Prostitutes, a Stalker, and a Jumper: Three Tales of Travel, Art, and Upended Expectations

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Prostitutes, a Stalker, and a Jumper: Three Tales of Travel, Art, and Upended Expectations

We travel, initially, to lose ourselves; and we travel, next to find ourselves. We travel to open our hearts and eyes and learn more about the world than our newspapers will accommodate. We travel to bring what little we can, in our ignorance and knowledge, to those parts of the globe whose riches are differently dispersed. And we travel, in essence, to become young fools again- to slow time down and get taken in, and fall in love once more.

Pico Iyer

Only when I travel can I ever successfully journal. I could not bear to miss a single sight, taste, person or idiom due to the fallibility of memory. So I write everyday, many pages at a time sometimes simply covering the things I did and other times delving deep into my experiences pulling back the skin and really tearing apart the meat. Oddly enough I consider myself a vegetarian but I will eat meat if I am abroad, especially if I am in a country where meat is a significant part of the culture like Spain or Australia, so as to not miss out on any aspect of the experience. No matter if I am in Spain for two weeks or Australia for six months I am living my life to the fullest when travelling.

Things rarely go according to plan during travel and while new and sometimes strange experiences are happening I as the traveler, must be willingly along for the ride. In Spain my every expectation was upended and that started with finding out my Spanish speaking skills were totally useless, so I ambled along as a bumbling tourist for the entirety of my trip. Australia felt like the edge of the world where everything was backwards from home. I left winter in America and entered into summer in Australia. Fake animals like snipes and barking spiders that I had only heard about in a fantasy context ended up existing on the massive island of Australia. I felt privileged to have an opportunity, in Australia to not be a tourist and be accepted by Australians who were as
interested in my culture as I was about them. I found that I learned more about myself in
that time and came to consider the dry hills, tall gum trees and beautiful oceans of
Australia home. Though I am now “at home” I feel a longing for Australia as if it is and
always has been my home. Because of this I wanted to write about more than what it was
like to travel or what you can do while your traveling, but capture, in my writing, the
essence of a place and how travelling can open you up to experiences that will change
your life. I wanted to express through reoccurring themes how more times than not one’s
expectations are going to get upended, plans will change and things will go wrong. My
Australia home was so new that it made even the mundane experiences I had there fun
and strange. As terrified as I was to leave home it was just as hard to be back in America
because things were never the same.

Art is a very influential medium in my personal life and my writing. My late
grandfather was a prolific artist who died a few months before I was born. His work
hangs in the household I grew up in and when I buy a house of my own they will hang
there. I knew he had to be a part of this story if even only marginally because he was the
driving force behind these stories. Making art made me feel connected and closer to him.
My mom always talks about her biological dad in such a nostalgic way that I have grown
up wanting to meet him. Without my grandfather’s influence I don’t know if I would
have ever pursued art, which brought me to Art History and eventually to amazing
museums that have opened up my mind to the expansive genius of other people. I found
that even describing a work of art, especially one as intricate and detailed as Bosch’s
Garden of Earthly Delights, is a task all in itself. Though it was difficult to find the right
words to express my self wholly about each piece of artwork that I use in these three
stories, it brought me a lot of joy to be able to write well about a subject I enjoy so much. My feelings about looking at art in museums changes when I write about art because I like to imagine I am presenting something that my reader has never seen or maybe has seen but never thought about it in the ways I am going to present it. This gives me the chance to take a fresh look at artworks I have known for many years, and sometimes, I find things I have never seen before like in Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, in the bottom of the left panel there are animals crawling out of the dark hole.

When I began this thesis, knowing I wanted to write about my experiences abroad, I did not want to write either a travel novel or a memoir. I was hoping to combine what I consider the best qualities of those two genres. In travel writing, I appreciate the adventure, the fresh experiences, and new information. Memoirs get criticized as a phase of our self-absorbed society, but I enjoy that memoir has a personal tone that connects to its readers. Writing these essays is my attempt to describe the experience of viewing art abroad, and thus combines my interests in traveling writing and art in a way that is also very personal. In my pursuit to see popular works of art and the odd things that kept happening to me, such as being stalked, or seeing a man attempt to jump off a bridge, or mistaking a bar for a brothel, I was able to create this work of nonfiction. I was able to intertwine the personal narrative with specific works of art and events that happened while traveling.

