

My Favorite Deal

Oud: eleven or twelve string ancestor to the guitar, a middle eastern lute, without frets

The weather was the meanest, as usual, over Detroit. It rained on my thirty year old LBJ Stetson hat and it dried dirty, a Levitical stain spreading on the brim, along the band, a Levitical stain spread on my hat but not my heart. My heart was pure.

I bought some corned beef for my son. He loves the beef lean. I took my instrument in with me from the car. An Arabic speaking Chaldean man waited on me from behind the to-go counter. "What's in the case?" he asked. "Oud," I said. "My favorite sound," said the man, he then packed up my corned beef extra special into two bags, thin bags, surrounded by plastic wrap, then wrapped them into white freezer paper, plastic wrapped again. He handed it to me over the counter and still I smelled corned beef.

I stuffed the two packages into my back pack, sat down at the table with Todd. Corned beef. We talked about the cover for my CD, a picture from his 36 Unknown show, the one with the hand superimposed over a dome, in Berlin I think it was, still throughout the conversation, corned beef.

I got up to leave, hugged Todd, dumped my instrument and my bag into the trunk, drove over to my aunt's house. Opened the trunk at my aunt's house, corned beef. There must be a way to contain that smell for the airplane ride.

Into the house. "What's that smell?" Corned beef.

"Here, I'll pack it up for you so it won't smell."

We packed the already thrice packed corned beef into heavy plastic freezer bags, folded them over, and taped them shut. I inspected the inside of my oud case and found enough room to stuff the two packages of corned beef.

I closed the case and locked it tight. Corned beef.

I put the instrument back in the trunk of the car. I drove to the cemetery to visit my parents on my way to the airport.

At the cemetery, I stood on the grave of my father the poet merchant, the grave of my mother the painter bookkeeper, near the graves of my grandfather the vaudevillian and my grandmother the rabbi's daughter, and I read to them a story I had been working on, a story about sacrifices and tall Black African holy men that was not yet finished.

I stopped reading and took out my instrument, one of my deals in life that I may not have explained clearly enough to them. "This is one of my deals," I said out loud to the souls of my parents swirling above my head, "last night I played my oud in Detroit." I went on about the instrument, pulled it out of the case, corned beef, and played a short improvisation as the souls swirled with renewed

vigor, the birds screeched and fluttered in a nearby tree and flew off in a great arc above the cemetery.

When I had finished, I explained that this was actually one of my favorite deals, maybe my best one. Of all the deals, explained and unexplained, revealed and hidden, shared and secret, of all the deals of my little life, this was perhaps my favorite deal. I explained that to the souls of my loved ones swirling above my head.

I repacked my instrument into its case, corned beef, I had played my oud in Detroit and over the graves of my predecessors, drawing down what I thought was the dreaded nostalgia response, but it wasn't nostalgia, though I had played my oud in my homeland, the land of my fathers' house, it was not the dreaded nostalgia response at all I realized, it was memory.

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Hurting down the M 14 after the gig the night before, the dreaded nostalgia response had threatened its descent. There was no one for me to visit, Mom I'm coming home there was no home, there was no place to light, I am a stranger in my homeland and the rain falling by the trail passing the place where my father worked, the dreaded nostalgia response made its initial descent but it did not descend. The rain broke underneath the overpass, and I realized that it wasn't the dreaded nostalgia response at all, not the homeland, not the faces who had passed before me hurtling down M 14, not the gig where I knew no one, not the moment, not the meeting with a younger more vigorous dreamier me, not that at all, it was memory.

It was not at all personal, not my memory, not the particulars of my story, but the story. What I had mistaken for the dreaded nostalgia response was something else entirely, hurtling down that highway with no scenery anywhere. What was against what is, pure, without names and only a trace of sentiment, a hollow longing for the imaginary past.

Now, as without a history, as if death did not exist, did not wait, did not sit patiently somewhere along this road and all other roads, this is what I was fleeing hurtling down this M 14, the earlier and the later of what I have come home to: no home at all. Everyone's story.

