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FALLING AND LAUGHING JULIAN GOUGH REALITY IS A BANANASKIN ON WHICH WE MUST STEP

6

Comic writers laugh at the folly of humanity (“Poor, sufferin’ Hugh Mannity,” as Flann O’Brien put it). Many, therefore, claim that comic writers should laugh from a position of non-folly: that comic writers need a solid ethical foundation under their feet as they write, in order to justify their attacks. But this is entirely wrong. In fact it is necessary to have no ideology, no religion, no politics, no opinions, when writing comedy. It must come from a pure moral void. Comedy which comes from a specifically Christian point of view, or socialist, or libertarian, contrarian, feminist, Freudian—from any merely human point of view—will be, to that extent, damaged and limited. Comedy is Dionysian, not Apollonian, and it is free of all ethics, all systems. It is pure. It has the sincerity not of religious leaders preaching, but of animals fucking.

But surely we have to stand somewhere? When Aristophanes wrote of Athenian political life, he put himself on Mount Olympus, in the position of the gods, looking down on humanity and laughing. But we are no longer writing from the point of view of the gods. So where do we stand when we write? We stand nowhere. We float in the void. Laughing. The point of view we express is that of the universe itself.

We know far, far more about the universe than the Greeks ever did. They looked up at a night sky that was no more than a high ceiling, dotted with splashes of milk. We look up at supergalactic clusters fifteen billion light-years away, their bright white stars redshifted down into the infrared, accelerating away from us as space-time expands. The Greeks looked down, and saw an ant. We look down and see the charged leptons and quarks that hold together the atoms of dust adhering to the antennae of the microscopic parasites that live in the cracks of the ant’s armor. This knowledge changes everything, including comedy. And it changes nothing, including comedy.





As Professor Albert von Szent-Györgyi points out, there are only two fundamental reactions of life:

Energy + $n\text{CO}_2 + n\text{H}_2\text{O} = n\text{O}_2 + \text{C}_n\text{H}_2\text{nOn}$... (Making little packets of energy.)

And $\text{C}_n\text{H}_2\text{nOn} + n\text{O}_2 = n\text{H}_2\text{O} + n\text{CO}_2 + \text{Energy}$... (Unpacking them again.)

Any given tree, insect, shark, lichen, bacterium, or professor of linguistics is merely a baroque expression of one of those two formulas. The idea that we are the best and most complex thing in the universe is so funny it's beyond funny. And yet, even in our post-religious humility, we are boastful: we're the most flawed animal! The most humble! The most evil! The most fascinating!

Human beings, like every other creature, make sense of the universe up to the level of their comprehension. No doubt our red blood cells, as they rush about the place, think it's all about red blood cells. ("Look! This universe is optimized for us! Amazing! God loves us!") They yearn for oxygen, fear clotting, and think red blood cells are as rich, fascinating, and complicated as it gets. But the red blood cells are entirely oblivious to the ever-more-complex patterns of which they are a part—my erection; a performance of *Hamlet* on roller skates, using real blood; the Battle of Stalingrad.

The relationship of a rock to its mountain will never be funny, because the rock does not believe it is the center of the universe. Does not lie to itself. Does not have an animal nature running like a refrigerator motor, day and night, beneath the babble of a consciousness.

But we are matter with attitude. We are inherently funny because we are inherently wrong about everything. All thoughts are lies. As a species, our thinking suffers from precisely the same intractable problem that afflicts us as individuals, a problem most elegantly expressed by Emo Phillips: "I used to think that the brain was the most wonderful organ in my body. Then I realized who was telling me this."

We experience reality through a—fiercely distorting—set of filters. We exist curled up at the bottom of a well of ignorance a billion miles deep, and as narrow as a straw. All we can experience of the universe is the little sound and light that leaks down that straw. And so we think we stride about the universe, while we are merely stirring in our sleep at the bottom of the well.

If writing is about committing acts of radical empathy, then the ultimate



act of radical empathy is with the entire universe. And the result will always be comedy. Comedy with only one punch line: the gap between what we think we are, and what we are.

We look at the universe and see ourselves: look! From Aquarius to Sagittarius. From *Star Wars* to *Avatar*. But comedy is the art of putting us in our true context. And our true context diminishes us to nothing. And yet we live.

