



JAN WIEZOREK

Lunch by Birdbath

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He nosed around the bookstore for forty-five minutes waiting for the appreciation luncheon with the museum director. Stacks of books piled in selective units on white laminate tables. Wondered why his books weren't displayed. The congratulatory letter said Ms. Tattia Termquist would welcome them, the three asked to assemble for this added affair. The last one was a miserable event, not the reading he had hoped. The suggestion of a thank-you luncheon gave him gas.

Walked up to the desk. She'd be here soon. Please take a seat. Four Barcelona chairs like the ones in his condo lobby. Originality be damned, he thought.

A child in a pink jumper ran to him and smiled. He gave no expression, but then offered his hand. She stuck her tongue out and ran back to mother, feet paddling the granite with a duck-waddling expression that sounded throughout the Hall of Eternal Waiting. The mother approached and said something about upsetting her child.

He stood, left the woman and brat, and walked toward the exit, but saw Raquel and Chuck arriving.

"Nice to see you," Paz said. At once Tattia approached and took all three of them through the white door with the elongated, brushed-chrome handle, down the suspended stairs—hanging by threads of steel—to the lower level overlooking a Romanesque-style garden, with thick arches, a formal fountain, private table, and yellow finches taking a bath. They sang up and down, back and forth with their birdlike scales, presenting complex, cheery notes in counterpoint to the fountain bubbles and water plops.

"Paz, what a pleasure," the director said, his salt-and-pepper beard crumbed with bread.

Paz extended his hand and gave a brief bow, about to say something, anything, but the moment came and went. The director wiped his face and turned to greet Raquel and Chuck.

The four of them sat on iron patio chairs, green. Chuck gave Tattia a wink before she parted, crossing the garden of magnolia blossoms, russet sweet-potato vines, and ivy crawling up the arches. The four sat uncomfortably on the iron, and Paz wondered whether the chair was clean. Patina disguises dirt.

"Just wanted to say thanks to you all for sharing your

talents with us,” the director said. Chuck cleared his throat on a bit of French bread that went down wrong, and Raquel smiled, but dropped the napkin, her head bending down toward the stonework, where a creeper chose to take over and bridge the gaps. She giggled on her way up.

Paz told the director how enjoyable it all was, meaning none of it. “Had some problem with the mic, and the crowd seemed nonplussed by it all,” Paz added.

“By *my* mic or *your* reading?” the director asked.

That’s just the thing. The director hadn’t attended. Missed their reading entirely. Here he was, expecting the three of them to carry the weight of his new public programs. No introductions given. Limited publicity. Was this position really right for him? Paz asked himself. It was akin to the public attending a party and having to guess the identities of those for which the gala was thrown. What was their significance, if any? No wonder it was all fouled up. Paz thought to himself. Never mind. Not worth discussing now.

“Yes, the mic,” Paz said. He imagined himself in a museum auditorium for a reading and only hearing every third word. He thought about that tour he took to southeast China, the one where the guide’s English was so bad. All he could do was listen to endless descriptions

of nothingness. A speechless finger pointing in the general direction of southeast would have sufficed. He sat on covered-plastic chairs and ate mediocre luncheon fare at a hotel with a distinct smell.

“It was the mic,” he emphasized again. At least the museum’s garden was pleasant enough, he thought, eyeing the finch whose bathing brought splashes ever closer to his arugula.

Paz thought back to another public reading he attended, the one where the poet rocked on the sides of his sneakers and whispered so no one could hear. Frustrating.

“I should have spoken up,” Paz said. But it occurred to him that he should have told the director he wasn’t as young as he used to be. He had a voice for the theatre once, one that a reviewer insisted was too loud. (There you go. Are things ever right?) Now his gravel throat gave out without warning, and his caved lungs stopped short, making his narration halt mid-air, even as he squeezed out the last phonemes of a syllable, hoping to be heard at all.

The forks all round hit the bottom of the glass salad bowls. Raquel, whose nails were a fashion statement in themselves, fumbled with her thumbs. They chased each other on the iron tabletop; the silver-and-black metallic

of her fingernails twisted themselves into a pattern that mocked the rings of a raccoon's tail.

Paz was brought back to his grandmother's own nails from her years of hard work on the farm, with ridges on them, sounding like castanets, one nail clicking against the next or clacking upon the work table, all to kill time while cooling off on the slanted back porch.

Chuck excused himself and pulled out the green iron for Raquel. Said something about missing an appointment, but it was indistinct over the solid scrape of iron across flagstones and Raquel's girlish giggle. The two looked down and dashed early.

"Yes, well, we appreciate professionalism, and we expect fine readers. Isn't that what you do?" the director asked.

"With proper support," Paz said. His face gave way to upturned ringlets, like the sprays that wash across the rocks out beyond a pier. That left the director and Paz smiling at each other to fill the time and space from one munch of smoked-salmon pasta to the next.

