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SIRONA
FINE ART

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HAVANA'S FINEST

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CIGARS

De La Isla De Cuba





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SIPPING COFFEE @ CARMELA'S
for Ferguson, and elsewhere

I

Urgencies of some noirceur, police
state tactics 2 hours 27
minutes due south, but *carne con huevos*
in a booth at the front and hazy sun
mitigate the appetite for unrest.
Believer and disbeliever alike
shuffle and jive while little white lies of
law and order shed black blood on the
angry streets of the lost city. Night for
day, Leo stares down as we stare up at
the storied void, its prophetic shimmer
of a meatlessly pointless plenitude
artsy counterpoint to a homemade meal
too savory for the mind's mindless
obsession with savage proximity.

II

Never mind the orange juice. Reaction
or activism the crux, not how
the body relents, feet apart or head
heavenward. Dead is dead, bitter failure
to protect or serve? Making shit up as
he lifts cup to lip, breakfasting, half and
half gone bad, the bad taste yet inspires, if
in bad taste. This family trekked north from near
Guadalajara, another tongue or
world to gauge discrepancies of event
or ogle goddamn flighty gringo birds.
So what are we to do who would bring words
to bear on justice this Friday morn? Are
we to suss out the nooks and crannies of
conscience from each crunch of English muffin?

III

The metaphysics of short order need
—*sí Sandra, more coffee, por favor*—trumps
one's regard for the other. Translation:
it's a new day of strife but the ancient

metrics of hunger stubbornly persist
¿comprende? Our races emerged from some
mythy mix of dicey isms, i.e.
can humans thus colored commingle? Can
have and have not jingle jangle jingle?
Easy on the jalapenos—my mouth
it tingles. What say we wish away both
the beautiful tones and the slovenly
epithets howling in the archived
notes? What say we don't? How shall hand-to-mouth
citoyens endure such intransigence?

IV

He's certain he can't be certain that so
distinct a conceptual shade prevails
it would avail us to pursue the nub.
But with frijoles and tortillas to
dispense of, two or three stanzas more might
stem the bloody chaos of the poem.
No, we all suffer, yes, you've missed the point
if the point is whether we can live with
ourselves. It's no walk in the park, this life
but he's grown fond of this eatery, this
Earth that at its best is one hell of a
paradise. At the same time, 2 hours
27 minutes due south, where the
aged river carries all it carries here
there, it's just plain hell on this green he loves.

V & VI

(He'd covered these. The tropes of death do
sorely test his patience when gotten down
to cases. It's not death per se, it's the
dying gives offense, and the lying, all
the vile echoes to such absence of sense.
Let beauty be what beauty does, let us
to love's sweet sorrow, sure, but hereafter
would that we be spared immutable bliss
when lives come dirt cheap on a dirty street.
Amid homage we note what strange fruit falls
with supremacist fictions run amok.
Times like these try the souls of beat folk, as

homeland remains stubbornly immune to
the conditions through which we might arrive
together at such place that gives a fuck.)

VII

Let us chant then: *The dead white male is dead
long live the dead white male!* The dead white male
had dead white cred, and in his dead man's hand
held hostage the dead brown body, laid to
rest with solemn, segregated psalms. For
all his deadpan aplomb in telling slant
say, the voiced devotions of divine male
flesh frolicking under an inert sun
were his complacencies a tad too bold
to confront the cargo in the ship of
state's hold, black generations held in the
dead air of history? Word finery
to spare, the dead white male appeared dead to
blues that stay news. Let us chant then: *The dead
white male is dead, long live the dead white male!*

VIII

The evidence is insurmountable
that, like some philosopher's stone, hardship
anchored to foundations of enforced want
converts a few cigars or cigarettes
into two bullets to the head or a
stranglehold. Ditto toy gun. We keep to
our kind at one another's expense, we
grieve among the same bleached demarcations
a few declarations to afford the
liberated mind the luxury of
comporting itself most liberally.
But to avenge the fallen ought we to
dwell in vengeful depredations, or sing
in protest of the body politic's
fleeting melancholy, and all that jazz?

Grace Notes:

GRACE CAVALIERI INTERVIEWS JOE AMATO



GC: What is the name of your forthcoming book and what's its theme or larger story?

J.A : *Sipping Coffee @ Carmela's* is, like my first book (*Symptoms of a Finer Age*, published in 1994), a stylistically diverse collection of poems, including a title poem, divided into something like thematic sections. The first section, for instance, "go big or go home," deals with what I take to be four key issues: fossil fuels and climate change; turmoil in the Middle East, Egypt in particular; death as a datum in the face of conceptual writing; and the title poem, about racial strife in the US. The title poem served in fact as the impetus for putting the book together (more on the title poem at #11, below); after finishing it I decided to see whether the poems I'd been writing for several years (one poem goes back decades) were of sufficient heft to comprise a book-length presentation. A theme or larger story? No. A signature style? No.

