

BUTTERFLY SLEEP AND OTHER *FEUILLETONS*

Rowena Tiempo Torrevillas

ICON FOR “HOME”

My eyes brush across the Safari icon my on laptop toolbar. The image used by the Safari Internet service provider is that of a compass. In the early days of Internet access, the signifier for the “Home” function came with an icon, a familiar little box with a peaked roof and an open door. It’s been nearly two decades since that icon evolved—from a house to a compass—and its imagery, now superimposed on the Mac’s default “cosmos” desktop screensaver, seems perfectly emblematic of the metaphysical journey we’ve taken from on the World Wide Web.

It’s now the icon for “Help” on the new TextEdit program on this machine. The old Microsoft icon for “home” had looked to me like one of the *nipa* huts from my childhood: a formulation, a cognitive signifier (a triangle and rhombus for the roof, a rectangle within which appeared a vertical rectangle for the door), to which one might add a horizontal rectangle for the window. Children across the world draw sticks at the base of the rectangle and a ladder to indicate this dwelling is tropical, probably rural Filipino; in the Western hemisphere, in place of the stilts and ladder, there would be a chimney on the roof with smoke curling upward: an archetype that constitutes every child’s first attempt at dimensional representation for one of the most basic of human concepts.

Beneath that one-dimensional sketch lies, invisible and vivid, an entire milieu: for me, there’s a coconut grove, the bucolic regions behind our backyard where as children we took the short cut to school; the huts of the *cocheros*, dappled in the sunlight of an unending afternoon, the rustling palm fronds overhead and the distant thrum of a ukulele or the plaintive strains of the theme from a radio soap opera. *Home, home.*

All of this is symbolic. I never really entered the home of Acoy, the *tartanilla* driver; the only bamboo-and-thatch hut I entered on a regular basis

as a child was Bising's: our dressmaker's tallish bamboo and *sawali* house, with the highly polished wooden flooring and the acacia leaves that pattered like rain as Bising ran her dressmaker's tape down one's shoulder to the knee and around one's midsection to measure one's "heaps" (hips) as she scrawled the centimeter numbers designating her clientele's bust-waist-hips ... calibrations of one's growing.

Bising's house leaned somewhat crookedly, west of the coconut grove and across the main road: redolent of the hog she raised under the house and the industrial acidity of the 3M oil from her *atras-avante* Singer sewing machine. Beyond her house lay the Baptist Student Center, where during the year I was ten, I would while away solitary summer afternoons reading the novels of Grace Livingston Hill. This spot marked the neighborhood boundary my parents felt I'd be safe to wander alone, away from our home.

The *idea* of a house, existing only on that Platonic plane of Being, is encapsulated in those geometric forms. But with that ideograph is an entire childhood and its aromas and its uncertainties, its fears of the unknown, and the sureness that my father and mother would always be there.



BUTTERFLY SLEEP

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Dreams have begun to be for me an unrestful reflection of waking consciousness. Set at night in localities whose vague familiarity brings disquiet: searching for a classroom or a ride to a waiting airplane; arriving late or unprepared for an otherwise easy exam in a class I'm taking and not teaching, a quarter-century after attaining the PhD ... these are simple to decipher, no play on words in the truffle to arrive at some understanding of a vulnerability—an unresolved issue, whatever—that one has willed away from one's awareness.

On waking, one finds no delight in the vocabulary of the subconscious, those buried treasures of puns or inventive configurations of the various untidy sloggings through one's daily mire. Even the occasional flash of lucid dreaming—the critically trained mind reverting to its discipline, recognizing correlations between past dreams and this present REM scenario; between waking life and this fabrication of the sleeping mind; spotting the significance

of images deployed by the mind's symbol-making faculty as even as one is living through the dream's artifice of plot and premise—these bring paltry pleasure.

Today, I learned that my quiet, amiable high school classmate from forty years ago, Alex Ybarley—always so self-effacing and unruffled in the acne-pitted craters of his already-mature face when we were both fifteen—had died in his sleep. On hearing this I thought, *He left us quietly, as he had in life, when we were walking out of Mrs. Mancao's history classroom, a lifetime ago.* And then: he left us in the best way possible, were one given the choice of the means and time of departure.

Two of my other high school classmates, Romulo and Randy, are now retired from the US Navy and live close to the ocean in southern California and the Pacific Northwest, though we've come many miles and many years from the place we first knew each other. They remarked separately in the course of our alumni e-mail chats that on waking from sleep each morning, they offer a prayer of thanks for another day of life.

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And I? I wake to the silence of the house on the days I don't teach, sometimes with heart pounding in the residue of unease, tattered shreds of the dream still weighting down my eyelids, a faint panicking awareness of my inadequacy to meet the hours on my own.

