



footprints in **wet** cement

peter wortsman



Footprints in Wet Cement by Peter Wortsman

ISBN: 978-1-938349-59-1

eISBN: 978-1-938349-61-4

Library of Congress Control Number: 2016954855

Copyright © 2017 Peter Wortsman

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>.

Cover Design: Harold Wortsman

With photographs and drawings by the author

Author photo: © 2016 Ricky Owens

Layout and Book Design by Mark Givens

First Pelekinesis Printing 2017

For information:

Pelekinesis, 112 Harvard Ave #65, Claremont, CA 91711 USA

Small Wonder, a foreword

An atom of matter is all it takes to make a pretty big bang. $E = mc^2$, the concise epic of the 20th Century, is three letters and a single digit long. The same impatient age that spawned the transistor and the computer chip, the acronym and the one-minute commercial, the information bit, the sound bite, the photo op, and the tweet, also contrived its own narrative form—call it short short, sudden or flash fiction, call it a story in a hurry, or a poem exploding its corset. Bastard child of the prose poem and the wise crack, illegitimate heir to the parable and the allegory, this mongrel darling was raised on a diet of the coarse and the cunning, brash big city bus bumper and subway ads, political campaign promises, dream fragments, one-liners, and over-the-counter painkiller packaging copy. Ever anxious for a quick fix of meaning, posing now as a poem, now as a story, it steals its strength from legitimate forms only to sabotage any underpinnings of legitimacy. Style and length vary with each narrative according to its needs. Soon enough, tomorrow maybe, it will be categorized, neutered and defanged for popular consumption and the college curriculum. But for the moment it is still as slippery as footprints in wet cement.

Miracle at Mount Moriah

“...press 3 for directions, press 4 for cremation, press 5 for perpetual care.”

Mount Moriah is, depending on your vantage point, a prime development with definite growth potential or the vestige of a lavish bygone real estate boom gone bust smack dab in the middle of the Borough of Queens. Implied palaces loom like the ruins of unrealized or faded dreams. Grandiose portals, their rusted iron gates ajar, affixed with noble bronze lions, dangling chains, ornately carved name plates and the like, all lead to the great unknown. And as in the cramped confines of a medieval hamlet huddled up against the castle wall, scattered rows of single-, double-occupancy and family plots marked for construction or demolition lie in a tight cluster. Here and there a stately Lilliputian villa rises like a toy palace out of the weeds and rubble. With real estate at such a premium, it's a wonder nobody has discovered the neighborhood. Or have they?

On a raw and rainy afternoon in late November, with winter already nipping at his heels, a homeless man of

hefty girth made himself at home in one such uninhabited abode. His last flop had been in the now defunct RKO Keith's Theatre, a once majestic movie palace at the intersection of Northern Boulevard and Main Street, in Flushing, into which he had managed to slip unnoticed and curl up on the balcony. But just as Claude Rains re-materialized on the silver screen at the end of the fifth and final screening of *The Invisible Man*, so too was the homeless man rooted out in the rude beam of a flashlight, promptly expelled and forced to look for other lodgings.

The chapel door had been pried open by previous visitors.

"Anybody home?" he asked.

No reply.

Aside from the brass candelabra, lions and other obscure bric-a-brac inscribed with indecipherable lettering, there also happened to be a very inviting looking bench. Removing and hanging up several drenched layers of clothing all the way down to his birthday suit, he stretched himself out in right stately repose, a king in his castle. It felt good to be horizontal and dry with the rain beating on the roof. He lit a fire of ivy twigs and dried leaves he found lying about, covered himself with the least damp of his layers, a mildewy navy blue West Point cadet's cape recently acquired at the Salvation Army, and promptly fell asleep.

He dreamt he was a drifter in some strange city stretched out asleep on the lower level of a parked double-decker

bus that rattled into spontaneous transit. “Step lively,” the conductor, a talking caterpillar, cried, “the early bird catches the worm!” The drifter rolled under a seat just in time to avert the savage fangs of a flock of perfumed furies clambering aboard.

Oh the spiked heels! Oh the red toenails of morning!