I knew this somewhere around Livonia, then the rain began to subside and the speed increased ten fifteen miles per hour and I came closer to where I was going. I was coming closer and that was giving wind to the singing, playing, loving, burning down this highway, writing, talking, praying to keep the flow, the movement.

I reached Stevie's house. Stevie had left the door open for me, which is as good as it gets I suppose after having had such an experience of death and rebirth, the clarity of story, a reframing, along the road, M 14, a new road.

Later we drank a white tea with crushed dried flowers and I breathed deeply the spontaneity of the oriental essence released by the near boiling water on the crushed chrysanthemum.

I played my oud in Detroit. I suppose among all the quiet meetings and shared victories with someone I love, present or not present, this is one of the best: I played my oud in Detroit.

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Earlier that night, in my telling of the legend of the thirty six at the gig, I talked about the piece of music I had written. It had a simple, drone like accompaniment, the return to a familiar tonic from which I embarked, then returned, a 1 - 5 - 1, varying the rhythm to keep it from becoming a jumping dance and not too happy. The beginning of a melody, a fragment of a melody, a few notes then back down the same modal ladder returning to the tonic. Deconstructing an obscure melody I had heard somewhere, adding the phrase by phrase but without resolution, returning again to the tonic, interrupting the melody, down to the deconstructed series of notes changing under my fingers into another melody, another part of a different story, a different song, similar but transitioning to and from melodies I had never connected before. These notes I thought I knew so well in isolation became fresh to me because they had turned into something else, surprising myself to meet a known fragment of a melody in a brand new flow, along for the wild ride I was, my fingers my heart my ears believing I was somewhere new. Old new melodies, parts of melodies, fragments.

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I played a version of that piece at the gig, after Todd spoke of the pictures, then I spoke of the legend of the thirty six and during the telling of the tale, I understood the relation between the pictures, the music I had written, the story of the thirty six righteous ones that I had taken from Abbaye the Babylonian in the Talmud, the sadness and the beauty of the tale that had drawn me deep into itself, as did the pictures, as did the music.

In the teaching of Abbaye, the world required a minimum of thirty six righteous individuals, but for what -- to exist? To be just? To be authenticated somehow? Thirty six individuals who draw down Godliness into the world, without them, what?

"There are not less than 36 righteous persons in the world who receive the Divine Presence, " this from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 97b, Sukkot 45b). It is a minimum, as if to say, there may come a generation, there may have been, that does not contain thirty six righteous individuals.

Following the story of the thirty six in the Talmud is the debate between two other celebrated Babylonian rabbis, the leaders of two academies. One claimed that the world would be saved when the hearts of individuals would be turned towards God. The other claimed that such a transformation was unnecessary, what we had to do was be with our suffering, to weep the world well. I imagined them sitting in their houses of study asking themselves the question that erupted out of the teaching about the thirty six: "What if there were not thirty six righteous persons in the world? What then? How will the world be saved?"

Todd called his photography project "the legend of the hidden Thirty Six." Was it a later necessity that the 36 be hidden, the hidden 36, who were necessary to redeem the world?

At the show Todd and I were talking about the legend, Todd asked, "where could we find such people today?"

I said softly, "they are present in every generation. Present but secret. The difference is then they were manifest, now they are hidden."

In looking at the photographs, through playing my piece, I felt the sadness and the optimism in the argument of the Babylonians, the necessity for the tears to somehow wash the world clean, to weep the world well, to cleanse it with our tears. A sad redemption, but a redemption. I felt it in my fingers and my fingers played it on my oud. I tried to explain it, but I played it better. I cleansed myself with the music and later, in the car, with my tears, I wept myself well.

It was time for me to come home. I drove to the car rental, returned the car. Smells like corned beef, the guy said. That is correct. It is corned beef, lean, and it will not be contained.

james stone goodman