The high point of my weekday afternoons during those non-teaching days is *The Barefoot Contessa* on The Food Network. I find it soothing and undemanding, the husky contralto and plump brunetness of Ina Garten in her kitchen in the Hamptons. Her beloved husband Jeffrey is usually away deaning at the Yale School of Business; the show's masculine presence provided by a series of occasional, and genially epicene, florists. My mother's bete noir—and at times in my own generation, mine also—is the Mittel-Amerikan housewife, that self-satisfied and incurious creature epitomized by smugly preening Sandra Lee, whose show follows Ina Garten's. But Ina's orderly, comfortably unostentatious and warm present is perfect company for middle-to-late afternoons in my quiet suburban study-room on Sweetbriar Avenue. Her recipes are within reach, even for me who—intimidated by my own mother's seemingly effortless efficiency in the kitchen—arrived relatively late in discovering the *Joy of Cooking*. Watching Ina strolling briskly with a light step from kitchen counter to vegetable market makes me think of my mother. I imagine Mom preparing her solitary meals high in the hills of

Shatin, the semester she was teaching in Hong Kong thirty years ago, as the first Elisabeth Luce Moore distinguished Asian professor appointed by the United Board for Christian Higher Education in Asia ... and I think Mom may have moved then in her kitchen with the same kind of quotidian joy that Ina Garten exudes easily, brightly, into my own afternoons.

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Chuang Tzu says famously: “Last night I dreamed I was a butterfly ...” Would it indeed be preferable to be a butterfly dreaming it was human?

The transience of this, all: snow falling, and with each snowfall this season, a faithful friend appears in the darkness, a figure in the winter night, shoveling a path from our driveway to the sidewalk to the street. As I write these words, at this very moment, my daughter is driving that family friend to the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, because he won't go himself; she is taking him there for tests to find out if Jim (Lord, let it not be so) has a terminal illness. The salt we spread to clear the walkways of our waking lives is as the tears we drop into the wounding awareness that all this, all of it, has only one terminus.

Which is the butterfly's dream?—the silken cocoon of events and ideas and interpretations and the games the rational mind plays upon itself, that we call being alive? Or is it waking into the unknowable, beyond that other sleep we call dying ...? Will we have wings in that unknown realm, or will the flight consist only of our consciousness fading into inert brain cells into dust into, one day, open space? Memory, grief, salt, snow, solitude, food, wings, glitter in the nothingness.

Last night I dreamed.



MOMENTS OF UNEXPECTED SWEETNESS

We all have them: sudden interventions that break into one's awareness, lifting the everyday toward the sublime, an intrinsic spiral in the DNA code of humanness.

The first time a child speaks your name. The taste of water right after you've vomited, replacing the bile of your bodily wretchedness with the restorative sip of the first and most basic element of biologic life.

Those moments are the favorite snapshots in one's personal album of the fleeting and uncelebrated: the golden leaf of autumn that falls at your feet as you walk down a busy sidewalk; the first crocus of the spring; or the green fronds of the prized, uncultivate-able Oriental poppy that poke out of the flowerbox in late summer amid the dried stalks of the played-out previous blooming that lasts only five days each year.

Among the "Bucket Lists" one tabulates periodically—the places in the world you hope to visit before you kick the bucket—I believe we regularly update our private Top Ten Things That Make Life Worth Living. The universal and the personal intersect in those lists; ultimately, the matter of "sweetness" is futile to quantify.

Perhaps created work holds those moments in fixity; perhaps that's the reason for art. They are sweet because they are embedded in, and spring forth from, bitterness or the crushing weight of banality: the artist's inadvertent epiphany, en route to another theme.

So here's my list of Moments of Unexpected Sweetness that I've experienced as a grateful viewer, reader, listener:

- Music: The trumpet soaring in the Beatles' "Penny Lane."
An enumeration of the otherwise unregarded lives on a city street: "... there is a barber showing photographs ... the nurse pretending she is in a play / She is anyway ..." is followed by a trumpet voluntary, rising triumphantly above the urban drabness—a passage of casually playful redemption.
- Painting: Van Gogh's *La Berceuse* (The Lullabye).
There is no infant in this portrait: only the weather-worn face of the peasant woman of the Camargue, and her strong work-roughened hands folded over the wicker handle of a rustic cradle.
As with the chair left behind by his friend Paul Gauguin, the immediacy of absence-as-presence—that aching vacuum that Vincent sought to fill with pieces of his clumsy, yearning heart—the unseen, unheard lullabye is, to me, emblematic of the painter's fierce, brief theme.
- Sculpture: the veins on the marble hand of Michelangelo's *David*.
The statue's hand was broken off during a riot at the Signoria piazza, and later reattached; one can see the crack in the stone, testifying to the violence that had been wrought. But it is not the survival of this iconic work—the damage and its restoration, its transcendent beauty—I find

inspiring. It is David's other hand I'm looking at: the hand that's poised above the slingshot, in that moment *before* he steps forward into the ages to assume his role as the heroic image of a nation about to be born, a young boy ready to walk over the threshold into manhood.

