

Patrick Madden

DIVERS WEIGHTS AND DIVERS
MEASURES

Invocation

I was reading *Futbol a sol y sombra* by Eduardo Galeano (not at the moment, though – I was reading it in my spare time during those days – at the moment I was riding a bus looking out the window) when I saw in the distance just past the viaduct in Paso Molino, Montevideo, three children, gray bodies against gray buildings, kicking a gray soccer ball back and forth as they ran in the half light and shadow of late afternoon. They ran among ruins – toppled bricks and cinder blocks from broken-down walls – and their goal was a spot between trees on a chainlink fence. I wanted badly to take a photograph, but the bus was moving by fast or the camera wasn't with me, and so the opportunity passed.

From then on I kept my camera open and ready every time I passed the spot. People on the bus with me stared as I readied the camera surreptitiously, then slipped it back into its case. I never saw

the children again. Nor did I ever see the backhoes or the bulldozers that steadily ate into the earth where the children had played, slowly destroying their *campo*, day by day carving a chasm to divide the flat expanse of gray.

Electrons/1

Alone in northwest Montevideo in the morning in the summer, I get on a bus heading downtown. Only a few passengers are on the bus already, each sitting on the right side in the shade against the bus wall, each alone in his or her molded plastic, two-seater bench. I choose a seat near the back, alone, on the right. The next stop, Plaza Colón, is full of people. They get on in a pack, then drift apart, first to the empty benches on the right side, then to the empty benches on the left side, some few to the sideways seats for the aged and crippled facing the *guarda* who sells tickets, and only then, when there are no more empty benches, do they sit next to people they don't know.

Nearly an hour later, near the bus's final destination, when the bus is again almost empty, riders jump up and switch their seats as an empty bench becomes available.

Nucleons

A knock came to my door early in the morning. It was Chacho and his brother Daniel. Their bicycles were still between their legs as they stood in the doorway and said, "Somebody broke into the chapel. Can you come down to help clean up?" Then they rode away to gather more people.

In the chapel things were in disarray: pages from books torn and strewed, garbage cans emptied, glass from broken windows shattered on the floor. The fire extinguishers had been sprayed out completely, and a fine layer of sticky, white film covered everything.

Many people had already started cleaning up. This one with a broom, this one stooping with a dustpan, this one filling buckets with hot water and tearing up old undershirts to use for rags. I took a rag, knelt down, and started to scrub a pew.

Even though it was a Monday morning, it seemed like the entire

congregation came to help clean. No one spoke of the injustice; no one complained or railed against the vandals. Many people didn't speak at all. They simply worked side by side, sharing rags and water, spelling each other and encouraging without words.

Electrons/2

You enter a men's bathroom (you're a man) to find three urinals on the wall and no one using them. Which do you choose?

A: Either end, never the middle.

Now there's someone using the far left urinal. You choose the one on the right.

One man using the middle urinal? Stare in disbelief and choose one on either side with an audible, gruff sigh.

Two men occupying both end urinals? Dejectedly choose the middle, but only if you can't hold it.

The dynamic of the restroom is governed by principles analogous to electromagnetics.

The Guitar

The first song I learned to play on the guitar, no chords, just a slow progression on the low E-string, was "Smoke on the Water," by Deep Purple, before I ever heard the real song, before I ever heard of such a band, before I ever imagined I would live in Montevideo, would marry a woman from there. It was at Tommy Lertola's house with his brother's guitar, *dabb dabb dabbbb*, with my right arm barely reaching over the hollow wooden body, *dabb dabb da-nabbbb*, with my thumb instead of a pick, *dabb dabb dabbbb*, playing what Tommy told me was the Beatles, *dabb dabbbbbb*.

I have just returned from Montevideo, where I heard, several times, nearly every day, from a high window across a path in front of my wife's parents' apartment, those same notes. *Dabb dabbbbbb*.

The Future

I have never forgotten the day Dennis Kelly had to spell the

word *future* on the blackboard in Mrs. Taafe's third-grade class at Our Lady of Mercy school. He began correctly: f, u; then phonetically: c, h, e, r. But his cursive was sloppy and the h looked like a k and Dennis Kelly stared frightened, unsure of why we were laughing at him and why the teacher took him under her arm as she swept the eraser across the board – I think about it now in light of an older Dennis lost shunned high failed expelled drunk arrested – erasing Dennis Kelly's future.

African Proverb/1

When two elephants fight, the grass suffers.

African Proverb/2

If you step on the snake twice, you're standing on the snake.

