

European Man. A Chronicle

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I.

in the museum
there's a timeline of evolution
which starts with that one fish
that had the courage
to crawl onto land
and ends with a man

I look at my daughter
she's getting blonder
looking less and less like me

I show her there were jellyfish
just like there are now
even before that fish
I point out that the tyrannosaurus
turned into a chicken
and the horse was already "complete"
a real "horse"
but people kept evolving
and horses did not

in the next room we see
how thanks to technology
we'll evolve even further

with an educational exhibit
on a pedestal
glasses, dentures
like grandpa
and then we move on

to implants as extensions of the senses
that doesn't interest her

we go to the bus stop

and this was once marshland
so this was where those dinosaurs roamed free

she sees herself in that marsh
and I see myself there too
at the age of eight
the date is
150 million years before Christ and 30 years ago
both at the same time
and we're just enough 'in the now' not to step out
in front of the moving bus

are we going to see grandpa again?
yes

my daughter leans against the door of the bus
she sees tropical forests and stegosauruses
they're the size of a car

a group of people board
wringing themselves between me and her
they push her all the way into the aisle
hey hey hey excuse me
I may not look like that girl's father
but that man she's next to now
is definitely no relation

she slips through their legs
and pulls herself back to me

I wink
she smiles half sincere
because she's blond
she's never seen as different
is that your daddy? where does he come from?
all she has are vaguely Asian eyes

but her last name
is she German?
she was once
it's my last name too

no, but where are you really from?

not enough oxygen on the bus
one wedged-in man looks like he's going to be sick

I feel her hand and inhale to
slow down my heartbeat
and in my mind I scratch all the other people
out of the bus – and away

we're at her grandpa's house
my daughter races up the stairs
shouting
grandma!

my dad is sleeping in his chair
his breath wheezing through the chinks
in his windpipe
he gasps as if he's drowning in his dream

let go
do what you always
tell us your father did
just roll over and be done with it
go on then
90 years is enough
he was almost 60 when I was born

my dad straightens himself up
my dad sees me looking at him
the way he looked at his own dying father
in 1953
now he's like his dying father was then
go on then
he hears himself telling himself

I'm not dead yet sonny
the doorbell
he gets up

take it easy dad
ok?
it's not a question

somewhere in the biography of Schiller
– the German poet who wrote the Ode to Joy –
there's a brief mention of an 'officer Franz Carl'
who was the great author's rival in love in 1787
and six fathers before me

– Franz Carl
– Abraham Franz
– Ernst Philip
– Carl Abraham
– Philip Ernst
and then my dad

I decide:
Franz Carl is the first man in my timeline

Franz Carl and Schiller
are in love with the same woman
and while Franz Carl is waiting for the right moment
to ask for her hand
Schiller persuades her parents
that maybe that's not such a good idea

*Franz Carl may seem
like a nice enough chap
but he has a few
shortcomings
of which I'm not at liberty to speak*

love and intrigue
Friedrich Schiller is a dick

my forefather – the supporting role –
fades out of Schiller's story when
his duke sells him to the Dutch
along with 2,000 other soldiers
to guard their global commercial network
from natives and pirates

Franz Carl's duke was strapped for cash
he wanted to have the most glamorous court
in Europe

once – for example –
at the opening of an exotic garden
he'd ordered snow brought down from the Alps
and all around the greenhouses the ground was white
and the pathways were strewn with barrellfuls of salt

a few years later the park had withered

the salt had been absorbed into the soil

Franz Carl goes for one
last stroll there
among the rotting tropical trees and plants
for which he is essentially being swapped
then onto the boat – and away

my fish with feet
takes to the sea
on a ship to the unknown
to wherever commerce takes the Dutch

I picture to myself
that I am now Franz Carl
I sail along the coast of Africa
and around the Cape of Good Hope

loading unloading
trading a few slaves
a few days of shore leave
I explore the South African interior

and then back on the ship
and across the ocean to Indonesia
where I will have children

the soldiers on board say
a country without a colony is only half a country
just like a man who never passes on his name
is only half a man
when we arrive in our colony we will
finally be men

and for the rest of my life
I tell anyone who asks
that Friedrich Schiller is a dick
that that woman must wish
she could turn back time
she must look at prints of the tropics
and picture me
moving through the scenery

at the door is a blond woman
hello
I'm from the committee

*for war victims
the boys' camps division
we talked on the phone*
she steps inside
she looks at my daughter
as she says hello to me
she takes off her coat
she sits down at the kitchen table
your son's quite young isn't he?

