

# A GATHERING OF THE TRIBES

Issue 14

Art | Poetry | Fiction | Essays



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ELLSWORTH AUSBY  
*Space Odyssey, 1*  
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Courtesy of Jamillah Jennings

**A GATHERING OF THE**

# **TRIBES**

**Issue 14**

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*The Sinking of the Jetstar Rollercoaster: Aftermath of  
Hurricane Sandy, Seaside Heights, New Jersey*  
2012

Chromogenic archival print, 42 x 55 in

# THE DEATH OF SCHEHERAZADE: FRAGMENTS

YARA FLORES

*In June of 2011, I was left by my lover of many years, who had quite suddenly fallen in love with someone else. I cared for our two small girls. He returned periodically over the month, slipping back home before dawn, in the hopes of maintaining some sense of normalcy for the children. I welcomed these visits, thinking that our love would eventually prevail. I concocted a strategy— not less impassioned than pathetic—that I would keep him returning with a story in serial, in the style of Isaac Dinesen (the writer out of whom our love was born) on the eminently suitable subject of Scheherazade. I wrote the installments sitting between the sleeping children, and left each brief episode in an envelope pinned under a single rose in a black glass vase perched on a leather bench by the door every night before I fell asleep. In a gesture of some ambivalence, I drew the bench across the entrance. Either so the envelope could not be overlooked, or to block the entrance. It would have been a grand story, an epitome of the condition of waiting, an allegory of faithfulness that enacted its subject. In the end, it is twelve shards of a broken thing. The thirteenth envelope will remain forever unopened.*

It was the summer of 1839, early July, and unpleasantly hot. By late morning even the sea-facing rooms of the Kursaal could become sultry and uncondusive to the humoral balance and refreshing charm promised by the grand spa at Ostend. And for this reason the great organism of the seaside palace, like an aged and ornate tortoise, quietly withdrew to its innermost chambers by midday—there to appreciate the cool shade of its own hidden forms.

In one of those chambers, then, gathered in the mahogany comfort of what was once a game-room, sat three women—each of distinction and each of charm. The eldest was probably little short of seventy, and carried herself with the rakish dignity of one who had not only seen the barricades of 1789, but had, in linen soiled with the blood of others, loaded muskets by feel—the smoke too stinging for sight. She wore her hair high, now, and it was nearly blue with Parisian talc. She had known Madame de Stael and thought her something of a bore.

Beside her sat her daughter—herself, too, a woman of uncommon beauty and regal bearing. She had been for many years unhappily married to an Austrian Count of great wealth whose dissipation was as tedious and exacting as his devotion to his horses. Having taken as a lover a ranking officer in Napoleon's army, then occupying Milan, Violaine De-Luque (Contesse von Haugwitz), had subsequently served as a subtle ambassador (which is not to say spy) in the intricate affair of Lombardy's Iron Crown.

The third member of the party was a girl, stern in her demeanor, and somewhat rigid of aspect. She was perhaps sixteen, pale, with jet black hair and the air of nun. Which, in fact, she had nearly been.

All had bathed early, and each had, by now, submitted to the rigors of the "frigidarium" (a great aid to the circulation, it was agreed). In this belly of the day, then, they found themselves in the suspended comfort of a shared silence. Violaine

was dabbling with her watercolors; her mother read quietly from a volume bound in gilt calf. The young woman, half-reclined on an ottoman of Persian cast, looked up through the potted palms at the louvered blinds of the clerestory.

Then Maman let her book close with a snap, "Scheherazade," she said—and she did not sound wholly pleased—"let me tell you the problem with Scheherazade..."

\*

Violaine looked up from her paints, but the young woman's eyes remained fixed on the ceiling.

"The problem with Scheherazade," Maman announced with a definitive air, "was that she told stories instead of taking action!"

Violaine returned to her watercolor – a delicate rendering of a vase of peonies, whose vase (and actual peonies) stood in full reality on the white marble pedestal table at the center of the room. The young woman did not move initially and for a moment, the room returned to silence. But before that silence could shape up as an actual snub, the young woman adjusted her position in such a way as slightly to rustle her severe silk dress, and, letting her gaze fall from the palm fronds to her fingertips, spoke: "and how is telling a story not taking action?"

\*

Maman—she was, of course the Baronesse de Laubade—began to cut the pages of her volume with an ivory handled paper-knife, doing so with keen thrusts. "Action, Annette, is action. A story is a suspension of action. Observe this book in my hand—it is, of course, Galland's edition of The Arabian Nights. Consider the last fifteen minutes. I read it. I read the salacious opening pages, mused sadly with the prince as he sat under the tree, reflecting in his solemn heart on love and its pains. In all this I submitted to the tale, suspending the busyness of life. Now, take note..." And with that she firmly sliced a signature in the compact book. "That, my dear girl, is action."



"But you are simply opening the story further" replied Annette; "you have refuted yourself in your very example." Annette had been difficult in the convent, and her quick wit had endeared her to a young Jesuit—in principle a confessor; in practice one who confessed often—who had sharpened her repartee with the zeal of teacher turned student of his student.

