, silent and separate.

“It’s certainly quiet here,” she ventured.

“Always.” His voice tolled like a bell, deep and metallic. “Quiet and deserted. Always.” He squinted to the whiteness of the sun, glinting, diaphanous at the edge of a cloud. “But
it seems right, out here, a billion billion years, silent and alone. I used to come here when I was young — quite often. We would drive out on Sundays for dinner with Uncle Ernest and Aunt Martha — you know, that big house back there near the end of the road? — and they would sit in the parlor and drink Irish coffee after dinner and gossip about the rest of the relatives and the Old Country and business. They would make me sit there for a while — endless, it seemed — and I would wait and wait and think about the endless waiting and cringe when Aunt Martha would whine, every time, ‘Ee-yas, ee-yas, he’s small, but he’ll get bigger when he’s older. Oh, Johnny, you were such a beautiful baby — did you know that, Johnny?’ Every time.”

He laughed. “Then they would let me leave and I would race down here to the point to explore the dunes and the beaches. Sometimes I would just sit and watch the gulls and terns, or the ocean, perhaps. Sit for a long, long, quiet hour and stare at the water and the sky and the faint line between them so far away. Nothing ever changed, nothing. Always quiet . . . and alone. . . .” He stopped and they walked along, feeling the sand crunch under the bare soles of their feet. Across the flat places where waves wetted and darkened the beach, they left tracks: his, broad and heavy; hers, lighter and smaller. The prints dissolved under some seventh wave that reached farther.

The clouds in the East were burning dry and scattering, and soon the sun stood white and naked on the sky. The air warmed slowly to the bleaching August heat.

“It’s very beautiful; I can understand why you came,” Donna muttered. Understand, she thought, understand John? Always apart, always silent. Sometimes, yes. But then, and now, no. No, not even after four months. John, why are you so much nearer now? I want to understand you. . . .

He was grimacing at the ocean, his face stiff and worried. She grasped his hand again and felt the sudden tightness. She squeezed it. He relaxed and turned.

“Hm?”

“It is,” she smiled. “Very beautiful. Is this what you wanted me to see?”

“Yes. And the surprise.”
“Don’t you think you’d better tell me what it is?”
“No.”
“I may go into shock, you know. I frighten easily.”
“That’s all right. I can give you Red Cross First Aid.”
“Please tell me?”
“Nope. Good God, you’re as nosy as that woman at Wel­lon’s party Saturday. ‘Are you reeeeally a commercial artist, Mr. Cranston? What firm do you work for? Oh, reeeeally? That sounds so exciting, making advertisements!’” Anybody who could think that making up pretty ads for the blind public is exciting... my God! And,’ I think that Dali paints the oddest things, don’t you? I mean, reeeeally, who ever heard of a melting watch? Just the oddest things you could think of...’”

Donna laughed. “You should have heard her when she cornered me. She was working on liaison — preparing an attack on you. Persistent as an inquisitor with an especially heinous witch on the stand. I just avoided her with I-don’t-know’s and Yes-he-certainly-is-isn’t-he’s. She finally decided that you must be going with somebody, and that you were too quiet, anyway.” Donna paused. “Impervious.”

John grunted and smiled.

She glanced and plunged on. “I got tired, finally. ‘He reeally doesn’t seem even friendly, does he?’ she said. ‘Nooo,’ I said, ‘he doesn’t seem that way. But his mother told me that he hasn’t said a hundred words in his life, and that he’s just reserved.’ She raised her eyebrows, like this, and said, ‘OooOH?’ I guess that got through to her; she took off for another cocktail right away.”

John was smiling broadly. “Too quiet, eh?”

“Uh-huh.” She bit her lip. “For example, you won’t say a thing about this surprise.”

“That’s right.”

“Hm. Well, it better be good.”

“It is.”

“You know, I don’t get up at three in the morning to drive out to Saint Thomas Point with just anybody. Especially on my day off.”

“I pressured you into it,” he grinned, “with my charm and a secret potion in your tea.”
"Only your charm. I'm immune to most potions, but you reek of charm."

"Sex or money?" he queried.

"Both, if you want to know."

John finally laughed aloud. "You mean to say you'd come out here with any man for sex and money?"

"Charm, please. And the surprise did help convince me. Otherwise it takes manual force or a darn strong potion."

"Like alcohol, eh? Ouch, damn it! Ye gods, you broke my toe." He stopped to lift one foot and hold it, pouting painfully. Immediately she knelt to examine it. "Oh, I'm sorry, John. I didn't mean..." He was smiling down at her, holding his tongue between his lips.

"Ah, you fraud!" She rose quickly and pulled on his hand. "Come on, now, let's get to that surprise. You're so mysterious about it, you'd think it was Walt Whitman's ghost. Look, there's the end of the point."

"And there's where we're headed," he pointed. "See? That big dune. It's the tallest one on the tip of the point. That was my favorite spot for watching the sea. I used to sit on top of it and watch." He closed off with a tight fixed smile. They struck off away from the beach toward the dune. From the top of the first mound, Donna could see the farthest extent of the point, a flat sand spit hooking out into the sea.

"Don't brush against that grass," John warned. "The blades are sharper than they look." He paused. "I learned that trying to pull one up once. Cut my hands, and they bled like hell. I was scared stiff, but I didn't want my folks to know, so I washed the cuts off in the water and held a handkerchief between my hands all the way back to the house. It wasn't too bad, and nobody ever noticed."

