

Coming Through

*A Boston museumgoer's art
of survival*

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There is a room at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, in the second floor of the American Wing that is comprised entirely of Winslow Homer canvases. Half of them are Civil War scenes—mostly men between battle, gearing up for the next one—and half concern the sea.

The former have a dustiness to them, a prevailing brownness, whereas the latter feature blues that trend to black, for Homer preferred to depict the sea at night, or at dusk, or with a storm coming on.

There is one exception at the MFA, a panel he painted for his brother's boat, depicting men, out in the sun, catching mackerel by the bucket. You'd want something happy like this for your boat, not a reminder of your mortality or, what I think Winslow Homer really specialized in, reminders of our emotional mortality.

When you go through a lot, and you try to keep going, you learn that there are all kinds of ways to die which won't actually remove you, physically, from this planet. It is cold comfort to know that enduring and pressing on and fighting harder to live than ever before, without anything changing for the better, is still a worthier way to go than inventing some narrative of falsehoods that you might try and accept to make existing easier.

This is where faith, I suppose, comes into it. Faith isn't a belief in a man in the sky. It's not bolstered by a catechism you chant out in the night. Faith is going through something that would break most people, continuing on, trying to evolve, letting nothing stop you in that march onward, even if your friends and family flake away because what you're enduring is too upsetting to them, too much of a reminder of what they might not be able to go through, and still having some shred of belief that doing all of this will be worth it in the end.

That, to me, is faith. Nothing else is.

There are—or can be, anyway—a lot of days, months, years, where it seems that the gale will never let up. You can be armed with thousands of reasons for why it won't, couldn't. And you find a way to put your head down, keep walking against the wind, because you know you are doing what any person, even a person in the sky, were there ever such a person—and who fucking knows—could not see as anything but right, on the moral up and up, and because, well...

Maybe.

Faith is what you put in a word like “maybe.” The further that “maybe” is from “certainly,” and the harder the winds blow against you and the harder it is to put your head down and walk against it, the more faith you need to keep going.

I see this notion of faith crystalized in a wall of three Winslow Homer canvases in a room of the American Wing at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, where the echoes reverberate every time I stop from my walking for a moment to behold them.

For starters, on the left there is a painting from 1885 called *The Fog Warning*. A lone fisherman rows a dory, laden down with his catch: two giant halibut. Big suckers, like mini-tuna. But the seas are choppy and roiling, and the clouds are, too; ragged and rain-filled, one aligns itself, diagonally, with the fisherman as a wave pushes him skyward. He is looking over his shoulder at this cloud. Things are not portending well. The seas are getting higher, you can practically hear the white-tipped waves breaking, and you know what the fisherman is thinking: *Do I dump these fish because they are weighing me down, or do I row like mad for home and hope I make it back with them? Fish like these ain't easy to come by. I should fight for them.*

You can strip the notion of its fishing contingency and extend it to touch on the question: *do I try and do the right thing and have faith, knowing that life goes so much easier for people who tend not to, or do I find something else I can live to, exist to, as a settling rather than a striving?* Do you exist, or do you live? Do you try and live even if it is that much harder than existing? Do you go on hoping

that you will do what most people without that courage and character cannot? Eventually, should the right things come to pass. Do you have that kind of faith? Should you? Is it wise, or stupid? Are you a fool to try and make it back in with the fish?

A lot of writers say they learned to write from other writers.

I didn't learn from a single one. I learned from music. Records. Beatles songs. How sound abetted sense. *Revolver* was a novel to me, and I'd explore its various parts, how it was assembled, how it told individual stories within a collective narrative framework, a many-ness stemming from a oneness, if you will.

And I learned from looking at paintings. From all angles. At the side, crouched down low, looking up into the foreground, from across the room, from inches away with the sensors going off and a museum staffer giving a tsk-tsk look as I nodded and backed away, giving my best *my bad* look of mild contrition.

