

Levity Redux #1

Of the birds and the bugs:



Mwalimu Muchema, the Form One *Kiswahili* teacher, visited this evening for the first time ever. He is about my age and lives with two other of our bachelor colleagues—Kimenyi and Choba—both of whom have visited several times.

Although we sit directly across from one another in the staffroom horseshoe, we've hardly spoken. I've never felt that Muchema dislikes *wazungu* in general, or me in particular. I've just assumed him to be shy and not confident in speaking *Kizungu*. When we pass one another on the school walkways or in following one another's lessons, he unfailingly offers a friendly—albeit formal—greeting.

Still, I was puzzled when he showed up at the door tonight. With his usual averted eyes, he said that he was making the rounds to say good goodbye. He is headed to the University of Dar es Salaam where he hopes to complete his Bachelor of Education degree... After that announcement, he stood uncertainly in the doorway, his Adams' apple bobbing.

"*Karibu, mwalimu,*" I said motioning towards the corner chair...

Nodding, he took off his sandals.

"Let me get you a drink."

Again, he nodded while curiously looking around (probably for the first time), the living room of a *mzungu*.

I had no alcohol but he took the plastic tumbler of orange squash gratefully in a silver Mustang convertible between both hands. With a soft chuckle, he turned to inspect the bookshelf beside him.

"Humm," he squinted sideways to read the spines. "You have some very nice books, Mr. T., *nzuri sana*. What's this?" From the row, he pulled down '*Where there is no Doctor*.' He thumbed through to the section on contraception.

"Hummm," he smiled.

"It's all very useful information," I offered.

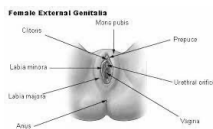
He covered his mouth in a cough. “Soooo...” Pointing to the diagram of the male urethra, he spoke in a classroom tone. “So, it is *this* tube— actually *inside* this tube— where the bacteria will bite you. Hummmm...”



I reached over and flipped the pages forward. “That’s true— but the bugs can’t bite if you’re wearing one of those.” I pointed to the illustration of a condom.

He chuckled. “Yes, some men are running here and there, here and there. They have to have precaution. But not easy to obtain in Tanzania.... Not at all!”

On the next page was an illustration of female genitalia.



“*Ebu!* This is much in detail. Very much. Hummmm. Very good information!” The book jerked on his knee. “Very useful.”

He then thumbed a few pages forward to the section of pregnancy and childbirth. He pointed to the picture of a nursing mother. Again, he adopted his teacher’s voice:

“You know many people think that a woman cannot become with child when she is nursing.”

That’s not what the book says,” I pointed. “It says that a nursing mother *can* get pregnant. That’s not a reliable method of birth control.”

“Yes, that is so,” he said, still in a tone of authority. “If a nursing mother should become pregnant, then her milk becomes intoxicated with hormones and her child can’t feed.”

“I didn’t know that.”

He closed the book with a sigh.

“Take it with you,” I said.

“What—are you sure?” For the first time, he looked straight at me.

“No problem. I can easily get another copy at the office of my organization in Dar. They have a whole stack of copies. Consider this one a going away present.”

“*Asante sana, mwalimu!*” Grinning, he shook my hand.

A couple of minutes later, he was out the door holding the book to his chest. Maybe he thought he'd better get away before I changed my mind. Or maybe Muchema was just eager to get back to those illustrations in the privacy of his room...

1981, July (Tanzania)

FWT

Too loud for old ears:

It was a typical Saturday night of married life, except for the sniffles of an oncoming cold. Holding sodden tissues, I sat for an hour with T. before the yapping TV.

During that hour, we were treated to ZTV's most popular weekly broadcast: '*Sounds on Saturday*' featuring both international and local music videos. Shown last night were videos from the 1987 MTV Awards, recorded in Los Angeles, USA.

Sodden tissue in hand, I watched videos of Crowded House, Bon Jovi and White Snake. Given the possibility that next year I could find myself struggling with pop-cultural illiteracy before high school students in Canada, I dutifully listened. Still, it was an ordeal. A Benny Goodman fan subjected to the Rolling Stones on the Ed Sullivan show could not have so gritted teeth.

