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Ethics and Narrative: the Human and Other

Love for the weak always includes a certain murderous intent.

—Kobe Abe

Liberty is not the power of doing what we like, but the right to do what we ought.

—Lord Dalberg-Acton

LET US NOT BEGIN WITH DEFINITIONS. With academic references. With proof that many books have been studied on the subject. With the notion that for an idea to be singular, purposeful, or even useful it must be backed up by the research of others. Let us begin with a smaller gesture. If small things can defeat us, and they can if we are to believe the old Igbo proverbs, then they are enough, perhaps, to hang so much upon. A cup of tea and a cold winter morning. Or a story, perhaps. Imagine this: a young boy of ten sets off down a village path to a stream, the part where animals are killed and dressed so that their offal washes away from everything holy. This boy has to become a man. He has to kill a goat. I was that boy. There is nothing harder to do in this world than kill something. I tell a lie; roaches are the exception. But everything else dies hard, struggles to live. Imagine if you will the cry of a goat. So human that the Greeks named catharsis after it. And goats' eyes? So human. In Igbo culture, children are told when lost in the forest to seek a goat and follow it, as it will always lead back to habitation.

Anyway, the story. I have to kill this goat, not much bigger than a kid. A kid to kill a kid. This is the reality—it wasn't cruelty that demanded this of me. It was simply the reality of a culture that killed its own meat, coupled with the process of masculine initiation that demanded the sacrifice of innocence as its entrance. Of course, arguably, I wasn't that innocent, having already killed chickens and turkeys, but birds are dinosaurs and retain their reptilian evil. It is easy to kill reptiles; they're just asking for it. But I didn't want to kill that goat. I wanted to read my new Silver Surfer comic in the shade of a mango tree. I wanted to hide behind the woodshed and drink cokes and smoke cigarettes. I wanted to do anything but kill that goat. It was a lonely walk down to the killing spot, dragging the reluctant, crying kid behind me. The rules were simple: kill and dress the kid alone. But then, halfway to the river, out of sight of the elders, a familiar figure emerged from the underbrush: my school friend and

former boy soldier Emmanuel. Emmanuel was hard; he had seen many terrible things. Taken the lives of men. Yet here he was to help me with something as ordinary as killing a goat. As I struggled to hold the animal down, my knees pinning its legs to the ground, my hands on its horns, pulling its throat back to ready it for the bite of the knife, I froze as our eyes met and the goat cried. Tears welled and Emmanuel, sensing I was about to fail this test, came over and with one hand covered the goat's eyes, and with the other, closed its mouth against its own cries. "Steady," he said. Such simple gestures, pedestrian even, but coming from someone like him who should have cared less whether I could kill a goat or not, they meant more. I was crying louder than the goat as I pulled my knife across its throat and held its head, draining the blood into the ritual pot. When Emmanuel let go, the goat's eyes were cloudy and the last blood gurgled through its lips. I jumped back. Emmanuel cleaned and dressed the goat as I sat sobbing. When he was done, he came over to me and sat down. He lit a cigarette, sucked on it and passed it to me, then said: Listen. It will always be hard to kill. But if you cry like this every time, you'll die of heartbreak. Sometimes it is enough to know it will be hard.

Until I began to write this essay, I had forgotten that though I killed maybe two goats in my life, my elder brother Charles had to undertake the responsibility of killing and dressing the goats we cooked for Easter and Christmas and birthdays and when we had special guests—quite a number. Until now, it never occurred to me to question whether this was hard for him. It might have been harder for him. Charles has always loved animals. As a kid, he took in stray cats and dogs, and once even built my sister and me a toy zoo complete with a lizard as a crocodile. Charles had a cat that got bitten by a snake and died in the backyard, crying horribly and foaming at the mouth. We all gathered to watch it with differing degrees of fascination and repulsion, but Charles held the dying animal. The look on his face comes easily to me as I write this, even though it has been over thirty years. Every writer thinks he feels things the most, that he is somehow special because he gets to narrate the world to everyone else as though they aren't living it. Pride is one of the deadly sins, one writers commit every time we put pen to paper.

A lot has happened between then and now. A lot of blood. Not all animal. The thing is, my knowledge of blood, of the terrible intimacy of killing, has taught me that though I have never killed a man, I know how, I know I could. The only thing that terrifies me is that I may not feel sorry. And even as I make this terrible confession, what can it mean? What does the moment offer? Affirmation of something already suspected? Or something else, the recognition perhaps that we all stand at the edge of the same abyss?