As Pico Iyer says, “We travel.” Travel is not an isolated experience and we as in the collective, the community, excels because of the benefits of travel. Nowadays the Internet allows people to see anything they want. I have used Google many times to see
works of art but the way I felt standing in front of Bosch’s paintings I would have never experienced from Google. My readers can therefore understand that difference and potentially want that experience in their own lives.

I never knew how vital travel was to my life until I wrote this small collection of narratives. I have never worked so long on a single piece with so many revisions. I feel very accomplished to have this final piece to wrap up my undergraduate career because I have never been more proud of a single piece of writing than I am of these pages. When I began this journey I had little confidence in my own writing and with this thesis I will struggle forth through this world to see more, to remember more and to write more.
Surrealism is to put things together that do not belong so those things have a deeper meaning to the subconscious.
Stephen Kuusisto on Surrealism

Upended Expectations

I always stood at the bottom of the stairs, my friends piled behind me huddled over each other’s shoulders, some shielding their eyes while I strained my arm around the wall to the light switch. All of us were holding our breath when the fluorescents came on to show my late grandfather’s artwork hanging from the walls in my family basement. The eyes of the people or creatures on the canvases followed us around as we played pool. They were paintings but with pieces of found objects: wires, fabrics and parts of machines that snagged on our hair and shirts. I started snooping around the house I grew up in, and knew so well, and when I was fifteen I found more of his artworks under the stairs. Mesmerized, I decided to make art of my own.

My grandfather died of cancer just months before I was born which only intrigued me more. In the pictures of him around the house he is smiling under the shadow of a tree or the brim of a hat. He continues to elude my gaze. My work began with a learn-to-draw-superheroes book and soon my sketchbook was filled with hands, eyes, and faces in masks. I painted a fish on an eight-foot canvas with a red glass chad for his eye and pleather fabric as his fins. The spraying water was splattered with white paint against the deep burgundy background. My painting looks like one of his creations of a man wearing a beret made of black thick haired fur or the man with a deep red horned hat, raised off the canvas with textured plaster that obscures his forehead as he stares blankly at his viewers.
I entered college to be a double art and creative writing major and after finishing a year of prerequisites I took my first writing class only to be told by the professor on the first day that I would never find a job. Every subsequent writing assignment seemed as if I was pushing against the side of a mountain. My art degree required I take two semesters of art history which sounded to me just like nap time, but I took them back-to-back during my sophomore year. Only to discover I could not get enough. I could not retain or learn enough information to satisfy a desire I never knew I had. And thus my art career was halted and a new passion arose. I was surprised to find that I was searching for the invaluable information of history.

The tent cities of protesting teens, the cobblestone streets and old men in pleated pants and shiny loafers made our group walks through the sunny Madrid promenades a cultural experience. My trip to Spain is full to the brim of expectations, including some of the best Mexican food in the world, talking with locals and staying out until the Metro ran at sunrise followed by days of art and culture. I have no idea when I think I am going to sleep but I haven’t been worried, these were suppose to be the eleven nights I sacrifice precious sleep and the three years of my academic career I spent fulfilling Spanish language requirements put to use. Though those three years seem mostly useless when I realize “bathroom” is not “baño.” I quickly learn the word “aseos” but rely on the plump figurines in dresses on doors to direct me.

Very quickly, I learn that Spaniards don’t eat burritos but rather drink a lot of wine. I buy bocadillos (ham and cheese on a baguette) because I can’t find so much as a quesadilla anywhere. Even after reading books on Spanish culture, taking Spanish
language and knowing the works in the Spanish museums I feel unprepared, what right did I have to come into this country with my expectations?

We reach the park in front of the Prado and the chaos is overwhelming. Artists display painted, colorful ceramic tiles, merchants sell CDs, musicians play and the old men sit in park benches wearing hats and sunglasses observing the tourists. I spot the other tourists by the way they amble without direction simply looking for the next thing to entrance them.