Now the bus became a freight elevator. A rat scurried by. Or was it a blind boy? The blind rat-boy threw karate kicks in all directions. Then a family of human-spiders followed, mistaking him for a fly. Families can always sniff out a stranger in their midst, whatever the species. Frozen with terror, he was trapped, caught fast in the viscous snare of their love.

Awakened by the roar of a jet plane overhead, bright light streaming in through the stained glass window in the wake of the storm, the homeless man squinted, only now noticing an oddly misshapen baby doll on the bench beside him. Countless hands had done unspeakable things to the doll, with knives, with wires, with matches and explosives. Its eyes were pierced through, its hair ripped out, its lips and ears blown off. Yet what was left of its mangled face retained the hint of a sweet expression. Lying perfectly still, the homeless man suddenly became aware of someone else fondling the doll, half moaning, half chanting “Be My Baby” by the Ronettes.

—“What’s that!?” A hand touched the intruder’s toes.

—“Can’t see ya, but ah sure can smell ya, boy!” The words were followed by the flick of a blade. Trembling, the

homeless man felt fingers slide swiftly under the cape and grab hold of his private parts.

—“Make a move and y’ain’t nevah goin’ ta play nick-nack with yo’ paddywack no more!” The homeless man gulped. “Now that we’s come to an understandin’,” said the voice belonging to the hand, “tell me what the hell you doin’ in Blind Bertha’s boudoir!”

“Bu...bu...bu...bu...bu,” the homeless man blubbered, unable to shape words.

“Speak up, son!” Bertha urged, a cold metal blade sliding smoothly between the hairy hemispheres of his bare bottom, tilting ever so slightly like a knife on white bread, shaving off a few stray hairs. Twisting his head and straining his eyes, the homeless man gasped at the sight of massive thighs towering over him like the twin trunks of a pair of intertwined trees with bulbous fruits ripe unto bursting straining the hold of a flowery sarong.

“My my, they sho’ is a lot of you, boy!” she said, feeling him all over. Bedecked with dark glasses and the bottomless smile of the blind, Bertha spread terror and desire indiscriminately like peanut butter and jelly. The bewildered man responded with an explosion below.

“Cat got yer tongue, but ya sure can blow that horn!” Bertha laughed. “Now listen up, honky butt, ‘n ya betta listen good, ‘cause Bertha ain’t goin’ to say it twice! I can tell you’s white from the smell o’ yo’ tail wind. Don’t know what you up to, but you’d best get yo’ white ass out’a here fast ‘fore the Seven Dwarfs get back, else they goin’ ta slice

you up twelve ways to Christmas like a loaf of Wonder Bread, and th'ain't no glue gonna stick Ol' Humpy Dumpy back together again!...Shush up now! Too late! I hear 'em comin'!" she whispered, keeping a tight grip on his goods. "The boys's back!" She relaxed her grip to prove that she meant him no immediate harm. "Better play dead, son, less you wan' yo' private property subdivided."

Thinking fast, Bertha pulled the cape over the homeless man's head by way of a shroud. Through a rent, he glimpsed what followed.

Displaced gravel, a rusty squeaking hinge, cursing and belching heralded the arrival of the Seven Dwarfs, an integrated teenage gang, whose clubhouse he happened to have crashed.

—"Hey Bertha, since when you into stiffs!?"

—"Business be bad, Doc. The gravediggers gets it for free. So I does me a little freelance embalmin' on the side, ya know, just ta make ends meet."

—"That one sure as hell didn't die of starvation!"

Hearing the crinkle of paper,—“What ya got in the bag, Doc?” Bertha shrewdly changed the subject. “I ain't et since morning.”

—"Abra cadabra!" Doc pulled a squirming, yelping mongrel puppy by its tail out of a brown paper bag.

—"So sweet o'you, boys, to think of me in my lonesome. I could use me a li'l house pet!"

Still yelping and squirming, the puppy tried to bite the

hand that held it.

“Damn, this bitch needs a fix!” said Doc.

The Seven Dwarfs all giggled as one. Bertha obliged with a smile. The homeless man held his breath.