(The book does include a poem about signature style though, "The Art of the Signature Style.") Being perhaps a little more sure-footed as a writer than I was twenty-odd years ago, I've taken some liberties with this book as far as structure and content, and a good deal of what's here works against the grain of typical poetry productions, is in fact a sendup of same. I like humor, I like irony, and I also like counterpoint, so I've shied away neither from public trauma (the title poem) nor personal loss (a section devoted to my one of my late uncles). Whether readers will appreciate a book like this will turn, as always, on what they think makes a poem a poem, and on how they understand my juxtapositions of idea and affect. I wouldn't have bothered assembling these sundry elements into a book – and I would say the same about my most recent novel, *Samuel Taylor's Last Night* – if I didn't think they spoke to some rather urgent social realities, on the one hand, and to some

keenly felt private moments, on the other – and if I didn't have fun doing it. So there's an expressive impulse behind this effort, to be sure, along with the belief that others might find value in what I have to say, might in fact be moved or provoked or even entertained. But as the dedication reads, this book is "not for everyone."

GC: How do you feel our culture affects our writing? Do you think you speak for others?

J.A: Well when I think of culture I think of it as the Jell-O mold in which we're all working, the frame around the Brueghel painting. Put simply it's the air we breathe, right? But it changes with our topography, if you will, and since where we find ourselves – physically, psychologically, spiritually, communally – is dictated both by how we act on our desires and by circumstances over which we have little control, our understanding of this thing called culture will vary accordingly. There's no way to escape the (let's call them) demographic facts of

one's flesh & blood body – I'm a US citizen, white, cis male, hetero, first-generation on my mother's side and second on my father's, not disabled, no internal synthetic equipment, earning just above the median household income, 61, ornery (wait – scratch that last one) – and I was raised in a fifties-style working-class community before a tumble into poverty, and so my sense of culture is slanted toward a certain skepticism re the American Dream and all of that. I know I'm not alone. However, and perhaps owing to my parents' generational struggles (my mother having been a refugee in France during the war and my father having met and married her there as a US Army corporal), I have more than a grudging respect for civilization as we know it, its bloodthirsty machinations notwithstanding. After all, here we are with the time and leisure to discuss a book of poetry, yes? We're not hunting around on all fours for nuts and berries, a significant achievement deserving of a Kubrick

My sense while I'm working is that I'm trying to figure something out.

sequence, even as I imagine that our neoliberal largesse comes at the expense of so many others who are hunting around on all fours for nuts and berries. In all, it may be an air-conditioned, Anthropocenic nightmare, but speaking especially as an asthmatic, I'll take the air-conditioning, thank you very much.

Now: even when I'm writing or collaborating on what I hope will be an accurate representation of reality – and this is not often my objective as a poet – I'm less interested in speaking for others than in speaking in such a manner so as to do justice to that reality, including justice to what has passed, to what is understood as no longer part of the real. This Jell-O mold we're in is at any rate a complicated affair, then, and while I do think we're all – all living things – in this together, I don't necessarily believe that I can speak for anyone, sadly, save little old me. My poem "Egypt" flirts in fact with the related issue of whether there are topics we ought to address via our writing. And as far as speaking for nonhuman animals (not that you asked, but it's become a hot topic in some circles): I am sensitive to the plight of all creatures, notwithstanding my omnivore appetite, and I do grasp the many ways in which their plight and ours are intertwined. But I am most concerned, finally, about human suffering, and frankly I have encountered no ethics sufficient to accounting in practical terms for the death of nonanimal others and the destruction of their habitats irrevocably wrought by the construction of a single dwelling or a single road, or of the many networks entailed in the publication of a single book.

The gambit of art is to make something that, in the final analysis, does not abide by and thus cannot be grasped in its entirety by prior judgment.

GC: How is art a reaction against training?

J.A: I was educated and trained as an engineer (a math major originally, which is something a bit different), so I'll address this question in such terms. Engineering is at its core about design and redesign, and design and redesign requires the identification of pattern. Of course life itself requires the identification of pattern, but the patterns