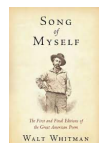
"I'm going to bed," I croaked, rising. "Can you turn it down a little?"

At the front of the sofa with baby TE on lap, T. turned with a 'tsk'.

"What, old man? Is it too loud for you?"

Clearing throat, I picked up the *Newsweek* from the floor and retreated across the slippery living room.

From behind the bedroom door the TV still blared. I was undeniably rattled by my wife's teasing comment. At twenty-six years old— does she really think me— eleven years her senior— an old man? Admittedly, not so long ago, I also thought that thirty-seven was old...



In that regard, I thought of my first reading Walt Whitman's '*Leaves of Grass*':

I also had a cold and was hunched under a fusty sleeping bag with a stack of books on the floor. It was in Spain, around November 1971, and I had recently turned twenty...

I clearly remember my astonishment in reading from '*Song of Myself*', the lines:

*'I, now thirty-seven years old in perfect health begin,
Hoping to cease not till death.'*

'Thirty-seven?' I wondered. 'How could a guy that old feel so good?'

I dropped the '*Newsweek*' on the floor. For a moment, I thought of surprising T.— running out into the living pulling her up off the sofa and giving her a jive whirl to the music video. That notion was quickly discarded.

Fortunately, the old guy *did* resist the impulse to storm out and shut off the TV...

1988, February (Zimbabwe)



fwl

Thinking on my feet:



In the Pacific Center Mall, 15 minutes before the interview with the ‘Save the Children Fund’ director, I realized I’d forgotten the office number. I knew the office was within the block but I didn’t know in which of the three surrounding towers.

I dug in my breast pocket for the slip of paper which I’d taken out to recheck several times on the bus trip in from Coquitlam. It wasn’t there. I checked all my pockets— even turning them all inside out. Nothing! In a clammy sweat, I swivelled round to the telephone stalls below the escalator. I dashed into one and pulled up the white pages. Anchored on its chain, the heavy book kept slipping back as the seconds ticked away. In frustration I gave it a heave when— *wham!* I knocked the top of my head— hard— on the sharp aluminum edge of the stall cowling.

Momentarily stunned with glasses askew, I felt my head. There was sticky blood on my fingers. On the cowling were a few hairs and flakes of whitish epidermis...

‘Dumb, dumb bastard!’ I seethed to myself. The sting of clumsiness was worse than the cut... With just 10 minutes to go, I knew I couldn’t show up late with a bleeding head. The director would probably take me for a stumble down drunk... I had to cancel.

I took a few deep breathes and opened the phone book again. Strangely calmer, I found the ‘Save the Children Fund’ number and punched the keys. The director answered.

"Mr. R.? Yes, nice to hear you, too... This is Mr. T." After pausing for a few seconds to frame my excuse, I rattled it off:

"I was supposed to be there now for our appointment. I’m downtown, not far from your office— but something has just come up at home. My wife was just called in by the day-care centre at SFU. They want her for emergency subbing. I have to take the bus straight back to Coquitlam. I am terribly sorry for cancelling at the last minute— but could you possibly reschedule me?"

‘That’s no problem, at all, Mr. T.,’ gushed the director. “Wherever you’d like to come in for a chat, just give me a shout.”

I clunked back the receiver in relief. My excuse probably sounded credible. I could even award myself a consolation points for thinking on my feet... Still, it occurred that whether or not I had gone to the interview— I was wasting my time. The director’s patronizing tone suggested there was but one non-volunteer position in the Vancouver office of ‘Save the Children’— his own.

I dabbed a tissue on the still bleeding cut. In a shiver, I imagined T. and babes hunched hungry in firelight, with me coming back from the hunt— yet again empty-handed...

1988, November



fwl

A question concerning procrastination:

Instead of working on a response to Heidegger's *'The Question Concerning Technology'*, I tried to fix MT's teddy bear lamp. Despite taking it apart and reassembling it over nearly two eye-watering hours, I could not get it to stop flickering.

When I plugged it in after changing the socket assembly with parts bought from Home Hardware, the bulb did not even flicker. A reversal of the wires on the poles gave no better result.

In growing frustration, I tried to check whether the new socket was itself defective. I asked T. to plug in the cord while I laid the screwdriver blade across the bare copper wires.