Our professor is holding the tickets to the museum as if they are money and I am as eager to get one as if they are. When I finally have it in my hands, the golden ticket, I am sure this is going to be an incredible, enriching experience. I am practically running towards the entrance as if it was a toy store, my classmates ambling behind me as if they were being casually herded. The entrance to the Prado is a concrete block built on the side of a steep green lawn. The “Museo del Prado” is carved in stark letters and I rub the black velvet ropes, leading into the entrance, as I pass under its name. The sublevel entrance opens to an expanse of wood floors and ceilings that meet large, light giving windows. A gift store is visible above a short wooden wall like a little chaotic island in the lacquered wooden sea. The diagonal lines created by the wood panels on the floor and ceiling make me feel like a trapped animal searching for the entrance to a gallery. The classmates catch up, needing to go the bathroom, ignorant of the minute amount of time we have. Finally I turn the first corner into the maze of galleries.

I enter into a large oval room with stark white tiles and olive green colored walls. I see *Las Meninas* like a beacon of light against the wall to my right. The golden frame reflects the light from the window on the opposite wall and illuminates the massive ten
and half foot canvas. I have to lean back to get a good look. *Las Meninas* is Diego Velázquez most famous work; it is a portrait of a young princess of Spain. The young blond princess is in the center, staring boldly at the viewer in her powder blue dress that is wider than she is tall. Two young maids, *meninas*, attend the princess Margarita as well as two dwarfs attempting to rouse the sleepy pet dog in the foreground. Behind them to the left, stand a bodyguard and the princess’s chaperone, and on the right is the artist himself.

In my opinion, the princess is too young to be immortalized in painting, too young to have all eyes focused on her. Her bold stare makes her look arrogant to me. But her wide-eyes also make her appear more innocent. A small mirror, hanging from the far wall reflects an obscured image of the King and Queen. Diego does this so that the viewer will realize they are looking from the viewpoint of the royal couple. It is often considered a blasphemous act of Diego to present the common viewer from the perspective of the King and Queen. Knowing this nuance I feel as if I have cheated my own perspective by being told that detail in a classroom, wishing I had discovered it for myself.

*Las Meninas* is Velazquez’s masterpiece of visual techniques because he plays with perspectives that bring the viewer in and out of the painting with a few tricks. The bold, outward gaze, an open door, a reflection and view of the artist painting the painting in the painting all work to push or pull the viewer’s gaze. The reflection in the mirror and the artist staring out from within the painting makes the viewer question if the scene portrayed in the painting is what the painter wants viewers to really see. Velázquez accomplished a great many things within one composition and his skill as an artist was highly regarded. I see these things that I learned and yet I take a look around the oval to
room to see what else it has. Some portraits of people I don’t recognize. I shuffle my feet from the room. As I leave I turn back to see the princess is staring at me in her dress shaped like a pastry puff, the dwarf is staring at me too and they both express to me that I have no clue about their lives. Do I really know anything? I feel as innocent as the young princess, insignificant and small. I continue wandering the halls of the Prado, confused in the maze of masterpieces, feeling aimless. When all seemed lost, Bosch was waiting there, ready to sweep me off my feet.

I turn the corner into a white wall room with a shorter ceiling than the oval room. A case in the center holds a circular piece of wood where Bosch painted his *Seven Deadly Sins and The Last Four Things*. I turned to the wall I passed on entering and come to stare at Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*. A twelve feet wide and seven feet tall triptych of three panels creating three separate paintings. In the left panel is a warm, pastoral scene of green hills that roll into the distance and are covered in animals such as an elephant, a grey giraffe, and three unicorns that drink from a pond. The pond has a pink fountain that looks like female genitalia. In the foreground, a pale, stringy Adam is sitting naked on the grass with Eve standing on either side of a man who is wearing a thick, regal layer of pink fabric, and has a tanned face. He is God guiding the couple into the world he created for them.