engineers seek, as they go about their business in a business context, are highly instrumentalized. An engineer's job is to identify such patterns, which patterns presume causal material relationships, as they strive to make things work so as to produce specific and (it is to be hoped) predictable effects. (Trouble arises of course when they don't account for all of the effects.) This can be a creative activity in that there are countless ways to skin a cat, but for the most part both the emphasis on end product and design inertia – the world as it is – generally determines to a large degree one's possible choices. In a plant where schedule 5 stainless steel piping has been spaced out, one is obliged to use schedule 5 stainless steel piping. Art too trades in patterns, but with this difference: aside from this question of signature style, above; and whatever one's aesthetic convictions; and regardless of the tried-and-true resistance of the medium, the gambit of art is to make something that, in the final analysis, does not abide by and thus cannot be grasped in its entirety by prior judgment. This is what Clem Greenberg meant when he referred to "the impossibility... of anticipating the outcome of aesthetic experience." That's the (impossible?) gambit anyway, and training, for all of its potential value as a preparatory learning activity, moves in something like the opposite direction. I might add that whereas Aristotle tells us that poetry – by which he means poetry and drama – speaks of universals, I would observe that it's only through the particulars of experience that we might catch a glimpse of these great or greater notions. By having ourselves experienced a "sweet May-morning," we realize viscerally what Wordsworth is getting at, and this becomes the basis for identifying his "intimations." Seen in this light, the emphasis in engineering on details has served me well as a poet.

GC: Your poetry seems to braid multiple ideas, tones, sensibilities. Is this a flowing-through process or a construction of ideas?

J.A: I think of myself as an assembler, and in this regard I'm no different than countless other artists, literary and otherwise, who have been drawn to collage, assemblage, etc. My sense while I'm working is that I'm trying to figure something out.

GC: What do you look for in a play or film you watch? What do you want from it?

J.A: I want to be wowed frankly, so as to confirm my faith in art. And I suppose this means that I want to be moved in all ways. But because I construct my own narratives,

primarily as a novelist and aspiring screenwriter, I can often see through what I'm reading or watching to the blueprint, let's call it, that the writer or writers used in constructing their narratives. And this means that I'm a tough audience. In which regard it should be noted that my hometown, Syracuse NY, has a reputation for being a tough audience, as it was once used as a testing ground for staging Broadway-bound plays (a fact I mention in my memoir, *Once an Engineer*).

GC: What is traditional about your approach to art? What's original?

J.A: Traditional? Certainly, to the extent that I'm a reader and devotee of so much that's come before me, so much of which pitter-patters through my work. Original? Oh yeah, I am myself a goddamn bona fide American original all right. Just ask me.

GC: What's the first book you ever read that let you know you were a writer?

J.A: I don't know that reading a book was what did it for me. I've been influenced by a vast range of written material, from the classics to comic books to fanzines to high theory. But I've also been influenced by TV shows and movies and of course pop music. I'm very much a child of popular culture. I have watercolors and oils by my (French) uncle and my mother's father hanging on the walls of my apartment, and those have been in my field of vision since forever. Add to these my father's inspiring work as a furniture finisher and my mother's talent for handicrafts (sewing, knitting), and I suspect the desire to make things was instilled in me – and in my brother Mike, who's very good with wood – at a young age. And words were where I happened to land. Of course I did grow up in a household where French, German, and Italian were regularly spoken along with English, and I'm sure this has something to do with it too.

GC: Do you see the world through a paradigm of language or images?

J.A: When I write, it's about words, and as far as words go, I've never been very adept at creating images. My writing is discursive (in all senses – I often proceed by argument) and occasionally musical. One of the challenges in writing poetry today, at least for me, has been to imagine a readership for same. Sure, poetry readerships, like all readerships, are always imagined – that is, in the case

of poetry, beyond a handful of poet-friends – but in this case I'm having difficulty actually *imagining*. It might simply be that poetry as a field of practice is mirroring the Balkanization and polarization we see, again, in our politicized Jell-O environs. I can't say. I write pop song lyrics too in collaboration with my musician-composer friend Barry Blinderman (Barry is also a curator and he's taught me a lot about art), and I distinguish my lyrics from my poetry in that Barry and I are aiming for a popular audience, hence our emphasis, accordingly, is on accessible (and singable!) lyrics. (We both love Dylan, yes, but we're not foolish enough to attempt something Dylanesque.) Similarly, when I'm writing conventional screenplays with Kass Fleisher, commercial interests (and in particular the realities of financing) are paramount, and our orientation is thus toward clear-cut story structure and dialogue, and naturally we try to visualize the result. When I write prose, whether fiction or memoir, I'm still wedded to what sentences can do. I'm hardly the most deft narrative writer, despite the fact that fiction has been my overriding pursuit for the past seven or eight years now and that fiction is what I teach. I dabble in watercolor and photography, and there I'm trying to learn how to see.

GC: What are your aspirations as a writer? Where do you want it to take you next?

J.A: Permit me to be pragmatic: I wish I could write something that would free me from having to teach. MONEY IN THE BANK. Teaching is a full-time, 100% commitment, and any good teacher knows that you can't put your writing ahead of your teaching. But I'm a writer-who-teaches, not a teacher-who-writes – a distinction I borrow from D. G. Myers – and at this point in my seemingly endless march toward tenure (let's hope the third time's a charm, as I go up again in fall of 2017), I would like to devote myself solely to my writing (and my dabbling). So money is, finally, my primary motivation for writing screenplays, much as I love the form. In less pragmatic terms, my only aspiration is to get up every morning and feel the need to keep writing. Oh, and since I've just predicated breathing, I'd like to keep breathing too.