Zow-ie!!!

We both had to jump back in the shower of electrical sparks.

"You could have killed us both!" my wife cried out. Touching her cheek where she'd felt sparks hit, she tsked.

"Sorry!" Sheepishly, I rubbed the fire-scarred end of the screwdriver. "Yeah, that was *really* dumb."

Later in the evening, the problem was finally solved—a burned out lightbulb... In plugging the lamp back in our daughter's bedside, I thought of a joke:

Q: *'How many hopeless procrastinators does it take to screw in a light bulb?*

A: *Only one—if he's willing to kill enough time—or to die trying.'*

1996, December



Of wacky sadism:

While MT helped me snip out cartoon panels and stuff envelopes for my ESL beginners' class, we chuckled over the sequences of pictures depicting a weird variety of accidents:

In one strip, 'John' is sitting at his desk when a baseball crashes through his window. In the next frame he is holding his smashed glasses... Then there is 'Grace': She is writing a letter when the flowerpot falls off the bookshelf and crunches her head... In another strip, 'Feodor' is about to light his cigarette when his lighter explodes. In the last panel he is yowling, his hand aflame...

But those little mishaps are nothing compared with that of 'Peter': In the first panel he is mounting the steps of a plane, briefcase in hand. In the second drawing, 'Peter' is seated on the plane calmly looking out the window. The third panel shows smoke rising from twisted wreckage...

"I think your students are going to be scared!" Said my nine-and-a-half year old.

"Well, maybe seeing a scary picture is a good way to learn words in another language. Who can forget 'exploding cigarette lighter?'"

Snipping away, MT smiled. "That sure is a weird English book!"

"For sure," I chuckled. "I wonder what was going through the head of the person who drew these pictures?"

Back to snipping, I really did wonder what was going through the head of the illustrator. Was the wacky sadism a shriek of frustration from a would-be artist reduced to survival English instruction?

It occurred that he/she might be sending a coded warning to others in a job that is about as intellectually stimulating as glue-sniffing...

1995, February



Of phrenology and adverbs of frequency:

"So how *often* do you listen to the radio?"

The three Emirati students before my table in the learning center had twice failed their PET (Beginners' English) oral exam. They had just one more shot before a forced withdrawal from the college.

"Every day? Sometimes? Never?"

Mohammed scratched his head, Musabeh looked embarrassed and Ismael looked at his fingernails.

"Com'on, guys— just relax. Don't be nervous!" My steely smile did not put them at ease.

"OK," I pointed to the picture in the practice booklet. "You ask me the question." I cupped my ear. "Then listen to my answer... Who'd like to read?" I held up the page. "Mohammed? No? How about you, Ismael?"

Both took a step back.

"Musabeh? Good man!"

With lip quivering, Musabeh slowly read: "How...of-ten...do you...lis-tin to... the radio?"

"O, almost *every day*," I chirped in response before turning to the other two. "So, what did I say, guys?"

"Every day, sir?"

"Yes, Mohammed. Very good... When you hear the question 'How often' you can also answer with *often*, *sometimes* or *never*. Very easy!"

Mohammed grinned and nodded. Just yesterday at my desk, he looked surprised when I showed him his name in the college directory... He thought it strange that the names of some of his friends appeared on different pages... Along with his failure to grasp alphabetical order are fading hopes that he can pass the orals on the third try...

I pulled out the three chairs from the table. "Now you be 'A', Mohammed. You ask the question. Ismael, you're 'B'— you answer Mohammed. Musabeh, you are 'C'. You listen and correct mistakes." I circled my finger. "Then we'll change roles."

Dolefully, they took the seats.

"Com'on, guys."

Painfully, they began, pointing at the pictures and mumbling out the PET practice dialogues ('see a film, eat at a restaurant, go shopping...').

Watching them, I wondered if it ever occurred to them just how lucky they are to have been born in the UAE... They are a PET exam away from a government job for life—and don't seem to give a shit...

Understandably, these ESL activities must seem pointless to them. It was impossible to guess what was going through their minds as they struggled through them...

As for their baby-sitter/tutor: he was struggling to suppress an image of a 19th century phrenologist measuring skulls with calipers...