The director eyed left and right. Paz twitched and his back end itched. The director grabbed his stomach. Paz rubbed his nose. The finch alighted and returned.

The scene was two men managing themselves in front of each other. Short gestures and grimaces bal-

anced the smooth concrete wall of this inner sanctum over which taxicab honks leapt and bus exhaust fumed into the dignity of two men, strutting frontally, at odds with each other, like two athletes adjusting themselves in a locker-room mirror. Paz hoped as much, but he wasn't playing. He wasn't a competitor.

The director sat massaging his gut and chest. One of the two men burped—or worse. The finch flew off, but returned for a second bath.

"Perhaps you'll be back, of course, after we hear from our patrons," the director said, raising his right cheek off the chair. Paz observed his own reflection in a silver bread tray, craggy lines like scars near the eye sockets—and spots around his crow's feet.

It was during their walk to the men's room that Paz saw the director's face turn sour, as if he had sucked a significant lemon drop. Maybe the greasy chorizo had backfired and flamed up the director's esophagus. The man clamped himself like a husband who had suffered all-night diarrhea.

At the sink Paz washed his hands and face and grabbed a brown paper towel. He combed his eyebrows and waited a moment for the director. No sound came from the stall.

Paz noticed how he had managed to wet his white

shirt with water from the sink. Paz understood the frequency with which he could mess his clothes, either at table or faucet. His sigh traveled across the tiled surfaces. Salad oil had stained the cotton fibers, too.

During his shirt-cleaning episode with pink soap, water, and brown paper for use as a blotter, Paz theorized that bathrooms are public areas for the most private discourse between mind and body. The door closes, but it hides no sound; it augments it. And what one hopes to keep private blurts out as unintentional, interpersonal communication.

Like a voice that gives way in an underpass, Paz heard the director at last, relieved and chirpy. He sang a melody that grunted its way throughout the men's room, from stall to complete satisfaction. An old Negro spiritual was what Paz heard. He felt ashamed to think of it in those dated terms, but there it was, and those were the words he had come to understand and appreciate: he remembered the smooth harmonies, powerful dynamics, and heartfelt calls and responses that bring a culture together in times of struggle and anguish, leading them to cry for a toehold toward eternity. Somber and catchy, if such a melody can capture all that.

The simple lyrics stopped mid-cadence and a pause gave time for song to resound against porcelain before

continuing again—an ongoing train that rested in the moment to slide open its doors, slither shut, and pull onward, each stop closer to its destination, and each traveling toot more pleased with itself than the last.

Paz recalled an earlier time when, as a young publicist, he had accompanied a famous horn player to the restroom and heard a trumpet solo arrive from the man's nether throat. The thought of it all made him snicker to himself.

Flush, wash, walk, sit. The basic commands led the two men back to rest on the green iron chairs near the birdbath.

As Paz told the story later, he said to the media, "I don't know how to tell you this, but the guy fell from the chair. He just turned ashen."

"At first, I thought he may have lost balance on those iron legs settling upon flagstones," Paz said, "or maybe he stumbled somehow half attempting to stand."

New guidelines for cardiopulmonary resuscitation highlight chest compression, and that's what Paz did. He called 911. He looked at the eyes staring at him, but not really staring at all. He heard a burp and thought the director would breathe again until it was clear that no breath of air was in the forecast. The director, Paz later learned, was age forty-two, and a search committee has

been formed.

When the paramedics made their presence known, and it was certain he was only in the way, Paz wandered outside the garden, beyond the ivy wall, to where the traffic spun up Michigan Avenue. He turned right and headed for the lake but stopped at a small park amid the traffic to put his feet in a fountain, its green, copper base supporting a flurry of metal cranes, their wings spread as if to take flight. He pulled off his walking shoes and support hosiery to run his feet through the water, cold and clean, with a burst of copper coins adding color to the mix at the bottom. The day's stress washed away. Paz stroked his calf, flaked dead skin, and wondered whether the director's family had been notified by now.

A yellow finch joined him at the opposite side of the fountain. He wished he had brought bread from the table, but he knew birds may suffer for eating it. Those bird feeders who scatter dried bread do no favors for birds. Bread lacks nutrients. It's not what a bird needs for survival. Dried bread can swell inside a bird and prevent it from absorbing the true nutrients it needs. The finch flew away, and Paz heard it sing and call.

An argumentative tourist couple stopped to ask directions for the museum. "So we sort of scurried south to beat the crowds. We know it's somewhere," she said.

Her "s" sounds were slurred, and Paz wondered whether he smelled booze.

"You might try that way," Paz said, pointing to his own past steps back among the traffic. "I don't think *he* knows," the woman said to her husband. The man didn't speak, but walked close to the pool and hacked near Paz's feet.