—“Here, Dopey!” Doc passed the pup to a confederate while he dished out the goods. A little white powder on a spoon, a little flame from a Zippo lighter, a needle to suck it up and shoot.—“Hold the mutt still!” As the tip of the needle sank into the furry flesh, its little hind legs quivered.

—“Get down, doggy!”

Dopey dropped the pup. Somebody turned on a radio. The boys all laughed as they watched the mongrel puppy boogie.

“What kind is it, Doc?” asked Bertha, doing her best to keep the crew distracted.

“What kind o’ what?” said Doc.

—“What kind o’ dog?”

“Looks like a *hot* dog to me!” Doc snickered.

Everybody cracked up this time, including Bertha.

“Hey Sleepy,” said Doc, “ever hump a dog!?”

Sleepy guffawed:—“Long as she got the buns, I got the mustard!”

Whereupon a curious sound emanated inopportunistically from the sham corpse’s posterior.

Doc eyed the stiff suspiciously, clasping the syringe, the contents of which he hadn't fully emptied into the puppy.—“What he die of, bean poisoning?”

“Cadavers leak!” said Bertha. “Ain't you never heard a dead man break wind before!?”

“Boys,” said Doc, “get ready!”

“Christ, Doc!” replied Dopey, perplexed and expectant.

Doc waved the needle like a magic wand:—“Watch me make the dead rise! Bottom's up!” he snickered and stuck it to him.

Whereupon the corpse let out a colossal howl, Blind Bertha still holding tight to his now stiffly extended goods that made the cape rise.

“Holy shit, Doc,” cried an incredulous Dopey, “you made the dead rise, it's a goddamn miracle!”

Doc had his doubts. Oh ye of little faith!

But just when things were about to get sticky for our latter day Lazarus, he was granted a reprieve from further indignities by the sacred sound of prayer.

—“*BARUCH OOVARUCH SHEMOH!*”

“Quick, Doc!” cried Sneezy, a breathless confederate stationed outside. “The Rabbis are coming!” And disinclined to blow their cover, the Seven Dwarfs made themselves scarce at the approach of two white bearded men in black suits and black hats.

—“Rebbe, I *tink* somebody's been tampering with the

tomb!”

—“Nonsense, Shimmy, who would dare intrude on the resting place of my in-laws of sainted memory!?”

—“With all due respect, Rebbe, I have learned never to say never.”

—“You will remember, Shimmy, what the *Besht* said to the *Maggid*: ‘My horses do not eat matzoth!’”

—“Forgive me, Rebbe, but to cite the *Aboth*: ‘Whosoever has three qualities is of the disciples of Abraham, our father: a good eye, a humble mind, and a lowly spirit.’ Of these, alas, I have only the first, but if ever it fails the service of my Lord, let Him pluck it out!”

“Eye and heart,’ says Reb Levi ‘are the two go-betweens of sin,’” the Rebbe reminded with an ever so slightly sarcastic edge.

To which the other man replied: “If thou give me thy heart and thine eyes, then I know that thou art mine.’ Blessed be He, who hath taught me obedient blindness!” Whereupon he unlocked the door and beckoned for his master to precede him.

“HEAVEN FORBID!” The Rebbe fell into a faint upon entering the chapel.

Shimmy followed, hardly believing his eyes. Naked underneath their shrouds, their faces hidden from view, two Dybbuks of mighty proportions, a male and a female, impersonating the Rebbe’s deceased *machatenista*, his in-laws of blessed memory, squirmed, one on top of the

other, their legs obscenely intertwined.—“This I witnessed with mine own two eyes—may the Lord pluck them out if I lie!” he swore, before likewise falling into a swoon.

The dead, as a class, are non-judgmental by nature. You can lie beside them, above them, among them, and they will take you as you are.

Not so the living.

Blind Bertha absconded with the cape, considering it fair recompense.

Abandoned, shaken to the core, the homeless man pulled on the layers of clothing he had left and set off in search of breakfast. A crumpled scrap of paper flapping from the leafless branch of a tree caught his eye. He plucked it from the branch and read:

“From the Land of Miracles comes

COUNTESS MARVELLA

and she says:

DON'T GIVE UP!

