

ARS POETICA

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An Allegorical Disclaimer of Classical Syllogistic Reasoning (Ed.)

Dubuque had one job that was many jobs. That much, at least, he had in common with the rest of the world. He was chief pruner in the Umlaut Botanical gardens in Austin, Texas. A meticulous wielder of the s-blade and the hand-held shear, he had been known to take a full morning to nip and cajole a single azalea bush into a shape and sheen he could live with. The wysteria, the hydrangea, the roses, the mountain laurel—all he clipped with equal care. Even the marigolds and the bamboo, which he didn't much care for, he tended as if they grew in the Garden of Paradise.

From the point of view of his fellow botanical engineers, he radiated such mania for detail constantly. He was never late for work, never lingered for a beer after quitting time, never let his locker get crammed with crusty socks and frayed workgloves and mossy old water bottles. Each morning he parked his pristine green 1958 Thunderbird rag-top exactly five and a quarter inches from the left yellow line of his parking space. And all day he waged mad war on the dead and ungainly branches of the garden's shrubs and trees. After two years of his solicitude there was hardly an unliving or unsculpted limb in Umlaut Gardens.

That second Spring his flowers were more bountiful and shapely than ever. He was said to be a shoe-in for botanical engineer of the month, and even his jealous co-workers praised his work, gave him little tokens of appreciation like eyeglasses with cardboard lenses, six packs of Lone Star beer, and a red bumper sticker that said, "Bust Loose!" In the face of such generosity, Dubuque felt a rank ambivalence.

Dubuque lived on the far side of Austin from the garden, nearer the east side bars he liked to frequent with his buddies in his other vehicle, a battered blue pick-up truck. His apartment was, in fact, a cockroach ranch, a knee-deep swamp of empty sardine cans and pizza boxes and the very soiled clothing he was so careful to keep out of his Umlaut locker. There were enough empty plastic soda containers in his kitchen to float a large pontoon. The living room

floor was strewn with abandoned shoes that guests had removed and then lost in the debris.

The week the azaleas bloomed, one of his bulging garbage bags split open from pure spontaneous generation and spewed out a wad of wiggling maggots and his billfold, which had been missing for several weeks. After a quick hosing, his drivers license was good as new, which was fortunate since his gang depended on him for transportation to and from the brawls they instigated nightly outside the Sixth Street discos. They particularly like to pick out some weeny frat boy and hold him down, make him watch while they abused his car. Dubuque's personal specialty was the flying frontal whip-kick, delivered to a defenseless target on the dead run. He never hit with his hands, and rarely fought if the foe was not seriously hurt or outnumbered. He avoided getting hurt himself because it made him curiously aware of his victim's pain, and so took all the fun out of whipping him.

Dubuque and his eastside cronies were weeding the world of weaklings. It was a sort of quest. And they enjoyed it so much, got such a kick out of culling some punk from the pack and leaving him in a clump of his stylish and bloody clothes, that they got a little testy whenever their sortee was delayed. One night when Dubuque took half an hour to find the truck keys he had foolishly thrown on his refuse-ridden floor, they punched two dozen holes in his living room wall and left the sheet rock looking like some hysteric's bingo card. The next night they brought him a new key ring that went "beep, beep, beep" when he clapped his hands. With this, they told him, he could always find his keys, even when they were buried.

Once they'd had a wedding in Umlaut Gardens. Some governor's niece. Dubuque had rather enjoyed the strolling musician, an Irish folk singer, and had discovered the next day that the flowers around where he'd played were visibly perkier, more colorful. So he'd installed a system that piped Irish folk music softly into every square foot of the place. It had taken him three weeks because he accepted no help, trusted no one else to wrap the wires around the branches with sufficient tenderness.

In that first Spring the azaleas were nice enough, but the hydrangeas failed to bud. The following winter he paid particular attention to their preparation, clipping their old growth assiduously, covering each individual shrub with its own plastic bag when there was the slightest threat of a freeze. But without telling him, the chief

sod man was all along altering the nitrate content of part of their bed, and when they budded out in April it was clear that half of them would be blue and half pink—one long row of each. The mere sight of that hurled Dubuque into a wheezing frenzy, and he found himself tearing whole hydrangea bushes out of the ground until he'd cleared a strip four feet wide between them, which he filled with the dark purple tulips he'd been secretly cultivating in an old tool house by the nude bathing pond. After that he went around for the rest of the day searching out spots where two colors of the same flower converged, planting a blackish stripe down each one.