The middle, largest panel is chaotic, with hundreds of naked figures paired off and scattered throughout the composition as some perform lewd acts: such as hiding naked in groups in tight spaces where only tangled limbs emerge, suspending fruit between their legs bouncing upside down in a river, canoodling young’s boys in bubbles on top dandelions, and helping smiling friends stick flowers in the their rectums. Faces
appear out of fruit shaped cocoons the colors of berries, peaches, and plums. They float down a river, sit amongst giant birds that do not stand out but blend in among the many figures. Some figures eat blueberries and others play games with the wildlife. A man strokes a fish in the foreground, while another man carries an oyster’s shell with human legs protruding from its end. In the center there is a ring created by figures riding camels, deer, horses, pigs and other animals I cannot even define. A sinister quality invades the details where people stick things like flowers into each other’s orifices, the unsettling giant birds and the fact that riding animals was considered a form of bestiality in Bosch’s time. The scene appears to be a continuation of the left panel because of its bright, green brush and blue-sky. And though the characters are not with God they look happy in what looks like one crazy party.

There is a glaring change in the right panel. It is painted in dark shades of black and blue. Nothing looks familiar and the whole scene looks frightening. Stark buildings in the background are black except for blinding rays of light escaping from windows and the deep glow of red that suggests something is burning. The middle and lower part of the right panel is filled, like the middle panel, with masses of figures but all the joy is gone. A knife emerges from two ears side by side that crush figures underneath its mass. A man’s large white head emerges from under a table where on top a large penguin is walking a naked human on a chain. He and other figures parade around another pink fountain, this one shaped like a bagpipe. The man’s head underneath the table, peers around what looks like a broken egg with a cracked open back, standing on top of two brittle, decomposing tree trunks for legs, each leg in a small wooden boat floating on a river so murky it blends in with the black ground. There are humans in backbreaking
positions, beings tortured with harps or needles and things like nails sticking out of their
cavities.

In all, his composition takes my breath away. I am standing too close for my eyes
to take in the whole picture. I step back but lose the details as my eyes blend the minute
figures into clumps of limbs and colors. I step forward to distinguish the globs and see
some new object, animal, or event occurring in every inch. I want to take a mental
snapshot to capture not only exactly what the painting looks like but how I feel as if I am
the only person who has ever really seen this painting, the aura of the room, how it has an
almost clinical feel and bad lighting. As I move from one object in a scene to another, my
brain is unable to catalogue the intricate details as fast as I see them. The details of the
painting fade from my memory even as I stand in front of it. A massive exhale escapes
and my shoulders slump as I cross my arms. I can’t peel my eyes from Bosch’s image of
eternal damnation. Why is it so different from the other panels? I go back to the middle
panel, with its chaotic party and generally gleeful feeling and see more objects sticking
out of human holes. In the left panel, previously a peaceful, beautiful scene with God,
there is a dark opening in the foreground and small, dark animals with wings are crawling
out of it. A cat carries away a bird in its mouth at the right hand of Adam. Something
about the right panel is so dark it is spilling into the other panels. This makes the animal
riding bestiality seem less innocent. Bosch’s style of darkness, inventive but horrifying
remind me of Dali. His ants signify death and his spindly creatures on brittle legs and
melting clocks have the same otherworldly sinister quality.
Our first thrilling night in Madrid a large group of us walk down the street to a bright bar that is selling tubes of sangria for fifteen euro. The second night we talk a good game of adventure and fall asleep in our beds quietly and shamefully. Lack of sleep on this trip kicks in around the third day of tours and I began falling asleep on whatever page in my journal I had been writing on, slacking on taking photos, and dragging my feet through the cathedral and cobblestoned street.

It is our last night in Madrid before moving on to Seville by passing through Toledo and Mercy, Juno, and Kayla and I are searching for our Spanish adventure that we believe to be in the heart of the city, in the middle of the night, in a crazy discoteca. Emerging from the tunnels of the Metro we find an empty street with neon signs beckoning our patronage. The night is dark and warm. I can see the moon at the end of the street framed by the concrete buildings. Guided by instinct or stupidity, I still can’t decide which we choose the green sign above a small indent that hides a door in its shadow. The sign reads Pub Nico’s above a dark oak door and a large man in a suit looks at us questionably as we walk past him through the door. The interior is dark with the same oak wood in big pillars creating a barrier between the entrance and its occupants like waiting to be seated at a restaurant. The wood surrounds thick, dark green glass and deep green upholstered couches, clearly decorated for men. I can see a bar beyond the green and the wood that runs along the entire back wall of the room, a recognizable and comforting sign. But the women at the bar are giving us dirty looks and scowls. What is going on? I am ready to turn around and leave when a curvy Spanish woman with thick black hair, slicked back into a ponytail approaches us. She wears a stringy black top that
is merely two panels of jewel studded fabric in front of her breasts, barely covering her camel colored brown skin, like breast chaps.

