Things We Hold in Common

Elvis Bego

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The first time I came upon Raley was in a volume of Edith Wharton's correspondence—a short, scabrous note he wrote from Venice in the winter of 1908. When I later read his *Drowned City*—one of those belated NYRB Classics that seem to appear out of a hidden crack in the library of Babel—I found its rooftop phantasmagoria irresistible. Tales of an unnamed city's last population of gnarled maniacs, scheming widows, foolish valentines, old men whose eyes are black with mascara, boatmen mooring their vessels to weathervanes, women who sell their kisses for a dry bed. The city is half-sunk in its dream and no news of the world across the spent sea. "An imagination as awkward and prophetic as Kafka's," says the blurb, predictably. Nobody knew about the book for a hundred years. It was privately printed in Venice in 1899—only a trunkful of copies—and remained obscure till Edward Kingsley, the Anglo-Italian philanthropist-slash-Luddite, found it in a library in Burano. James Wood's piece in the *New Republic*, although not without censure ("Raley's iambic murmur too often apes the Jacobeans ... but the wry vision is his own. His world is peopled by blind self-unravelers, and we are their stunned eavesdroppers"), sent me to the bookshop, and I tore through the two hundred perfect pages in a sitting.

Years later, pretty much down-and-out in London, I was pondering a short rhapsody on Raley and his work, thinking it might get me a teaching job at one of the universities, when out of a dry cloud a sweet moist grant fell into my hands. The moment couldn't have been more right. I was sick of London and I was sick of myself in London and sicker yet of always being sick in London. My mood had darkened till I could no longer face my friends, nor street, nor bed, nor books, nor my own face for that matter. I had stopped shaving, as my mother kept reminding me, my eyes arrested like tyro sentries glaring at some gruesome thing unfolding in the dark wood. Took me a while to realize it had turned so bad. If the Arts Fund envelope hadn't come, I might've blown my brains out, as they say, had I but a gun, or a lump of guts. The money would buy me six or even nine months' worth of research in Italy for the little study. I found a corner room in a small town not far from the village where Raley somewhat unexpectedly died and was buried.

An old insight midflight: that world there, underneath the awning of cloud, is a slaughterhouse. That's what gravity is for, to keep us heavy for the reaper's swooping blow. Death doesn't like flying around, collecting bodies like stray balloons. He likes us snug and tethered to the earth, heads bowed. I thought about the ages and the generations rolling into mass graves like a procession of blind men, for that's the thing we hold in common. When I was a child, I'd seen the world riven and burnt. But you don't need a warmed biography to see it's true. There's a massacre in every album, in every street name, in every single name—it's bones and bones-to-be. And love makes it worse, in all the miles of silk that it secretes and wraps you in with others till you are no longer yours. One lover dies and you die. Your mother dies and you die again. Father goes, as do you. How many times do you have to die before you are allowed to

just fucking die? But death isn't all bad. Everything is radiographed against its subtle light.

Those thoughts came out of my swelling panic on the flight south. Sweet, sweet stuff, I heard myself whisper, and the drowsy teenager sitting next to me made a slow, alarmed craning of the neck and surely thought something feebly. Wasn't that long ago I was one of them. Now they enrage you with their mere breath, the yawning vacancy. There you are, hating them, and hating yourself for doing it. All of thirty years nothing but equanimity, but then the skin of your ghost slackens a millimeter and the terrible fact announces itself. One kind of you has ended and another begun. You don't know the time, you just know the event. You now know and see that past self as clearly as if it had been swallowed by an amber gem, the perfect fizz of youth no longer yours. And you think, Me too? *Me too?* Me, like the others? As if you alone had struck a deal with the devil and wouldn't age. There were times when you almost believed it, looking in the mirror, even saying it aloud: *Maybe you will never die.* But then you notice how 3 a.m. no longer feels like 3 p.m. and everything shrinks except the nutsack. Teeth become alien objects wedged in your flesh. It's not just the body that gets jolted out of its oblivious well-being. Some nights you wake in terror and there is that scream you do not make. Everything you thought you did not care about is in that stricken silence. The career (how you used to laugh at this word, the concern of mediocrities) you did not have the balls to pursue; the time you wasted; the girl you betrayed; the *you* you betrayed. It's hard not to think about the end when you are up there looking from the clouds and you can see the curve of the blue world, the bend of its finitude.

