Angela the Upside-Down Girl

And Other Domestic Travels

Emily Hiestand

waterfront would you expect, these days, to be met by the two chief heroes of epic seafaring? True to their names, the boys cannot take their eyes off our boat. They are intrigued by paddles. Fascinated by the weight and color of life jackets. Overjoyed by ropes, by tying knots. Desirous to know what the canoe is made of. Running their hands over the cane seats and wooden thwarts. In love with all things nautical. Beside themselves with happiness when their father says, yes, they can take a short ride with us, just around the perimeter of the dock, not far. And when at last we must head home, the legends (as gallant, as bold, as clever as ever) cajole us, insist on hauling some of the gear up the slight incline to our waiting car, where they are further enthralled by the every detail of mounting a canoe on a Subaru coupe: how the canoe is lifted up by two people, how it is strapped onto the roof of the car, how foam clips are slipped over the gunnels, how ropes are laced and tightened.

Ulysses and Erik tell us that they were born here, in this city, but that home is an island far from here, somewhere over the water. They each point out to sea, not exactly in the same direction. When the canoe has been secured in place, and all the gear stowed, the hero-boys shimmer away, are last seen lying flat on their stomachs, their arms submerged in water up to the shoulderblades—as close to being in the ocean as boys on dry land can be.

ERRAND

The moon and sun are eternal travelers. Even the years wander on. A lifetime adrift in a boat, or in old age leading a tired horse into the years, every day is a journey.

—Matsuo Bashō, *Narrow Road to the Interior*

WHAT A COMFORT words can be—stays, pitons on a cliff—and each is also a house of history and a slippery fish. "Errand" has been roughly treated, a word whose many meanings have narrowed to just one: a short journey to perform some simple task of life. Often an employee or a child is sent to perform the task, but no longer is the sent soul known as an errand-bearer. No one uses errand-carts, or goes on those "errands into the wilderness" the Puritans so liked. Moderns do still go on fool's errands, although never on "sleeveless" ones—or rather, persons *do* go on those errands leading to nothing (being sent by Pope Alexander to convert the Sultan of Iconium was one), but do not have so fine a name for them. And who calls anymore on the embassies and expeditions of "Immortal forms, / On gracious errands bent," the comings and goings of Hierarchies and Thrones, those beings who can roam earth and underworlds with their messages, or send an errand to heaven, as they please.

Many of my errands are performed along a broad avenue a few blocks east of our house. The post office is there and a family-run market famous for its fruit baskets wrapped in colored cellophane. There is a stationer, the kind whose shelves hold the wild promise of blank paper and new pens, and simultaneously embody an old idea of order: envelopes and rubber bands stacked by size, tubes of oil paint nestled in boat-like slots, each color with a berth. There is a consignment shop so chock-full of teacups and porcelain that even a small woman can feel like a bull. The Socrates Newtowne Grille is on the avenue, also a boutique named Dish, a Turkish café, and a laundry (land of Steve, zen master of folding). It is a midwinter afternoon, and I am on a round of errands along this avenue near the very edge of a city. It has been snowing for nearly a week.

The only problem with life on the edge, of course, is the edginess of it, but at the latest café to open on the doomed corner along this stretch, someone has stuck a glossy sticker on the window, a black-and-pink number that reads, "IF YOU'RE NOT LIVING ON THE EDGE, YOU'RE TAKING UP TOO MUCH SPACE." A declaration like that is a sign, from whom we do not know, but it suggests enough souls on the edge to support the cost of a silk-screen run.

The post office has a foyer, one wall made entirely of P.O. boxes with brass doors and glass windows. In the main room, a sleek philatelic display revolves silently near an exhibit of three mailing cartons, prices scrawled on the sides. There are no other

customers as I walk in, but the clerks like you to observe the handwritten sign: "Wait here until called." I wait with a parcel in my arms and two letters with the new Coleman Hawkins stamp on them. For as long as I can remember, I have adored sending and receiving mail, selecting commemorative stamps, and anticipating what a Monarch or No. 10 envelope may hold—and thus I adore the post office, too, in the way that a woman who loves to cook delights to honor and respect her pots and pans. She is interested in their condition and upkeep, the accoutrement of their being, because they are central to an outcome upon which she relies for happiness.