she's made a special trip from the Netherlands
with a sheaf of blue forms
and a gleaming Atoma notebook
*all you have to do is tell your story
we'll fill out the forms*
my father introduces himself
*I was born in Indonesia in 1928
back in Europe since 1945
right after the war
I took the boat to Holland
and went on to Belgium?
in 1963
they don't know what I am here
with all the Moroccans around
who they invited here
sure maybe I had brown skin too
but what most impressed the Belgians
was my German name*

the blonde woman frowns just like the third-grade teacher
who said to me
*in a way you look Chinese –
but in a way you don't*
an Indo, they call that, short for Indo-European
a person with roots in the old Dutch East Indies colony
a mix of native and European
from India?
the Dutch East Indies – now Indonesia
*if you'd said half-Moroccan
I would have believed that too*
I'm not half anything

the blonde woman notes in blue
Dutch East Indies
my dad says
*scratch that
Indonesia never belonged to us
now write down that I said that*

of course, sir
I'm a historian by training

my daughter's lying down
at the other end of the living room
with her legs up
she's walking on the ceiling

look
if I walk out the window
then I step into the air
and fall into the sky

she scribbles in her Atoma notebook
and checks something off in a table

my father taps me on the arm
yesterday I looked outside
and the apartments
across the street
weren't there anymore
I couldn't see myself
in my reflection in the window
I saw my father
I saw the mountains in Indonesia
my face became the mountains

it's as if all the things that ever touched him
are coming to the foreground one by one
in his mind
things, people, animals
they come to say hello
and then bow – and away

he takes my hand
for a moment
you know what's funny to me
we all know we're going to die
but no one really believes it

my daughter sits bolt upright
goes up to my father
and bends her fingers back
until they touch her wrists

he does the same thing
the blonde woman from the committee sees it
look – she's a real Indo after all
I can't do that

I ask him
can he still manage, here at home?
maybe you're starting to need more care these days?

*I'm not about to sign myself up
to be a prisoner all over again
I still remember the camps*

The blonde woman from the committee checks something off
ask away

*"don't mention the war"
that's what you people say
well, I don't believe in that
sure I don't talk about things
that are pointless to talk about
but that's different*

the year is 1953
in the city of The Hague
less than eight years after the Second World War

my dad is 24
it's Saturday morning
he's sitting on the tram

suddenly he hears shouting in the street
a group of boys rushes the tram
they jump on the rails
they point

just yesterday 15 Dutch students
burst into an Indonesian shop
to assert their rights
in an atmosphere heavy
with fish sauce and spices
they beat up the family that runs the shop
and wrecked the building

they're angry
because the newspaper says
it's the Indos' fault
that the dikes broke

the government cared more about saving the colony
than fixing the dikes here after the war
they sent all that money over there

but then the great flood
swept the country

my dad is caught in the tram
they won't hurt me
I was repatriated
returned to my homeland
150 years late
but anyway, I'm European, I'm Dutch

a hand bangs on the window of the tram
aimed at his face behind the glass
there's one in here!

the shouting boys go on re-enacting
what they saw as children in the war
no dike could hold that in

like in Indonesia
when he was a prisoner in the Jap camp
the smallest boys played a game called
"Jap camp"

ichi ni san shi go roku
whoever doesn't learn the rules in time
will get

shichi
a blow with the stick
whap
right on the head

this is how war goes on forever

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a few years later
Franz Carl is dead
I'm Abraham Franz now
five fathers before me

a native, Indonesian girl looks at me
I just turned 17
in the half-darkness

you're younger
you're naked too
my penis

is a loose cannon
a knife
in the hands
of a drunkard
who's trying to explain something

I talk the whole time
*my father came by way of South Africa
when he sailed to the Dutch East Indies
someday when I'm 18 he'll let me go to Europe
my father studied there
in Europe
one of his classmates was Schiller
who wrote the words to the Ode to Joy
ever heard of it?*

you can hear the staff bumping around
in the rooms on either side
the jingle of silverware in the corridor
you don't understand that I don't even notice them

I'm talking
*you're beautiful
almond eyes
not a drop of Chinese blood
I'll put you down on the edge of the bed
have you ever
you haven't, right?
my mother was thirteen years old
when she married my father*

I lie down
I want you to lie down too
I don't want to be a boy anymore
my father is dead

*don't worry
it's OK
if this makes you pregnant
I'll give the child my name
I promise*

a child with dark hair
dark eyes
like every child
from this moment
for five mothers long
until your genes are gone

and a blonde daughter pops up
in Europe
as if you never existed

*ssshhh hush now
don't be frightened
it's going to happen now*

you're stronger than I am
you could easily push me away

I enter you

wait you say out loud
to yourself, I think
and you disappear
scratched out – and away

the people in Africa, I add,
existed because my father found them

the blonde woman from the committee inquires
what percentage Indo my dad is
and how many generations back
her pen is poised to check off the right category

*what could that possibly mean
you can't be part Indo
an Indo is always a mix*

she asks

then how do you identify yourself?
it's for her to jot down in her notebook

*identify myself?
I thought you could only be identified
by someone else?
If I'm allowed to choose
I'm everything*