When life has beaten the bag out of you, I've found that there are several ways to keep going. Or that I have used to keep going, anyway. One of them is creating. Maybe you need to be the kind of person who can create, whether that is the watercolors you try your hand at, or your needlework, the figures you whittle out of wood— if anyone even whittles anymore.

Me, I'd write, and I had a routine, which I also think you need. Maybe not a strict routine, but some regularity, things you turn to often.

On Sunday mornings, I'd run a few miles, then turn up at the diner down the street from my hellish shoe box. I'd have on my red track bottoms, maroon Gloucester high school Fishermen sweat-shirt, purple-ish winter cap bearing the name of the British rock band the Vaccines. My rocket ensemble of less-than-sartorially-splendid-Sabbaths.

And covered in sweat, too, but this was the sort of place where that really didn't matter, at six in the a.m., when it was mostly just old men discussing how no one could ever have seen the wonders of

the 1967 Red Sox coming. We're talking hardcore Boston here.

I'd flip through the sports page and then the comics. I had to look at the same strips each Sunday. *Adam@home* on the back, then *Mother Goose and Grim* inside on the right hand page, moving up to the *Family Circus*, which is so daft and bathetic, but a sort of homily of hope if you are down low enough, and conclude with *Arlo and Janis* at the top of the left hand page.

I once dated a girl I didn't much care for who remarked, "*Arlo and Janis* has really lost its edge over the years." I wasn't doing any of my subsequent routines back then, but the line stuck with me. She'd read the strip so much that she could chart the demise of its potency? *Arlo and Janis* ever had an edge? Was this something lay people thought, too, or something that you'd only mull over if you were a professional cartoonist yourself? Need one be an expert on the lower branches of art? A week-in, week-out inquirer into these matters, like some hall monitor of the funny pages?

As the men in the café nattered away about the impossible Dream Sox, I'd try to read *Arlo and Janis* through that girl's lens, but it made me sad as the strip is ultimately about two people living life through each other, sharpening up their own individual identities through such processes. A cartoon roadmap for what you're supposed to do, in a way. What I hoped to do. What I wasn't doing. What I feared I'd not have a chance to do, though I knew that later in the day, after the internal dilemmas and cartoon consternation of the diner were behind me, I'd be back at the museum, to ponder some more.

And to work on my writing, my creating, my version of the whittling, but whittling at my core.

But first: a stop at the New England Aquarium, where I was also a member. I loved it there as a kid, and as a man of the sea—in my mind, anyway—I loved it more as an adult.

A giant tank in the center of the New England Aquarium goes from the bottom floor to the top, with a ramp coiled around it so you

can perambulate from the surface—which the sea turtles like—to the craggy, coral-lined bottoms.

In this tank lives a moray eel whom I have dubbed Murray. I like moray eels. I admire their teeth, that they will take no bullshit, that they have a look of ultimate Piscean determination on their svelte faces. Angular faces. If fish made film noir, you'd want to cast a moray like Murray as your protagonist.

He's also elusive as fuck, and I'd not allow myself to leave the Aquarium until I'd spotted Murray in the big tank. My Waldo, you might say, who stood for so much more.

Sure, I'd have to go from the top to the bottom like six times on some visits, swearing under my breath as I did so, but it'd always end with "there you are, you mad fucker, you," (what skill he possesses for contorting himself into corral crannies) sometimes to the chagrin of a stroller-pushing parent, but a man's soul was at stake here. Or the energies required to keep himself going, anyway, to now press on to the Museum of Fine Arts where I would write some more in my head.

All I was doing was creating. Engineering gambits in my mind that came with a flourish of whimsy, wit, and yet which also bore the cold touch of the Reaper, of laughing into the abyss, sizing up the abyss, dreaming dreams and making ideas that would allow one, perhaps, to overleap that very abyss. Some day. Ideally with someone. Necessarily with someone, I suppose. Yes.

Three miles later, I'd be in the American Wing of the MFA, getting too close to a Sargent painting, setting off the sensor, seeing how he wrote with two brushstrokes, two strong twists of the wrist that moved the coloristic narrative from point A to B.