"Next," says the clerk. I'll call him Lyle.

"Hi, Lyle. What's that under your lip?"

"It's sort of an experiment; they call it a jazz dot. First class? Any books inside?"

"It's not a jazz dot, it's a soul patch," the other clerk yells from the sorting room. "I have to tell you *everything*."

Lyle ignores Bobby.

"Yes. No books. What do you mean by an experiment, Lyle?"

"He's in love," Bobby says, passing the counter.

"This is three dollars," Lyle says to me. "Anything else?"

"What are your commemoratives today?"

Lyle pulls out the drawer of stamps for me to look, and turning to his tormentor, announces, "This. Is. A. United. States. Post. Office."—pronouncing each word distinctly, invoking all the propriety of the great office whose appointed rounds are not stayed by rain nor sleet nor snow; whose "ceaseless labors pervade every . . . theatre of human enterprise"; which "mingles with the throbbings of almost every heart in the land"; the service that is "the delicate ear trump through which alike nations and families and isolated indi-

viduals whisper their joys and their sorrows, their convictions and their sympathies, to all who listen for their coming."

"I'm bad, I'm *bad*," Bobby says.

Lyle turns back to me, fully recovered.

"Do you need a receipt? They're free today."

On this winter day the two clerks are wearing gray cardigans, but in summer they may wear gray Bermuda shorts, the hardy getup of field biologists and intrepid explorers. I say that a group of (still mostly) guys who show their legs deserve our approval in an era when businessmen are persuaded that extra-long socks are *de rigeur* to prevent sightings of (gasp!) flesh during executive leg-crossings. As I leave the P.O., a barely recognizable version of "Georgia on My Mind" is playing in the background—a perfect music to send mail on its journey toward motorized carts, elevators wired for crooners, the cold bellies of jets.

IIII IIII IIII

Where the snow has been shoveled and scraped away, the mica-rich sidewalk glitters like democracy. A vent of steam ghosts from a manhole; a snow devil whirls off the top of a bank, filling the air with a small spangled tornado; a cupful of sun spills over the rim of a woolly cloud. A gleaming epic coming at you gratis can make you feel like you're getting away with something, although its story may be hard to follow and any one of these things is an infinite whodunit: the mica in the cement; the two monks passing; the steam coming out of the tall industrial mouths, white snakes rising, shedding smoky skins into the winter air; the blood-red flags on the roof of the hamburger place bright and rippling with a greed now so interwoven in this land with grace that greed and grace are like the single indivisible heart of Siamese twins.

IIII IIII IIII

Smack next to the P.O., in the same 1920s sandstone building, is a sporting goods and gun shop, a deer head mounted in the window above a collection of wildlife T-shirts. Inside, the smell that rises from the old wooden floorboards is a Proustian cookie for anyone who was a child in small town with a hardware store, or a five & dime (the kind with a Maybelline counter, and glass dividers corralling handkerchiefs and bobby pins).

The goods of the gun and sports store are arranged roughly in order of lethality. The front shelves hold bandannas and wicker picnic hampers with aqua plates, evoking an outdoor pastoral which gives way in the middle section to shelves of ointments that make a man smell like a female deer, and boxes of thermal gloves, toe-heaters, and a wall of fishing lures: Jig-in-a-Tube, the Slug-Go, and Mister Twister; the Do-Sump'n lure with flame-colored tentacles; a shelf of Pork Crawdads; a fish scale called the De-Liar. The lures gradually feather into a shelf of game-callers—Bleat Deer, Goose Flute—and boxes of bulk bullets shrink-wrapped in bronze plastic. By the bullets there is a clothesline hung with canvas hunting suits, the fabric printed with a realistic bark pattern. (Shades of *Macbeth*—the body as the moving wood.) The threshold to the back room, the gun room, is marked by a moose head mounted high near the ceiling on a supporting column. Here in the city it is easy to forget how big a moose is—this head is larger than a steamer trunk. It is large enough to preside, with glass eyes, a cracked nose, a still silky chestnut-brown neck.