I liked my hosts, the Marottas. Carlo had no choice but to fall for this once-shapely virgin when they first met at the engineering college and, judging from the old photos, they'd both been less stout in those days. He with his blue, square, mineral chin. By now everything had scruffed, loosened to an oval. He combed his dark temple hair over the glinting pate. Silvia remained quite beautiful in her way, resplendent with the magnolia-leaf eyes and the rococo nevus by her mouth. She had this open-mouthed laugh that killed me. Her English was better than his, as she'd been an au pair in Chelsea in her teens. His were the collected works of Marx and Gramsci, and hers the votive candles and pathetic Virgins with eyes cast down in *dolor mundi.* Silvia exuded maternal excess, seemed permanently hospitable, volcanic in this way, receiving whatever fell her way but capable of emitting great torrents of fire too. Carlo looked professorial in his threadbare cardigans, even somewhat crabbed. Their love was chaotic. The china would shudder at spontaneous combustions of anger, and then they would kiss and purr. They had a son and a daughter, but they'd moved out.

There was a plum tree in their yard for whose ripe fruit I waited impatiently. Often in the evening I would sit under the thickening womb of the tree and work at a little table that Carlo had made from the hull of some great ship dragged up from the Arno some thirty years before, apparently a pleasure boat of the magnificent Lorenzo. Like wayward satellites, gnats would flit and wheel about the one bare electric bulb on the

veranda of the Marotta house. Moths flew to their dusty deaths. Dogs snarled unseen from walled courtyards, and crickets sawed away. There was a frightening lustiness in their yard and the little river that loitered a few hundred yards away, brimming with crucian carp. That tumescent hum of multitude. When night fell, I'd light a fat candle and feel pretty romantic, with my ink-stained fingers and the whirring dark.

It took me days to shed my dislocation blues. Every time I arrive in a new place, something seems to nest inside me and just fidgets there like a fiberglass gnome. I still felt feeble, ready to weep at the sight of an old man, when Marina, their daughter, came in the dead of night after a nightmare bus ride from Perugia, rousing all of us and relating her urgent tale. Still shaken, she told us how the fat driver had one dead eye and a pesky wasp kept pestering the other and the guy was freaking out and sweating and at one point the bus was teetering on the edge of—but all I could do was stare from the stairs and curse the man and the vague threat of her extinction. O Beauty! Let heaven sing her praise in fluted horns and horsegut gambas and seven-angel harmony or whatever the hell a waxing creep might want to say about her—but boy was she pretty, boy oh boy was she now, and that she knew it too was half the trouble. Pretty is no good. Pretty is useless for such random objects of singularity. Eyes that could peel a banana at ten paces. A poignant, tragic face under an auburn welter of curls. Cheekbones like two green apples sown under her skin. Fresh as a sprig of tarragon, to my eyes almost morbidly fecund. A strange beauty like a cold fire. She wouldn't smile at me. We shook hands and I went to bed with palms vibrating like I'd been galvanized on some madman's table.

From then on, Marina would come out to the plum tree and taunt me with her big absinthe eyes and lurching English, buying me with each perfect malapropism. We'd laugh, and she'd ask me to correct her. She wanted to be a painter; she was doing graphic design merely to please her parents. Her older brother was an architect—in Bern, a peculiar green city with a green river, she said. Very claustrophobic up there in its fountain nest.

"Fountain nest?" I said.

"Yes. No, mountain! Mountain nest!"

"Why is he in Bern?"

"There are no jobs in Italy, stupid."

"Why green?"

"Every stupid house is green there. Not one yellow. Not one red. Very boring country."

