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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

*The trees are in their autumn beauty,
The woodland paths are dry . . .*

— William Butler Yeats
“The Wild Swans at Coole”

The inimitable Yeats, of course, reflecting somewhat wistfully on the passage of time and seasons, the intimations of our mortality, and the immutable laws of change and renewal.

After the drumbeats of a long, tedious, and disappointing campaign, we have a new president. One candidate spent his time trying not to appear as dumb as he seemed to be, the other trying not to appear as smart as he seemed to be. In their strenuous efforts not to appeal to our intelligence, they locked their figurative horns, butted heads to suitable bellows of testosterone-induced boosters of masculinity, and left us with the choice between two might-have-beens, clones of the mediocrity to which we have accustomed ourselves.

We repeat the ritual every four years: candidates commit themselves to campaign finance reform, abhor the extravagant expenditures on advertising, insist they will never stoop to negative campaigning, promise attention to the “real” issues facing the nation, praise the working men and women who carry the burden of the country’s economy on their slender shoulders, tell us that our future lies in our children, remind us of our obligations to the elderly and infirm, implore us to be more empathetic with the needs and concerns of our minorities and the less fortunate, gorge on hot dogs and hamburgers, and try desperately to be one of us, so ordinary, so lacking in any distinguishing characteristic that one of them deserves to be elected to the highest position in the land, to assume the mantle of the Most Powerful Leader on Earth.

And every four years we buy into the same ungodly spectacle: perhaps it is the sheer effort they put into their groveling which appeals to us, so that in the end we reward the one who grovels most, sure of the fact that he will never recover his self-respect.

Self-flagellation in the pursuit of power is in itself a form of democratic expression.

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There are no lengths to which presidential contenders will not lower themselves to prove that they are as good as the least of us. Cicero would approve.

But it is on the question of the issues that we reveal most about ourselves. The candidates, after all, only say what we want to hear, and what we want to hear is that more is better, that the relentless pursuit of consumerism is the divine lightning rod which drives our prosperity, that there is no world beyond the bounds of our own narrow confines, and that if there is, let it be damned, for God has given us a special dispensation and ordained that the consumer shall inherit the earth.

Throughout the recent presidential campaign, no candidate paid more than passing heed to the billions spread across our wobbly little planet who exist on less than two dollars a day. Neither mentioned that the globalization we bow before as the Holy Grail of being itself has increased the disparities in income not only between rich and poor within the developed countries, but has accelerated the increasing disparities between the developed and developing worlds.

The North/South divide grows at exponential rates, and in the comfort of our conveniences, we hear the rising clamor of the voices from the South: "Give us bread," they plead, and we respond, "Let them eat cake."

But beware the baker, for his day will come.

* * *

I will tell you a story. It has already become dim in my memory because I want to suppress it but cannot because it epitomizes the desperation of our disbeliefs, the paucity of our imaginative cognizance, the absence of a connection with the rest of our fellow travelers on the journey through planet Earth.

But first consider this. Because light takes time to reach us, and the distances are beyond our comprehension, everything belongs to the past. The present is about 15 billion years old. When we look at the stars, we are looking at history. As William Blake put it, "*The stars are threshed, and the souls are threshed from their husks.*"

My little girl looked at history.

Not until you hover with a helicopter, slide down a rickety rope slithering its ways backward and forward at the whim of indifferent winds, and try to clutch the hand of a young girl no more than six or seven years of age, perched, hanging with rapacious life, on the top of a leafless tree, suffocating waters rising relentlessly with an insouciance that only an indifferent nature can mock us with do you begin to understand the limits of compassion.

I had the "honor" — God, how we abuse the word — of being aboard one of the few helicopters that ricocheted across the whirling devastation that engulfed Mozambique last February in the aftermath of cyclone Eline — the name an oxymoron — gentle because of the way it rolls with facile attachment off the tongue, ferocious in its own internal dissents.

Honor is probably a peculiar word to use, especially when there is so little honor in our world, a world supposedly more interdependent, but actually more fragmented. The gods do funny things, but then again, that is the function of gods. If Zeus didn't prey on the lesser gods, what gods would we have to pray to?