GUARANTEED RESULTS IN 24 HOURS

THIS CONTINENTAL BORN SPIRITUALIST

who

BRINGS YOU

the solutions to the mysteries of life,

seeks to help many thousands, like yourself, who have been

*CROSSED, HAVE SPELLS, CAN'T HOLD MONEY,
WANT LUCK, WANT THEIR LOVED ONES BACK,
WANT TO STOP NATURE'S PROBLEMS or WANT TO
GET RID OF STRANGE SICKNESS.*

*IF YOU REALLY WANT SOMETHING DONE
HERE IS THE WOMAN WHO WILL DO IT FOR YOU
IN A HURRY.*

*DON'T TELL HER. LET HER TELL YOU.
THIS WOMAN DOES WHAT OTHERS ONLY CLAIM
TO DO!!!!*

*DON'T WAIT FOR RELIEF!!!! CALL NOW!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
(ONE FREE QUESTION BY PHONE)*

Spotting a public phone outside the cemetery office, lacking a quarter, he nevertheless felt driven to dial. Fate and faulty equipment were on his side.

—“Countess!”

—“Who!?”

—“The Countess Marvella, please!”

—“Oh yeah, hold it!...Countess Marvella here, how can she...I help you?”

—“I don't know.”

—“Whiskey?”

—“No.”

—“Gambling?”

—“No.”

—“Impotence?”

—“I don't think so.”

—“Inexplicable disturbance just happens to be my specialty!...Visa, Mastercard or American Express?”

Silence.

—“Money troubles too, huh!?! Time is money! Why don’t you come visit me in person during my office hours when you’ve got the wherewithal. The Lord provideth. I’ll pass you to my secretary to make an appointment.”

A pause.

Chimes rudely interrupted.—“DEPOSIT FIVE CENTS OR YOUR CALL WILL BE TERMINATED!”

“But I didn’t get to ask my free question!” the homeless man bitterly complained to the wind of the electrical void. Feeling defeated, as usual, he replaced the receiver in its bed, when out poured a shower of quarters, Atlantic-City-slot-machine-style.

“Thank you, Countess Marvella! Thank you from the bottom of my heart!” he half-laughed, half-wept, rich enough for once to pay for a stack of pancakes, hot coffee and a flop. Feeling hopeful, despite the chill in the air, the homeless man headed straight for the International House of Pancakes, jingling the change in his pocket, unaware of the hole, preoccupied for the first time in a long while making plans. First he’d eat his fill. Then he’d stop by at the Salvation Army to replace his cape and see if they needed any Santas for Christmas.

The Disease of Self

What the doctor can't cure is a point of pride, a condition inscribed in DNA and nonsense. There are over-the-counter remedies you could take but they just hold off the inevitable. If only you were a worm, which, when cut in two, could grow a new head and tail, or didn't even bother, but just kept wiggling along, taking things in stride. At the border between night and day even the shadows evaporate. Dreams scatter like vampires afraid of the light. The sleepless are compelled to embrace the disease of self.

A Warning Concerning Autocannibalism

Do not eat yourself, others, if you must, but refrain from your own flesh, however tempting, or there'll be nothing left when you need it. From time to time you may bite a lip or suck on a hair. There is documented evidence of one desperate case, a ship's captain marooned on a desert island, who fed first on his right leg and then on his left, and by the time he was rescued was down to the thumb, index and middle finger of his right hand, fist clenched, bravely resisting temptation. I don't know what I would have done, he is reported to have said, if they hadn't found me when they did. The repressed autocannibal feeds on his own thoughts, turning them over and over, savoring the scent. Some spend their entire lives salivating over a single notion. Others, more rabid, need a new idea every second to break open and suck out the marrow. There are repressed autocannibals in high places, government, industry and the military, who secretly long to devour themselves. Only discipline (the science of self-denial) and the desire to devour others, the enemy, the competition, friends, keeps them in line, though they do have trouble deciding who's edible.