"Your eyes are green."

"Don't be stupid."

"Why's everything stupid?"

"Because everything is stupid."

"They're the green of a river near my hometown."

"Such a romantic."

"Tell me, is there anything fun to do around here?"

"What is fun for you?"

"You know, something to see, eat, whatever."

"Do you know Alberto Rasa, the photographer?"

I didn't.

"He lived here, not far. Maybe nothing special, but very, how to say—early. There is a museum at his house."

"How early?"

"He started in the middle of the ninth century, and—"

"The ninth century?"

"Yes. The nineteenth! The eighteen-hundreds. Daguerreotypes and things."

"I see."

"They call him the first street photographer in Italy. I don't know. He has interesting pictures. And he died very old when Mussolini was here. You can take me there. We could sail the boat."

"The boat?"

"Our little boat by the river. You could give me a ride like a real English gentleman."

As early as the night I met her, I'd thought: wood creature. I've never seen a pixie, but she had a pixie's voracious, toothy smile. Looked at you nakedly, eyes full of swindle. Then she'd be thinking of something, and her eyes would be lost among sands and caravanserais, pure wonder that became your wonder. It is that stupid grip of apathy. She'd be flippant too. She referred to her boyfriends as "conquests." They were invariably "good meat." None of them understood her, she said. They wanted to improvise her. Improve, she meant. They all want a princess, but she was no such thing. They don't want to know the real you. Nothing scares them more than when you tell them they can be with other girls. She kept telling them not to build her up in their towers, but they hope and hope and hope. Nobody will have her. Sure, I thought. We'll see.

"Love is a kind of violence," I said.

"It can be. On the bed," she said.

"That too."

"And good."

"Hm?"

"But what you mean, 'violence'?"

"I mean it is a beautiful injustice against the world, yourself too, when you choose one at the expense of all the others. See what I mean? In some way, I think devotion is the radical thing."

"But why choose? What is monogamy? I don't understand it."

"Until you *really* fall in love."

"All men think this, but no. I have been in love. My heart is strange, and he likes new things." She said *he*.

"I used to be a great cynic. But I'm not sure anymore."

"You mean you are getting old."

"Yes yes yes yes yes."

"I think love is selfish. Greedy. Afraid. A control thing, like religion."

"The song will be different when you fall for me."

"Yes, fall into a hole." Her face flickered red in the low light, her lips moist like nectarine flesh.

"Love is a hole," I said.

"Something tells me you will fall first."

"In several holes."

"Keep the hope."

"I will."

"Tell me, are all Bosnians as handsome as you?"

"Of course not."

"But I've seen some good specimens."

"Have you been with any?"

"Maybe I'll try you."

"I don't think I'll let you."

She didn't want to continue the vein. "Tell me something about Bosnia."

"What do you want to know?"

"Did you see dead people?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Just dead, lying in the street. Shot. They get dark."

"My god. Children?"

"Some."

"Your family?"

"No."

"Oh, good."

"I've been lucky."

"Is your side the good side?"

"Aha."

"But I don't believe in black and white."

"Well it's not black and white. But sometimes it just turns out to be like that. Or nearly."

"How old were you?"

"When it started? Twelve, thirteen."

"Why did it happen?"

"What?"

"The war."

"Do you have three weeks? It's a very long story."

"Just give me a schizo."

"A sketch, you mean?"

"Yes!"
She lashed out at my arm when I laughed.
"No, I can't do that now," I said. "It's too complicated."
"Tomorrow, maybe?"
"Maybe. Now leave me alone. I don't have all summer to fuck around like you."

