

In defiance of gravity: writing, wisdom, and the Fabulous Club Gemini

by Tom Robbins

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It had been a long time since I'd contemplated suicide. In fact, I don't believe I'd ever before considered the corporal DELETE key an option. Yet there I was, teetering on a bridge high above some oyster-lit backwater from Puget Sound, thinking about closing my earthly accounts with a leap and a splash.

Why? My romantic life couldn't have been sweeter, my health was close to rosy, the writing was going well, finances were adequate, and while the horror show that that cupidinous cult of corporate vampires was making of our federal government might be enough to drive me to drink (a trip I'm seldom reluctant to take), the political knavery does not exist that could drive me into the drink.

No, the truth is I was being prodded to execute a Kevorkian header into the Stygian slough by a short story I'd just read in a back issue of *The New Yorker*.

Entitled (ironically enough) "Fun With Problems," the piece was composed by Robert Stone, and you can bet it wasn't Stone's prose style that had weakened my will to live: the man's a crack technician whose choices of verb and adjective can sometimes floor me with admiration. He's a smithery of a storyteller who's hammered out a stalwart oeuvre -- but holy Chernobyl is he bleak! Stone apparently believes the human condition one pathetically unstable piece of business, and, frankly, at this stage of our evolutionary development there's a shortage of evidence to contradict him. Nevertheless, I'd always counted myself among those free spirits who refuse to allow mankind's ignoble deportment and dumb-cluck diatheses to cloud their grand perspective or sleet on their parade. On that day, however, Stone's narrative prowess had been such as to infect me (unconscionably, I now contend) with his *Weltschmerz*.

In fairness, Stone alone was not to blame. For too many years my edacious reading habits had been leading me into one unappealing corner after another, dank cul-de-sacs littered with tear-stained diaries, empty pill bottles, bulging briefcases, broken vows, humdrum phrases, sociological swab samples, and the (lovely?) bones of dismembered children: the detritus of a literary scene that, with several notable exceptions, has been about as entertaining as a Taliban theme park and as elevating as the prayer breakfast at the Bates Motel. "Fun With Problems" was simply the final straw, the charred cherry atop a mad-cow sundae.

So who knows how things might have turned out that glum afternoon had not I suddenly heard, as I flirted with extinction, a particular sound in my mind's ear: the sound, believe it or not, of a distant kitty cat, a sound that instantly transported me away from the lure of fatal waters, away from the toxic contagions of sordid fiction, and into a place -- a real place, though I've only visited it in my imagination -- a place called the Fabulous Club Gemini.

The Fabulous Club Gemini. Where is it, anyhow? Memphis, probably. Or Houston. No, actually I think it might be one of the ideologically unencumbered features of Washington, D.C. In any case, some years back, a music writer for *The Village Voice* made a pilgrimage to the smoke-polluted, windowless, cinder-block venue, wherever its exact location, and while being introduced to some of the ancient musicians who'd been playing the Fabulous Club Gemini practically since the vagitus of time, the pilgrim became so excited he momentarily lost his downtown cool.

"I can't believe," he quoted himself as having gushed, "that I'm talking to the man who barked on Big Mama Thornton's recording of 'Hound Dog'!"

"Yeah," the grizzled sideman drawled. "I was gonna meow but it was too hip for 'em."

Okay, perhaps I'm overly fanciful, but I have reason to suspect it might have been precisely an echo from that crusty confession that, as incongruous as it may seem, enticed me down from the kamikaze viaduct. I do know that I'm often reminded of it when I glance at the annual lists of Pulitzers, Booker Prizes, or National Book Awards; when an interviewer's question forces me to reexamine my personal literary aesthetic; or when speaking with eager students in those university creative-writing programs where prescribed, if rarefied, barking is actively promoted and any feline departure summarily euthanized.

There's some validity, I suppose, in the academic approach, for, as Big Mama's accompanist would attest, our culture simply has a far greater demand for the predictable bow-wow than for the unexpected caterwaul: orthodox woofing pays the rent. In a dogma-eat-dogma world, a few teachers, editors, and critics may be hip enough to tolerate a subversive mew, a quirky purr now and again, but they're well aware of the fate that awaits those who produce -- or sanction -- mysterious off-the-wall meowing when familiar yaps and snarls are dearly called for.

Let me explain that when I refer to "meowing" here, what I'm really talking about is the human impulse to be playful; an impulse all too frequently demeaned and suppressed in the adult population, especially when it manifests itself in an unconventional manner or inappropriate context. To bark at the end of a song entitled "Hound Dog" is just playful enough to elicit a soupcon of mainstream amusement, but Fred (I believe that was the sessionman's name), in wanting instead to meow, was pushing the envelope and raising the stakes, raising them to a "hipper" level perhaps, a more irreverent level undoubtedly. There's a sense in which ol' Fred was showing a tiny spark of what the Tibetans call "crazy wisdom," a sense in which he was assuming for a bare instant the archetypal role of the holy fool.