We went for the little girl — how many nights under a canopy of stars, under "*that little tent of blue / Which prisoners call the sky*"? (Oscar Wilde, "The Ballad of Reading Gaol") — helicopter almost at tree level, water inches below our clutching hands, her hands outstretched with the desperation of hope, looking for innocent redemption, eyes

wide with the intuitive pain of miracles we know will become undone, eyeballs glittering with the twisted bewilderment of the discovered but not saved, eyes wincing, enveloping her face, and mirrored in the mounting but serene waters, rising ever imperceptibly.

We made five tries. Each time the capricious winds made that “clutch” impossible. The rope would fall, the rescuers climb down to the last metal ring of a dangling rope like the hanging rope which men being hanged last see; the rescue crew swayed in the winds but could never get close to the little outstretched hand. Her hand never stopped reaching out; their efforts to reach never wavered.

Pilots can fly only so low; necessity demands ascent. But they try again. And again. And again. And they just can’t get it right.

“Fuck,” the pilot mutters in the eerie silence inside the helicopter. Inches between that little hand and the muscular hands that could haul her to safety.

“Fuck,” again. “I’m losing it.”

The glittering in the eyes begins to dim; the centimeters become millimeters; the vast swell of the consuming waters, rising at their inexorable but languorous detachment. They have no hurry, no rush to achieve; merely a merciless ennui.

On the fifth try we lose her. Last saw her taken home by the waters, little hand still outreached, little fingers still clutching at what might have been; the bare but miraculous branches of the tree that had looked after her went under. Nature to nature. To each god his own.

Of course, who cares? One more lost child, one more lost in a world of lost children. I mean, when was the last time you thought about Mozambique? Sixteen years of savage civil war, financed by the West and the East, a meager casualty of the Cold War, a small blot on the infrastructure, no roads, no anything. How can a storm destroy what doesn’t exist?

Did the little girl think about this? About Big Thoughts?

Or did her eyes simply close and surrender themselves to familiar gods, ancestors coming to save her from the best that technology could offer, from us in the West who did nothing? Did we ever care about Mozambique, or was it just another video?

* * *

But that was then. Before CNN and the like rolled in, commandeered the Polano, plush-est hotel in Maputo, dangled their walkie-talkies, barked on their cell phones, strutted hotel lounges with the arrogance of the new mandarins on the block, complaining endlessly about the poor service, hiring everything in sight to capture what they had missed.

Who are these reporters? How do they think people lived during sixteen years of savage civil war? Even today, 2 million land mines greet each step one takes; one mistaken step leaves you with the stump of a foot. Where were they when their governments were using Mozambique as a pawn in a geopolitical chess game? The propaganda of the convenient lie is always more appealing than the ratchet of truth.

The “humanitarian” rescue teams follow, weeks after the initial disaster has voraciously devoured everything in sight, after a million (no one really knows how many — estimates in Mozambique are less reliable than playing the wild card in a straight poker hand) — of Mozambique’s estimated 19 million people lost their “homes” — a Western euphemism for conditions of living they cannot comprehend, never mind understand. Up to 250,000 people are living in makeshift camps and another 250,000 in ruined villages. And, of course, food is in short or no supply, and malaria is on the rise.

The children giggle as they play in the sewage-filled water and balance buckets of the poison on their heads to take to whatever makeshift camp has become their new home. Drinking water for supper.

But that was nine months ago, and Mozambique has had its fifteen minutes of air time.

The little girl was more than one unfortunate little thing caught in the maelstrom of the misbegotten. Her tiny hand was the hand of the South. And we failed her.

In “The Ballad of Reading Gaol,” Wilde wrote, as he, too, hungrily sought solace in the canopy of stars for relief during the long, dark nights:

*Yet each man kills the thing he loves,
By each let this be heard.
Some do it with a bitter look,
Some with a flattering word.
The coward does it with a kiss,
The brave man with a sword!*

But we have gone one better; we kill with neglect, for the price of a cell phone, a CD, a concert ticket.

* * *

In this issue of the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, we present a potpourri of articles disparate in their scope yet with oddly connecting threads.