1999, March (Dubai)



fwl

Three hours, unzipped:

I had just taken a step back from the urinal and was zipping up when ‘ping’—the zipper broke. It was two minutes before a faculty meeting and I couldn’t close my fly!

Swallowing back the panic, I tried to think fast:

There was certainly no time to go home and change my pants. Not even time to find a safety pin (and bear the snickers while asking around). Having already been seen by the supervisor moments before, I couldn’t come up with an excuse to skip the meeting... The only choice was to keep the jacket buttoned and hope that the belt would hold up the seam.

Steeling myself, I stepped forth...



Holding my jacket closed, I took a seat at the side of the quadrangle nearest the door. For the ensuing hour, I kept my notebook positioned on my lap. At the end of the meeting, I waited until the others left before rising.

“I’ve got to get ready for my CERT class at 6:00 PM,” I chirped to supervisor MB who was still gathering up his papers.

“Good, good.” He mumbled, barely looking up. Clutching my jacket, I stepped sidelong out the door. Fortunately, the corridor was almost empty.

I still had my evening class at CERT, a five-minute drive away.... I could not possibly get through ninety minutes of beginners’ English shtick with hand over my crotch... I thought of the pair of ladies dressed in eye-slit *niqabs* who always sat in front. It was ground-breaking enough for them to show up in a mixed class with their male workmates. But to be exposed to the open fly of a *kafir*? I would be jailed!

Instead of returning to the staffroom, I left the campus compound and walked to the Sana department store, ten minutes away.

In the shop frequented by south Asian labourers, the only pair of trousers of my size was of vomitus green polyester. Yet it had a working fly. I gladly forked over the 45 Dirham asking price without even trying to bargain with the Indian salesman.

I changed into the new pants in the same washroom where the fly broke. Back at my desk, I had just enough time to gobble a sandwich...

Ten minutes later in the CERT foyer, I was tempted to hum a few bars of ‘*Amazing Grace*’...

1998, October (Dubai)

In prostration before the god of probability:

Looking side to side, I dropped the bundle of brown envelopes into the letterbox outside the Jumeira Spinneys supermarket, strategically far enough away from our apartment. The twenty addressees were taken at random from the Etisalat phone directory. I felt both embarrassment and relief...

The instructions I was following were received two weeks ago in a letter with my name and the Oasis Apartments address hand-written on the envelope. There was no return address. Inside was a single folded page of greyish photocopied type. It read as follows:

Dear receiver,

This prayer has been sent to you for good luck. The original copy is from the Netherlands. It has been around the world nine times. The luck has now been brought to you. You will receive good luck within four days of receiving this letter, provided in turn, you send it back out. DO NOT SEND MONEY, FOR FAITH HAS NO PRICE. Do not keep this letter. It must leave your hands within 96 hours after you receive it.

An RAF officer received \$70,000. Joe Ellito received \$450,000 and lost it because he broke the chain. While in the Philippines, General Welch lost his wife four days after he received this letter. He failed to circulate the prayer. However, before his death, he received \$775,000. Please send 20 copies and see what happens to you on the fourth day.

This chain comes from Venezuela, and was written by Saul Anthony de Oziof, a missionary from South America. I, myself, forward it to you. Since the chain must make the tour of the world, you must make 20 identical copies to this one. Sned [sic] it to your friends, parents, or associates. After a few days you will get a suprise. [sic] This is true even if you are not superstitious.

Take note of the following. Constantine Dino received the chain in 1953. He asked his secretary to make 20 copies and send them. A few days later, he won a lottery for \$2,000,000 in his country. Carlo Caditt, an office employee, received the chain. He forgot it and a few days later he lost his job. He found the chain letter and sent it to 20 people. Five days later he got an even better job. Dolon Fairchild received the chain and not believing it, threw it away. Nine days later he died.

For no reason whatsoever should this chain be broken. Remember, SEND NO MONEY.

So, it took half a century and multiple circuits of the earth for a chain letter to finally land in my mailbox? I guessed that it had been randomly sent by one of the Filipino or Keralan workers at the college. Yet it could just as well have been sent by one of T.'s African friends. With a snicker, I tossed it aside...