“Do you want to sit? Here, sit here.” She says as she orders us past rooms covered with heavy red curtains to a large area so dark it is only illuminated by the light from the bar about ten feet from the couch we choose.

“You want whiskey,” she says standing directly in front of us. We are all lined up against the couch as if a parent was reprimanding us. She holds her hands out, asking for a reply but also shielding us from the dark shadows of figures across the way.

“Tequila,” I manage to say and she nods, walking away towards the bar. I take a look around the room and there are fat men busting the buttons on their expensively cut suits, sitting with sickly skinny women who hang all over them. The men give us glancing looks but appear uninterested and a frightfully skinny blond girl grips a man’s lapels as she shoots a look that can kill our way. A man approaches Mercy who is sitting on the end closest to the bar. His shirt is disheveled, he has bad teeth and he wobbles unsteadily into the seat next to her. I hear him say Marry me with rolling the double “r.” Mercy she smiles uncomfortably. Our personal bartender comes back with our drinks and glares at the man by Mercy, and soon the man in the tuxedo from the entrance is looming over him and shooing him away and out. Our nice hostess sits next to Juno and they talk in broken Spanish. Nothing makes much sense to me until she looks at all of us and says to Juno:

“We are… as you say - Pros-tee-tutas”

and then it clicks.

“Oh,” I said, letting that telling sound escape from my mouth.
“Finish your drinks and let’s go,” I say. Kayla, Juno and Mercy nod and we toss back the burning fluid from the depths of our tall glasses. I stand up and Kayla, Juno and Mercy do too. Our hostess stands up with a smile and ushers us with her arms open from the dark room. I walk along the long bar full of women who still give us hateful looks though I thought they might be glad we were leaving and no longer their competition. I can almost feel the cool air of the street. I should have said Thank-you, to our hostess for keeping us safe in the lion’s den.

The bouncer smiles as we leave and once in the open air we laugh our relief. How American of us to not see the signs, to act as if every door was open to us.

This brush with darkness, this encounter with counter-culture, makes us feel wild and adventurous--exactly what we were seeking--but stupid, too. Gladly climbing aboard a Metro train home I think back to Bosch and his self-created world where the darkness of life is ambiguous to the chaos of life. Until the darkness is experienced wholly it does not reveal itself in the most peaceful of scenes. I think about our prostitute and our protector as the train rambles under the city streets and I am glad she was there in this new kind of classroom. When my head reaches the hotel pillow I don’t even bother opening my journal.
A Surrealist Experience

Our hostel in Sydney, The Jolly Swagman, provides us with a walking map of the massive capitol city and a multitude of free activities. We take a walk through the Botanical Gardens and emerge looking at a wide, sand-colored building on the opposite side of the street, with statues guarding the columned entrance and the harbor lapping behind it. It is the Art Gallery of New South Wales and a Picasso exhibit is advertised.

I had left my family for five months to study abroad in Australia. As much as I like to think of myself as an independent, carefree adventurer I cried in the waffle batter during a going away breakfast with my roommates. In those first few days in Sydney I learned what little control I had over my own emotions. It was a fractured feeling of adventurousness and terror, fearlessness and hesitation.

Tickets for the Picasso exhibit are 25 AUD (Australian dollars) and I decide to spend the money because I want to see more of Picasso’s famous work. I want to stay distracted from my sadness, as my travelling companion as I have spent every hour thus far at a loss for what to do with ourselves. If nothing else it will pass the time until we find ourselves yet again silent in our hostel. Whatever it was we had in our minds to do this week was heavily outweighed by exhaustion from jetlag that kept us from any desire to spend money or go out at night. I leave my friends sitting on a black bench, tired and hungry, but unwilling to part with money for food at the café.

A guard in a blue suit with red trim smiles as I hand my ticket to the woman similarly dressed on the opposite side of the red velvet ropes. The exhibit is set up chronologically through the life and works of Picasso, I learn, because his changing style is so closely tied to his personal life. His radical changes of style and genres can be
directly related to life experiences and relationships with different women. Though Picasso had the capability to paint realistically he chose to distort his subjects, mostly women, as in his most famous work *Les Demoiselles d'Avignon* where Picasso portrays prostitutes in a brothel. Three of the five women have a sketchy, multi-tone colored skin. One’s head is turned 180 degrees from the direction of her body.