GC: What do poets need to keep writing, to keep imaging, to find new material?

J.A: Just keep an eye out for, and ear tuned to, what's going on outside of your own orbit. One reason I like to hike is because it takes me outside of myself. (Now if only there were mountains in Central IL...)

GC: Do you think you are an intuitive writer? Sensual? Thinking? Feeling? Or all 4?

J.A: The easiest way for me to answer this question is to walk you through part of the writing process of a specific work, so let's look at the title poem of my forthcoming collection, "Sipping Coffee @ Carmela's". What follows is to the best of my recollection, which means I'll doubtless fudge things a bit and print the legend:

As I recall, the line "sipping coffee at Carmela's" came to me either while texting or emailing someone about, well, sipping coffee at Carmela's. Carmela's Restaurant here in Bloomington-Normal is my favorite breakfast joint (this is a term of endearment, trust me), and I have breakfast there just about every Friday morning with my friends Bill and Carol Spencer. (The late Stan Clark was a regular too. I miss Stan.) I know Carmela and her family, all of whom work at the restaurant – her husband José cooks, her son Alex and daughter Alexa wait tables – and I know several of the other wait staff too, one of whom, Sandra, makes an appearance in the poem. (Though I hasten to add that I never attempt to order in Spanish, so the poem departs from verisimilitude here.) Anyway, "Sipping coffee at Carmela's" has a nice tetrameter ring to it, doesn't it? And I was immediately struck by the potential it had for serving as the locus of a poem about the images that were at the time bombarding me every night on TV, where African Americans were being targeted – there is simply no other word for it – by law enforcement, with predictably disastrous results. This is how things often go with me: an element of spontaneity, if you will, coupled with an issue that strikes me as urgent or compelling (and in this case, topical). My next thought was that the line itself speaks to a moment of potential reflection, even leisure. *There I sit, at Carmela's, sipping coffee* – while black men and women and children are being gunned down, strangled, what have you. And here I am, a white guy, living in a blanket of relative security and safety. What on earth could I possibly have to say that might address this kind of collective trauma? What is my investment in this situation as a *writer*? (This latter question is one that I think all writers have to ask themselves, and it was framed for me in such terms by Patricia Foster. Thanks Patricia!) But to pose such questions is to inquire, at one meta-poetic level, into the privileged agency of the white male poet, an agency that obviously applies to yours truly. And under the assumption that past is prologue, one might further ask how this agency has in the past ministered to readers regarding death. Thus for whatever reason – well, it probably has something to do with the fact that I love his poetry, his nuanced and often beautifully musical idiom, even as he gives me semantic conniptions, even if he could

be casually racist in his letters, which can bleed over into this poems, and what's more, I always imagine him as luxuriating in excess as he articulated the imagination's claim to the real (though in reality his trappings were probably more typically office drab) – Wallace Stevens came immediately to mind, and specifically his great poem, "Sunday Morning." His morning to be contrasted with my Friday mornings — and for what it's worth, in Christian terms, Friday of course being the day Christ was crucified, Sunday the day of the Resurrection – and hey, I'm no believer. And if you read my modest effort against Stevens's stunning exposition – his poem has a lot to do with death – you will I hope note something like a stanza-by-stanza resonance, and you'll note too, in stanza VII, my address to this meta-poetic and historical lineage that I'm busy exploiting. Feeling? Sure, maybe even the anxiety of influence. Thinking? Absolutely, and one could argue that I'm too clever by half. Sensual? Well I *am* sipping coffee, and I do at one point mention the taste. My friends have suffered my disquisitions on the necessity of keeping one's brain intact even or especially in the presence of beauty. Well, but this is how I work, this is how I theorize my work as I'm working.

GC: How do we live in the world without being overcome by the world, so we can keep a clear lens?

J.A: Like I have an answer to that one, me, a guy with severe myopia who had Lasik at 54! I'm just a writer. My way of not being overcome by the world is to be a part of the world and not imagine myself an island (cue Donne). We have after all a responsibility to one another and trying to escape that responsibility might make so much that goes on around us seem irrelevant, an intrusion on our privacy or some such. I think that's a mistake. That said, I understand too that it's all too easy to be overwhelmed by the 24/7/365 intensity of our socially-mediated, getting and spending globe – Kass is fond of quoting Shakespeare's great line, "sick and blunted with community" (this assumes you're lucky enough to enjoy some semblance of community) – especially while trying in the meantime to make ends meet. So for me, hiking — in the absence of same, a long walk (think Thoreau) – provides some necessary quotient of solitude, that bright fucking air that Michael McClure once wrote about. I'm sounding very literary now; it's time for me to stop.

Just keep an eye out for, and ear tuned to, what's going on outside of your own orbit.