Now, the fact that Fred would have denied any such arcane ambition, the fact that he may only have been stoned out of his gourd at the time, all that is irrelevant. It's also unimportant that Fred's recording-studio tomfoolery lacked real profundity, that while it may have been eccentrically playful it was not very seriously playful. What does matter is that we come to recognize that playfulness, as a philosophical stance, can be very serious, indeed; and, moreover, that it possesses an unflinching capacity to arouse ridicule and hostility in those among us who crave certainty, reverence, and restraint.

The fact that playfulness -- a kind of divine playfulness intended to lighten man's existential burden and promote what Joseph Campbell called "the rapture of being alive" -- lies near the core of Zen, Taoist, Sufi, and Trantric teachings is lost on most Westerners: working stiffs and intellectuals alike. Even scholars who acknowledge the playful undertone in those disciplines treat it with condescension and disrespect, never mind that it's a worldview arrived at after millennia of exhaustive study, deep meditation, unflinching observation, and intense debate.

Tell an editor at *The New York Review of Books* that Abbot Chogyam Trungpa would squirt his disciples with water pistols when they became overly earnest in their meditative practice, or that the house of Japan's most venerated ninja is filled with Mickey Mouse memorabilia, and you'll witness an eye roll of silent-movie proportions. Like that fusty old patriarch in the Bible, when they become a man (or woman), they "put away childish things," which is to say they seal off with the hard gray wax of fear and pomposity that aspect of their being that once was attuned to wonder.

As a result of their having abandoned that part of human nature that is potentially most transcendent, it's no surprise that modern intellectuals dismiss playfulness -- especially when it dares to present itself in literature, philosophy, or art -- as frivolous or whimsical. Men who wear bow ties to work every day (let's make an exception for Pee-Wee Herman), men whose dreams have been usurped either by the shallow aspirations of the marketplace or by the drab clichés of Marxist realpolitik, such men are not adroit at distinguishing that which is lighthearted from that which is merely lightweight. God knows what confused thunders might rumble in their sinuses were they to encounter a concept such as "crazy wisdom."

Crazy wisdom is, of course, the opposite of conventional wisdom. It is wisdom that deliberately swims against the current in order to avoid being swept along in the numbing wake of bourgeois compromise; wisdom that flouts taboos in order to undermine their power; wisdom that evolves when one, while refusing to avert one's gaze from the sorrows and injustices of the world, insists on joy in spite of everything; wisdom that embraces risk and eschews security; wisdom that turns the tables on neurosis by lampooning it; the wisdom of those who neither seek authority nor willingly submit to it.

Oddly enough, one of the most striking illustrations of crazy wisdom in all of Western literature occurs in a pedestrian piece of police pulp by Joseph Wambaugh. *The Black Marble* is so stylistically lifeless it could have been printed in embalming fluid, but the rigor mortis of its prose is temporarily enlivened by a scattering of scenes that I shall attempt to summarize (though it's been decades since I read the book).

As I remember it, a relatively inexperienced member of the Los Angeles Police Department is transferred to the vice squad. No sooner does the new cop report for duty than he's introduced to a strange lottery. There is, it seems, an undesirable beat, a section of the city that no vice cop ever wants to patrol. It's a sleazy, filthy, volatile, extremely dangerous area, full of shooting galleries and dark alleys and not a doughnut shop in sight. So great has been the objection to being assigned to that sinister beat that the precinct captain has devised a raffle to cope with it. At the beginning of each night shift, he produces a bag of marbles, every marble white save one. One by one, the cops reach in the bag and pull out their fate. The unfortunate who draws the single black marble must screw up his spine and descend that evening into the urban hell.

Around the drawing of the marbles there's a considerable amount of tension, and the new man quickly succumbs to it. Just showing up for work is twice as stressful as it ought to be. In the station house, negativity is prevalent, jovial camaraderie rare.

The new cop draws the black marble a couple of times and finds the dreaded zone to be as violent and unsavory as advertised. However, he not only survives there; he learns he can tolerate the beat reasonably well by changing his attitude toward it, by regarding it less as a tribulation than as some special opportunity to escape routine and regularity, by appreciating it as an unusual experience available to very few people on the planet. Slowly, his anxiety begins to evaporate.

One night he shocks his comrades by emptying the bag and deliberately selecting the black marble. The next night he does it again. From then on, he simply strolls into the station house and nonchalantly requests the black marble. He no longer has to fret over the possibility of losing the draw. For better or worse, he controls his destiny.