WANTING TO BE A FACT

MAUD CASEY
READS MAX FRISCH

In Max Frisch's strange and beautiful little novel *Man in the Holocene*, an old man named Geiser is trapped in his home in an Alpine valley in southern Switzerland by the collapse of a supporting wall that blocks the highway to the tiny village. Over the course of a few days in isolation, he tries to "make sense of the universe up to the level of [his] comprehension." He's tired of novels in which "people behave as if the earth would remain the earth and the sea level would stay the same forever," and turns, instead, to nonfiction books—about the local area of Ticino, popular science, gardening, hiking, and a twelve-volume German Brokhaus encyclopedia, among others. He is especially interested in evolution and geology—the extinction of Tyrannosaurus Rex, for example, and the geological formation of the diluvian ice sheet. He wants just the facts, ma'am, though, of course, the facts begin to tell a novelistic story, too. Geiser devours the information, as if it could fill him up, make him heavier, and keep him from floating away into the ether. Things have gotten pretty strange there all alone in the cabin and he becomes more and more desperate, to the point where running his eyes over the pages no longer suffices to keep him steady. It's as if he needs to get his hands, as well as his eyes, on these life buoys of fact—the golden section of the Pythagorean theorem, continental drift, and the formation of the Alps—and that's what he does: he tears these pages, and others, out of the books and tapes them to the walls of his home. Frisch has done the same to the wall of his novel, which is interspersed with collaged pages from the books. I read as Geiser reads, and I begin to feel his urgency. He consumes the facts; he wants to be



as solid and irrefutable as a fact. I want to be a fact, too!

Just before my favorite paragraph, the highway is cleared and Geiser's daughter has arrived to discover her father has had a stroke. When she walks in, a burst of wind blows the torn pages everywhere, "a confused heap that makes no sense." Knowledge doesn't absolve him of his mortality, and we aren't absolved of ours either. It isn't possible to make total sense of the universe when you're in it, a part of it, a speck—a speck whose attempts to understand and make sense are poignant and sometimes beautiful but still, a speck who is part of a speck tribe who may soon go the way of Tyrannosaurus Rex. And yet, what Frisch does next is so oddly comforting to me. Geiser moves from rage-raging-against-the-dying-of-the-light to entering into a transcendent humility in this, my favorite paragraph:

The ants Geiser recently observed under a dripping fir tree are not concerned with what anyone might know about them; nor were the dinosaurs, which died out before a human being set eyes on them. All the papers, whether on the wall or on the carpet, can go. Who cares about the Holocene? Nature needs no names. Geiser knows that. The rocks do not need his memory.

This is followed by the final collage, seven clippings: a definition of erosion; the chestnut trees in the Alps, first planted by the Romans; a definition of eschatology; a snippet from an article about chestnut canker that might obliterate the chestnut woods of Ticino; a paragraph on the Roman military colonies in the area; and the definition of apoplexy. In the middle is the seventh clipping, the definition of the philosophical concept of the "principle of coherence"—everything is connected.

And then Geiser disappears altogether from the narration. Frisch takes us out of the novel with a long paragraph that describes the landscape without Geiser in it. "All in all, a green valley, wooded as in the Stone Age." This place is so beautiful, and Geiser was there for a while. Each time I read this novel, I disappear from the landscape too, and, fleetingly, feel only gratitude that I am here for a while and, fleetingly, *stop* trying to "make sense of the universe up to the level of [my] comprehension." Relief, respite, and then I go back to rage, raging.



YOU HAD TO BE THERE

BRIAN T. EDWARDS

IN TEHRAN, CAIRO, AND FEZ

No one jokes with me when I go to Tehran. Well, that's not exactly true; there's plenty of gallows humor in the capital city. But in Iran my nationality puts parentheses around most of the jokes I'm told, limiting the range of the material I am offered. A young man deadpans: "You are from America? I hear the U.S. has two capital cities." Really? "Yes, Washington and Tel Aviv."

One night, three Iranian friends are trading jokes to the point of tears, two of them English professors from Tehran, the third a bearded scholar of Islamic law from Qom. The jokes are ribald, obscene as they get: marriage and mullahs and infidelity and cuckolds. Many of them pose a Rashti from the north of Iran as the butt of the humor, no surprise. My Persian can't keep up, but later a translation from one of the English professors fills in the holes, which makes everyone laugh all over again. The jokes were funnier before I understood them.