- Poetry: too many to be named. For now, the poems of Rilke, perhaps: II, 4 of the *Sonnets to Orpheus* ("Oh this is the animal that never was ...") and the final sentence of "Archaic Torso of Apollo." And Henry Vaughan's vision of Christ's hair filled with drops of dew as He walks through the night. And from the same era as Vaughan, Robert Herrick's *cri-de-coeur* over his faithless mistress in "Cherry-Ripe."
- Drama: Shakespeare, again too many to be isolated. What comes first to mind is when Lear tells Cordelia: "Come, let's away to prison: We two alone will sing like birds i'th'cage ... And laugh / Like gilded butterflies"
- Film:
 - The moment at the end of the French film *Leche le blanche/Secret World* (1969), when the young boy lifts the vial of perfume and pours it over his head.
 - Tommy Lee Jones's smile at the end of *The Fugitive*, when, as the relentless Lieutenant Gerard he pursues Harrison Ford's Richard Kimble, and, taking him in custody, gives Kimble a packet of ice for his bruised head, to which Kimble says: "I thought you said you didn't care." Tommy Lee Jones's rugged features light up in a rueful laugh of surpassing gentleness when he says: "I don't. But don't tell anyone."

Wandering the world, the benisons come unsought and breathtaking, so transient they catch one almost unaware. During our quest to set foot on all fifty states of the Union, my husband and I have had encounters with these eccentric serendipities: on my birthday, walking through a hillside meadow, across the Crazy Woman Mountain in Montana, wildflowers of yellow and purple outside our cabin and knee-deep everywhere my eyes reached, all that long, bright afternoon. That was sweetness, throughout: sharp and unadulterated, so that even as it was happening, one knew it was joy.

One of our trips brought us the confluence of sight, song, cultural iconography, and personal history that fulfills the definition of *unexpected sweetness*. We were driving through Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, trying to find the Motel Six where we'd made reservations, and as the sun was setting, we found

ourselves back on the same stretch of highway, seemingly always returning to the same place. Finally one of the Bengali/Urdu gas-station owners who have set down their lines of convenience stores all down the East coast told us in his gruff singsong that our best bet was to get to Lancaster. “The nearrest *Mooool* Six whar you can find a room for sure is in *Lanbcasturr*,” he declared helpfully.

So to Lancaster we went, and tumbled into our Motel Six bed tired out from driving across Illinois and Indiana. The following morning we rose at dawn, refreshed and determined to reach Connecticut by afternoon.

A light rain was falling as we pulled onto the road. This was farm country, its contours faintly familiar, but somehow denser, more condensed in its bucolic consistency than the prairies where we live. I knew that the Amish lived in Lancaster; books and movies like *Witness* with Harrison Ford had made that awareness a part of my visual vocabulary. And in eastern Iowa we’d see the Amish and Mennonite farm folk all the time, driving their horsedrawn carriages in Kalona, and I’d nodded at the cheerful, bonneted ladies occasionally at the Aldi grocery store in Iowa City. There, at the northwest edge of town we’d sometimes drive past the bridge over a river that the sign designated as the “English River,” a stream running through the rolling hills of the territory that the German settlers a hundred fifty years ago, standing in a shaft of sunlight, declared was *Amana*: “Here we stay.”

So I would not have been disappointed if, on that morning, we drove through Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and did not see any black-coated gentlemen in stovepipe hats and spade-shaped chin-beards. I had already seen them in movies, in real life, in paintings and the book of photographs by John Zielinsky that stood among the folio-sized volumes in our study.

But on that Pennsylvania morning in May, coming out of the mist, in the light rain of early morning, there it was: the carriage with an erect, weather-scoured man holding the reins, the horse trotting under the leaves of tall old trees, while the raindrops fell in the gentlest and most matter-of-fact of benedictions.

Just as we were pulling onto the road, Lem had randomly popped some music into the car’s CD player. Twelve thousand miles from where we first heard it, and two thousand miles from our transplanted home, the song flowed through our black Ford Escort—an old favorite, first heard when we were across the sea, a world away: Michael Franks’s “Dragonfly Summer.”