When he clocked out that afternoon (just after using his little battery operated vacuum cleaner to suck the lint and loose leafage from the bottom of his locker and then hanging his well-brushed gloves with both thumbs pointing inward, as always), he was confronted by his boss, the Head Groundskeeper, a soft-spoken little Hispanic with a close-clipped gray moustache and tiny, tawny hands. He frightened Dubuque intensely, though he'd never so much as raised his voice to anyone in the garden. And now he simply reached out and shook Dubuque's trembling hand and informed him of his nomination for botanical engineer of the month. If he won, the H.G. added, he'd automatically qualify for botanical engineer of the year, an honor he stood a fine chance to win since Umlaut was the most beautiful garden in the city and April its most breathtaking month. He'd be given a banquet, be called upon to make a few pithy remarks. At night.

One evening a few weeks later Dubuque left the T-Bird in his rented garage and switched to the pick-up, as usual, for the ride home. But for some reason he chose instead to go to the LBJ Library, where he parked his truck on the lawn and tried to electrocute himself by urinating on a spotlight beside the reflecting pool. The hot and impregnable light only boiled the smelly piss away without relinquishing so much as a volt, and that made him angry enough (when a campus cop came and tried to take him in) to kick the guy twice in the crotch and hold his head under water for a long time.

Then he got back in the truck and drove home at a leisurely pace, as he so liked to do. In the mornings he was usually rushing because one of him was never late while the other always was. Or else killing time because he'd been out all night. In those drives the vehicle itself altered his perception. He no longer had to worry if the Mexicans all around him were a blessed and beautiful people

or scum to be scoured from the streets. In the garden car they were beautiful, in the assault vehicle of a truck, targets. He no longer had to wonder if women were the apex of evolution or crippled sluts begging quick and utter humiliation. He didn't have to think about Good and Evil at all, not when he could nurture the world in the daytime and head-bash it at night. He was quite conscious of the whole transformation; two years ago he had even worked it out as a syllogism:

I exist in the form of two halves.
Two halves always make a whole.
Therefore: I am whole.

When he got home he found a letter naming him April's botanical engineer of the month. Beating on the campus cop had raised his spirits, but now he felt doomed. He crumpled the letter and got back in his truck and drove straight to Sixth Street, where he found his buddies and helped them beat up a derelict and leave him covered with crumbs from the cat food he'd been eating. Then they took out after a lone faggot in a sputtering BMW, ran him down in the park at the end of the street. They had never chased a mark so far before, but this guy made them mad. He knew he deserved a beating, but wouldn't pull over. So they chased him until he skidded off the road and over a blooming redbud tree, cracked up against the rocks along a creekbed. Then they dragged him out of the car and started kicking him, while Dubuque, unable for some reason to join in the fun, wandered over to the badly scarred tree instead, began by reflex to prop it up, pull away the broken branches, straighten the merely bent ones. It was almost a minute before he realized what he was doing, and then he backed off and threw a rock at the tree, and ran for his buddies. As he went by the mark's car, he caught sight of a red sticker on its bumper that read, "Bust Loose!"

"Hey!" he called, pulling up short as his gang finished off the guy and left him lying on the wet rocks. "He's got my bumper sticker."

When they saw it, they roared with laughter.

Four days later he put a bullet hole in the T-Bird. He didn't mean to; but he had to shoot something. Thinking about the banquet was driving him crazy. What if he couldn't keep the garden part of him alive after the sun was gone and the wine was flowing?

Already he was having these moments where one of him bled into the other. And not just with the hydrangeas and the redbud. There'd been other things too: a balkiness in the T-Bird's clockwork of an engine; an erection for a Mexican girl spotted from the window of the pick-up. And one afternoon when a tourist had taken his picture beside the purple tulips, he had lost his mind with rage, knocked the guy down and forcibly exposed the roll of film. That night he'd run into the same guy outside a Sixth Street disco and had dragged him around a corner and pretended to beat on him so the others wouldn't, had set him free without even lifting his wallet.