Right after Hurricanes Katrina and then Rita hit New Orleans, I read in an Egyptian newspaper about a joke circulating around Cairo via text message: "The work of a suicide plumber!" It wasn't meant for my ears, or eyes, but I laughed out loud.

And in Fez this summer, my friend Sadik tells me about the way some reporters have been referring to the American national pastime: *kurat al-qa'ida*. It's a perfect translation—*al-qa'ida* of course refers to a base, as in a base of operations or a safe haven, which is just what a base is in baseball—but in the past, sports reporters in the Arabic language press referred simply to *al-beesbol* when referencing the game.

But the jokes I love best in Morocco don't translate. The al-Qa'ida plumber joke and baseball as *kurat al-qa'ida* place you and me in a relationship with their tellers. We can laugh because they reverse power—the jester mocking the king to his face. But the wittiest jokes—about the king, the religious leaders, the patriarchy—play to an audience that does not include outsiders. The teller and the told are continually orienting themselves in relation to the power being mocked, establishing where they stand through the telling of the joke.



In Casablanca this summer, I had dinner with a young writer who three and a half years ago made the mistake of publishing an inventory of Moroccan jokes: the ones that everyone knows but no one had dared to print before. Jokes about religion, sex, the king, right there in a popular Casablanca magazine with her name on it. She and the magazine's editor were taken to court, given three years suspended sentence, huge fines, and the weekly periodical shut down for two months. Unless you are Moroccan, I doubt you would laugh at the jokes, for they are local.

That night, I found myself increasingly unsure where I myself was placed in relationship to this writer whom I had just met. And as if she sensed this, she kept breaking the course of our conversation with jokes. It was magical—and disorienting—and it brought us into the joyous and rare proximity of shared laughter.

I'M NOT CRAZY ABOUT THAT PART

AVIYA KUSHNER

SARAH LAUGHS, GOD EDITS

One of my biggest fears is that I will die because I have talked too much. According to Jewish tradition, every human being has a limited number of words, and then that's it—you're gone. Every few months I start to worry about my tally, and warn my friends that a quieter life lies ahead.

And then there is my sister. Once, in the middle of dinner, my parents complimented her on her magnificent efficiency (she had, as usual, brought order to a family mess). "*Emor me'at ve'aseh harbe*," she said, crediting Abraham. "Say little and do much."

I love the way everyone has their own scheme, and their own way of reading and absorbing reality. In the story of Sarah and Abraham, my sister—the future management consultant—noticed how Abraham rushed to get butter and milk, how he rushed to delegate, how he coordinated all of the tasks to welcome the visiting angels. What I've always loved about that story is Sarah's laughter.

When the angels come to talk to Abraham, Sarah listens in the





opening of the tent and laughs when she hears the angel say she'll have a child within a year. In English, the Oxford Annotated Bible primly says, "Sarah laughed to herself, saying, 'After I have grown old, and my husband is old, shall I have pleasure?'"

The Talmud is a little blunter. Sarah says something more like, Is there any way this withered old husband of mine will give me a good time in bed? (The word for pleasure here—*edna*—is from the same root as Eden: Can this man take me back to Eden, can he take me back to pure delight?)

How Sarah laughs is hard to translate. She laughs *bekirba*. Literally, that means inside her—in her guts, in her intestines. That laughter turns God into an editor, and Sarah into a liar.

In the translation and in the original, God is a benevolent gossip. "Where is your wife Sarah?" God asks Abraham as Sarah listens. It would be nice to have Sarah out there too, with Abraham and with God's representatives, instead of in the tent, eavesdropping and thinking that her husband isn't all that talented. "Why did Sarah laugh and say, 'Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?' Is anything too wonderful for the Lord?" God has just edited Sarah. What she actually said about Abraham, how bad a lover she thought he was, is no longer part of the conversation.

The rabbis discuss the matter further, saying God knew Sarah laughed because she found Abraham, well, a little disappointing. The translation can't convey the fascination of the rabbis at God's editing. The Talmud suggests that God knew that *shalom bayit*—peacefulness in the house—was the most important thing. "Great is peace," a rabbi explains, "and even God will make changes to have it."