A block from the moose and down one flight of stairs is the copy shop run by Art, a room with three large machines that exude the hot electrical smell of warm plastic. Art is an even-tempered

man with dark blue eyes. "Ocean-blue," he says. He's right. He wears black jeans, black boots, workshirts. Assistants come and go in the shop, several each year, but Art is constant, has managed the place for ten years. In his room one flight underground, Art copies tax forms, sheet music, resumes, manuscripts, and bake sale flyers. He prints up business cards and wedding announcements. He can make a sign for a new tailor or a bakery. In the second year of our acquaintance, Art began to fling me the key to the self-service machine, bypassing the need for a change purse of quarters and nickels. "Just tell me the number," he said.

Today his counter is solid customer, each one with an urgent request—a birth announcement, a dissertation, a petition. Six days of the week, Art takes the wall of urgency that arrives in his room and melts it by his evenness, his patience. Everyone's copies get done, and they are done well or else they're done over, and people leave saying "Thanks, Art." While the manager dissolves the present line of impatience, I wait by the bulletin board, reading the sheaf of notices pinned to the cork: saxophone lessons, grief counseling, a Tercel for the best offer.

Do we mix the pigment of days with the binder of our bodies? Carrying water to plants in the morning, I could be a raincloud, something that does not ask why it exists. I fill up a jug and pour the water; the water sinks into the soil, sometimes making a sighing sound as the earth absorbs the liquid. The water disappears; a humid smell fills the air. The leaves are beaded. What is that wish to be the gray-green of the leaf, to be like water soaking in? In a society compulsive about production, is it an art to subside, to cease, to sink? Naturally, everything happens in a specific gravity, and passing through the sieve of a culture's toxins must be one

of the essential finings. But can a lifework happen in unrecorded moments, be something the self does unawares? By definition, this cannot be a commodity and it would be almost invisible. How could this good, whatever it is, be coaxed from hiding, from latency? When the rush is over and Art is free, I pick up a paper clip.

"I've been thinking," Art blurts.

"Uh-oh."

"I've been thinking about going," Art says.

"Going?"

"Heading out," Art elaborates.

"Do you mean leave the store?"

"The store, the country. I'm thinking of heading out."

"Where would you head?"

"I'm thinking about Spain," Art says. "Maybe Ireland, the South Pacific. I've got friends on St. John's. Russia, Madagascar . . ."

Art names most of the known world. "Machu Picchu, Japan . . ."

I nod.

"I'd have to close the shop, of course."

"Of course."

Art is speaking in truncated phrases, nearly gasping for breath.

"Save my money for about a year. . . . I've been . . . saving . . . for a while. . . . And then go . . . for . . . I'm thinking . . . about a year."

Abruptly Art stops his tour of the globe and spreads his hands in the air, like a prosecutor resting, the scope and breadth of his case completely aired. He bends down to hunt for a ream of paper in a cubbyhole and asks in a muffled voice, "Is this a good idea?"

Many people will be glad when Art returns from traveling. Here, where his machines pulse with flashes of light, the man is admired. Here he has made one of the ephemeral communities of a

city, gathering citizens as easily as a knife-grinder at his wheel collected an earlier metropolis. (With a light but firm hand, said Whitman, the knife-grinder held his blade to the stone, and there issued forth then "copious golden jets, Sparkles from the wheel"—the incidental beauty of the modern city.) We're into Fodor's guides when a new customer floats down the stairs and unfurls a child's finger-painting: a house with a turtle landing on the roof.