Some things about Raley's time in England had been dug out by one or two scholars. Life at his father's vicarage in Suffolk was a drab affair of "porridge and sermons" relieved by reverie of "the stones of Italy and the Levant," he wrote Wharton. At Oxford he fell under the spell of Walter Pater, Greek philosophy, and the splendors of Italian art, and he then went to London and wrote reviews for the newspapers. A photograph of him from this period shows a tall, slender man in a bright jacket, an ascetic's face with a pointy beard. He'd already earned his cane. He was a member of The Elektra Club, the group postulating that true morality was aesthetic in nature. Any act was moral so long as it was beautiful—that is to say, beautifully executed. Even murder, in theory. They were lampooned in *Punch* as effete nihilists, cute propagandists of Russian terror in velvet and pink. Raley wrote an essay describing their philosophy as "aesthetic anarchism." Then came the scandal of 1893. It involved an elaborate seduction of a younger daughter of a newly rich coal magnate, and Raley fled the country. The details are sketchy, the prim Victorians never quite naming the transgression, but it looks pretty close to rape. Seems he'd made promises to the girl he had had no intention of keeping. A prosecution awaited in vain his return. He was thirty-three. Nothing he wrote prior to the scandal promised greatness. He spent some time in Lausanne, and by the following year he had settled in Venice, taking two rooms in the square opposite the basilica of San Zaccaria. He gave private lessons. Never had any money. For a Paris-based publisher he produced unorthodox biographies of the sweet patricide Beatrice Cenci (1897) and the tragic composer and cuckold-maker Alessandro Stradella (1904), as well as a short study of Giorgio Baffo, the pornographic poet (1909). As late as 1993, Edward Kingsley was able to meet an old man who remembered Raley (the house Raley lodged in belonged to the old man's father). Kingsley tells us Raley ate little—a roll with an egg and a cup of coffee in the morning, a bit of fish in the evening. He traveled seldom before that terminal trip to Umbria. He met and was treated like an antique curiosity by Proust, Wharton, and Gide. The old man, born in 1900, remembered the sugared treats Raley would give him in the dark corridors, away from Mamma's eyes. The man could not remember much of Raley's conversation. It isn't much, but it's something. What I couldn't see from his biography is where *Drowned City* had come from.

The Marotta house was cool. The rugs were oriental, pale and worn. There were things in rugged niches in the walls. They had traveled. I had a bulky desk, a copper bathtub, and a huge carved bed in my room, which was bigger than any of the apartments I'd rented in London. There were nooks and sconces in the house, passages

where imps might make a quiet life. Most mornings I spent shuttered in my bed like a sulky concubine. By three o'clock the sun would pass to the other side, and I'd open the window that looked onto the orchard behind the house and the paling washes of hill against hill. One day when Marina was visiting a friend in town, I took a bus to the Rasa museum and fell into conversation with the director, a marsupial lady in her middle years gazing dreamily out of oversized spectacles. She told me about Rasa's time in the 1870s as the first Italian town photographer and the various problems he'd had, which led to getting dismissed and settling here and moving on to still life and interiors. He is the Atget of Italy, she said. When, on a pointless whim, I asked if she knew about Raley, she said in her lucidly academic tone that, yes, she knew of this English scholar and eccentric, and that they in fact had had some of the letters Raley had written to Rasa, but that they had sold them to Lord Kingsley. Raley had died during a visit here. At the house. It had never occurred to me that they should have met. What was in the letters? She couldn't say. She said maybe they had copies somewhere and she would let me know. Now it all seemed inevitable. Who but Rasa could draw Raley to this place? And what was Kingsley doing with the letters? I feared my work on Raley may turn out to be stillborn. I went back to the pictures, gorged on the stillness of those rooms in the stillness of the very rooms depicted, wondered with envy at Rasa's retreat from the world, and all was well again.

Marina showed me some charcoals and pastels she'd done on paper. Peculiar figures, big-eyed, hardly human, wildly colored, firmly against gravity. We hid under the plum tree with a blanket, a bowl of cherries, and a pile of books that we didn't touch. The green plums were plumping up. In the orchard a shirtless Carlo was hosing trees and himself. You could hear his tremulous groans of shock and delight. I said I liked her stuff.

"Don't give me shitty praise," she said, eyes closed. "It ruined me as a child. I want to be criticized. I want to know what is wrong with what I do, not what is right."