Definitively, swiftly, both economically and expansively. That is what you fucking want. That is how you communicate. Brushstrokes.

What you learn when you look at enough paintings, hear enough Schubert piano sonatas, whatever it may be, is that brushstrokes are not the stuff of brushes. Not exclusively. They are the true emotions, those that are scored into you, etched so deeply that

they go through you, come out the other side of your personage, hang in your personal ether, like a nimbus of your insides radiating around your skin, and which therefore enter the orbit of others, when you get up close enough to them, so that the emotions go into them, too.

You don't write when you write. When you truly write. You paint. And that has nothing to do with heaps of description. It has to do with where you have the balls to dip your brush. I'd say, too, it has something to do with what your wrist can do, as that was clearly the case with someone like Sargent, but that sounds like a masturbation double entendre.

Hmmm. So maybe it is. Maybe a lot starts with such a process, in a metaphorical sense, that it becomes a kind of practice for the real thing: real connections, real blending, real trust.

Sometimes I'd walk those corridors of the American Wing

listening to my iPod. I had the Rolling Stones' *Let It Bleed* on there. The title track is my favorite Stones cut and I'd be struck how well it synched up with what I was seeing on the walls, and what was germinating in my head, a soup of confusion, pain, nascent ideas, burgeoning art, desires of the heart, the flesh, transferences of meanings in which an eel was no longer an eel, a girl no longer a girl, a comic strip a beacon, a couple of eggs a kick in the ass not to drink away a morning, all of it a push to remain alive.

You do what you need to do. You use whatever you can use. When you're about to plunge over the cliff, and you're still thinking maybe there is some iota of a reason to hang on, you don't question the kind of root you've managed to coil your fingers around. You grab and pull indiscriminately.

At the end of "Let It Bleed," a song with a simple blues structure that no one would mistake for a vanguard Stones work, Mick Jagger starts having what sounds like some meaningless risqué fun. The song is about finished, the lyric proper is done, and Jagger com-

mences doing his own thing, singing, again and again, over the coda:

Ahh, bleed it alright, bleed it alright
You can bleed all over me
Bleed it alright, bleed it alright, you can be my rider
You can cum all over me
Bleed it alright, baby, bleed it alright, bleed it alright,
You can cum all over me

I looked so hard at those paintings, which I'd approach with such alacrity that when I stopped to inspect one of them I could still hear the echo of my tread on the marble floor resonating. A last final beat prior to stopping. Like a heartbeat before you go, maybe. Only I wasn't going anywhere, just yet: I was here.

Those echoes were like echoes of the past, as the past was so often on my mind on these occasions. People tell you to leave it behind. Thanks. But what people too often fail to consider is that the past is alive as well, maybe more alive than all but a few of us are. We walk, it walks, and it is a skilled out-pacer, racing on to the future, even, which it can muck about with if you do not deal with it.

But as the last echo faded out, I'd turn up the Stones song in my earbuds, beholding what Sargent or Winslow Homer or Fitz Henry Lane or dear old Childe Hassam had done.

The movement of skilled wrists. The efficacy of the brush, the character required to dip it where it had been dipped. To find that making art, in large part, is a measure of character. Pulling at the root.

And then it would click, what Jagger was singing about, what all of these things had in common, what was coming into focus in my mind from that soup, that salmagundi of so many thoughts and feelings.

You can bleed all over me. You can cum all over me.

That "me" is the blank canvas. And if what you make is also

who you are, that blank canvas is also you. And if life is, as F. Scott Fitzgerald said, a series of blows from which one must always fight to come back again, it's also a challenge to be the blank canvas and get the sucker filled up right.

You can cum all over me, as it were. I trust you to. I trust me to, too. Just do it right. With trust. Openness.

Cum with character, you might say.

Anyway. It is Sunday morning now. And this is all still going on. Meaning, I have a few places to get to and will return posthaste. The cum awaits! No no no—that was wrong. You know what I mean.

I spend a lot of time at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston.