After the expiration of the four-day deadline for sending it on, the ‘broken chain’ began to haunt:

I was not superstitious. I was not tempted by the letter’s dangled hope of a windfall... I have always put my trust in mathematical probability and rarely even buy lottery tickets.

I take as an article of faith that winning a lottery is about as improbable as crashing in an airplane... I tend to believe it unlucky to wish for a miracle of good luck. Since the extremes of luck are on a continuum, it seems safest to remain in the middle of the bell curve of random occurrence— camouflaged. Otherwise, the sadistic gods tend to take notice...



While I had no wishes for miraculous showers of blessing— I was admittedly jarred by the letter’s warning to chain-breakers. The dice had been rolling low over the last several weeks. It felt like something had to give... So, after missing the ‘deadline’ by more than a week—I broke down and complied.

Of course, I felt foolish secretly photocopying the letter at work and addressing the envelopes. Yet in driving back to the apartment from mailing the twenty copies, I felt a weight lifted...

At the same time, I wondered whether along with the photocopied chain letters I should have included the following note:

‘Mr F. of Canada got the letter in Dubai, laughed about it and threw it aside. In the days afterwards, his computer crashed, a deal to sell his carpet fell through, the tenant in his house in Canada absconded without paying his last month’s rent, he received notice of a tax penalty, got a traffic ticket, discovered that his wife had been unfaithful and found a malignant growth on his scalp...

Two weeks later, he found the letter under a pile of old receipts. It was already too late—but he sent it on anyway. He is waiting for his luck to change...’

1999, May (Dubai)

Simulacra of the 'real world':

Along with my English for Trade Access students, I donned a facemask and yellow safety jacket this morning for a tour of the autobody repair department on the ground floor of the college. The department head, wearing safety goggles, greeted us to the shop floor. He then turned us over to student escorts...

Amid the noise and shower of acetylene sparks, we stepped around stripped-down chassis and whole cars with mashed fenders. Blue-coveredalled students hunched around the detached parts. They wielded rubber hammers and spray painters...

One highlight was the 'hot tank'— a vat into which a whole chassis could be lowered from an overhead chain. The acid bath ate away both rust and old paint...

A student with acne scars and a neck tattoo was our guide. He pulled the black knob that pneumatically raised a basket of transmission gears from the chemical dunk. The immigrant students edged forward to peer into the tank.

"Watch it," our demonstrator warned. "All it would take would be a coupla drops on your skin— even on yer clothes." He chortled. "It'd eat right into yer bone!"

"Dangerous," I muttered.

Still smiling, the pudgy student caught my eye. "Our instructor said if you ever want to get rid of a body— this'd be the place to stuff it!"

My four Iranian students looked at one another, nodding... They had obviously not caught the joke...



Back upstairs in the classroom, the students (still in shop coveralls), dutifully performed a speaking activity. After a preparatory exercise on passive voice participles, they used the same word forms in filling in the blanks on a list of instructions for operating a metal lathe. Then in pairs, the students took turns reading the instructions while their partners mimed the action...

While monitoring, I had to admire their forbearance... How insipidly artificial these little activities must seem to guys raring to get down on the automotive shop floor!

Regarding the 'real world' from which the 'English for access' classroom seemed so utterly detached— I thought of the vat of acid bubbling away just two floors below our feet... Ready to dissolve the bones of the unwary?

1999, November

Brown shoes don't make it:

I was at the foot of Granville Street, five minutes from having parked at the West Cordova St. parkade, when something prompted me to look down at my shoes. On the left foot was my brownish loafer. On the right was my slip-on of a darker brown. In groping absently into the darkened closet, I had grabbed a mixed pair.

Jee-zus! In a hot flash, I looked at my watch. The IELTS rating session two blocks away, started in about an hour. That was definitely too soon to drive home to Coquitlam and back to Vancouver on time.

But I had to make it through four hours of work. Anyone who took a second look below my knees would surely notice... What would a struggling candidate think in seeing his examiner was wearing mismatched shoes? Clown shoes would look no stupider!

I looked down Granville towards the department stores. There was still time to buy a new pair and make it back to the exam venue just two blocks away.