\*

The Baronesse laid her knife aside. "Of action," she said gravely, "I know a good deal. We did not kill Bonchamps with words, my sweet. At Cholet, we did not use those sabers to cut pages." She paused for a moment, letting the full weight of those names sound in the quiet room. Violaine, as it happened, had heard a great deal about Cholet over the years. She found herself, as she meditated on the strange purple hue that lapped the white fringes of the peony petals (was it madder lake, or was that too red?), wondering if they were to hear again the story of her mother's gallant encounter with the youngest of the royalist generals on the field, the impossibly beautiful Henri du Vergier, Comte de la Rochejaquelein. madder lake. It was basically madder lake. One could cut the red with the slightest touch of Prussian blue.

But the Baroness de Laubade (who in her sleeve-shirt days as a citoyenne was known simply as Dianne—for she was the goddess of the cruel hunt in those tumultuous years) elected on this occasion not to press her tales of that great fight or its sundry skirmishes both before and after. Not this afternoon would she rehearse the lurid and magnificent account of how du Vergier had, pistol in hand, recognized her instantly when he leapt over the stone wall of a shattered farmhouse and found himself face to face with his second cousin, her chemise open to her navel, powder-burns having pocked the breast opposite her shooting hand, her tresses coiled into savage glory by mud and gore. How he bowed simply, dropping his jauntily feathered bicorne hat with an unostentatious sweep: "Ma chère cousine..." he offered solemnly and with respect. By all accounts, she nodded courteously in reply, before raising her gun to his head.

And as the infamous story goes, he too promptly took aim, and they both fired—each well wide of the mark, but neither having known the other's intentions. Then, with the slightest of adieux, they each sprang from the little garden—she to rejoin Marceau (with whom she was said to have fallen in love) and set up the artillery ambush that would turn the tide of the battle; he gallantly to hold the line against Beaupuy, but then later, wounded and in full flight, to ferry the dying General Bonchamps across the Loire to Varades, where the cemetery awaited him.

\*

No, not this afternoon, this great tale of heroes in an age of heroes. Instead, Dianne, the Baroness who had once felled a Baron, eased herself back into her chaise lounge and said,

a smile spreading on her handsome face: "But I am a great lover of stories, to be sure. Here, let me tell you a little story about stories, told to me by Bonpland, who insisted that it was true..."

"I met the great explorer at Malmaison in 1811, where I had gone to spend the late summer with Josephine, so recently divorced from that Corsican troll and betrayer of the Revolution, Napoleon. She remained wholly the Empress, it should be said, in her exile at that lovely chateau. And why should she not? It was she, after all, who had, in effect, conferred the title of Emperor upon him, merely by her grace and beauty. Her gardens at Malmaison were already legendary, and there were said to be more than two hundred and fifty different varieties of rose lining the allées behind the original palace. I myself counted more than one hundred in bloom early that September—and no two alike. Roses that looked like celestial nebulae, and others like the flaming head of a serpentine Medusa. Roses so small one needed a hand-glass to spot them at the base of the fountains, and others that had been grafted to fruit-trees in the Arabian manner, so that the oranges that grew in the groves had within them already the distinct perfume of a perfect rose. Such botanical alchemy is not of this world. But then neither was Aimé Bonpland—and to have him as a gardener! Well, you may attempt to imagine the tropical glories of his hothouses, but one would need half a life in the cordilleras, in the jungles of Columbia, in the deserts of Mexico—which is to say you would need to be Bonpland himself—to conceive such luxuriant splendor."

\*

"He was a shy man, though. Nothing like his more glamorous travelling companion—and for that the more charming, and the more pleasant conversationalist. With Humboldt one feels endlessly thrust before the Kosmos, which is to say, thrust endlessly before his own cosmic conceit. By contrast, Bonpland once, seated in Josephine's lively salon amidst the banter and play of thronging Parisian muses and feathered generals, appeared to lose himself in a damask tablecloth laid out beneath the cafetière. When pressed, he mumbled quietly that the weavers had apparently reversed the pistils and stamens in the floral pattern. He was a sage, and man of infinite gentleness."

"One evening, at a large and formal dinner, he turned to me quite suddenly and said, 'Dianne, have you heard of the table stone of Xichtlapan?' and I said I had not. He then stared for a moment at a piece of cutlery polished to mirrored brightness, and, as if remembering something in the sight of his own face, began to tell the following story."

\*

"In March of 1803, Alexander and I, together with Carlos Montúfar landed in Acapulco after an uneventful passage from Lima. The white sand of Coyuco was like a stripe above the luminous water, and beyond banana trees, coconut

palms, and the mountains, rising like fierce pyramids—dry and stepped. The viceroy, José de Iturrigaray received us, and arranged for us to make a three-day mule trip to visit the famous ruins in the interior. The voyage was tedious, the botany largely unremarkable, and the flies relentless. Iturrigaray himself had the good sense to stay behind. But when we came to Talacan, however, we dined at a lovely little mission, and met an aged Franciscan who had spent his whole life among the Indians of those parts. He was a true specimen of a man: tanned to a leathery toughness, and the color of Cuban tobacco—his beard and hair, cut close, were perfectly white. The mission Indians called him Huma, which Alexander insisted—via a convoluted philology that I refused to follow—meant “father,” but the gentleman himself insisted it meant “he whose ears are both wide and long.” It should be said that this was indeed a fine description of the curé’s actual ears—though I suspect he was pulling our leg.”