THIS IS WHAT THE ART I MAKE REQUIRES OF ME: that in order to have an honest conversation with a reader, I must reveal myself in all my vulnerability. Reveal myself, not in the sense of my autobiography, but in the sense of the deeper self, the one we keep too often hidden even from ourselves. This revelation is not designed to engender sympathy, or compassion, or even pity. These sentiments, while generous on the part of the reader, obscure the deeper intent, the deeper possibility. The point is to dissolve oneself into the journey of the protagonist, to face the most terrifying thing in narrative, the thing that has been at its heart since the earliest campfire and story. To dare ourselves to imagine, to conjure and then face all of our darkness and all of our light simultaneously. To stand in that liminal moment when we have no solid ground beneath us, no clear firmament above, when the ambiguity of our nature reveals what we are capable of, on both sides. The intensity of that confrontation is the only gift the writer has to offer, the only redemption that is possible.

This is perhaps the awe of us, this attempt we undertake to juggle the dialectic. To accept that all acts, every intervention in the world, requires judgment and that judgment by its very nature conjures up the specter of shame. Between these two things, so far, the only language we have of defining self does violence to another.

Like a piece of ice on a hot stove, the poem must ride on its own melting.

—Robert Frost

WE HAVE WRESTLED WITH THE QUESTION of our humanity since man pointed to a star and saw that his finger was not connected to the night sky. Our humanity, this humanness, is something we still cannot fully define. It is in fact more like a black hole. We know that it is there simply by observing and charting the phenomenology of our reactions. Wise ones amongst us know that it is the sum of all the play and field and the phenomena and the black hole. But we are not all wise, at least I am not, and while the knowledge can be present in its academic sense, we embody it only once in a while. But to stretch the physics analogy, the measuring of a black hole entails the elimination of phenomena one at a time, so we as humans, in the measuring of our humanness, remove these phenomena (or add) depending on our world view. What if we think of those phenomena for a moment as facades, or the masks of identity, and there are so many that we layer upon whatever is human about us to be seen in the world? I think, then, that we can all agree that even though we don't know exactly what this humanness is, we know that being human, the process itself, forces us to release the masks that we hide behind. Masks we

believe we cannot live without, even though we know deep inside that we all hate being measured by them, even as we realize it is impossible to go on living behind them. These masks have many names—fear, hate, pain, love, jealousy, self-loathing, and on—but share very similar archetypal origins regardless of where in the world we are from.

This is what I know about being human—that we all desire to live without fear, or disease, or affliction, but that we all refuse to give up our crutches. James Baldwin said it better: “I imagine one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”

In making my art, and sometimes when I teach, I am like a crazed, spirit-filled, snake-handling, speaking-in-tongues, spell-casting, Babylon-chanting-down, new-age, evangelical preacher wildly kicking the crutches away from my characters, forcing them into their pain and potential transformation. Alas, or maybe not, I also kick the crutches away from my readers. And many have fled from the revival tents of my art, screaming in terror.

WHAT OF COMPASSION, YOU MIGHT ASK? Is that the measure of it? Aristotle liked conditions and listed three that must exist before compassion can take place:

1. That a serious and bad thing has happened to somebody other than us.
2. That this bad event was not (at least not entirely) the person’s own fault.
3. That we know ourselves to be vulnerable in the same ways to the same bad thing.

Baldwin said, and I paraphrase, that suffering means something only in so much as someone else can attach his or her suffering to yours. He offered this as a point for young writers to find ways to make their work compelling, but it speaks often to our general tendencies towards the relational. We feel things for others only in so much as those things can fall within the realm of our understanding. This relational model, while laudable, is also, sadly, delusional.

French writer Marguerite Yourcenar says this: “Compassion emphasizes the experience of suffering with those who suffer and it is far from according a sentimental conception of life. It inflicts its knife-like pain only on those who, strong or not, brave or not, intelligent or not, have been granted the humble gift of looking the world in the face and seeing it as it is.” But what if we change the idea of gift to choice? What if compassion, true compassion, requires not the gift to see the world as it is, but the choice to be open to seeing the world as it really is, or as it can be?

This is my hope—to create an art that can catalogue the phenomenon of our nature, all of it, without sentimentality, but rather by leaning into transformation, so as to offer up what Diane Arbus would call the veritable, inevitable, or the possible, so that we can all have that terrible but necessary confrontation with all of ourselves. Whatever we feel about specific situations, we must at all costs avoid the sentimental.

WHEN I WAS A YOUNGER MAN, I was engaged in an ideological war with the Nigerian dictatorships under which we lived. I use the plural because there were many coups and counter-coups, and many governments were replaced, but they all had one common denominator: they were dictatorships. Upper-middle-class, educated, privileged (although not bulletproof), I campaigned tirelessly to organize protests to rid us of that oppression. I marched with the people I helped to organize—mostly poor, working-class or yet-to-be working-class citizens. Together, we faced down riot police and tear gas and beatings and bullets with nothing more than songs and the uncrushable belief that nothing good could die. But many did, and I paid little attention. I speak only for myself here and not the many good and wonderful thousands of other Nigerians engaged in that struggle with me. But I hardly questioned myself about my privilege and my right to organize these people. Any questions that did come up I rationalized. Had I not myself been imprisoned? Was I not also facing beatings and bullets? I was engaged in a righteous war. Now I have to ask myself if I had the right to place others in harm's way in the battle for our country's soul. And it is not because I have regrets, or because I suffer from survivor's guilt. It is simply that I have to accept this discomfort—that being human, being courageous, requires the ambiguity of doubt. Would I do it again? Probably. Would I feel this conflicted again? Probably. I have no answers. I have no crutches. I told you the terms at the beginning.