Ordeal now has been transformed into adventure, stress into excitement. The transformer is himself transformed, his uprightness replaced first by a kind of giddy rush, then by a buddhistic calm. Moreover, his daring, his abandon, his serenity, is contagious. Vice-squad headquarters gradually relaxes. Liberated, the whole damn place opens up to life.

And that, brothers and sisters, although Wambaugh probably didn't intend it, is crazy wisdom in action.

Admittedly, when the cop made the short straw his own, when he seized the nasty end of the stick and rode it to transcendence, he put himself in extra peril. That's par for the course. Only an airhead would mistake the left-handed path for a safe path.

Although serious playfulness may be an effective means of domesticating fear and pain, it's not about meowing past the graveyard. No, the seriously playful individual meows right through the graveyard gate, meows into his or her very grave. When Oscar Wilde allegedly gestured at the garish wallpaper in his cheap Parisian hotel room and announced with his dying breath, "Either it goes or I go," he was exhibiting something beyond an irrepressibly brilliant wit. Freud, you see, wasn't whistling "Edelweiss" when he wrote that gallows humor is indicative of a greatness of soul.

The quips of the condemned prisoner or dying patient tower dramatically above, say, sallies on TV sitcoms by reason of their gloriously inappropriate refusal, even at life's most acute moment, to surrender to despair. The man who jokes in the executioner's face can be destroyed but never defeated.

When an eminent Zen master, upon hearing a sudden burst of squirrel chatter outside his window, sat up in his deathbed and proclaimed, "That's what it was all about!" his last words surpassed Wilde's in playful significance, constituting as they did a koan of sorts, an enigmatic invitation to rethink the meaning of existence. Anecdotes such as this one remind the nimble-minded that there's often a thin line between the comic and the cosmic, and that on that frontier can be found the doorway to psychic rebirth.

Ancient Egyptians believed that when a person died, the gods immediately placed his or her heart in one pan of a set of scales. In the other pan was a feather. If there was imbalance, if the heart of the deceased weighed more than the feather, he or she was denied admittance to the afterworld. Only the lighthearted were deemed advanced enough to merit immortality.

Now, in a culture such as ours, where the tyranny of the dull mind holds sway, we can expect our intelligentsia to write off Egyptian heart-weighing as quaint superstition, to dismiss squirrel-chatter illumination as flaky Asian guru woo woo. Fine. But what about the Euro-American Trickster tradition, what about Coyote and Raven and Loki and Hennes and the community-sanctioned blasphemies of the clown princes of Saturnalia? For that matter, what about Dada, Duchamp, and the 'pataphysics of Alfred Jarry? What about Gargantua and Finnegans Wake, John Cage and Erik Satie, Gurdjieff and Robert Anton Wilson, Frank Zappa and Antoni Gaudi? What about Carlos Castaneda, Picasso, and the alchemists of Prague? Allen Ginsberg and R. D. Laing, Rahsaan Roland Kirk and Lewis Carroll, Alexander Calder and Italo Calvino, Henry Miller, Pippi Longstocking, Andrei Codrescu, Ishmael Reed, Alan Rudolph, Mark Twain, and the electric Kool-Aid acid pranksters? What about the sly tongue-in-cheek subversions of Nietzsche (yes, Nietzsche!), and what about Shakespeare, for God's sake, the mega-bard in whose plays, tragedies included, three thousand puns, some of them real groaners, have been verifiably catalogued?

Obviously, although crazy wisdom may have been better appreciated in Asia, nuggets of meaningful playfulness have long twinkled here and there in the heavy iron crown of Western tradition. (It was a Spanish poet, Juan Ramon Jimenez, who advised, "If they give you ruled paper, write the other way.") The question is, when will we be hip enough to realize that these sparklers aren't mere rhinestones or baubles of paste? When will our literati -- in many cases, an erudite, superbly talented lot -- evolve to the degree that they accord buoyancy and mirth a dime's worth of the respect they bestow so lavishly on gravity and misfortune?

Norman N. Holland asked a similar question in *Laughing: A Psychology of Humor*, concluding that comedy is deemed inferior to tragedy primarily because of the social prevalence of narcissistic pathology. In other words, people who are too self-important to laugh at their own frequently ridiculous behavior have a vested interest in gravity because it supports their illusions of grandiosity. According to Professor Donald Kuspit, many people are unable to function without such illusions.

"Capitalism," wrote Kuspit, "encourages the pathologically grandiose self because it encourages the conspicuous consumption of possessions, which symbolize one's grandiosity." I would add that rigid, unquestioning allegiance to a particular religious or political affiliation is in much the same way also symptomatic of disease.

