

Carla Harryman

from *Scales for the Living*

Canyon

You know about dreams.

In some circles it's uncouth to include movie producers in them.

Or screenwriters.

I am not talking about—

I know the alternatives.

For which—

Or whom there are no names.

So.

So.

I'll tell you anyway. Jobs are unsatisfying however you look at them.

So. Wait for me.

Here in the distance.

In a canyon mud surrounds a swimming pool made out to look like a natural swimming hole. You have to be in the scene to know the water is chlorinated.

Are you sure it was chlorinated?

I was in the scene and it was off-gassing. No one swam when I was present, though I waited around for someone to take the first plunge. I want to paint a picture, but that includes people and people can get in the way of the picture. When you find the producer, his spindly legs and matted hair prematurely grey his frenetic gestures of pointing and waving, spinning around in a nearly beet-red rage, then stopped in a sequence of cool stances a beer in one hand and a host-like observance of the party, you forget for an instant that you are in a canyon and that your host, however temperamental, wants to protect nature. It's a place of longing and dangerous mudslides, but it's the scent of mud-water, chlorine, and dry chaparral when its tonic is just fading a bit that begins to fix the picture, as if seen from above.

I thought you said you were in the scene but now you are seeing it from above as a spectacle attached to scents?

How do you get into a scene? You approach it. Sometimes you enter into it and sometimes the camera just skips the transition or you get edited out. In this case, it was challenging to find the way in: no path or drive was apparent. The scene was plopped down into a nook of something vast, defined by a square stucco house nestled against one canyon wall, the one that seemed to evade precarious erosion. It was a house of contrasts, with shadowy tones drifting away from a stark white paint job, filtering through a disproportionately small verandah supported by natural wood beams. It didn't occur to me until later that engineering was involved in the illusion of stability of this one segment of the canyon wall, which was everywhere else stripped and gashed but also suspended in a pause such that the more violent effects of its erosion had been smoothed down a bit. There was something glamorous about the whole thing.

I wonder if one saw this with the naked eye it would be different than looking at it through the camera filter.

You know, I was thinking about that and I was thinking that I *was* seeing it with the naked eye, whatever that is, but then I thought I should be more honest: I really can't tell the difference between one and the other.

How did you get down into the scene when there was no path only dangerous canyon walls and harsh sun to boot?

There's a kind of delirium that sets in. Instead of staying curled up in a ball of weeping misery from recent deaths of friends, I crawled around on my hands and knees until I felt as strong as a mountain lion. Then I stood up on my two hind feet and sauntered around the canyon rim until I found a smooth and more gently sloping part of the wall just behind the stucco house. This is how the guests descended to the party; however, later I learned that there is a drive concealed largely by shrubby landscaping, so somebody has to explain all of this to you but in this case my friend, the host, wanted me to already know—by osmosis as if I were a native of canyon life when in fact I had grown up on the edge of an estuary answering the calls of seabirds.

Bearings

—things we can sense but not know.

Were you talking to me?

Sure.

You became audible and ended a sentence, but there was no subject or maybe *things* was the subject.

I've already forgotten. These local blueberries are what I'm focused on now.

What about the music?

I've been blocking out the magisterial sorrow of strings.

But not totally.

No, I'm listening with habituated ears. They take in effects and connect dynamics and passages without much demand on my attention otherwise.

Interesting, I was just trying to piece something together from before I was awake.

Help yourself to the berries.

Sure. I couldn't tell if I was being carried off to sea or being ushered forcefully back to shore. The water wasn't very deep, thank god or I might have woken up in a sweat.

You hadn't panicked yet?

No. The beauty of the shallow gray ocean, which obscured the shore and ignored the horizon was so mesmerizing it gave me a feeling of seduction and thrall, of juiced up mortality and hopeless abandon. Which I was resisting as well in order to keep my bearings.

This seems classic.

As in *the bottom of the sea is cruel?*

There's nothing new in the symbolism.

Yes, not even the dolphins I suppose.

They weren't porpoises?

Why would they be. I have been close to dolphins many times but never to my knowledge a porpoise. The dolphins were surfing on shore waves. They sprung into the picture as a signal that I would reach the beach. And I did, without clothes. When I turned around to wave good-bye, they were gone.

The dolphins or the clothes?

Both. Then my task was to keep my dignity in the nude. It was a mildly grimy beach, with lots of people in bright swim suits and dark tans and the smell of lotion and chips. Who wrote, *a picture is never true?*

I think we could use a vacation. Did you make it back?

You mean to the beginning of the dream? That was a prescient question. I did. That's how I got here eating your blueberries.

They are berries. Not *my* berries. It's like pin the tail on the donkey. It's not my tail or my donkey. It's *the* tail and *the* donkey.

Then there are donkey tales, which are also passed down through word-shattering belief systems generation to generation.

Let us genuflect to biblical abstraction.

Ha! That reminds me that you didn't have any clothes on.

You know that I just got dressed, if you can call this house dress dressed.

I mean when you were naked on the shore with the sticky scent of tanning lotion gluing up your adieus to surfing dolphins.