All such inappropriate responses nagged at him, sapped his confidence. He had to remind himself again and again that Summer was coming, bringing the sort of relentless Texas heat that clarified roles, made it impossible for plants not to thrive and humans not to ask for a good beating. And the fact that he was aware of the problem made it easier to solve, he was sure. He'd even come up with another airtight syllogism that went:

The weirdness is because of the banquet.

The banquet exists in time and will pass.

Therefore: The weirdness will pass.

But the very night he'd thought of that one, he'd gotten a little too drunk and started playing with a pistol he'd borrowed from a friend, and the next thing he'd known he was cruising the streets, waving the gun out the window, pointing it at anything that moved. He remembered getting out somewhere and putting a slug in a vehicle, intending to shoot the old pick-up, maybe set it on fire. It was the next morning before he discovered that he'd put a clean round hole in the T-Bird's passenger door instead.

That day he had to make up a story about being shot at while leaving a Longhorn baseball game against Texas A&M. He knew no one in Austin would doubt that some brick-brained Aggie had fired on him, and sure enough they didn't. No one bothered him about it at all as he went straight to work sculpting a Hellenistic masterpiece from the tall slab of a yew tree. Just down the sidewalk a couple of gear-head part-timers set up camp around a rosebush bed that the chief sod man had ordered them to weed within an inch of its life. They took off their shirts and laid them out on the sunny sidewalk, set their large and cranking jam box as close to the bed as its brick border would allow, and went at their work with

amphetimine-laced zeal while bopping to the beat of the local album rock station, manned in the mornings by a comedy team known as Gip and Flip.

"Hey, Gip," said Flip. "I heard Rock Hudson had a really bad car wreck one time."

"That right, Flip?" Gip asked. "What'd he do? Get creamed from behind?"

Somewhere in the midst of the hilarity the duo gave way to a syndicated national news brief which included a report about a man in Indiana who, in the midst of being honored as Moose King by his local lodge, had broken down and revealed that the prize-winning buck he'd "taken" near Paoli three years ago had been in fact bagged and bought in Canada and smuggled in in a refrigerated diesel truck. Dubuque was so jolted by the story that he flinched and cut his finger rather badly, had to leave work and get a half dozen stitches at the county hospital emergency room.

Two days later he forgot to change vehicles. He was so preoccupied with his dilemma that he drove all the way to the garden in the pick-up and got out in a sort of daze. His co-workers stared at him, already startled by the fact that he was twenty minutes late, as he strolled slowly past them and down into the garden without clocking in. He passed a small pond and came alongside the banks of hydrangeas, stopped at the row of dark tulips, where he bent over and dug a little in the dirt around the stems of the motionless flowers. When he'd made something of a hole, he planted his keyring in it and covered it with two handfuls of earth, then stood back and clapped, listening with a childlike smile to the three muffled beeps.

He looked around, unmindful of the arrival of several campus cop cars, noticing instead a withered hydrangea blossom, which he went over and plucked away absently. As he did, he popped off a bud as well as the dead flower. He shook his head, stunned by his clumsiness, frowning into the foliage as the cops got out and looked over his truck. He caught sight of a dead branch near the base of a nearby bush, whipped out his small shears and went into the bed after it. He bent over, got his balance, and placed the heavy scissors precisely. But somehow when he pinched them closed, they jerked in his hand, and he snipped off two healthy branches along with the dead one.

Amazed, he stood stiffly and stared up into the wiry live oak trees all around him. The officers moved his direction, but he ig-

nored them, searching the bushes again instead for a delicate task, a way to prove himself. He quickly spotted a crinkled leaf beside one of the big blue blossoms, went at it smoothly, coolly, eyeing just the spot he wanted to cut and feeling his tool rise for it with all the old certainty. But once again, as he squeezed the scissors shut, his hand spasmed and he severed the stem, watched the big fluffy flower fall heavily into the dirt at his feet.

He dropped the shears and backed away, froze as footsteps thudded on the sidewalks all around him. Someone shouted, a few automatic sprinkler heads hissed to life among the azaleas, and as they took him roughly by the arms he heard a woodpecker working one of the live oaks and the keys beeping back from beneath the warm garden ground.

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