Disillusion/1

Two December school trips to the ice-skating rink, a year apart, the discussion is the same: Is Santa Claus real? The first year we had incontrovertible proof: Linda had seen an elf looking in her window. By the next year, walking out from the bus to the rubber jigsaw floor, we had decided he wasn't real. How could he be?

Disillusion/2

Donna Martone and I were born on the same day in the same year, and we went to the same small school together in the second grade in Morristown, New Jersey. She was tall like me, smart like me, pretty with straight brown hair in a bob that I didn't know was called a bob until many years later. Donna confirmed for me my theory – can I call it a theory if I never doubted its validity, never had to think it up or consciously look for proof? – that if a boy liked a girl, she automatically liked him back. There's something dangerous in the theory, something of fulfillment of fantasies, something easy, light, naive, pastoral, impossible. And Donna confirmed it, and I

went on believing it, or not disbelieving it, never questioning it, for a while longer.

Disillusion/3

I kept my second-grade Santa-Claus discovery from my mother for as long as I could. If I told her, I thought, she would be disappointed in me. Maybe "Santa Claus" wouldn't bring me any more presents at Christmas. When I finally told her that I no longer believed in Santa Claus, it was in her bathroom, me outside the door, she inside cleaning the makeup from her face, and she said, "It's about time. Your little sister told me a year ago that she didn't believe in him anymore."

Disillusion/4

If Santa Claus, then is God too an invention? Perhaps in many ways, but I am not willing to give this up yet, have had many testimonies, confirmations, inexplications. I hold on.

Memory

Karoline, whom I met when I was her swim coach and she was nine, says, "Remember when I went to a movie with a boy and you went to the same movie just to check on me and make sure I was okay?"

I don't. But it sounds like something I might do because I have always worried about her and wanted to protect her. I say, "Maybe it was a coincidence that we were at the same place at the same time?"

"No," she says, "You were there to make sure he didn't try anything funny."

"Really?"

"Uh huh. And you sat in front of us and kept turning around to look at us, and the boy was like, 'Who is that guy?' And I kept sending Kristen down to talk to you so I could kiss him."

"How old were you?" I say.

"I don't know, maybe junior high."

"Oh, well you shouldn't be kissing boys at that age, anyway. And what movie was it?"

"*Death Becomes Her*," she says. And I cannot remember ever having seen the movie, cannot remember the first thing about the movie, can only vaguely remember ever hearing of the movie.

Inefficiency

Every time I hear that word I think of my summer work at Exxon as a secretary. Exxon gets enough bad press, I think, and I am often drawn to defend the corporate giant, at the very least as one of the hands that feeds us (unless you're biking everywhere and heating your home with a wood-burning stove, which also isn't very good for the air, especially if you live in a valley), but the view from the inside offers its own look at the company's insidious prodigal practices. For example, I've just now finished a photocopy run of a memo sent to the entire staff onsite in Clinton, New Jersey's laboratories. The gist was that the visitor's computer room would be moved from one room to another. Reasons were given; time frames were set. Attached on a separate sheet of paper (I asked if I could make the two sheets double-sided onto one and was told no) were general guidelines for such moves. I carried a Xerox box full of the memos to the mail room, from whence they will be delivered to every employee in Clinton one by one. Two or three days from now the memos will be in recycling bins all over, soon to be picked up by some other summer temp like myself, then carted off to be recycled.

Omniscience

What I imagined happened is this: somebody, or a group of bodies, set out to think what would be the ideal for a god, what would be superior. With that came the idea that to know everything would be really neat. Sort of like being invisible and able to sneak up on people and sneak into places, something God also is, according to most theologians.

Efficiency/1

Because it was not marked proprietary, I assume I can share with you a planning memo that once came across my desk at Exxon. The title: *CC340/CC338 Mr. Innes's New Layout*. Below that, *Does not include office furnishings*. A summation of expenses follows with the total \$48,392.00 below. That you could buy a small home or a government-subsidized home for the cost of refurbishing, but not even refurbishing, the Exxon president's office may make you wonder why exactly you are paying, at the moment, at least \$1.55 for a gallon of gasoline.

Efficiency/2

That I still find filled three-ring binders with their curved, plastic page-lifters turned the wrong way, concave side to the pages between them, despite the clear instructions "this side to sheets," despite the obvious logic of their purpose and functionality.

Word Association

dilapidated

furtive

decayed

secund

fetid

verdant

Where are you now?

Practice

I asked my friend Travis Hubble, "Which do you think is faster: pouring out a bottle straight vertical, so the air gulps in as the water gulps out, or angling the bottle always so there is just a small opening and the air and water can flow smoothly?"

"It's about the same," he said.

