

Amor Fati

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On the shore of Coney Island, white foam forms and merges, twisting in the surf, yielding shapes. Each shape is unique, not only in its momentary appearance but also in its transfiguration over time. Eventually, each returns to the waters that made them like continents crumbling to the ocean floor.

And yet we don't like to think of our own continents as being as precarious and fragile as those white shapes on the waves. We prefer to think that the land beneath our feet and the civilizations we build upon it will last forever. I need only look in front of me at Coney Island proper, at the bright red Parachute Drop rising out of the horizon, to see this line of thought in effect. A great blaring mass of steel, the Parachute Drop has been defunct for over 40 years, but that does not keep it from standing tall and pretending it is everlasting. I wonder how many people, so familiar with the island, look at the tower and think it will be there forever. It's just too large, too iconic, too proud to fall.

Coney Island has always had a relationship with the proud and ostentatious. It began its vibrant and at times lurid history with the establishment of the Coney Island House in 1829, one of many retreats for the wealthy, accessed by a carriage road laid with seashells. Over the years, Coney Island was lavished with ever more hotels, eye-catching amenities, and a bevy of roller coasters and theme parks. Perhaps the most recognizable representation of Coney Island is the famous Elephant Hotel, its facade shaped like its pachyderm namesake. The "island" was a place of money and vanity, and by the late 1800's it was known as "Sodom by the Sea," and with good reason (Meier).

Yet I need only look to my left to see a broken pier, torn apart by Hurricane Sandy and closed for repairs. One can only wonder what happened to all those other bright and seductive attractions Coney Island is so famous for. The antique roller coasters were condemned as death traps and closed (most notably the "Roosevelt's Rough Riders" coaster, which threw sixteen

people off “from a height of 30 feet, killing three”) (Meier). The Elephant Hotel burned down, as did many other relics of earlier decadence. Indeed, it was the tendency for the fires, along with the economic tumult of the Depression, that led to many of Coney Island’s attractions being closed. One of the most famous attractions, Luna Park, was shut down after an economic decline (Meier).

And what has become of Coney Island today? Crime abounds. The local news recently reported the killing of a homeless man, Julian Salley, with no arrests made as of this writing (Fractenberg). The legendary theme park itself fares no better. On the official Coney Island website, the iconic mad grin of the Island’s mascot leers from the top of an atrociously-designed page adorned with manifold pleas for financial aid and support. An aged man in an antiquated top hat and white button-down shirt with chest hair poking out from the top crosses his arms and gazes, self-satisfied, at the camera: he is the Coney Island artistic director. Beneath his picture is an announcement that the opening of the park will be delayed because of the damage from Hurricane Sandy.

One might say Coney Island is dead, has been for many years, but I would argue that’s not the case. Coney Island is now what it has always been, a contorted Frankensteinian combination of mad hubris and pitiless reality, a desperate attempt to cling to a fantastical representation of a life that never really existed. But to consider Coney Island a unique phenomenon in this respect is disingenuous. Coney Island is nothing more than another piece of collateral damage in mankind’s losing war against nature and its overwhelming force.

The attempt to deny the ebb and flow of life is a trend mirrored in all of art, which so often attempts to replace the force of nature with pleasant, monotonous fakeries. In his essay “The *Panorama Mesdag*,” writer Mark Doty finds himself impressed by the ostentatious hubris of the titular panorama, which attempts to imitate a beach pavilion, yet is static and unchanging. It seeks to pass itself off as a replacement for nature, with artificial sand and beach debris, a panorama painting that attempts to imply that it is more than just a canvas. The *Panorama* was painted in an era in which works of art and literature attempted to encapsulate the entire world within their frames or pages, betraying both a certain arrogance and ambition we have since lost (226). What impresses Doty about the *Panorama* is its attempt to create a virtual world that is somehow superior to the original. What impresses him even more is how it has failed; the forces of nature still press upon it, and the own-

ers must constantly renovate the *Panorama* to keep it in its seemingly eternal state (228). In response to the renovation, Doty says:

I confess: I would have loved the *Panorama* more in disarray; I'd have loved to have seen it with stains of mildew creeping through its skies, or a worry of unraveling the mice had done down in the sands beneath the high dunes of Scheveningen. Then, in the face of time's delicate ruination of human ambition, I would have been moved. (228)

There is something truthful about such decay. In contrast to many paintings kept flawless under layers of shellac, the *Panorama* lies naked and crumbling, revealing the impermanence of our art, our creations, and ourselves. But the *Panorama* constantly attempts to keep that decay at bay, which is, perhaps, exactly what is missing from much artwork—an acknowledgment of decay, of change, and perhaps ultimately of rebirth.