The Amish carriage slipped quietly past us, out of the mist, through the fine rain, into the timeless space where, all unknown to oneself, memory takes shape:

*A chorus of sparrows in summer
Is how I remember you
The fire of maples in autumn
Is how I remember you
The silence of snowfall in winter
Is how I remember you*



ROYGBIV AND OTHER OCDs

I've just read the *Time* article about obsessive-compulsive disorders, and while it evoked from me a responsive chuckle, it also led me to thinking about my loved ones who, like me have, or have had, minor manifestations of the condition—behavioral quirks so mild as to be barely considered as eccentricities. According to the list of symptoms, I must be the sister of The Monk.

Reading the descriptions of the disorder, I recognize in myself a few of the compulsions, a couple of which I've outgrown ... but one of them—the leeriness about germs and the fear of contamination—continues to manifest itself in my need to take at least two baths a day without fail. The one taken before I go to bed is especially important for my sense of well-being, even if (or *especially* if) during the day I've dropped by a public place like the grocery; God alone knows what germs I may have encountered in the air and that subsequently cling to my hair and skin, from walking down the breakfast-cereal aisle of Hy-Vee to pick up a box of oatmeal!

I remember my mom recounting (numerous times, I must add) how my nursery-school teacher commented that “Rowena is so fastidious; she keeps washing her hands,” and how anxious I'd be if I inadvertently misinformed a visitor at the house who asked if my parents were in (“I said you weren't home, because I didn't know you were. Was that all right?”) ... and all the unspoken dread and guilts that plagued my childhood. I laughed just now when I read the little checklist in the article, describing the symptoms of childhood onset of OCD ... because I experienced at least three of those.

We all have bizarre, passing thoughts, as described in the article, and I am so relieved to know that others share them, too. Including the one that comes when my eye falls on the knife-block on the kitchen counter—as I’m washing my hands, of course, at the sink!—and the fear that I’ll suddenly snatch up one of the big knives and, possessed by madness or in thrall to an irrational urge, plunge it into my heart or into one of my loved ones. Yet here I am so worried that harm may befall Lem or Rima, God forbid, such that I’ll clamber aboard the motorcycle they so fearlessly drive ... even though I myself hate the precariousness of it all. The reasoning is that my presence riding pillion will somehow ward off disaster.

One of my students, a few years ago, wrote an essay about his OCD, now partially conquered. One could tell, just from looking at his pale anxious eyes and the distance he was careful to keep between himself and the person seated next to him, there was something “a bit off” about Sean. He wrote of needing to scrub his hands for hours each day. So it’s no laughing matter.

One of my daughter’s friends, a bridesmaid at Rima’s wedding, arranges her underwear in her drawer so the panties are in an immutable, specific order—sorted and piled according to the color spectrum, ROYGBIV. This organizational structure is exactly the one followed by one of Rima’s earliest babysitters, who’d pick up all the crayons the kids would use and put them away in rows of red orange yellow green blue indigo violet ... and all the gradations between in the Crayola box. I have a *comadre* (Rima’s godmother and my best friend, born a Virgo—as if that explained her heightened tidiness and perfectionism) who needs to align all the pictures on the walls and to straighten the books the shelves, no matter whose home she’s in, otherwise she’s ... uneasy.

Is it the need to impose order on an unpredictable world that leads us to perform these rituals in an attempt to control even a small arena of turf ... and then these compulsions in turn control us? My daughter must have inherited that finicky sense from me: it offends her whenever, as she and her husband as sorting clean laundry together, she spots a perfectly white sock that has been rolled together with one that bears the faint marks of washed-away grass stains; the socks must be paired according to the gradations of wear, so one can tell which socks were previously worn together, even if the dozen socks are otherwise identical. Moreover, when folding a T-shirt, the sleeves must be folded such that their shoulder seams are symmetrical. It offends our sense of order so acutely that we’ve been known to secretly and discreetly (so as not to hurt the feelings of the helpful, well-intentioned “offender,” usually the

hapless spouse) go back and re-do the job so the symmetry is as perfect as we can discern it to be. And we're also the ones who circle the block to make sure that the little bump we heard when driving past was just a pothole, and not the little kid who crossed the road behind the car when we went by. Is this behavior neurotic ... or just an overdeveloped sense of conscientiousness and responsibility, or the heightened fear of future guilt?

The amygdala, or whatever part of the brain controls these imaginative/anxiety-producing functions, is now being closely studied, so the article says. Thus there's hope, that wonderfully fantastical word, that we're normal after all (whatever that is). Editors and mustached Belgian sleuths, and me.

Meanwhile, you keep straightening up those books and picture frames, and I'll keep arranging the mismatched silverware just-so in the kitchen drawer in the order known only to me, before I can take my before-bedtime shower at two in the morning.