"These will be ready tomorrow morning," Art says of my stack, and I go on down the avenue toward the shopping center, an open-air relic from the fifties. Who can lament the enormity of choice; it is the premise of the land, and we are spores of an immense bloom that long ago burst. But for every Vietnamese girl who arrives and becomes a surgeon—a lovely one was on the news the other night, pure grit unbuckled from a scripted past—there must be millions who falter in chance. Passing the cleaners, I see Mrs. N-, sorting a heap of shirts. Behind her, the overhead belt carries dresses and slacks, swishing in their plastic tunics, swooping along an undulating track suspended from the ceiling. A few weeks ago I brought in my husband's black kimono. It has two white emblems above the breast, and on the inside, modestly, a riverside village woven in grey-green silks: two women fishing, two ducks, a dumpling seller near the bridge, a boat being poled through a ripple. Together, Mrs. N- and I stuck small red adhesive arrows on the stained places, and she noticed a rip forming in the seam of one sleeve.

"Tuesday—okay?"

Rounding the corner into the mall, a teenager with a hood pulled low looks surprised when our eyes meet, then grins. A look can pass between strangers, kin to the look countrymen may give finding one another in a far place. My, my; you as you, me as me. The recognition goes so unremarked as not to exist in any official

account. It has taken me most of my life even to notice the look, which happens, I suppose, in the interstices of everyone's life.

The windows of the shopping center are full of reflective red foil hearts and cupids flying with champagne glasses in hand, and in the sky over the lot the hunger moon of January is rising huge and unobstructed, orange-red through the city's exhalation of gases. We live in an unintended landscape of still-damp, coexisting scriptures. Coming home once from the north, I crested the glacial hills and the city popped up, as it always does, as though a hand has pulled a cord. I was aware, that morning, of the many ways that love can go wrong and I might have faltered again, but coming down the long hill into the basin and seeing the city, the hive inventing itself, storing and translating generations, one for another, I felt a slight stirring, a coalescence, like a few grains of sand lodging in the lee of some dried grass. That was the way courage came to me, just enough to cantilever love, to transfer its improbable spirals and towers to a ground.

"Buy a copy of *Spare Change*," sing-songs the man at the entrance to the Star Market. "Help the homeless, get your *Spare Change* fresh and hot off the press."

His high, clear intonation recalls the Dublin street song that we learned as children, "Cockles and mussels / alive, alive-o." The cold of the cobbled streets, and the salt and clink of black-blue shells of mussels, which we had not yet touched, had descended through a century, crossed an ocean, come into the fluorescent room of an elementary school. How does a song do that?

"Love your hat," the man says as he takes a dollar for the paper.

Are things truer if said aloud? Inside the market there is a "two-for-one" roasting-chicken special. Two chickens suggest a fu-

ture. Maybe to have lived at all is the thing. I buy the chickens, and a melon, and a box of After Eight mints, which an elegant man I know likes, and when I put the box in the wire cart, the man's confident manner hovers briefly above it. I hold on to the cart. At the end of the soft drink aisle, a woman is handing out samples of a dill-flavored hummus spread. She spreads puréed chickpeas on crackers, sets the samples on small white paper plates. The woman is in her late sixties, dressed in a good wool skirt and a pale yellow sweater set, and she has the air of someone just up from a nap, features still settling into a face. I wish I could hug her. She has a certain line to say: "If you'll try a carton of Mr. Hummus today, you'll also get . . . ," but she speaks so softly it's hard to tell what the free thing is. You can see that she is surprised at the whole idea of herself proposing a dip. To strangers. She's trying. Is the family like a mobile, a floating thing that shivers and moves when any one of its pieces is touched?

Outside the sky has turned a slatey, indigo blue, one of the blues that is the scattering of dust in air. Carrying the two chickens and the Mr. Hummus, I go north now along the avenue, passing the Maharaja restaurant and the window treatment place with Mohawk blinds.