"Sounds ugly," Donna murmured. They stepped through the cordgrass and walked over a few more dunes. Finally they stood at the base of the towering dune. The whole southern side was a glaring slope of sand.

John stepped over to a sea-bleached board stuck into the sand. He pulled it out, knelt beside the spot, and began to dig.

"Here?" she asked.

"Here."
“Looks like somebody’s been here recently,” she ventured. There were lines of cratered tracks up and down the slope. “Probably the abominable sandman.”

John snuffled a laugh but continued digging, slowly and methodically scooping handfuls of sand out into a pile. Donna scrambled up the slope a way and sat down. *He looks ape-like*, she thought, *with that protruding muzzle. A shaggy Neanderthal digging for some cache of food.* She watched him moving under the bright white shirt and pants. His skin looked very dark — tawny olive — against the whiteness. She waited, silent.

Finally he grunted and dragged a wet metallic object out of the hole. It was pillar-shaped, a sculpture. He lifted it carefully and carried it up the slope to the top of the dune. Donna followed him slowly, her feet pushing more pits into the sand. He set the pillar down, upright in the center of the bald top of the dune. She knelt down near it, out of the sun, while he brushed off the wet sand. Finally he crawled away and stretched out prone with his head near her.

The pillar was already corroding in blotches of scaly green, but the rest glinted with the yellow-burnt brown of bronze. There were two figures, a man and a woman, their shoulders and heads detailed. The rest of their bodies fused and melted together into a column that spread at the base. The figures clung to one another.

Donna’s breathing shortened. The figures were John and she. Now he was lying on his side, resting on one elbow, and watching the sculpture intensely. Then his eyes, yellow-burnished, looked up; the crudely-carved face turned up to her with bronze eyes watching from beneath the browridge.

“John?” She suddenly relaxed with a deep breath. “It is, John — it’s beautiful.”

There was a long quiet, undemanding, unstrained. They watched the sculpture and its shadow on the sand. John finally sat up and grimaced out over the sea beyond the hook. The sun shimmered pendulant on the porcelain blue of the sky. The air was getting warmer.

“Two months ago,” he began, “after we had met, after this was started, two months ago I watched an old man walk into the bar at the Goat’s Horn. At first he seemed like any
other old man you'd see there, just old and grayed. But he walked with a sort of jaunty swagger that caught my attention. I watched him for a while. He was a collage of ovals, an oval head and an oval body — the whole impression you got from him was ovalness, and massiveness. He looked like a — giant, a disproportioned giant that had shrunk down to normal size. And all the time he smiled a sly, quiet smile, as if — as if he knew all there was to know.

"I went over and bought him a drink. I don't know why; it just seemed like the only thing to do right then, perhaps because we both were alone. We had a drink or two and talked for a long time.

"Mostly I talked, and he listened, all the time smiling slightly. When you got closer to him, you could see he looked white and delicate, I mean his complexion and hair, a sort of waxy whiteness. There were three lines on his forehead; the rest of his skin was perfectly smooth. And his eyes, his eyes were a crystalline bluish white; they looked blinded, burned by some tremendous heat, and still hot."

As Donna watched the sculpture, the figures seemed to waver in the bright heat. She blinked to stop the tightening dryness. She could not look away from it; now seemed the one compelling time to see the pillar, before it vanished.

John's voice went on, relaxed. "I told him many things about myself. You know how it's easier to tell things about yourself to strangers than to your friends. And he asked questions about me.

"Many things. I told him about this dune and watching the sea and the birds, and about the solitude. I told him how I hated commercial art, despised it, and the bragging and fawning and all the rest of the Great American Enterprise. I said that flagrant displaying of yourself was degenerate, degrading; and that included artists. I said that art was entirely personal, for yourself, your own satisfaction, for no one else. I said many things.

"He listened to every word, not saying much, with those blue-white eyes watching every part of me, inside and out. Then what I was saying and his eyes and smile frightened me. I stopped. After a while, he simply said, "For there is
nothing hid which shall not be manifested; neither is anything kept secret, but that it should come abroad."

"He said that to me, and I was terrified. I hated him for saying that. So I started to laugh, very loudly. He thanked me for the drinks and went out. I just sat there for a while, scared, and going over and over that passage. I wanted it so badly to be a lie. It had to be a lie."

John sighed and lay back then. "And this is the proving." Donna reached over and touched the cool bronze.

"The old man was right, wasn't he?" she murmured.

John nodded, and they were quiet for a while. She caressed the figures with trembling fingers and felt the heat of the sun. The dune's slope burnt whiter in it.

John lifted his head to see her and smiled. "It's a gift, for you."

"For us." She looked out to the tip of the point. "As long as it's here."

Two silent terns wafted lightly over the spit, spun once in the air, and drifted out to sea.

Hypochondria

by James Sage

The land is infected
The people are infected
Pestilence is everywhere
Pity — pity those who see strangers
In this land. Yes,
Pity our weeping nation
And all that occurs.
Must we have excess
To know moderation?

Heaven must be a sterile place.

I've heard
Clamorous death
Sweeping through the mob;
Muted life is seeping in new breath —
There are signs.