I walked up Granville, trying not to masochistically signal an invitation to the oncoming pedestrians to look down at my feet. After crossing West Georgia, I went down the escalator into the Pacific Center mall. I nipped into Sears and made for the Men's Department. Only then it occurred that even if I bought a pair, I would have to carry my old ones into the examining session. How silly would that look?

I realized that I had to brazen through... It was not as though I had a big wart on my nose. With my feet hidden under the table and most of the candidates nervous, they probably won't notice...

Still, on the walk back down Granville, I was taunted by '*Brown shoes doesn't make it,*' an old Frank Zappa earworm (*'Brown shoes don't make it/ quit school—why fake it?'*).



Five hours later, I was sitting in my examining room gathering up my testing materials. I had made it through. As far as I could determine, no one had noticed my shoes...

Meanwhile, also finishing up her session, was the youngish woman in the brown tam with whom I had briefly spoken to at the 'training session' last month. She mentioned that she was thinking of leaving the unpredictable world of ESL teaching and pursuing a more stable government job. She said she had applied to the Canada Border Services. When she asked my advice, I had strongly encouraged her.

This afternoon, in standing before her open door in the intervals between her candidates' arrival, she seemed eager to chat again...

Several times while I sat at my table (legs pulled back), she had looked in the open door, smiling. It could have been my imagining— but at one point, she turned in profile, as if to emphasize the amplitude of outthrust breasts...

Unfortunately, a man wearing clown shoes had no option but to pretend not to notice...

2004 December

FWT

A blown off wig:

Descartes' Evil Genius could hardly have dreamed up a more unnerving scenario:

Moments before the beginning of the IELTS oral interview, I was holding the audio tapes in the temperamental new myoelectric hand while I scrawled on the labels. Suddenly, the hand popped off.

Near panic, I tried to push it back. After a few awkward tries, I jumped up and squeezed into the front corner of the classroom, partially out of sight of the open door.

Just then, the elbow lock on the arm froze with the forearm in the highest position. Only by reaching into my shirt and jerking the lock wire did I loosen it. With that, the fake hand dropped to the floor with a dull thud. I swooped it up and tried to jam it into the socket. It didn't catch. Taking a deep breath, I crouched down and more slowly inserted it while turning. Mercifully, this time the wrist joint clicked in place. All this was in full view of the open door.

This ninety-second episode occurred in a rare interval in which there was no passersby in the usually busy corridor. It was only by shit luck that I was spared the devastating humiliation of a wig blown off in public....



One of the afternoon's candidates for the oral interviews was a middle-aged Korean, arbitrarily assigned the '*Positive and negative ways the internet is changing our lives.*' monologue. A few seconds into it— she halted— dumb-struck. For the remaining ninety seconds, she looked down, smiling in silence. When the timer beeped, she scurried out without a word...

Preparing for the next candidate, I turned around the scratchpad which she had been given for taking preparatory notes. Only one word was scrawled in the middle of the yellow page: '**God**'.

It was noteworthy that her deity— no less than Descartes' Evil Genius—seemed to be in an especially sadistic mood today.

2005 February

Cambodian hotel streaming:

Jet-lagged at 2:30 AM under the whirring fan of my modest room in the Hotel Chaya in Battambang, I flipped through the TV channels. There were military parades, dancing and soaps both in Khmer and in Thai. I stopped for a few minutes on a martial arts movie then flipped forward past the cable channel... Unexpectedly, a few clicks beyond the white noise was an in-house channel. It was showing porno—presumably streamed from a VCR under the counter down in the lobby...

For the twenty minutes or so the channel held my attention, the first sequence was conventional porn: a Bruce Willis clone driving a silver Mustang convertible while receiving fellatio from a busty blonde. She was rooting in his lap as they twisted along a mountain road that could have been in the Philippines. After that humdrum scene, the set ups got bizarre:

Amid park greenery, a dominatrix in black leather straps and enormous buckles commanded a slave girl. Her cat woman costume was not unconventional, but the open crotch of the slave certainly was. Her genitals were drawn up to resemble a cat's face. A closeup showed a jagged toothed feline mouth flanked by whiskers...

In a subsequent scene behind a hedge—another slave had slitty Masonic eyes painted onto her nipples. Her consort had a bleeding *ecce homo* image of Christ tattooed on her pudendum...