I had to walk some distance without clothes and I just imagined myself with a plump and buff suntanned butt that looked like it belonged in a bikini. This helped me through a few populous spots without commotion. And then I snatched a towel, wrapped it around me like I'd just gotten out of the shower. And that's how I got back to where I started.

To the predawn of history.

As I was saying, things we can sense but not know—

—*To Lyn Hejinian*

Sleep

I didn't dream and then I dreamed of abandonment entwined in thoughts of accusations regarding zealotry.

Does it matter that you didn't dream, or that you did dream?

Not dreaming is crashing into sleep without time holding you in its clutches.

Wait.

No, I can't. It's time to rev up some attention to detail. Like the sandwich I made you just before you were leaving for the getaway car. It had a thick crust.

I was getting away.

Yes, you spoke German and I didn't and the party you were joining spoke German, so I was left out even though I know some German words and they spoke English too.

Maybe your dream is telling you to learn German.

It seemed matter of life and death, but you were fighting me on that perspective tooth and nail.

I see you are channeling some colorful platitudes this morning.

I fear their disappearance from the general lingo and keep them close.

The general calls out to me—

The general calls my name, but my intense fighting spirit goes after something close, very close. Later the general is used as a reason to resist addressing the local situation. Nobody can keep anything in the proper category anymore.

Doesn't that suit you? You are handing me a sandwich for an outing that you mistake for insult and abandonment, then what did you do. I forget—

—I didn't beg, I decried.

—Who said, *sleep is the slave of dreams?*

Standpoints

You know what I'm up to *sometimes* regardless of certain casually oblivious ripostes that surge through each encounter or train of thought in which you figure below a surface easy enough to imagine while wondering how long it would take to search the quantity of flow-images among the arts and sciences without any interest in searching more color-coded undulations with clear layers lacking depiction or index of muck twigs thought detritus for instance the three millennial muses who snagged me in the surge of airport lobby traffic recently publicly holding forth with first a PowerPoint on one of their publication accomplishments, then on another's black and white form-fitted suit without comment on the eyeliner and mascara that punctuated their twinkly nod to a young person in the dress shop and finally on the third muse's need for confirmation that I knew something about literature something erudite that would *if it were worth their time to talk to me* inform their discussion of three terrible sounding films I have never heard of and that they described in detail and to which descriptions I lacked riposte and thus wishing you would wake me up with one of yours as there is a stultifying abundance to conjure though I remain speechless in the face of volcanic flows competing with conceptual charts of flow but the memory sensation of floating down a gently moving river which is still a commonly shared experience despite the waterway health alerts recalling to mind those instances in which traveling down a river on my back or belly without a lifejacket in peaceful ecstasy is punctured with the thought that I am moving at a faster pace without effort and the current is picking up speed such that it is a good idea despite the coolest of shields those crafted in light and water forged in realism and bliss coating me in dragonflies goose bumps foam and ear pressure enough to spin my orientation to the riverbank farther and farther out to mesmeric clouds as my butt *floams* over a sharp rock with the water bumbling under me increasingly whittled such that I must at this instant attempt against current to claw my way out of a sublime tincture turning mildly treacherous.

Allow me that the lenticular day has become a bloom of impending cluster bombs. There are letters to Congress to sign against their use. The narrative whitewater floods the banks with wishes to get it over with, end it all. Destroy the invader. Then a tank of self-annihilation rolls into the neighborhood and I see that this abstract desire to end fighting can kill that I love. How can we look at each other when this happens? Like you I find myself moving too fast in an element, without retort. Humor loses its grace. A heavy feeling that I am not sufficiently well informed. Even the fantasy of erudition evades me. De-escalation thinking remains a set of variable communal beliefs with my subjective sense flowing through punditry's smoke and mirrors. On the other side, where living happens, who wakes up each day to the betrayals war sets in motion. Is there an agreement to reach for?

You know *there is a lack of fit between the personal and the structural standpoints from what the world is imagined and acted on*¹ while individualized collective signing campaigns result in an onslaught of Evites to join groups whose members you don't know as a fantasy of living breathing crowds traipsing into the garden eating up all the zucchini tomatoes eggplant borage basil peppers radishes and playing until moonlight plumps a bed on the trampled ground we can hoe tomorrow in shirtsleeves and sweat disgruntled from the bruises left on shoulder blades when trying to make love on pounded tufted soil at which point the deluge relocates the zone to underwater phenomenon moving dirt to build new banks lined with backroom deals the *natural* way with our little snapshot of rebellion standing on the opposite shoreline with the de-escalation thinking it had seemed impossible to connect to during the Evite rampages and our personal electronics our computers and cellphones and watches and MIDIs and micro sound devices strung out in the currents whose established form and duration will be determined or better predicted once the bank room occupants arrive from their elsewhere havens though the torrential waters surging through the windows yet-to-be-installed may deter them until enforcements can determine what to do when these are still assessing the scraped land as geological time erupts more rapidly than the speed of making a plan.

¹ Lauren Berlant, *On the Inconvenience of Other People*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2022) 76.