

## Melville's Fist

I cannot describe my own character. I have neither the talent nor understanding. But the character of others--that is my business. A particular breed of others both extraordinary and yet more basic than any on Earth. They are its giants. They arise from it as demonstrations of its might. They have fascinated me since my first glimpse in childhood of a bully and the first dollar he wrestled from me without ever asking, as if a slight, anemic boy could have refused on vain principle.

The man I am about to describe was as sturdy as a ship. His arms wore blue anchors as tattoos, and a continent itself could have defied geological tugs tethered to those swelling barbs. His name was Melville. At least, that's what I have taken to calling him, and he seemed to prefer it to his real name of Herman. There was a look that would come over him when addressed in that manner. A look that possessed a fortune in a gold for any seeker of treasure.

I can be such a one, such a seeker. I am probably seeking the same things over and over again, but always in a different place, so that my confusion assails me at critical moments, in which I recognize the false diversity of my means. For in Melville, I recognized a windfall, financial prosperity of the likes I nightly dreamed about. While in Elizabeth, I saw, strangely, the same thing: a great bounty, a cornucopia. And for her, I went astray, as if to find her that much more clearly.

She was walking beside me. It was a night of cool, summer drizzles and steaming pavement. I held Elizabeth's hand in the crook of my elbow, and pressed

on it with my own small hand. We kept a practiced pace along the sidewalk, her long, graceful strides almost stuttering at transitions to accommodate my shorter efforts.

We were happy. I remember the delicate pressure of her inclined head atop my inclined head, the way her shoulder rocked gently, like a cradle, as we advanced along the avenue.

It was lit with dim streetlights. The muted, black poles seemed to hover like bats. I was not in the mind for commerce at the moment. Only the doors of a windowless tavern flew open and a small man, looking oddly like myself, sailed across our heading. He waved his arms madly in that short span of time, then crashed to the ground like a sack of mildewed wheat heaved overboard blindly by a deckhand approaching shore leave. I was tempted to kick him lightly to make sure he was alive. His posterior jutted upward and his chest pressed the cement as if it were a mattress of the deepest sleep.

Elizabeth gasped. Beneath her white umbrella her limbs and torso began shaking, and tiny blasts of dislodged water droplets lashed my face. The doors of the tavern bounced back to closed a few times, bottling up a fitful organ music that quickly disappeared.

"That man is hurt!" Elizabeth exclaimed. The degree of his injuries, however, exceeded that estimation. His right wrist bent mildly in an unnatural sideways direction, and his mouth bled profusely, so that a thick spill of blood spread over the ground, mixing with puddles. The geometry of that combination was impressive.

I knelt beside the crumpled stranger and peered into his one visible eye, which was already swollen. The vantage point was like looking into the mysterious socket of a spying blue whale. I shall never forget it. Nor the mad thoughts that arose in me, as if a sudden charitable disclosure were being revealed by my destiny.

"There is no second chance," I thought immediately. "There is only the tension before the truth and the afterwards memory of seeing it. There is here, now, and eternity." And because these words, at other crucial moments in my life, have made similar sense in dissimilar contexts, I snapped promptly to my full height, and leaned into a purposeful gait toward the bar, pushing the doors twice before recollecting they opened outward. I corrected my mistake and entered, perhaps intentionally flourishing my overcoat as I yanked it clear behind me.

The man at the bar was enormous. There was no mistaking him for something other than a catapult. That by only one arm he had hurled his tiny skeletal load from the room, and so by imaginative extension from the inner hold of some unreadable fort, was the clearest connection of cause and effect I have ever encountered--much, much clearer than most. The great certainty of it delighted me. I nearly danced in my spot on the elevated landing within the doors. But I did not dance, for to dance was to belong to that other world beyond those doors, where my fiancée reacted in who knew what way to who knew what development? I calmly fixed my lapels and advanced toward the man.

"Do you always punch that way?" I asked beside him. Melville did not acknowledge me, but squeezed his shot glass on the bar. His expression was

mournful, troubled. He quickly reversed his grip of the small vessel and capsized it, huffing.

"Let me get you another," the barkeep volunteered, eyeing me with the equivalent of a snake's angry hiss. He did not reach for the original glass, but cleaned a new clean one with exaggerated efforts of his towel hand and placed it before Melville very delicately. Liquid the color of rust poured up to and then over the rim before the beverage was complete.

"I'll have one too," I said.

"You will, eh?" said the barman.

"Always do, sir. Always do."

"Yeah, I bet.