All this was taken in with more of bemused curiosity than erotic interest...

I wondered whether in-house porn streaming is a standard feature of other hotels as modest as this one. If so, what range of perversions could the porn channels of classier hotels possibly be catering to? Are videos selected for Khmer guests or directed at foreigners? If the latter, perhaps the aim is to prevent the corruption of local girls by enticing *farang* to drain off their wild libido privately...

As for the Khmer hotel guest: the very awareness of the freedom to ogle at porn—punishable by death not so long ago—could be far be more exciting than the erotic titillation itself... But why bondage porn?

If the intended audience is primarily local, I wondered whether there could be a political aim in showing hard-core S. and M. Perhaps it is a warning that the new Cambodia, freed from the totalitarian (and puritanical) Pol Pot regime must still be wary of indulging the grotesque excesses of western liberalism...

I flipped back down to the Kung Fu channel just in time to see a Bruce Lee clone launch himself feet first into a machine gun nest...

2002 March (Battambang, Cambodia)



Three minutes of fighting the law:



Winding along the Barnet Highway at 10:30 PM on the way back from work, I was suddenly blasted by the opening drum roll of '*I fought the Law.*' Yet instead of turning down the volume on the radio cassette player, I cranked it up. In the jangle of the opening chords and the start of Bobby Fuller's wailing vocal, I joined in at the top of my lungs:

*'Breakin' rocks in the hot sun
I fought the law and the law won
I fought the law and the law won'*

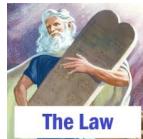
What rock standard better captures the quixotic stubbornness of male adolescence? And no cover of this classic— even the later punk versions— slays it like the Bobby Fuller Four did in 1965... Even in the middle-aged heart, its jarring chords trigger black-sheep defiance... Until the fading of the last jangling chord three minutes later— I was transported by joy:

Yes, I affirmed, I was once one of those kids who fought the law. I fought the teachers, the preachers and the Mounties... I fought the Law of Moses. I sneered at all the shibboleths... I defied the wisdom of Aesop. Like the fiddling grasshopper, I did not prepare for winter... Most defiantly of all— I fought the law of Calvin. I did not care that every morsel of gain must be purchased by the sweat of the brow. I scorned all the wintry precepts of clan and tribe...

Though on the edge of the precipice— even if the very mouth be stuffed with dirt— may there be the balls to hoarsely whisper: '*Fuck the law!*'

After a few more half-mad hoots, I rolled up the car window.

2002, May



Reassurance from Darwin's Bulldog:



'Apes, Angels and Victorians: Darwin, Huxley and Evolution' by William Irvine has been a hard slog. Its ponderous style seems to reflect the time of its writing (mid-1950s) when little was known about evolutionary biology or genetics...Still, the author clearly makes the case that without the fierce advocacy of T.H. Huxley, AKA, "Darwin's bulldog"—the foundational legitimacy of biological evolution by natural selection would never have taken hold in Victorian England.

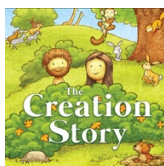
I struggled to get all the way through— but the reward came in the final pages in the unearthing of this gem—a direct quote from T.H. Huxley:

'...more than half the species that have survived the ceaseless struggle are parasitic in their habits, lower and insentient forms of life feeding on higher and sentient forms; we find tooth and talon whetted for slaughter, hooks and suckers moulded for torment— everywhere a reign of terror, hunger and sickness, with oozing blood and quivering limbs, with gasping breath and eyes of innocence that grimly closes in deaths of brutal torture...'

In reading these lines I thought of a children's book seen on the rack of the library at the same time as I borrowed *'Apes, Angels and Victorians'*. The cover of *'Creation Story'* showed a smiling Adam and Eve surrounded by gentle animal friends, peeking out from behind a bush. There is no difficulty in grasping why a story of 'intelligent design' is reassuring to many adults as well as to their kids... A challenge it would be to depict the tooth and claw struggle of DNA vessels in a bedtime story...

Yet I found Huxley's description oddly reassuring. Indeed, it was refreshing to glimpse an intuitive understanding of the natural world that is even darker than mine...