"How do you know?"

"I've tried it."

Dreams and Reality

Though I have often read or seen or heard of those dreams that are so real they are indistinguishable from wakefulness, even in waking moments, I have never experienced such a dream until now. It is nothing interesting, just that I have seen Dr. Seuss's *Hop on Pop*, which I am looking for, and I am not sure if I saw it somewhere in my house or if I dreamt it. And I wonder how long I will look for it before I find it or decide it must have been a dream.

The Evolution of Memory

Overheard: Dennis Cecchini has just returned from a business trip to Baton Rouge and New Orleans. His plane was delayed, and he got in at four a.m. He tells a co-worker, "Yeah, the guy I was traveling with, Jim, was saying, 'Hey, let's get a car and drive back to New Jersey.'"

He explains to the co-worker about how Rich Palluzi once drove from Atlanta to New Jersey because he was frustrated by a similar airport delay.

"We could beat Palluzi's record," suggested the other guy he was with.

A few minutes later, with his first hearer still present, he tells the story this way:

"I'm getting by on two hours' sleep. I got in from New Orleans at four a.m. I was thinking about renting a car and driving. Jim was saying, 'We can beat Palluzi's record.'"

By the third telling, first hearer still present, overhearer, me, also still present, he has had *less than* two hours' sleep, his plane got in *after* four, and he is now sole owner of the clever remark about beating Palluzi's record.

Perspective/1

On the saying "Behind the eight ball," my father asks: "What if

you're another ball? Then the *best* place to be is behind the eight ball."

Perspective/2

On the saying "Up the creek without a paddle," my father observes: "If you're up the creek, then you simply float with the current until you get where you're going. If it said 'up the creek and wanting to go *farther* up the creek' it'd be one thing, but as it is, the real problem would be being *down* the creek without a paddle."

Our Wonderful Languages

On reading a line in the English translation of Jose Mauro de Vasconcelos's *My Sweet-Orange Tree*, I wondered how a translator would get this from the Portuguese:

"Uncle Edmundo said twine. I thought twine was a pig. But he explained that it sounded similar but that a pig was a swine."

How creative this translator must have been, I thought. Then I pieced together from my Spanish, knowing that Portuguese and Spanish are very similar: cuerda: rope; cerda: pig; twine: rope; swine: pig. I was radiant with the joy of discovery.

The Misunderstandings of Youth

That if you like a girl, she automatically likes you back.

That in order to move, you have to find somebody to trade houses with one for one.

That in order to work, you have to pay your boss.

The Tragedy of the Commons

Early in the morning in the streets of Durazno, Uruguay, the old women would appear with their shawls and their brooms to sweep the tiled sidewalks of dirt and debris. Religiously they swept, every day it didn't rain, and clouds of dust floated above the brooms, parabolas of dust that extended into the streets.

One autumn day when it was raining, and rivers raged against the curbs, a woman worked quickly to gather the fallen leaves she had raked into piles previously. With great, sweeping strokes she vanquished them into the torrent, and I watched them float away, carried with the water, around a bend in the street and out of sight.

Time

Roger Tijman, who has lived in Montevideo all his life, who rides a bicycle from one end of the neighborhood of Melilla to another end of the neighboring neighborhood of Colón, who publishes a local newspaper with socialist leanings called *The Bicycle*, asks me of my home in Ohio, "How far away from New York is that?"

"About ten hours," I say.

"Ten hours?" He laughs. "I don't know that unit of distance."

Long distances, once measured in miles, are measured now in hours and minutes. Work, whose physical definition is power (mass times acceleration times distance) *divided* by time, is also measured in time. In the United States every hour of every day can be heard the refrain *Time Is Money*.

Coins for Judas

Beginning in late November, children all over Montevideo stuff sweatshirts and old jeans with straw, add a teddy bear or a painted, stuffed head, and ask passersby for *moneditas para Judas*. They will use the coins they collect to buy fireworks, which they'll stuff in their Judases, which they'll hang from a noose on Christmas Eve and light on fire at 12:00 a.m. Christmas day. I once lived on a street with eleven such burning Judases; it was an awesome display of sight and sound.

Generally I don't give *moneditas para Judas*. But one day Hubble and I were walking, sick of being bombarded by the requests, and we answered one kid, "Do you have any *moneditas para nosotros*?" He did, he said, and pulled out a peso bill. This kid – whose Judas was nothing more than a nappy stuffed Alf doll, in no danger of burning we supposed – this kid got our *moneditas*. We emptied our pockets of coins.

