

Divers Weights and Divers Measures

Patrick Madden

1.

A low door so I have to stoop to enter; whitewashed cinder blocks coated and chipped, a patina of mildew and wear; hanging pastoral landscapes photographed in the mountains of Switzerland or Bariloche, Argentina, colorized with greenest grass and whitest snowcaps, a quaint cottage below, a curl of smoke rises from a stone chimney; sagging curtains for a door into the kitchen; children's toys strewn about; a concrete floor, broken in places; metal chairs with torn yellow vinyl cushions, missing feet and wobbling, hissing as I sit down, place my backpack in a corner, start a conversation with my hosts for this midday meal, notice the iron grate in the fireplace, the white ash, the red coals, the black pot simmering with stew; they are cooking in the fireplace; and for the first time, I am ashamed to admit, *fireplace* and *cooking* connect in my head.

2.

A *Little Rascals* episode, an older one, I believe, before Spanky talked much, and he is in a wooden tub bathing, places a bar of soap to his head and lathers, no shampoo proper. Years later my wife convinces her campesino father, who is visiting us, to use her salon shampoos, and he does, and then complains that his hair flies in his eyes in the wind; with his bar soap this would have never happened.

3.

When I was a small child I closed my eyes and the world disappeared and I was invisible to the world.

When I was a young boy I first loved a girl and she also loved me and I believed it was always, would always be, this way.

As a man I have never heard my neighbor singing through the walls we share and so I sing loudly believing he can't hear me.

4.

I am riding a bicycle behind Portones Shopping Center in Carrasco, Montevideo, on a bright night awash in headlights and streetlights and the glare from the businesses calling out for attention and getting it, even late at night, as I return to my temporary home, a missionary with his companion, both young men nearing the end of two years in Uruguay and recently called to serve as assistants to the mission president: a

responsibility and an honor given to few, two at a time, perhaps only six in a year out of a possible 200 missionaries.

It has been a tiring day of pedaling and preaching, reflection and rejection, and Elder Shepherd and I have yet to prepare talks for an upcoming conference where we'll be expected to teach proselytizing methods to other missionaries—a task we work to bring excitement and fun to, after suffering the mind-numbingly boring, intelligence-insulting lessons given by so many before us, and which is creatively draining and difficult to fit in a schedule anywhere except during those hours reserved for sleep. Weighed down by responsibility and unsure of my faltering strength, I stop my bicycle and turn to Elder Shepherd, who has stopped beside me. It's not profound, nor innovative, nor particularly interesting, but I think of the cool projected by those assistants to the president before me, their calm collectedness, their facility with scripture and Spanish, their quick, easy smiles, and I realize that I have not been magically transformed along with my calling, that I suffer the same weaknesses and temptations to laziness that have always beset me. I mention it to Elder Shepherd, and for a moment I feel a connection, a reason for working together, and he says something back, something affirming my observation or encouraging me, I can't remember, and it's not, in the end, important, and I place my left foot on the top pedal as I push off the asphalt with my right, and continue on, and the lights continue on.

5.

For more than half my life now I have wondered about a song I've heard only once: in memory it is a dark night after a Boy Scout camping trip; there's a hill behind and a parking lot and a car radio playing as we wait for everyone and pack up tents and backpacks and sleeping bags. I am with my best friend, Vin, and we're laughing about something, then we catch the lyrics of the song on the radio.

In the broad sense, this same event must have happened countless times in my life—hearing song lyrics on a radio, or, in the narrower sense, hearing attention-grabbing lyrics that I've never heard before—but for some reason, on this night, the scene fuses synapses in my normally forgetful brain and forms a memory that hovers close to the surface, that returns to me uncalled for and without obvious purpose from then until now: the strangely amusing song that mentioned something about you, the listener, possibly learning to play the bass (to form a band), or, "You can always be the singer, like me, and lead the band," sung in a raspy almost monotone over a driving hard-rock beat.

We laughed even more heartily then, and mimicked the strange met-al lyrical, self-referential advice. And I suppose we recalled the night together on future camping trips and during school and in e-mails thenceforth. And we hoped to hear the song again, for another laugh, but we never did.

And a part of me began to doubt the existence of that song as I heard similar-seeming songs ("Join Together with the Band" by The Who or "We're an American Band" by Grand Funk Railroad, for instance) and wondered if I had misheard or misremembered. And another part of me loved the mystery of not knowing, the sense of ownership of a moment of the past that only one other person experienced, that no one but we remembered. There was no evidence that it had happened, just our word against nothingness.

Then, years later, computers advanced and were faster and more capable of completing complex operations and were linked together across the globe, and people everywhere constructed pages and sites of information, sharing what they knew or loved with whomever might happen across it. And I, now more than half my life away from that singular recollection of strange lyrics on a dark night after camping, happen to be sitting at my computer connected to the Internet at the very moment the memory strikes me, and I type the phrase I remember into a search engine, and nothing comes back.

Still caught in the middle of wanting proof and wanting no proof, I shorten the phrase in quotation marks to "You can always be the singer like me," and seventeen pages come back and even before I hyperlink to any of them I see that I have remembered "lead the band" where the singer sang "front the band," and I have found "Denim and Leather" by a band called Saxon. But what have I lost?

6.

My wife says, *Come here*, and as I move toward the sound of her voice, waves catching waves bending around corners where light cannot, she says, *Look at your son laughing, hiding in his bed*, and the waves bring me a scene and a memory and I no longer need to see.

7.

He lies in bed next to his mother while I dress. She is asleep, he is awake and illuminated in the gray half-light of morning spraying through the blinds above his head. He holds up one index finger, touches it with the other, and says, *Uno, one*, slow on the *oo* in *uno*, rising pitch of excitement in *one*. And a flood of information comes into my head, but mostly understanding free from the weight of information: that he is realizing that he speaks two languages and that *uno* and *one* symbolize the same thing, and that what he speaks in school and what they mostly speak on television is not what he speaks at home with his parents or on the phone with his *abuelos*, and I stand for a moment in something like awe, and then smile, sole witness to the moment. ✧