A Modest Proposal to Combine Toilet Stalls, Telephone and Voting Booths for Increased Efficiency, Turnout and Satisfaction*

Picture this! It's the day of the local school board elections and they're expecting the same low turnout as always. But wait! What's that? The flow is slow but steady. All day long they've been coming in off the street, eager and ready to cast their ballot, armed with a quarter and recyclable soft weave rolls of campaign literature provided by the candidates and their supporters. The voting time is variable, depending on personal habits, degree of preparedness, diet, and calling pattern. But fluctuations in the norm can be factored

* The reader will note certain anachronisms in this essay written and published in 1996. The monopoly of Ma Bell was not yet broken into the smaller entities of AT&T and Verizon, a local phone call still cost a quarter, and the cell phone had not yet rendered the phone booth an extinct species. Voting booths have since been replaced by virtual electronic voting nooks devoid of privacy, in which the sexless scanner replaces the tantalizing downwards thrust of the lever.

into the total for an acceptable average turnout time. The sanitation people are happy. So are the plumbers. Ma Bell's faltering campaign to push public phones has finally paid off. And best of all, civic responsibility is on the rise, a fact which ought to please religious leaders and politicians of every stripe.

The scenario is not as utopian as it might seem and can easily be achieved with a little imaginative urban planning. Indeed, why clutter the schools and public places with those clunky curtained "Porto-Sans" of the electoral season, when the structures you want are already in place and merely require a slight functional modification!

The plan is simple enough. If washing machines come in compact invertible models that double as dryer, radio-alarms can also brew coffee, and fax-phone-answering machines tackle it all, then surely someone could design a multipurpose module to simultaneously satisfy the biological, electoral and telecommunications needs of John and Jane Q. Public.

The idea crystallized, of course, where most of my best ideas do, while seated on the can one day. I was skimming an article on the shrinking participation in national and especially local elections. And being a dedicated voter myself, never having missed a single ballot in the 25 years and counting since my majority, I wondered just what it was that attracted me to the electoral process and turned others off. And just then the telephone rang, as it invariably does at the least opportune moment, and of course,

by the time I got around to answering it the caller had hung up.

And then it came to me in a flash, the feature that toilet stalls, voting and telephone booths have in common: that cozy sense of closure. For each is a temporary retreat from the crowd, an oasis of privacy. Why not combine functions and kill three birds with one stone!?! So I reached for my pen and scribbled this proposal on the only paper at hand.

Now I may be one of the very few people who feel this way, but voting booths have always given me an erotic tingle. I like to position myself in line so that there's someone worth looking at directly in front of me—in my case, a female, but the same could be true for any sexual proclivity. I take her in from head to toe, let her image imprint itself on my mind, creating a kind of carnal hologram. And when she slips behind the curtain, the effect is that of virtual burlesque. I stare at her legs, wondering how she casts her ballot. Then I think of the things that could conceivably transpire behind that curtain if one were quick and agile enough. And once she pulls back the curtain with a fleeting smile of purpose on her lips and a sigh of satisfaction, I inhale her lingering scent and hold it with me as I, in turn, take her place. The climax comes when after a few moments of reflection on my predecessor's qualities and the candidate's qualifications, I flick a few switches and pull the lever.*

* Here, again, the text shows its age. Manual voting booths have since been replaced by the electronic variety to insure against the phantom hanging chads of the infamous Florida presidential election in 2000.

What, if anything at all, you ask, can this process possibly have in common with the functions effectuated at the loci of long distance and elimination?

Let's start with the public telephone.

You will remember, I trust, the old-fashioned enclosed phone booth in service before they rudely ripped off its folding door in the '70s and shrank it down to the stunted, pathetic, open-backed phone stand of today! Gone the site of Clark Kent's quick change, where the ordinary caller could rent an illusion of intimacy at ten cents a pop! Seated behind a folding glass door, you could ignore the angry minions on line and let your consciousness dissolve locally or long distance. And even the operators with their sultry faceless smirks stirred the libido—Number please!—a far cry from the contemporary computer-generated neuter attacks programmed to intrude every two minutes with the ominous threat to “terminate” call and caller. Inscribed in the vintage wooden panels of old were numbers and names to which a fertile imagination could attach features.