The cold and gray-blue light recall another Art, the one made up by Madame Estella in Atlantic City. That was a winter day like this one, in late January, when two other painters and I had fled school for a day. The landscape painter had a car and she knew of a palm-reading place on the boardwalk. It would be open, she promised. This was a winter in the lull between the floy-floy years and Caesar's Palace, when the boardwalk scene was waddling seagulls. Madame Estella, with very black hair and a fuzzy car-coat, told the

future in a room as small as an ice-fishing hut but swagged in scarves and patchouli incense, and lit by a flotilla of votive candles in red shot glasses.

My friends went first. Out the window, the ocean and sky were the same gray, the water distinguished from air only by its metallic sheen. I didn't know then how to account for the future, except to imagine that it must have some root in the present, and that the present might be formed like clay on a wheel, with attention to the amount of air kneaded into a slab, the amount of water from the elephant-ear sponge, the speed of the wheel, and the gesture that arose in the hands and telegraphed to the spinning slip. The future might be touchable in that way. But Madame was speaking of another future, shown in the movements of planets, each of which had its own house. Which was nice. She placed my palm in her own, ran her index finger along a "life line" and a "heart line."

The life line, she said, was broken. I saw that she was right; it was a skein of bundled strands. At first she said it wouldn't be a long life, then that it would be long enough but would stop and start again. Looking at my palm in Estella's hand was looking down on a moist topography flecked with paint, and one dark purple spot in the mound beneath the thumb—the remains of a thorn which you could see under the skin like the tip of a branch under ice. The Atlantic giantess rocked beneath the shack, and it felt nice to have my hand held by a woman with a fake name and dyed hair. Madame spoke for ten minutes, during which time she made no comment about my future as a painter, the subject then uppermost in my mind. So when the reading was over, I asked, "May I ask a question?"

"Yes, dear."

"What about art?"

Madame Estella cradled my palm again, studied it, and said, "You will be married in two years!"

I was too polite to laugh, but we did later, outside, and again when we passed the roadside elephant at Margate, cousin to the three-story ear of corn, the immense fiberglass fish, the giant sombrero motel. The creature had a gazebo for a saddle, and massive legs planted in hard-pack sand, legs which were not in correct proportion to the body. They were like a basset hound's, short and squat. But we could easily sympathize with the designers; it must have been hard to engineer any legs at all for a colossus. This one was large enough to have a staircase inside its legs and belly. Maybe you went up into the head, looked out through large eyes to the sea.

By the time the weird sister turned out to be right about life stopping and starting again, I knew enough to know you can hardly go wrong with that prediction. You look, you see it all the time. It's starting again now as the city goes home in the snow, each bundled pedestrian a receding swirl, like the wintry figures of Utrillo's Montmarte. And again as snowbanks receive their shadows, as spray paint propagates on the Greek restaurant wall, as the cook inside pats eggs of rice into grape leaves pulled from brine.

PLOT

THE DAY WAS SO HOT that the pumps at the Merit station were undulating in sheets of octane-scented air, so hot the city looked blanched—the cement sidewalks and canvas awnings pale, and our houses pale in their shingles and jackets of aluminum siding. The attendant gestured with the end of a fuel nozzle, wand of petroleum man. "Yes, ma'am," he said, "right down the block." Young men were just starting to call me ma'am. By the office door, the cola machine pleaded *cool cool* with a big bluish photograph of ice cubes the size of car batteries and a torrent of soda coming over the cubes like a stupendous falls, like a natural wonder.

One block farther, at the end of a sizzling, shadeless street, and I was walking through a prairie of tall, airy cosmos in feathery bloom, through lanes of nodding dahlias, trellised tomatoes, and a stand of tasseled bantam corn. I passed a hybrid tea and a heavy old courtesan of a rose (Souvenir de la Malmaison? Nymph's Thigh?), also patches of opal basil and cayenne, the pepper leaves cloaking slender red fingers. The bees of summer were murmuring by the hour in foxglove bells, exactly as Wordsworth saw them in his praise of the surprising freedom to be found in the sonnet's measured and