I also spend a lot of time walking around, and making lists in my head. Lots of lists, which I revise: my favorite F. Scott Fitzgerald stories, my favorite backyard birds, top horror pictures of the 1930s, and, not too long ago, a list of things without which I would not be alive.

The first half dozen times I went, I wandered the galleries, learning the entire layout of the place, finding the shortcuts down corridors no one went down, making lists—which I saw as progress—of my favorite paintings.

Progress because I saw that my mind wanted to engage in this dialogue with me for longer than just the hellish here-and-now. It wanted it to be there in the future, too, because, knowing how I think, I could tell that a part of me wanted this to be a long-standing debate of decades, with a Winslow Homer seascape, at some point, leaping past a Georges Braque Cubist study, and then reversing once more as a Sargent watercolor surged past them both, for a time.

I'd sit on a couch, in a dim alcove, beneath a Sargent mural depicting Perseus holding the head of the Medusa, having just lopped that bad boy off.

The first time I woke up to see the Asian tourists pondering me, it took me about ten seconds to realize they thought I was some live exhibit. At a better point in my life, this would have embarrassed me.

But you know how it gets. You go so low, you almost laugh. Maybe you do laugh. Personally, I went all method acting that first time, pretending I was Brando. Gave a most exaggerated yawn—which made two of them clap—and then wiped the drool from my chin with what I viewed as a Shakespearian flourish, before emitting a lone and concluding “Fie!”

Upon which the Asian tourists scattered. I think I was a hit. Or maybe they just have really curious notions of art.

Fie, bitches.

That was what Sargent wrote in his notes as to what overarching feeling he wanted to convey with this portion of the mural, this particular scene.

Yes, of course I’m kidding.

I’m mostly kidding.

I kind of feel like I’m not kidding.

I was far more human than I’d ever come close to being by that point. I don’t know that you can get more human. When you want to die more than you thought possible, and yet you’re more alive than you’ve ever been, what are you? You’re not Leprechaun, lion, ghost, owl, woodland sprite, succubus, canard, Father Christmas, or an elemental. You’re pretty fucking human.

And I’d just be saying what happened to me, how I came to create some of what I created, and that would be the past—the past repairing itself in the manner that makes justice perpetually relevant, even seemingly after the fact, so far as calendars go. The present and the future would be far more bountiful. But justice still matters. Accountability still matters. Truth matters more than that still.

So that was my little thing, sitting under that part of the mural. Still is.

The Boston Museum of Fine Arts is a hamlet for me. It is a place where I feel safe, and where, at the same time, the past echoes, the “what might have beens” resound. It’s a place, too, that I’ve envisioned in my future, if faith ever pays off. Because I’d want to

share it with someone special to me. If they were someone right for me, it'd likely be a place right for them. Maybe for totally different reasons.

So it was a big deal when I took someone to the MFA. There was a time when I could go with anyone, kill an afternoon there. In theory. Discuss some paintings. Have lunch in one of the restaurants. Those times are no more, though. The place just means too much to me. No, if I go there with you, at this point, we are endeavoring to go somewhere together, in a larger sense: "the museum outside of the museum" sense. The "world outside life" sense. Which is also to say, "the world on our respective insides" sense. Those museums of heart and soul, with, I like to think, a Connection Wing, lined with the art that comes from two people really having given each other over to each other, and thus advancing as individuals in double-time.

Some years after I painted my "life stuff" canvas, if you will, after working long and hard to keep going, to do what I knew to be right, if not easy, to try to live rather than exist, to try so hard to have some degree of faith, I stood in front of Winslow Homer's *The Fog Warning* with a person who made me think that, fuck me, yes, it really is true, I should have had that faith all along.

But you know how it is. You confide. People have their own stuff. Sometimes they can't deal with it. You've maybe set yourself up for them to instead use what happened to you against you in their way, so that they can keep everything going outward, and not have to look inward and try and contend with what's stopping them from living and leaving them merely existing, and barely at that.