\*

“Be that as it may, he and his charismatic little mission prepared for us a fine meal of red beans and orange maize with small green peppers and thick unleavened bread. And after we had eaten, he himself walked us down the embankment behind the chapel to show us what he claimed was an ancient temple stone that he had arranged to use as the threshing floor of the granary...”

Annette, who had arranged herself in a position of somewhat indolent attention in submission to this narrative (reclined, peeling the thread-like fibers from a fallen frond), suddenly sighed audibly: “Does this story have anything to do with Scheherazade? Because I am still rather back on that question, and wish to know if I am being led therefrom, thereto, or thereabout in this lovely tale of Bonpland and his rustic Franciscan.”

But the Baroness loved Annette altogether too much to take offence—loved her impiety, impatience, and quarrelsome insolence all in equal measure. “She is just as I was at her age,” thought the white-haired Dianne at least once a day, and she thought it now.

“That, my dear Annette, you shall have to judge; but to judge, I fear you must permit me to finish...”

\*

“I was afraid you might say that,” replied Annette, tossing a hair-like peeling from her bit of palm onto the white carpet. “And I suppose that itself answers the question, doesn’t it...”

“Or defers it,” offered the great lady with a smile.

Annette cocked her brow theatrically: “For some reason the distinction is suddenly escaping me...”

There was a pause, interrupted by the Baroness de Laubade, who had allowed it merely for strategic effect: “Surely it

will come to you,” she replied indulgently, her triumph quite complete. “Now where was I...”

“With Bonpland and his Franciscan, out behind the granary, as I recall.”

\*

“You are, of course, an impossible girl,” sighed maman, “but you do refresh my memory: the threshing floor of that granary was, in fact, the table stone of Xichtlapan.”

“Of which I know nothing,” said Annette, “so tell on...”

“This giant black stone is, across half its extent—and it is as large as a barn door—engraved minutely with a lengthy, folding thread of bizarre hieroglyphs: Aztec characters, it would seem, every one apparently different, and each a tiny cameo of minute sculptural perfection. The story goes that broad slab was once the center stone of the great sun-temple of this coast, and that it was tended for thirty generations by a caste of priests whose sole duty was to maintain it and extend its inscription, which, it seems—though its code is as yet unbroken—amounts to a single sprawling sentence. But it was no ordinary sentence. Its purpose was nothing less than to hold the sun away from the earth. Which is to say, the priests spent the whole of every year laboring to determine what single character should be carved on the stone at the summer solstice—knowing full well that if they failed to add the mot juste to the story they had inherited, the sun would not reverse its frightening annual approach, but rather continue to fall down upon Mexico until it scorched the world to a cinder. So this long sentence was understood by all to be the single and central work of collective preservation, and the entirety of the people of the coast thought of little else from one summer to the next. What word would be chosen? And would it have the power keep the sun at bay?”

“I would like to know the last word in that fateful stone sentence,” said Annette dreamily.

“You and all of us. Naturally, Alexander insisted he could make it out, by analogy with the Egyptian, but you know he is not to be trusted in such things. Aimé made copious fun of his ‘translation’—which apparently had something to do with the gonads of an Ibis. Unlikely in the extreme.”

\*

“Whatever it was, we can hardly blame it—the civilization ended, true, but the sun did not fall to earth,” noted Annette.

“Quite right my dear. Indeed, it turned out quite the contrary. There is not the slightest doubt that the temple of Xichtlapan, and indeed the whole people of that coast, was wiped out by a massive tidal wave—a wave so great that it heaved the stone itself halfway up mount Tezatan. The sun stayed its course.”

"In this respect," said Annette, "the sun is rather like Violaine, no? Look at her there— contemplative, attentive, imperturbable. Violaine stays her course. She is, I think, indifferent to stories—just like the solar sphere, which, in the end, cared not one iota about the tormented sentence of Xichtlapan. Lovely Violaine. Terrible to behold. The tip of her brush makes its implacable cycle: from the little crystal water glass, to the tray of colors, to its suspended apogee above her paper block, then the little stain, then to the crystal glass again."

Violaine did not look up: her brush was indeed poised above the page, her eye on the peonies before her in the vase.

And Annette continued, adopting a manner both grand and slightly acidic: "Dianne, Maman, *chère* Madame De Laubade, baroness of Echèsse et Viole, tell me, if you would: what is right now in the mind of your fair daughter, the Countess von Haugwitz, Madame DeLuque?"

"At this moment, my dear, there are two possibilities. Either she is thinking 'What is the precise color of the point at which I am looking at this instant?' Or she is thinking 'How strange it is that the world—with all its apparent joys and pains—consists wholly of an infinite number of irregularly shaped areas of mixed hues.' She is thinking the one thing or the other."





CHARLES MEACHAM  
*After the Storm. Prospect Park, Brooklyn, NY.*  
2013