When God asks Sarah why she laughed, she denies it. All the commentators chatter about this too—why did she deny her laughter, why did she try to lie to God? Most of them agree with what the text says: because she was afraid. I'm not crazy about that part. The only person with the guts to laugh in all these chapters is a very old woman who is barren and stuck making conversation with a concubine she doesn't like much anyway. She's out there in the desert with a ninety-nine-year old husband who runs around to fetch butter as soon as he





sees a guest. All Sarah did was what God did: edit the truth, say as little as possible and try to keep the peace.

I WAS A MICROAGENT OF THE BODY GUARD

IAN CHILLAG
MISSING ARBY SEA

Red blood cell. For twenty-five years, every time I've heard or read the term, I've thought of *Arby Sea*. It's a useless memory, the words somehow just the wrong shape to enter whatever hole the things I forget pass through. Instead, *Arby Sea* is caught there at the drain, picking up bits and hairs of phone numbers and names as they move out into nothing.

My memories of *Arby Sea* himself are pretty vague. I've wondered if other people have memories like this: quick images arriving on cue. The smell of gasoline and lake water: I'm treading water with my sister behind my grandfather's motorboat, aware of what *neutral* means but afraid of the propeller anyway. When I decide to leave work every day, I have the memory that confuses me most: a flash of an intersection on a hill, halfway home from my elementary school, where I can't remember anything ever happening.

When I was six, I played a computer game, a take on *Fantastic Voyage*, in which you, miniaturized, traveled around a diseased body diagnosing and curing. *Arby Sea*—as in, R-B-C—was a red blood cell who gave you advice, and on whom you rode through the bloodstream like a surfboard. It was an educational game, and so no game at all. I remember trying to pretend otherwise, because it was the closest thing I was going to get.

Thinking of the game recently, I couldn't remember what it was called. I searched for *Arby Sea red blood cell*, and discovered an entire forum of other people who could remember *Arby Sea*, but nothing else about the game. It had caught in their brains too, a leaf against a rock in the middle of a hurtling river, everything else rushing past. A dozen people, in a dozen towns in America, had thought of the same dumb pun every time they heard "red blood cell" for twenty-five years. Maybe there was a moment we all thought of him at the same time, *Arby Sea* written in unison in twelve brains, and disappearing at once.





Was it called *Plasmania*? *Knight's Eduventure*? No, no. Then someone said: Was it *MicroAgent of the Body Guard*? And we all remembered everything at once. We'd had subscriptions to something called *MicroZine*. Scholastic put it out. Every month, or quarter, or some other unbearable unit of time, we'd receive a package of four new educational computer games on 5 ¼ inch floppy disks. Some were disguised well: *Malice in Wonderland*, *Escape from AntCatraz*. Others were not: *Math Mall*.

We had played *MicroAgent of the Body Guard* on computers not connected to anything else. You wouldn't imagine anyone was doing the same thing you were, and you couldn't ask them if they were. The computer was a box, open toward you, but closed at the other end.

Some more looking and I came across a worksheet, meant for health classes. Sample essay questions: *Write a section for the MicroAgent Handbook containing everything an agent needs to know about blood. Write a description of the enlarging machine which will allow Arby Sea to enlarge and receive his medal. Imagine you are a MicroAgent. Write a description of your travels through the body as a nerve impulse telling the left hand to wave good-bye.*

It was my guess that the name *Arby Sea* had stuck because even at six I'd had contempt for the pun. The name had attached itself to that contempt and ridden it safely through my history like a miniaturized *MicroAgent* on a red blood cell. But someone on the forum recalled there was a point in the game where we'd been required to remember *Arby Sea*—a door you couldn't pass through if you didn't know the name of the red blood cell you traveled with—and that rung a faraway bell. Was I just doing as I was told? Did some memories ask to be memories?

Imagine you are a memory. Write a description of what it's like to stay inside a brain forever. I haven't asked my sister what she thinks of when she smells gasoline and lake water—if she's on the other side of my memory, treading water with her little brother, watching the oil make rainbows on the surface. Maybe she is afraid of the propeller too, or thinks I'm silly for trying to keep my distance from something we know is idle. The intersection I remember is deserted, so there's nobody who can tell me why it visits me every day. There's no one to confirm or complete the memory the way there was with *Arby Sea*. To turn steam into water, or all the way to ice.