The more I move through the exhibit, the deeper I submerge myself in Picasso’s Surrealism, his Cubism and his own consciousness. As if I am in a vortex I see paintings like *La Lecture*, a portrait of Marie-Thérèse, one of his many notorious lovers. She is created with curving lines and her face is the shape of a heart. The colors are generally happy: a pastel purple, swatches of red and dark blue and a vertical line pattern of green and yellow in the arm chair she rests in. Her breasts are revealed over her clothes, the centerpieces, and the armchair Marie-Thérèse sits in and the table next to her double as parts of her body. I wonder if that means she is meant to be a fixture in the room, an object to be removed when no longer desirable.

The masochism comes full form in his fractures, especially in his portrait of Dora Maar, portrayed in bright colors: yellow, red, and green with sharp red nails. Her face is shown in many profiles as if she can see, or is seen, from all angles. The background of *Figures on a Beach* is divided into three horizontal colors: a yellow sand floor, a strip of cobalt ocean, and a baby blue sky. Two figures are intertwined, only recognizable by gradations of skin tones, faces, and breasts. Two faces seem to violently mash together and tongues touching. A series of bronze sculptures individually placed on pedestals of white sit along a wall. The first looks like a woman’s head. The deep bronze shows the form of her eyes, lips and hair. The next sculpture is bulbous, she has caught some
disease and it is deforming her. The fifth sculpture resembles a male phallus. Picasso takes only the parts that make women feminine, such as breasts and exposes them to this barrage of chaos. These women look like monsters. As I stand in front of them I am tense, I feel attacked, maybe because I am a woman seeing these women, known by their relationship to this man, who immortalized them in these paintings through his unforgiving perspective. These deformed portraits are the legacy they leave behind. The deeper I get into the exhibit, lost in its maze. Each corner reveals a whole room of new horrors, a deeper darker part of his mind where the chaos runs rampant. I get panicky turning corners. The guard at the end of the exhibit sees me and says,

“That was fast.”

I doubt he saw what I saw.

It is a sunny, brisk day in June, in Adelaide, South Australia where it is their winter season. Since my brave stand at the Gallery of New South Wales I haven’t had to go many places on my own but today I venture alone to visit the Art Gallery of South Australia. To which I must ride a bus a half hour to get into the city. I’m wearing my headphones for the thirty-minute bus ride and listening to a song on a playlist my boyfriend sent me three months into the trip, “This Wind” by The Tallest Man on the Earth. From my apartment door, I walk down the sidewalk past the community center where there is always one international student playing pool. I walk down stairs and cross the main walkway that leads to the medical center or up to campus. There are more stairs that weave around the Hall and down a steep, winding footpath on the edge of what will one day be a mudslide and on the other side is a steep road down from campus. This is
the four-lane road I have to cross to catch the bus going down the hill towards the city. I see on the bench in the bus stop across the street is old woman. When I reach the glass box she has a scowl on her thick-skinned face. She is wearing loose, gray sweatpants, black slippers that may have some colorful embroidery like a flower design on them, and a dark grey sweater. I smile at her but decide to wait outside the bus stop in the sun when “The Sun Lit Earth” comes on my IPod by The Shadow of the Colossus.

A bus comes down the hill but it is not my bus and apparently not hers either because it passes without stopping. Within a few minutes another bus is careening down the hill and it’s the bus number I am waiting for. The lady is watching me as I pass. I hail the bus with my extended hand and wait for its doors to open. Climbing in, I show my ticket and find a seat. There are very few people on the bus. One young woman in her late twenties, a girl and an older woman sit behind her and they all have tan skin and dark eyes. There is an older gentleman sitting in the handicapped section with a cane between his legs and they watch me walk past them to a seat in the middle of the two-car bus. I settle in for the lurching release of the bus’s brakes and when that doesn’t come I look up to see the old woman from the stop get on. She is unsteady on her feet but finds an empty seat one row in front of me.