Ironically, it's this same malignant narcissism, revealing itself through arrogance, avarice, pique, anxiety, severity, defensive cynicism, and aggressive ambition, that is keeping the vainglorious out of their paradise. Among our egocentric sad sacks, despair is as addictive as heroin and more popular than sex, for the single reason that when one is unhappy one gets to pay a lot of attention to oneself. Misery becomes a kind of emotional masturbation. Taken out on others, depression becomes a weapon. But for those willing to reduce and permeate their ego, to laugh -- or meow -- it into submission, heaven on earth is a distinct psychological possibility.

It's good to bear the preceding in mind when trying to comprehend the indignation with which the East Coast establishment greets work that dares to be both funny and deadly serious in the same breath. The left-handed path runs along terrain upon which the bowtiesattvas find it difficult to tread. Their maps are inaccurate and they have the wrong shoes. So, hi ho, hi ho, it's off to the house of woe they go.

Nobody requires a research fellowship to ascertain that most of the critically lauded fiction of our time concentrates its focus on cancer, divorce, rape, racism, schizophrenia, murder, abandonment, addiction, and abuse. Those things, unfortunately, are rampant in our society and ought to be examined in fiction. Yet to trot them out in book after book, on page after page, without the transformative magic of humor and imagination -- let alone a glimmer of higher consciousness -- succeeds only in impeding the advancement of literature and human understanding alike.

Down in Latin America, they also write about bad marriages and ill health (as well as the kind of governmental brutality of which we in the United States so far have had only a taste). The big difference, though, is that even when surveying the gritty and mundane aspects of daily life, Latin novelists invoke the dream realm, the spirit realm, the mythic realm, the realm of nature, the inanimate world, and the psychological underworld. In acknowledging that social realism is but one layer of a many-layered cake, in threading the inexplicable and the goofy into their naturalistic narratives, the so-called magical realists not only weave a more expansive, inclusive tapestry but leave the reader with a feverish exaltation rather than the deadening weariness that all too often accompanies the completion of even the most splendidly crafted of our books.

Can we really take pride in a literature whose cumulative effect is to send the reader to the bridge with "Goodnight Irene" on his lips?

Freud said that wit is the denial of suffering. As I interpret it, he wasn't implying that the witty among us deny the existence of suffering -- all of us suffer to one degree or another -- but rather that, armed with a playful attitude, a comic sensibility, we can deny suffering dominion over our lives, we can refrain from buying shares in the company. Funnel that defiant humor onto the page, add a bracing shot of Zen awareness, and hey, pretty soon life has some justification for imitating art.

Don't misunderstand me: a novel is no more supposed to be a guidebook to universal happiness than a self-indulgent journal of the writer's personal pain. And everyone will agree, I think, that crime is a more fascinating subject than lawful behavior, that dysfunction is more interesting than stability, that a messy divorce is ever so much more titillating than a placid marriage. Without conflict, both fiction and life can be a bore. Should that, however, prohibit the serious author from exploring and even extolling the world's pleasures, wonders, mysteries, and delights? (Maybe all this neurotic, cynical, cry-baby fiction is nothing more than the old classroom dictum "Write what you know" coming back to haunt us like a chalky ghost. If what you know best is angst, your education commands you not to waste a lot of time trying to create robust characters or describe conditions on the sunny side of the street.)

In any case, the notion that inspired play (even when audacious, offensive, or obscene) enhances rather than diminishes intellectual rigor and spiritual fulfillment, the notion that in the eyes of the gods the tight-lipped hero and the wet-cheeked victim are frequently inferior to the red-nosed clown, such notions are destined to be a hard sell to those who have E. M. Forster on their bedside table and a clump of dried narcissus up their ass. Not to worry. As long as words and ideas exist, there will be a few misfits who will cavort with them in a spirit of *approfondement* -- if I may borrow that marvelous French word that translates roughly as "playing easily in the deep" -- and in so doing they will occasionally bring to realization Kafka's belief that "a novel should be an ax for the frozen seas around us."

A Tibetan-caliber playfulness may not represent, I'm willing to concede, the only ice ax in the literary toolshed. Should there exist alternatives as available, as effective, as potent, nimble, and refreshing, then by all means hone them and bring them down to the floe. Until I've seen them at work, however, I'll stand by my contention that when it comes to writing, a fusion of prankish Asian wisdom, extra-dimensional Latin magic, and two-fisted North American poetic pizzazz (as exotic as that concept might seem to some) could be our best hope for clearing passageways through our heart-numbing, soul-shrinking, spirit-smothering oceans of frost. We have a gifted, conscientious literati. Wouldn't it be the cat's meow to have an enlightened, exhilarating one as well?