Asylum Letters

Joe Franko∗

∗Iowa State College

Copyright ©1971 by the authors. Sketch is produced by The Berkeley Electronic Press (bepress). http://lib.dr.iastate.edu/sketch
Asylum Letters

Joe Franko

Abstract

THE FLACCID-FACED fat man in the corner was the first to speak. He spoke in soft, almost cooing, sounds, letting the vowels gather roundness in his mouth...
Asylum Letters

by Joe Franko

English, Graduate

I

The flaccid-faced fat man in the corner was the first to speak. He spoke in soft, almost cooing, sounds, letting the vowels gather roundness in his mouth.

“I wonder what the blue blazes is going on here.”

A purveyor of the obvious. I hated the bastard. Three more fish floated by on his sweater as he turned toward the wall. He didn’t really expect any of us to answer him, did he? I imagined his pursing his mouth like a fish, his jellyskin, pink and squamous, dripping with polluted brine. I could see myself taking the hook out of his bleeding mouth. It would get caught. I’d have to tear away half of that bulbous upper lip. I could hear him cooing as I tore the skin from his mouth, ripping away the redness of his coo. Plastic surgery on the lipfull bastard—crude but efficient. I’d hang his upper lip on the wall, like a trophy, or perhaps rather like an icon, perpetually dripping blood, perpetually watering the ivy set beneath it.

The hag in the corner looked down as I caught her glance. Her blackness made the corner darken. She exuded blackness. I was afraid of getting too close to her, afraid of getting caught in the purple folds of skin, in the bleakness of her hair. She wore no shirt or bra, displaying her knotted black breasts. National Geographic’s wild flower. I wondered what type of milk this dandelion would drip if she were picked. Would her milk be black, too? Would it fall from her, as sticky sap falls from a maple? She glanced at me again, beckoned me to abdicate the light—to go deeper into the forest. I turned to stare through the slit in the door.

A fly buzzed in and out through the freedom of the slit, as if he couldn’t make up his mind which way he wanted
to go. Out there, in here. In here now, now out there. Finally in here. I didn’t turn around. I heard him buzz off into the silence behind me. When the fat man began to coo again, I lost track of the fly. Perhaps he was at the other end of the Rec Room. The fat man was cooing heavily, now. He was on her, climbing the gnarled trunk and kissing the branches. His coos gathered depth, as if he were going higher. Deep cooing, dark cooing.

I decided not to call out through the slit.

II

Buzz,
Coo,
Fat fish,
Dark knots.
Asylum.

III

I think that most psychiatrists, when they graduate from med school, must get issued a pair of glasses and a soft voice. Perhaps they just take courses in cultivating a soft voice, and get the glasses as a reward. Mine must have done exceptionally well. He was really excellent at drawing a patient out. The softer his voice got, the louder I wanted to scream. I would rant around the soft voice in the chair until I became the medicine man and he the patient. I practiced deep, guttural shouts for those days when he was particularly soft. Round and round those god damn glasses I danced, waving my arms over his head, trying to draw out the demon voice, trying to find the entrance to his Republican soul. Bad medicine. He never changed. I take that back. He did once. I broke his glasses. I tore them off his face and smashed them against the wall. He had me sedated. The next week the soft voices and the glasses were back.
Why didn’t you call the nurse?”
“Why should I have?”
“He was assaulting her. It was the Rec Room.”
I decided it was time for the gutturals.
“Ugh . . . ah . . . Ugh . . . Ah . . .”

IV
Soft voices
Call me to look
Through black glasses.
Ugh.

V
Love,
John.

VI
The security guard’s beer-belly was greatly extended the night he pounded in the professor’s head. I watched from behind the bush by the canteen. I heard the god-awful crack, crack, cracking, sometimes muted by the old man’s hair. Crack, and the old man fell. Crack, and the old man’s eyes began to bulge out. The guard was the conductor and the old man moaned to his beat. I sat there listening to the symphony of the crazed, mesmerized by the photographic quality of it all. The alcoholic atmosphere of the guard masked the old man’s smell. The stillness of the night gave focus to their act. The character of death stood off stage; or rather, out of the picture, off to the side somewhere.

I have often had that problem with photographs. What was cut off? Who was off to the side when the photographer snapped his memory? Whose face existed on the decapitated head of Uncle Bob, while his body graced the family album forever? But was it really Uncle Bob’s head off the picture? Was death hiding, too, behind a bush?

The security guard stumbled away and fell off the photo.
I went over to the Professor. His moan was almost inaudible by now, his hair matted with blood. I stood there and looked down at him. His right leg was twitching slightly. I picked up the Professor's lecture notes and slid them back into his coat pocket.

I slept in his bed that night. It was much more comfortable than my own. That's where they found me.

VII
To whom it may concern . . .

VIII
Like Alice's cat, only the grin is left. The judge grins, and the jury grins, and the lawyer grins, and the defendant is condemned to life. But eventually, he too grins. In a dark closet, in his apartment in hell, he sits on a john and begins to see it all. Former faces float across his mind. He grins, and passes the toilet paper to the judge on the john next to his; and the judge passes it to the jury. In this communal closet in hell, the toilet paper is passed around. It is an endless roll made to record endless grins. And Alice's cat stokes the fires.

Burlesque Poem

by Mike Messenger

Speech, Junior

Faith healer came to mama
(mama's blind to fallacy)
promised her the blind would walk
and the crippled lame shall see.