Before the bus has reached the first stoplight the woman is out of her seat, even more unstable in the aisle as she turns to the back of the bus, I reach my hand out instinctively as if to stabilize her. She does not look at me but takes a step up out of the deep aisles and swings her large body into the empty space on the seat beside me. I feel my heart begin to race like a blown tire on the freeway beating the sloshing of my blood.
What made this woman decide to get on the bus at the last minute? Why did she abandon her own seat to share one with me on this nearly empty bus?

I remember a story that came out a while ago like an urban legend about a man who was discovered on the back of a Greyhound bus eating out of a human head. I can imagine how a situation like that started. But shortly after, realizing my likely neurosis and tendency to over-exaggerate I take a deep breathe and remove the headphone from the ear in between this stranger and me in case she wants to start a conversation. She says nothing and looks straight ahead. I construct a narrative that her husband had just recently passed away and that they used to ride the bus together into the city, not speaking. With this fantasy playing out in my mind I relax the stiff position I realize I am sitting in. I can allow myself to be this unassuming person for this woman. I can be her anonymous companion on this short ride.

The Adelaide Metro bus is arriving in the city, in the most congested part of town where the bus nearly empties itself of passengers and fills itself with new ones in one stop. The woman beside me stands up and I exhale for what feels like the first time in a long time. I guess I never fully relaxed. She is standing by the door waiting to get off and I am relieved that our ride together is over. I also feel bad that I imagined in the first place she could do any harm. I am thinking these things as I see her looking back at me. She has the same scowl on her face when the doors open and she doesn’t move as people start funneling out around her. The tan skinned dark eyed woman, girl, grandmother and old man with the cane exit the bus but not the old woman. She stands there and, seeing me not move, hustles over and lifts herself back into the seat beside me. I could scream for the thoughts racing through my mind and the terror of uncertainty at what might be
coming next. Why has this woman chosen me? Is she going where I am going? What does she want? Why won’t she say anything? How long will she follow me? Is this going to be my last lonely adventure? I am only experiencing fear now, no more compassion. I have no idea what this woman is doing, why she has chosen me and what is she expecting.

My stop is approaching and I wonder what will happen, how I will defend myself. My stop marks the end of the city center. On one side of the street are tall steel buildings and on the other, manicured English inspired gardens. I can see the bronze statue of a man on a horse atop a marble pedestal, facing the city as if defending the serene parks from its chaos. We are strangers, we are not going anywhere together, and that this is the last we will see of each other. I stand up as much as one can in buses between the benches and say, “Excuse me, this is my stop.”

I don’t look back as I reach the door but she has followed me out of the seat and is standing behind me. My heart is pumping. The doors open and I worm quickly through the people waiting to load the bus. I pass a blur of people wearing business suits and walk very quickly towards the man on his horse. I am practically bounding from the sidewalk with each step. I’m walking hard, half convinced I am going to go my merry way undisturbed, until I take one peek behind me and there she is, walking my direction and looking right at me. I turn back, heart racing and pick up speed - still walking but ferociously. I make it about ten feet before I take another anxious, desperate look. I have almost reached the cross walk and she has picked up speed too, but she isn’t walking. She is running with her hands in small fists, elbows bent and pumping side to side as her weight is shifted with each stride of running slippers. Enough.

I stop and pull out my ear buds. I turn on a dime and ask in a stern voice,
“Are you following me?”

Her eyes are wide at first with surprise but then she gives me the first smile I have seen on her face and it compliments her wide maniacal stare. Her lips part to show all of her teeth and she is nodding with her wide-eyed, open-mouthed smile. I can see moles on her face and sprouts of grey and black hair growing from her upper lip and chin.

“No,” I say, shaking my head, “Don’t. You can’t follow me. Please stop.”