2003, February



In failing to grasp e-meters:

It was just the latest phone chat with ole buddy, LJ. Over the last three years, he has regularly called from the B.C. hinterland offering moral support amid the marital break-up melodrama.

Perhaps last night I was rather more melancholy than usual. In the silence of the third night without the kids, I was missing the booming TV and zap of video games... When the phone rang, my faithful chihuahua companion Romeo, was cuddled on my lap.

Hardly had greetings been exchanged when LJ asked: “Do you have depression?”

I was startled by the bluntness but managed to chuckle.

“What do you mean by depression? Do you mean when a person who has every reason to be happy still feels like shit? That’s real depression. But when a person’s situation is fucked and he knows it— I’d say that’s not depression— that’s brutal honesty.”

He nervously laughed. “So, I guess you’re not one to think about suicide, are ya?”

I was stung. Our phone chats were usually jokey exchanges about current events, movies or music. Awkwardly, I tried to steer him back to our usual tone.

“Well, I gotta confess, L... Just before you called, I was trying to fix up a rope but couldn’t figure out the clove hitch. I missed that badge in boy scouts.”

Reacting to another sputter of his nervous laughter, I stumbled further into the weeds.

“Seriously, old buddy— what a shrink would call clinical depression is pretty foreign to me. But I can’t deny some pretty disturbing family history...”

Only after three minutes of blabber (about the tragic fate of a few relatives) did the filter kick back in. Yet the underbelly had already been exposed...

“Jeeze, yeah that’s rough.” LJ sighed. “Listen, I gotta go. Give a hug to MH, eh? Hope he’s keeping’ up with his guitar. He’ll be a bluesman!”

“He certainly could— if he doesn’t get too wrapped up in Grand Theft Auto. Thanks for calling.”

I was left embarrassed. Why the patronizing concern? Was he coached by his well-meaning wife whispering in the background? Why did I feed further into their suspicion that I was ‘depressed’? Why the tendency to abjectly submit to the will of others?



Amid the usual self-castigation, I thought of a notion of Scientology once apprehended from leafing a copy of '*Dianetics*', in a second-hand bookstore aisle. The suggestion—which seemed rather dark at the time— was that one can free oneself from the domination of stronger wills by learning certain techniques of ruthlessness...

Around the same era (mid-1970s), I often passed business-suited young men handing out brochures outside the Scientology bookstore on Hastings St. in Vancouver. They invariably ignored me. I could only guess that they judged that a person dressed like me could not afford their courses...

They might well also have instantly assessed that a person with a hook poking from one sleeve could not use the e-meters to even get through the introductory test, let alone 'get clear'... So, it seems by the inability to grasp e-meters, I escaped the clutches of the heirs of L. Ron Hubbard...

How lucky can that be?

Even more reassuringly, I remembered the comment of another friend, CB, who visited last summer from Dubai. I know no other person so intelligent and self-aware with such a cheery disposition— that despite having both legs in braces and a collapsed lung.

'Some people have asked me how I can continue in my situation,' he had said. 'They imagine if they were in my situation, they'd commit suicide. As if they know who I am and what pleasures I have.'

Right on, comrade!

2004 October

Self-flagellation— Yankee style:

Underwater kayaking? Mountain unicycling?

Those were but two of the sports featured on last night's PBS program, '*Extreme Sports of Oregon*.' For the most discerning adrenaline junkies, the Beaver State also provides such boutique thrills as surfing a wilderness waterfall or tobogganing into a volcanic crater...

Some of the video clips of this craziness brought to mind the bizarre mortifications of medieval saints or of Indian Gurus. Indeed, underwater kayaking seems no less bizarrely self-flagellating than feeding maggots with one's open sores or dragging an anchor up to a Himalayan peak...

At the same time, it occurred just how quintessentially *American* were the featured Oregon extreme sports. With 'nature' and 'wilderness' so long subjugated to practical utility—the breadth of novel physical challenges is almost exhausted. In the weariness of demonstrating manhood (or womanhood) in conventional displays of guts and glory—ever stranger feats need be devised and undertaken...

So, it seems that mountain unicycling is an American equivalent of the Hindu ascetic exercise of growing ten-foot-long fingernails...

2005 April