

Esperanto Echo

Everything was reducible to itself infinitely. There was no bottom, no solid core. So the question of what the thing part of anything was, if it was endlessly divisible, drove him fucking nuts.

If you went within, you would have to go within within, and within within within. You couldn't stop fucking pushing it. You had to go beyond each level. You had to go beyond beyond. You had to go beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond beyond.

He once knew this woman who wrote a whole page of everything being a means to a means to a means to a means to a means.

But he figured that also meant that everything was an end in itself, and he could rest in that. Both ways of looking at it were true. It just depended on your current energy level.

He sat on the bench at the bus stop thinking, "A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose."

He turned to the pretty and professionally dressed woman next to him and said, "A bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop."

She smiled at him nervously.

"Conversely," he said to her, "a bus stop's just a fucking bus stop."

He wasn't sitting at the bus stop because he was going to catch a bus. He was there because he liked to be with the people who were. He liked to feel like he was going wherever they were going, doing whatever they were doing, worrying about whatever they were worrying about, distracted by and distracted from whatever they were distracted by and distracted from, in love with whomever

and whatever they were in love with. Because who the hell did they think they were anyway? Who granted them a charter? Who the hell stood them up straight, looked deep into their eyes, and with bona fide bullshit authority, told them, “You are you are you are you are you are you are you are you”? And did this same authority figure then turn right around to Jerry sitting at the bus stop and finish the sentence, “and not him and not him and not him and not him and not him”?

Hardly.

So Jerry sat there and watched one group of bus riders leave and another arrive. He thought maybe he should go with them, not following any one individual, but as a group. Maybe he'd walk into an office building, report to work, be someone and something they were all supposed to be. Maybe he'd end up fixing someone's plumbing or air conditioning. Maybe he'd end up a street preacher. *Are you a sinnah or are you a winnah?* Or maybe he'd even be converted.

If you were employed, you probably shouldn't have a job more than three weeks, he figured, so in ten years, you'd have filled over 180 different roles, and later you could celebrate your silver work anniversary with having worked more than 4,400 jobs. If you had to be employed, that would be the way to do it.

He had just enough change for the bus, so he got on. There were 43 people sitting down, facing the same way, pretending to be alone, pretending these were only living bodies they sat next to. There were 43 people sitting together in identical fashion, moving through space in a long steel body on wheels.

And then he couldn't take it. What reason did strangers need to speak to each other? What was the use of decorum and small talk, if not to buffer one person's presence from another's with some pretence of connection?

He turned to the bearded man in the white shirt and tie next to him and asked, “Who are you?”

“What?”

“Who are you?” Jerry repeated.

“Why?”

“Why not?”

He eyed Jerry suspiciously for a moment and said, “Name’s Henry.”

Henry? Name’s Henry? What kind of response was this? “What’s Henry?” Jerry asked him.

“What?”

“I asked you who you were and you said your name’s Henry. You’re not Henry. Your *name* is. I want to know who you are. You’ve been divorced twice, right? And you hate your work, but since there’s nothing you really don’t dislike, you can’t imagine anything else. And not only that, but you don’t even really know how much you hate. You’re so bitter, but your bitterness toward everything else only touches yourself. That’s why you’re so lonely. That’s why you’ve been impotent for four years. That’s why—”

Henry grabbed Jerry’s ear, and it felt like he was about to twist it off. “Listen, you prick, I don’t know what you think you’re doing. Did my ex-wife put you up to this little joke?”

The man had Jerry’s head down almost in his lap now, and Jerry wheezed, “Can you let go of me?”

He let him go, and Jerry said, “I just want to get to know people. You’re not Henry. Henry’s not here.”

The bus was stopping. Jerry walked briskly past the new passengers and got off. He had no idea what street he was on, but it didn’t matter.

What he wanted to do now was find somebody to fall in love with.

The forty-five year old woman in her car at the stoplight, who had been arrested for stealing jewelry from the department store last week, who drank herself to sleep most nights, who lived alone, wishing she had been a better mother—she seemed like a good candidate.

The obese woman who obsequiously thanked her corporate supervisors for their every breath, who went home and ate and ate and ate and ate to destroy all the structure and stricture, to fuck all the goddam niceness she embodied all day—she seemed like a good candidate.

The woman in the dirt patina, the wide brimmed hat, and the long skirt, who pulled her briefcase behind her twenty-four hours a day, talking to herself about legal decisions—she seemed like a good candidate.

The Indian girl with the nose ring and the black pants and white tee-shirt and the overflow of thick black hair, speaking in an English accent about how stupid Americans are—she seemed like a good candidate.

They were all locked in. They were all locked away, behind behind, and from from from from from. The whole city was entirely barren. Nobody occupied it. The people were depeopled, sole, unable to reach and bring. They could only project their own personal depopulations onto all the depeopled people around them.

Jerry stopped an old man with a cane, holding him gently with both hands just above the elbow. He was slightly aware of the desperation apparent on his face.

He said, “Listen, everybody is not you! The world is not your world! Stop projecting!”

Even as he said this, he knew he was projecting, projecting outward in concentric circles, projecting projections of projections of projections, projecting projections from way within within, pushing infinitely outward from infinitely inward. There was nothing in either direction. Every outward led out of itself, and every inward led within itself.

The old man was afraid of him. But Jerry couldn’t help asking him, “Are you as lonely as I am? Am I as lonely as you are? How can we be lonely if we’re not really here?” He thought the old man was a good candidate to fall in love with too, but he let him go.

Everything around him echoed, everything he heard, saw, smelled. Everything he did echoed. His letting go of the old man let the old man go and let him go and let him go and let him go and let him go.

There had been times when the outward and the inward were not so far apart, times when he wasn't pushing someone away with his projecting while that someone pushed him away with projecting. There had been a handful of times. They were miraculous moments. Now and then they recalled themselves. Not *every* now and then, but occasionally. He'd been a strange old man from the day he was born, but once or twice, but once or twice, he'd felt quite at rest and at home with himself in someone else and that someone else in him.

The wholly unique individual would be indecipherable, he thought. Jerry, on the other hand, had always wanted to be everyone at once, but this involved its own cryptic ciphers. He was an Esperanto solipsist. Why should everyone not be everyone else? Why should everyone not feel quite at rest and at home with themselves in everyone else and everyone else in them?

He sat at a bus stop beside an eight year old boy who could think about nothing but the girl at school with the big hair. He was in love with her hair, but sometimes she'd put her hair back, and it always shocked him how big her ears were. But he loved her anyway. He loved her so much he could hardly say one word to her, and because he could hardly say one word to her, he loved her.

Jerry told the boy, "A bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop is a bus stop."

"Conversely," the boy said to Jerry, "a bus stop's just a fucking bus stop."