

MEDITATION ON BANGS

by Lowry Pei

I have declined to comment on the appearance of small clouds of black smoke over distant parts of the city, or the ubiquity of buzz-saws, but lately I have devoted a great deal of thought to the investigation of mysterious bangs.

You are so familiar with them, perhaps, that you no longer notice them. But they seem to occur more often at night, or perhaps they merely reach the awareness better at that time. Was that a gun? you ask yourself. A backfire? A cherry-bomb? Did anyone else notice it?

I am willing to entertain any hypothesis concerning these bangs, but each must be scrutinized carefully. If the bangs are backfires, why are there so many and why are they so sharp and clear? My car does not make such a noise when it backfires – it makes a sort of choking sound, and only does it on hills; this neighborhood is entirely flat. If they are shots why is there never an outcry or the sound of shattering glass? If they are firecrackers where are the children who light them?

No. Those thoughts do not satisfy. But perhaps one might come to an explanation by thinking about breaking a barrier, as I seem to do between waking and sleep – and just then I sometimes believe I hear a bang. Consider other barriers: class lines – artistic breakthroughs...but I do not believe this neighborhood is full of climbers and creators.

Surely not the population explosion, though we are almost as thick upon the ground as the mayflies that cause auto wrecks in Iowa. Yet do you ever see dead pigeons lying about the streets, though hundreds of thousands of them live in this city? Ask yourself why: it may be that dying pigeons journey to a secret place, known only to their species, and there die by the thousands in great heaps; it may be that

they are immortal; it may be that they have a lifespan of, say, 300 years and that they all came into being 200 years ago and will eventually die around us, to our astonishment, *en masse* – one might as well consider every possibility – or it may be that when pigeons die they vanish. With a bang, caused by the inrush of air into the temporary pocket of vacuum left by the dematerialized pigeon.

It may be that our streets are, at all times, so littered with dead pigeons and we are so accustomed to them that they have become invisible. Or that, without mentioning them, you notice them and I do not. The bangs, too, are a remarkably private phenomenon – an invasion of privacy, to experience or to speak of. I'm sure I am not alone in hearing them.

There seems to be nothing to do but return to the very first conjecture and begin again. Perhaps the bangs *are* shots. Is there no outcry, no sound of breaking glass, because these shots come to us over the curve of the world? There is always firing somewhere, El Salvador, Sri Lanka, East Timor; perhaps in the next block the population is being reduced for reasons – even humanitarian reasons, from the proper perspective – that we do not know.

You object: Have I noticed my neighbors disappearing?

No. Just as I haven't noticed the pigeons. It is only the unnoticed who disappear.

Make sure someone notices you today.

Even a clerk in a shop. But make sure you are really noticed, that you actually register on that person's brain in a more than reflex way. Everyday conversation is not reliable. You could make a scene, try to befriend the other person, commit rudeness or violence; you could expose yourself, or solicit an illegal transaction. You could take the risk of relying on your intuition. Watch the eyes carefully. Some persons are perfectly defended against noticing. You might want to do something which would cause a loud bang.

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