In “Redeeming the City,” Meredith Ramsay undertakes a review of an emerging urban revitalization driven not by traditional grassroots community activists but by religious groups, a phenomenon she describes as faith-based activism. “Political science,” she argues, “has fostered the widespread acceptance of two harmful fallacies with policy ramifications for cities.” The first reduces human choice to a rational calculus of profit maximization and, therefore, overlooks the social embeddedness of “preference formation”; the second, a consequence of the first, “equates economic growth with the general good and glosses over its inevitable social costs and inequities.” Ramsay’s paradigm has important implications for the North/South dichotomy

In “Managing Sprawl in the Land of Unintended Consequences,” Robert Bucci concludes that given the American affinity for land, anti-sprawl policies and laws which fail to take into account this unique relationship will almost certainly fall short of their goals. Initiatives intended to stem sprawl are more likely than not circumvented, compounding the problems they were designed to resolve. As a result, land management policies that fail to comply with the desires and inclinations of existing and prospective property owners, regardless of the collective benefit, will be sidestepped by the individual. This being the case, he suggests that “mutually agreed-upon policies are more likely to be embraced and successful than state- or federal-ordered edits, which, like performing surgery with a chainsaw, are rarely effective and usually leave the patient far more injured and defaced than when they started.”

Matthew Reidy, in “The Longest Commute,” examines a different kind of sprawl — the geographic sprawl between the communities in which people live and the communities in which they work. The key variable here, he points out, is the length of the commute. He believes that one of the dimensions of the disconnect between job-rich and job-poor communities is the length of the commute many low-income people have to en-

ture. All things being equal, the longer their commute, the likelier the workers are to have a lower net income, less time with their families, and a decreased probability of job retention. The solution, he suggests, is not more investment in transportation systems but bringing jobs to communities isolated from mainstream transportation systems, namely, “bringing jobs to the people rather than people to the jobs.”

“The Harringtons of Salem” is one more essay in which Richard Hogarty chronicles the tumultuous careers of the members of one of Massachusetts’s legendary and illustrious political families. The article is the stuff of the drama we expect from families in which politics is the bloodline to immortality — at least immortality of the political sort, of the capriciousness that accompanies great achievements and their counterpart — ignominious falls. One cannot but repeat the beautifully nuanced Frank Freidel epigraph with which Hogarty opens the essay: “It is never easy to explain to a later generation the achievements of an earlier one in shattering an unacceptable status quo, because these achievements in turn have become a status quo beyond which it wishes to advance.”

In “The Fountain,” we revive a tradition dating back to the earliest days of the journal. Edie Shillue spent a year living in Northern Ireland, wandering the streets of Derry and Belfast, the byways of the villages and the country towns, enjoying the “crack,” tossing back more than the odd pint of Guinness — and taking it all in, filling notebook after notebook with her keen observations and acute insights — definitely a different view of the conflict in Northern Ireland, but fastidious to a fault. We hope that the tradition of publishing original works of literature once revived will continue to be revived.

The last two articles come from different perspectives, except for the fact that both deal with public policy issues germane to the public interest. In his thoroughly researched study of the use of rubella vaccination and its consequences with regard to fetal rights and women’s health, Jacob Heller concludes that vaccines have a cultural value, that the continued expansion of rubella vaccine use includes the structural and professional needs of physicians, that “a cultural, rather than scientific, reliance on the vaccine model of preventive public health administration better explains the consistent support for rubella vaccine despite changes in both the social and medical contexts.” Heller’s article is difficult for a lay person to follow. We publish it because it contains important information, supported by the best literature in the field, regarding the use of vaccines and whether they are actually responsible for reductions of epidemic infectious diseases. For all, it provides food for thought.

Finally, we are proud to include in the journal an article by Samuel Woode, an associate professor of public administration, School of Administration, at the University of Ghana. Woode spent a year as a visiting fellow at the McCormack Institute. His article, “The Handling of Taxpayers’ Money,” provides sharp insights into the problems facing emerging democracies in Africa in confronting fraud, abuse, waste, and corruption in revenue collection, thus reducing the resources available for good governance and hampering sustainable development, without which good governance itself is impossible.

Enjoy — and remember the tiny hand.✂