LET US RETURN TO THE SMALL THINGS. The stories that hold all this transformation that I am trying to articulate, because they are far more reliable than anything I can say. As a child growing up in post-civil war Nigeria, I had the unique opportunity to spend time working on the rice fields that my father owned. I say it was a unique opportunity because farmwork, particularly the growing of rice, was considered women's work. My father wanted us to learn everything about our culture, though, so as boys we were free to take part. I remember that as the women planted rice, they would sing mournful songs, dirges that were made up of the names of everyone in the town that had died during the civil war, as though the women could somehow seed the souls of the dead into the tender

shoots of green they threaded through the mud of the rice fields. I learned the songs and sang along, threading with them, back bent. Months later, as we harvested the rice, the women would sing happy songs, and woven through them would be the names of all the babies born that year. The following planting season, we went back to the dirges. I had always assumed the songs were fixed seasonal ditties, designed to make the work easier. Later, I learned that this tradition was new and began just after the civil war, and that far from being seasonal, the songs were magical. I began to notice that the number of dead who appeared in the dirges dropped in proportion to the number of births that year. This wasn't a simple belief in reincarnation, but the palpable and powerful transformation of sorrow and pain, and even an underlying anger and hate, into absolute redemption. These women, quietly, textually and bodily, in their way, were changing the narrative of the world.

WRITING *SONG FOR NIGHT*, my new novella, was a strange journey. It is a quest story and part of the quest is a spiritual one, as the protagonist looks for a way to accept death. The month before the book's U.S. debut, my publisher sent finished copies. I was in Thailand teaching when they arrived. I went out with some students to celebrate when I got the call that my mother had just had a heart attack. I rushed to England to see her. The first thing she did was grab the book and start to devour it greedily. When she got tired, she asked my brother, Greg, to read it to her. I spent ten days with her before heading back to the U.S. A couple of days later, before my plane left Los Angeles for a gig in New York, my mother called. She was too tired to finish the book, she said, but wanted to know if the protagonist, My Luck, ever made peace with death. Yes, I said, he did. I'm glad, she said. She died the next day.

This sometimes happens to us, that we write the song that sings our mother across to the other side. That the narrative is beyond even the ethical work we wanted it to be. That it is sometimes a good yarn, that it sometimes brings comfort to others, that it sometimes makes our people proud of us. It doesn't matter in the end; integrity will find its own way.

... terror is a state of complete understanding...

—Larry Lewis

AS TERRIFYING AS THINGS WE SEE ARE, perhaps more terrifying are the things that, once seen, cannot be unseen. This is a difficulty I think we all recognize in the most instinctual way, and perhaps this is why we all look away as often

as we can from the things that have the power to unmake us. We do this in every way, every day.

But what if you cannot? What if you had to arrive at a tree? A lynching tree bearing the burned-out husk of a person. Not male, perhaps because his genitals have been cut away, or because it was a woman to begin with; no matter. This body, before the torture, before the fire, before the dying, this person you have come to meet, this being, this no-longer human, this body, is no stranger to you. This is someone you loved. Someone whose smile you can still imagine under the crinkle of the crackled skin, even though, sans lips, there is only a snarl. What do you do with all that anger, all that rage that burns through you? How do you not pass it on to your kin, if not in words, then in blood, in the silence of the heart where unknowable things become illuminated even without thought? The point of the purposeful narrative, of the ethical story, is to draw all the courage, kindness, goodness, and hope from the world into the open, where everyone can share it.

To be human requires no action. What is required, though, is harder: the non-judgmental (and I don't mean non-discerning) daily accounting of our lives and narratives to ourselves. It is owning all the power and privilege we have wielded that day, as well as its true cost. Perhaps this is what makes my work hard, and human—a difficulty I disguise in beautiful language like any good lover knows to do. One of my earliest spiritual advisers told me that to be human is to accept that there will never be world peace, but to live life as though it is possible. This is the core of my aesthetic: belief in a deeper humanness that is beyond race, class, gender, and power, even as I know that it is not possible. And yet I strive for it in every way, even when I fail. In the end, we may never know. Perhaps it is enough, as Emmanuel said, to know that it will always be hard. May we cry, but may we never die of heartbreak.