"As it happens, it is my opinion. Some of the drawings are better than others, yes."

"Which ones?"

I told her.

She kissed me.

I was not prepared for the hunger of her lust. That sinister look of desire all verb, and me all direct object. I wondered how many she had wanted just like that, only to want another the next day with the same totality. It wounded me, and I was ashamed that it did. We swam one night naked in the river and fucked on the invisible muddy bank while a mosquito feasted on my ass. Then we lay there in the dark and pretended to look at the spattering of diamonds in the firmament.

"I love playing your ribbons," she whispered, strumming my ribs.

"It feels so good to have your head on my chest."

"You feel like a man?"

"It just feels—right."

"You say this to convince yourself?"

Most nights she'd sneak into my room after bedtime. Her parents' bedroom was downstairs, at the other end of the house, so we felt safe. After a rough session in which she was positively animal—a crazy look in her eyes as she pounced all over me, galloping, biting, punching, and hissing to be slapped—I was nearly terrified by the unabashed greed. Both spent, we plummeted onto our backs. Like a great sated toad she just lay there and slept, one leg astray. I tried to fathom the event, surprised to be disturbed. I marveled how easily she housed the savage and the sage, the clamor and the quietness. She appeared unknowable to me, and I wanted to know. But I also knew that to know more may kill whatever it is that unknowability had allowed to grow.

The next morning the crucifix fell onto the head of Silvia and she stirred in deep distress. She made a rumpus in the house, questioned everything. Why would it happen? What does it want to say? What had she done? What had she not done? What needs to be done? She would not take coffee. She called her ailing mother for counsel. The woman told her to take an aspirin. Carlo was amused and teased her all morning. Maybe God is angry with you, he said. Maybe you are supposed to be a nun. Or maybe, just maybe, the crucifix fell because there is no God, a mere object falling as objects fall from time to time, whether we invest them with magic or not. When she could take no more, she went to the priest to ask for his interpretation. She came back even more perturbed, angry at the priest, who'd told her to forget it. He'd offered her a cube of Turkish delight, a cube of Turkish delight! she said several times, finding it insufferably frivolous. She prayed over her rosary, summoned Marina, and I heard them shriek at each other. Silvia knew everything. Howled how she was sick of hearing Marina moaning in this house *come una puttana russa*, this house her grandfather's father had rebuilt and died in. Marina seemed unaffected. I was in hiding for a couple of days, although Silvia did not seem to hold me responsible for anything.

I wondered at Marina. At her art, her strange notions, the piercing intelligence. She saw through my subtlest bullshit, astonished me with wry insights. She was like something out of Raley, one of the defrocked nuns, or the woman who pickles the heads of dead lovers. I wanted all of it. The animal, the spirit, the artist. The way she would arrange herself with her ass in my lap and her cheek in a slope of my chest and sleep like a cat. The way she'd mumble sweet things at night and never remember them the next day, as if they'd fallen through her dreams into the dry world. The way she'd look at me and avert her eyes. The way she'd say she had no idea someone like me existed somewhere. The way she exhumed out of me my best, most skeptical mind. Taught me to laugh at my solemnities. It ravaged me.

One golden morning we walked down the dirt path to the tiny wooden jetty and unmoored the boat, and I punted it out of the shallows. I'd surveyed the map, and the plan was to sail the couple of miles down to the Rasa museum, and afterwards another five miles or so to see Raley's grave. I would use the oar downstream, and Carlo had

shown me how to work the engine for the return trip. Silvia had packed three days' worth of food, as if we were going into the wilderness, and she kissed the two of us as we left. They'd reconciled.