Her face falls and I turn around and cross the street nearly jogging against the big buildings. I look back and see her looking around in the spot where we were like a dog searching for his tail but she is not looking for me. I continue walking but keep looking behind me and across the street where I can see the grass of the park and all the figures of people walking along side it. They all resemble the woman. Their clothes are grey and black and they all look like short old women. I must be hallucinating or having a panic attack. I near the Art Gallery and make a game plan to tell the receptionist that an old woman followed me here and could she tell me if she sees her outside. But I don’t. Because when I enter the tall doors to the clean marble floor and in the first gallery the artwork is staged and organized and I am calmed by its familiarity. The floor is dark gray granite and the receptionist’s counter is a sleek black granite box. A guard stands in front of the first entrance and through the doorway I can see sandstone colored tiles that shine from polish and a tan, plush seat that creates and entire circle to view art on every wall. I can see paintings encased in gold frames that are highly detailed and elaborate and each work is spaced just perfectly from the next that it creates a grid of great works of art on the high painted walls. When I spot the corner of a beautiful landscape painting it releases my tense breath as if the art itself and the organization of it hanging on the wall is
stabilizing and civilized. I ask for a pamphlet and make my way past the guard into the
first gallery. As I pass him I wonder if his job includes protecting art lovers.

What became of that woman after I left her circling that street corner? If I was not
just chased by her I might have put my hand on her shoulder and asked if she needed any
help. That day I hoped she giggled as she climbed on another bus, heading the opposite
direction and sat next to some oblivious rider because it would mean it was all a game, I
had no fault in her insanity because it was a ruse to begin with. But to me what seems
more accurate is that she disappeared, that she was never real to start with. She was a
chaotic creation of my subconscious.
The Jumper

Near the end of my five-month stay in Adelaide, a city in South Australia, I am walking across a bridge that extends over a large gully in between university housing and the campus. I am done with my courses and making the long trek down four flights of stairs divided by different levels of the campus on the hill. Crossing the narrow street where buses careen around corners heading into the city and down the steep hill towards the bridge, the footpath is loaded with black-shelled centipede looking insects that come out after big rains. I reach the bottom of the hill to the expanse of the bridge over the gully and gum tree branches frame my path, growing tall enough to touch along the bridge. The bridge is a concrete slab about seven feet across and lined with white fencing and lights. There is a man on the bridge, facing the ocean framed like an open funnel by the gum trees. He is in blue pajamas with red stars and a crème colored bathrobe. His head is mostly bald but for patches of wispy black and grey hair. He is not looking out at the ocean but down at his feet that keep coming up to the fence of the bridge as if trying to find grip. Other people pass him on the bridge and stare as they walk past giving him a wide berth. There are men at the end of the bridge watching him and pointing, casually putting weight on one leg and crossing their arms.

When I reach him I ask, “Excuse me, are you okay? Is there someone I can call for you?”

Though my heart is racing and I am afraid of what he might say, he takes his foot off the fence but keeps one hand on the painted metal and turns to me. The skin on his face is loose under his eyes and hangs onto his cheeks. It is mottled with dark age spots.
and his eyes are deep set in the skin and darkly shaded by his eyebrows. His eyes open as if they have not been shut in a while. He looks confused and he asks me back,

“What do you know?”


I turn to leave. I walk towards the men at the end of the bridge who watched the whole scene and are avoiding my passing glance. At the end of the bridge, I ask the men if we should call someone. They just shrug and I storm off, amazed at their blasé attitude. I worry what that man plans to do and I hope I can get to someone more qualified to help him. I am also scared that I exposed myself by addressing him directly, I looked at his face and he looked into mine.

I climb a flight of stairs and cut through a mud path under the bare trunk gum trees with their stretched green leaves. The path is firm under my footing despite the peppered holes made by the black-shelled bugs. I step in Koala poop that is littered under a tree one has been living in for a week now in my haste to get to my room. When I get back to my room I call security.

“Um, there’s a man on the bridge in pajamas and he keeps putting his foot on the fence I don’t know if he belongs somewhere or if you guys can do anything.” I say into the receiver.

“Yeah, we see him,” the man replies.

He says nothing more. I don’t know what that means. He does not sound concerned and I assume that means he will not doing anything. I knock the phone back into its cradle. What would have to happen for the security man to sound alarmed, or even just concerned? Where does that man on the bridge belong? Because I spoke out did
I make my self a vulnerable target? Because even locked in my room, in my apartment I feel exposed. I close the windows and shade my room from the sun or peering eyes. The rest of my trip I have to make sure the blinds are down at night unless I will see his face outside looking in. It is a figment of my exaggerated imagination but I can do nothing to repress it but pretend it isn’t there.
Bibliography