I think that's how some people can do what's both bad for someone else and bad for them at the same time. I read an article the other day about how most people in the middle class would be utterly screwed if they had an emergency and had to all of a sudden free up \$400. As a sort of adult *Oliver Twist*, I'm a long way from the middle class, but I think the same kind of idea applies to people at the emotional level. One more extraction, one more burden, one

more taxing of who they are and how fragile they are, would be one too many. So they do whatever they have to do, no matter how mendacious it might be, to safeguard against that. It's not survival of the fittest, I've learned. It's survival, in a way, of the sickest. Anti-life, pro-existence.

So that was hard. I'm a foul guy as well—in a good way, I hope—and we were all primed to test out together that bathroom near the Childe Hassam paintings, outside of which is a painting—hung on the tiny alcove wall—by Aldro T. Hibbard called *The Sentinels*, a copse of two cedars and three oaks stripped of their leaves in a snowy forest keeping vigil over the untrampled woodlands that recede into the background.

Bathroom buggery was not to be, no “let it bleed” moment, but when faith is rewarded, in these situations, everything becomes an extension of everything else. You realize that there's a lot of overlap between what Winslow Homer might have been doing, what the Stones and the echoes are doing, what two bodies covertly pressed up against each other are doing when they are two people who have elected to live rather than exist—to have the balls to dip the brush, to cum—and are now proceeding a hell of a lot faster in tandem against diminished winds.

I didn't go to the museum for a couple weeks after all of that, but eventually I returned to that wall of three Winslow Homer paintings. Next to *The Fog Warning* is a canvas called *Driftwood*, from 1911. It is the last painting Homer completed. You look at it, and you know he must have known it was going to be his last.

A man on a rocky shore has a coil of rope. He is approaching an enormous log—or maybe a ship's spar—that has been driven in by a storm. A good three fifths of the canvas is white sea foam. It surrounds the man, who may well be the fisherman from *The Fog Warning*. Same hat, same slicker. I like to think he's the same man, anyway.

If you've ever walked on the craggy New England coast when it is raining, you know how easily it is to slip, to wreck. Basically,

you're going down. The rocks have a layer of seaweed atop them, and I'm not sure anything is more slippery than that shit when it's wet. Ice is less slippery.

But this dude is out there, and he wants that wood. He's probably already wrecked a bunch of times in getting as far as he has. There he is, though, and he's only an arm's length away. It doesn't even seem to matter that the part of the wood we can see is four times bigger than the guy. Why? You know why. Because this is someone who has lived rather than existed. Someone who has faith. Someone who didn't dump the fish, just put his head down and rowed.

But it is one hell of a night he's picked to look for driftwood on. It's a hell of a night, too, in the painting to the right, the last of this triptych called *The Lookout*—"All's Well" from 1896.

You won't have seen a painting like this. I can't think of another one that uses this method of perspective, for we are on the boat, basically, right in the face of the title character such that we can all but feel his breath as he bellows his words that everything is good.

At least for now. The bell behind him is on a diagonal visual line, on account of the pitch and roll of the ship. We are at the top portion of a wave. If it's possible to get seasick from a painting, this is the one. Homer puts you right in the boat. Right in this life. The viewer, even if he or she is from Wyoming, is no more a lubber than this ancient New England mariner carrying out his duties for the latest time.

Duties. I think one can also feel duty bound to try and live, to hold on to faith, and sometimes that's a matter of finding places, as well as people (if you are so fortunate) to help you maintain that faith. Right now, one of the things I have for that purpose is a museum where I am sometimes mistaken for an exhibit.

I tend to think of those three Homer paintings as capturing some aspect of the same night. Three scenes from an autumnal New England storm. The fisherman just after dusk with a decision to make as to whether to give something up or try all the harder; that

same fellow imagining how well he could sally forth over the most slippery of rocks upon his latest return to shore; and a ship's watchman signaling that the storm has past, we are good for the night, we have come through.

In other words, it's time to take another hit of Dramamine and sail out again. I'm tired and due for a nap at the MFA for my fans. You can find me under the Sargent mural of Perseus holding the head of the gorgon. I'll leave out a little coffee can for tips.