The river was lethargic. Insects swarmed atop the fat brew. The banks were overgrown, but we came upon picnics and people frolicking in the shallows. Some waved to us energetically. The sun burned through my black T-shirt like a branding iron. It all reminded me of Bosnia. When we saw the museum, with its flag hanging limp behind inert crowns of trees, we went ashore. There was not a single visitor. At first we loitered from room to room looking vacantly at the pictures. The balding furniture had ropes slung across the arms. We could not keep our hands off each other, staggered along in fumbles, bites, and kisses. In one of the rooms upstairs, she asked me if I'd ever played in public, and I slurred the most casual *No*. We seemed to exchange a thought between our eyes, looked around, and found no one near. Marina undid my buttons, sunk to her knees. The floorboards creaked. A fly seemed caught in the old curtain.

Within a minute, I heard a stunted gasp. I turned, and a stout woman in her sixties stood in the door, an attendant, her hand covering the outraged mouth. We stirred, she said something, alerted someone else, and we flew out the other door, darted through the enfilade, me clutching the waist of my trousers, then picked up pace down the stairs until we were out in the sun, gnashing gravel underfoot, laughing hysterically, legging it toward the river. She jumped in and I pushed the boat off in frenzied haste and got my thighs wet and when we felt we were out of reach, we cried with total delight in being.

"This is good for me," I said.

"You melt me with those dog eyes."

"And with my dick. Such a romantic." I realized I was speaking in some sort of resentful mimicry of her own cold thinking.

"You're not like other guys, with their flowers of bullshit."

"That should've been the title of Baudelaire's book. *Les fleurs de bullshit*. Now come to London and no one gets hurt."

"Wow."

"Maybe you could do art in London."

"You really want me there?"

"What if I did?"

Our conversation often floated uncertainly between joke and sincerity.

"I'm afraid of your illusions," she said.

"My illusions?"

"Expectations."

"I have none," I said, maybe even believing it.

By the time we came to the village it was late afternoon, murky, dull. Sickly green lawns, sienna roofs. People stared at us like we were tax collectors. We found the cemetery, very old, overrun with scrub, zero recent graves. The tiny chapel was whored out with graffiti. A magpie was building something in its tree. It took a while to find

Raley's place. But there it was, the chipped, crummy headstone, the barely legible, misspelled legend that made him into a Russian: *C. A. Ralev, 1860–1912*.

There was so much I had kept to myself. With my chin in one of my hands and my trouser legs rolled up, mosquitos set upon my shins. "Death, death, death," I said, mock-Hamlet. "Right here, in a clump of earth, the total, absolute end. Without death there's nothing."

"*Porca Madonna, adesso parla della morte!* You are too young for this."

"It has nothing to do with age. You can be a child and death is still this great unfuckable fact and everything has to be thrown against it. Everything. Art is the antidote. And love, I think. Love is this outrageous middle finger against that miserable fact that is always on its way to us. It may be illusion, love, but what a way to be deceived."

"It's so risky."

"That is the whole point."

"What about possession?"

"I don't want anything that is not given to me freely. I know it can be taken away any moment."

I thought I did well with my flowers of bullshit. Everything was rustling. Somebody was playing the mandolin. A child wailed and the music stopped.

"You know, sometimes I think I will never die," she said.

I laughed.

"What is funny?"

"Nothing."

"It's so depressing to die unknown," she said, looking surprised by her words. "It's not worth it, it's not worth it."

That night, as I steered the boat north through the meaty dark, her body black against the indigo night, I saw the great river between us. I'd had the thought before, many times even, but hadn't dared give it voice till now. What she found humiliating, I thought poignant. What she thought unworthy of her time, I found noble. What depressed her, I did not give a flying fuck about. But I'd tried to convince myself. Even her painting, I feared, was too cute. It was almost her. Almost. And yet, maybe thanks to the way she was in the world, I could see that there was ecstasy even in the death of love.

Elvis Bego, born in Bosnia, was turned into a refugee at the age of twelve, and now lives in Copenhagen. His work has appeared in *AGNI*, *The Massachusetts Review*, *Ninth Letter*, *The Kenyon Review* online, *The Threepenny Review*, and elsewhere. He has recently completed a novel entitled *Introvertigo*.

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