Traditions

My wife's brother Fernando is getting married in two weeks. They don't want anything formal, but the women are fussing all the same. Karina says to her sister-in-law-to-be, "You'll need – how does the saying go? – something old, something new, something borrowed, something blue, and a penny in your shoe."

They brainstorm, matching items to each of the superstitions, but they're stuck on something borrowed. "You can wear my panty hose," says one, but Gabriela isn't going to wear panty hose. "Maybe I can buy a barette and then you can borrow it," says one, and Gabriela says, "Maybe."

Fernando, *parando la oreja*, as they say, eavesdropping, offers, "Mamá, lend her one-hundred-fifty pesos for a taxi, and there we go."

Before and After

I wanted information on the conversion of Montevideo's Punta Carretas prison into a European-style shopping mall because I was researching the *Guinness Book of World Records'* largest mass prison escape. After traipsing all over the mall following bad directions, I finally happened upon the mall information and security office. A man inside offered me a full-color booklet called *Punta Carretas: Before and After*.

"Perfect," I said.

When I got home and looked inside, I understood that the *before* was before the new Sheraton five-star hotel that's integrated into the mall.

Progeny

Arturo Dubra has just returned with me to Punta Carretas, the first time he's been back inside since 1971 when he and 110 others tunneled their way out of the prison. He grew up in the neighborhood, and in our walk around the outer wall he meets a few people he knew. When we're looking for the house the prisoners' tunnel

ended up in, a small man approaches, offering to give us a tour of the area.

"This is where we broke out in the seventies," he says.

Dubra smiles at me.

"Well," says the small man, "not me personally, but the Tupamaros. Greatest escape in history."

Dubra presents himself, never mentioning that he was a key organizer of the escape or that he worked eight hours a day for sixteen days digging the famed tunnel.

The small man gets to talking about ages. "He's nearing eighty," he says.

Dubra says, "I'm sixty, with sixteen years in the shade."

After the escape he was recaptured, I know, and spent over twelve years in dank dungeons throughout Uruguay. The other four years, I figure, must have come before then. Through it all, his wife was faithful.

Before we part ways, I give him my email address so we can communicate: pcmadden3@yahoo.com. He sees the number three and asks about it.

"It's because I'm the third," I say. "Named after my father and grandfather. My son is Patrick the fourth."

"That's like me then," he says. "Arturo Dubra is my name, my father's name, my grandfather's."

"Do you have any children?" I ask. I have been wanting to ask. "Any Arturo the fourth?"

"Only my nephew."

Perspective/3

Watching a volleyball game upside down, lying in the grass as the ball moves quickly then slows then quickens again in reverse as it jumps as if on a string tied to the earth which is up or repelled from the sky which is down.

Way Back/1

When I was young and riding to swim practice with Brian

Pfarrer, hanging our feet over the top of the seat in the backward-facing way-back seat of his mother's station wagon, watching the tops of trees and swirling skies and traffic lights and telephone poles speed swiftly by somehow disconnected from the ground, somehow surprising refreshing neverbeforeseen.

Way Back/2

I have wanted to tell this story for a long time. My brother and I were playing a game we had invented wherein one would toss an old, half-deflated basketball at the other who stood waiting with an aluminum baseball bat who then would swing with all his might as the other ducked behind a splintered wooden table turned on its side so as not to get hit by the strange and wonderful, erratically zip-pingziggagging basketball that flew uncontrollably and chaotically through the back yard to, if the hitter was good and lucky and had connected well, the way back. I want to emphasize the uncontrollability of the ball.

All of a sudden my brother's friend comes up through the woods in the way back and I tell my brother, "Pitch me the ball; I'm going to hit him." And he did and I whaled the ball with all my might with some hope for direction but really no more control than that, and Ag, the friend, wasn't looking or paying attention even though the ball ripped through several tree branches making a lot of noise and tearing off leaves which came floating to the ground it seems like long after the ball hit Ag square in the chest almost knocking him over and giving him a big fright.

Benediction

I was reading *Futbol a sol y sombra* by Eduardo Galeano (at the moment, sitting on a sky-blue, half-circle brick wall at a playground in the author's hometown of Montevideo, watching my son). I was not reading about the passion of poor children in Latin America who leave their homes in the early morning and head to any flat ground and play fútbol all day and will kick anything remotely round – balls of rags or plastic bags, volleyballs and soccer balls of any size or qual-

ity – but I had read about it recently, and wish I were reading it at that moment, but I was reading about professionalism, or the World Cup of 1934, very interesting reading all the same, when I was struck full force in the side by a miskicked, lopsided, half-inflated, dented plastic tether ball. My side was still stinging as I tossed the ball back to its two young owners.