As for the public toilet stall, it has never, of course, been selective in the business of bodily discharge. Relaxed sphincters are a green light for virtual or actual two-way traffic. The white tiles invite an unexpurgated spill-over from the collective well of the unconscious. My all-time favorite inscription on the wall of a café water closet in Rome portrayed three images of an engorged penis, before, during, and after, drawn with Renaissance precision and perspective and captioned with Caesar's famous

dictum: *Veni! Vidi! Vici!* (I came! I saw! I conquered!). This, by the way, in a country in which a stripper ran for high public office and almost won. (Okay, so the Italians keep changing governments! Doesn't that prove the popularity of the electoral process?)

Telephone booths attract long lines of would-be callers in all kinds of weather. Toilet stalls are seldom lacking in customers. So why couldn't a voting booth be jazzed up a bit to entice the prospective user? And why indeed, if communication and elimination are proven draws, could they not be combined in locale with electoral politics (especially considering the cathartic effect of casting a ballot and the fact that politics is in any case already associated with the sewer!)? The voting booth would only benefit in activity and, in turn, add cachet and a certain respectability to the seamy side of telephone booths and toilet stalls, the latter often confused with the former?

I would recommend that American Standard, the leading manufacturer of public toilet fixtures in the U.S., design a hybrid unit with a flush in place of a lever and a telephone receiver resting on an Economatic toilet roll dispenser. Or better yet, let each political party provide a competing colorful dispenser with its candidates smiling image imprinted on every sheet. A quarter would suffice to release sufficient quantities of paper, open the phone and ballot line, and revenues could be applied to defray the cost of the campaign. American Standard, whose company name already graces tanks and tiles from coast to coast, would reap the benefits of enhanced public image.

As an added refinement, I would permit the parties to station their cohorts outside the restroom precinct to hand out supplementary rolls of recyclable campaign literature. Furthermore, for a racier effect, I would allow candidates to hire graffiti artists to depict them and their spouses naked. This would permit the voter-caller-eliminator to imagine various forms of intercourse, say, with the prospective President and First Lady before casting his or her ballot (a dimension now already covered by the new media), while dialing 900 for an X-rated political party line immediately prior to pulling the flush-lever. Also, voters would be encouraged to write or draw their candid assessment of the candidates on pressure-sensitive wall panels, thus providing a built-in exit poll.

Place a call, elect a President, eliminate waste—all in a single sitting, on the thunder mug of our great participatory democracy!

I am herewith submitting this proposal on a roll of Scott Tissue to the leadership of the Republican National Committee, whose pronounced anal tendencies and ardent desire to streamline the system make them likely to be more receptive to radical solutions than the Democrats. Who knows, they may even wish to tag it as a rider to their Contract with America!



About the Author

Peter Wortsman is the author of five books, including a travel memoir, *Ghost Dance in Berlin, A Rhapsody in Gray* (2013); a novel, *Cold Earth Wanderers* (2014), and a previous book of short prose fiction, *A Modern Way To Die* (1991), a classic of flash fiction.

He has written two stage plays, *The Tattooed Man Tells All* (2000) and *Burning Words* (2006). His travel writing has run in such major newspapers as *The New York Times* and the *Los Angeles Times*, and was included five years in a row in *The Best Travel Writing, 2008-2012*, and again in 2016.

He is also a critically acclaimed translator of numerous books from the German, including *Posthumous Papers of a Living Author*, by Robert Musil, now in its third edition (1988, 2005, 2009); *Telegrams of the Soul: Selected Prose of Peter Altenberg* (2005); *Selected Prose of Heinrich von Kleist* (2010); *Selected Tales of the Brothers Grimm* (2013); *Tales of the German Imagination, From the Brothers Grimm to Ingeborg Bachmann*; and *Konundrum, Selected Prose of Franz Kafka* (2016).

Recipient of a 1985 Beard's Fund Short Story Award and a 2014 Independent Publishers Book Award (IPPY), he was a fellow of the Fulbright (1973) and Thomas J. Watson Foundations (1974) and a Holtzbrinck Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin (2010).



112 Harvard Ave #65
Claremont, CA 91711 USA

pelekinesis@gmail.com
www.pelekinesis.com

Pelekinesis titles are available through Small Press Distribution,
Baker & Taylor, Ingram, Bertrams, and directly from the
publisher's website.