Not all modern art is like the *Panorama*, of course. There are some works that distinctly acknowledge the ravages of time, as Doty would prefer. Upon visiting the Carnegie Museum of Art in Pittsburgh last year, I beheld one of Alberto Giacometti's *Walking Man* sculptures, a bronze piece depicting a tall, emaciated, and fragile humanoid who presses onwards despite the forces working against him. The sculpture endures as a powerful symbol of human fragility and perseverance. Whether or not one agrees with the implications of Giacometti's rather dreary style, there is something unique about art that does not deny the complexities of nature but rather embraces them, that acknowledges the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth.

Some may think such art tragic in its acknowledgment of death and decay, but I do not. There could be no rebirth, no regeneration, if there were no decay. Renovations such as those made to the *Panorama* maintain a comfortable illusion. But like the *Panorama* itself, all things will fall apart in time. Facing such truth, we see more clearly that our art, the trappings of our civilizations, cannot protect us from the ever-encroaching primal void. In time we all will come into contact with nature and its inevitable decay, as Coney Island reminds us. What purpose does it serve us to believe we won't all ultimately fall?

The concept of *amor fati*, Latin for "love of fate," suggests that all things in life, joys and tragedies alike, while perhaps not comforting, are necessary to the achievement of our greatest fulfillment in life. Perhaps we should cease trying to fortify our manmade constructs against the ravages of nature. Perhaps it might be best to give into *amor fati* and acknowledge that we can-

not resist the ravages of fate and time, that our constructs will fall, and that we must find purpose within the context of such knowledge.

And I wonder, is that acquiescence enough for us? The Parachute Drop demonstrates the human impulse to try to overcome fate, to stand tall and proud against the forces of wind, rain, and gravity. And I wonder too if we can ever really accept our own powerlessness and own up to our inability to change fate.

An answer of sorts can be found in the most un-Lynchian of David Lynch films, *The Straight Story*. It is the tale of Alvin Straight, an elderly man who seeks to make amends with his brother Lyle who has recently suffered a stroke; neither man has much longer to live. Unfortunately, Alvin's legs and eyes are too worn down by the years for him to get a driver's license. This handicap, however, does not stop him; instead, he drives his lawnmower across Iowa and Wisconsin, a 240 mile trip of meditative interludes and quiet conversations with strangers on his path to make amends with his brother. At the end, the two reunite and share a moment of quiet emotion.

It is not a typical happy ending. The two brothers are frail and will die soon. Indeed, in the grand scheme of things, neither has altered his fate in any significant way. Yet at the same time, there is a change which gives the end of this journey meaning. One brother has gone to great lengths to make amends, and both of them are the better for it. Perhaps that human need for reconciliation distinguishes us from all the other complex natural rhythms that govern our lives. We need not avoid our ultimate fates, but we might dare to make the journey with a bit more awareness of what makes ours distinctly human.

Suppose Straight's brother had never answered the door. Suppose, as is sometimes the case in life, his brother had died before they could make amends. Does that mean that Straight's journey was all for naught? I do not think so. Even if his brother was not there, there still remains the memory of those long meditative drives, those deep and at times not-so-deep conversations with the people he met. There still remains the fact of what he did, the accomplishment itself. Can the winds blow apart an accomplishment? Can the waves wash away the conversations? Or do our risks and our efforts linger, not simply in the physical world but in the land of memories, deeds, and meaning? The things we build, like Coney Island or the *Panorama*, may not last, but their destruction does not diminish their significance. They give testimony not only to human vanity, but also to human stubbornness and determination in the face of seemingly insurmountable opposition. Our creations may fail and crumble, but the record of their existence matters. As

inevitable as the crashing white-capped waves might be, they do not defeat our human passion for creating and restoring. In these stories of decay and re-creation, we find the essence of our human will to survive, and our art should serve as a continual reminder of our changing, but ever persistent, struggle against the fate that enlightens us.

I think back to a trip I made to Coney Island several weeks ago. There, I saw many seagulls: they lay in the water not far from me, wings tucked, rocking in the surf. They had such looks of concentration and calm, like little avian Buddhas on the waves. At times, they would rendezvous on the beach, their stick feet awkwardly padding along the sand, ill-at-ease. Soon enough, they would flap their wings and take to the sky, where the winds would blow them in ways they did not anticipate, sometimes back to the water where the waves pushed them in whatever direction the ocean chose. I could not help but admire them.

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