

The String, the Pen & the Ruler

[3rd Draft]

by Robert Glover

"Saturn is lord of the right ear, the spleen, the bladder, the phlegm, and the bones."
- Claudius Ptolemy

"All the while Poppy sat at the dining-room table reading the obits and want ads and looking up toward the ceiling
into the corners of the room."
--*Blu's Hanging*, Lois-Ann Yamanaka

pt. 1 - "Ruler"

Joseph doesn't read anymore. He's in a bit of a crisis. The last book he began to read was *Mrs. Dalloway*, but you know how that goes. He held it in his hand when the rain came good and fast upon the mid-afternoon of a Monday he had off from work. Joseph's a librarian; a Californian, out-of-state, up the coast somewhere near Canada. He told me he wants to move down again, then became quiet as if I was the one who he needed to tell him where to go. And I have a feeling that if I did tell him, he'd leave. So, I didn't say anything and left him be, with the trifling, whirling sounds of the tree tops—cypresses, I think—above us. Joseph's brows furrow in the Scots-Irish way he was told to, while his jangled fingers cross with the purpose of his Mexi-Germanic maternal grandfather; his solid, enchanting blue eyes light afire as the jewels of his grandmother's Scandinavia. She'd read him red books in a fading flowery rocking chair as a young child. And he'd fall asleep to dreams of his older self.

We are standing on thin grass in Wickersham park, undoubtedly without a jacket for the either of us. Sunlight breaks the rain and gleams a temporal blindness into our eyes, reminding me of near-death: a nasally aftertaste. The waves among the trees seem to breathe by Joseph's command. I unsheathe a Papermate pencil from my pocket and twist it into one of the trees. The aftertaste could be burning sage. The leaves can fake me. Joseph's bits of fruit teeth emanate a smile.

I never really liked Papermates because of their stiff erasers, he tells me.

He sniffs the air and smells quiet smoke. The trees really are disillusioned. Their voices are rich and well-read.

“Have you finished Virginia Woolf?” I ask one of his detached ear lobes.

Not yet, he says.

The rest of his words are held fresh within him. I can't quite get to them just yet. They have me thinking of the days when short and long-sleeved-shirts are all hung away in the closet, their patterns and lengths next to each other, their coordination just right. I convince myself that Joseph cannot wait to be older, to let him saturate in my memory, new and renewed to save my focus. He longs at the good sky for a while. He cores an apple right when we find a spot by the park to park ourselves. The park is nearly empty; everybody's at work. There's a couple white-washed Mexican drug-dealers I recognize, weaving in and out of the park. I can tell by the kind of handshakes. Joseph and I have come here because we need to canon our thoughts to some sort of outside presence.

Birds turn their wind while Madlib's “Please Set Me at Ease” plays somewhere. The music seems loud, then quieted; soft then hard. Joseph seems interested. He's sure in his deeply rooted fascination with music, something celestial. The connection he has with music—that is, it's as if he's meant to translate.

It's Madlib, he assures me. He sampled Bobbi Humphrey.¹

“Yeah.”

Off of *Shades of Blue*.

Joseph doesn't speak to many people. It's what I can't figure out. It's another thing about him, some connection, that means ethereal. He speaks with me, though, rather fluidly—breaking, too, like a brook—and quiet. The thump of the music times the dealers in their step. And we're bobbing our heads: I'm a little off beat. Joseph has wonderful timing. It's another thing about him. He twitches a little.

“Joseph?”

Yeah?

“Are you alright?”

He nods. I'm fine.

“Okay--”

Let's go find the music.

We're up and moving around park benches and drugs, smoke with harp strings hoping to do the right thing. We turn towards a Chase bank and walk that way. The air's a cool heat slight of a repeat breeze, passive over Joseph's shoulders. It ensures just a little late arrival of a shiver. I prefer mine in an 8:30, A.M. kind of way, before squints and the curve on Kentucky Street know how to throw me off. Joseph stares with his lips and talks with his eyes to help his reticent audio. I feel like we could sit in a

classroom again, lay our heads down on a desk. The teacher gives us a lecture on a book that just makes me want to read other books. I think of this candle I drew with pastels and blue ink pen. Just bite-sized notes on spiral bound paper scraps and library due-date slips. DEC 18th one of them reads. Joseph picks up his words from the concrete corner near the gutter and puts them back in his mouth round something he's saying about silence.

We're near the local grocery market, named after the town. The name's something coastal. Neither of us really like crosswalks.

We're near the post-office, Joseph murmurs.

"I know."

Why the market?

"Check-out lines."

Ooh.

"There we go."

Joseph perks up and motions for me to orbit close behind him. We sweep through the parking lot speckled with cars owned by someone you know. And parting ways, crossing our paths, he jolts left to head around the back. I'm near the front entrance, perhaps a little too early, so I think I should give him a little time. An elderly woman is carrying groceries to her car; I let her leave in her slow way. I don't count or anything. I watch her put the groceries in the car and drive away. She takes a left out the lot and takes a right down at the end, probably headed to the boulevard.

I'm tingling at the whip-crack pinch of sudden sweat and hot skin; a woman's scream is bloody and boiling like something you hear and know it is. I have no control over my body. Everything's automatic and rushed. I draw a darkish bowie knife from mid-air. And creep up and through and over the threshold of the front of the indoor market. Seems everyone's distracted by Joseph's gun that waves and wails like wounded, abandoned game. All this bad karma shouldn't befall him—I need to act. Joseph's taken a hostage. And screaming glossolalia, something divine. Chaos—big bang—never felt so ordered. I grab the nearest long-haired man—because Joseph has a short-haired woman—practically ripping him from the earth to wipe the knife along his neck.

"I will kill you." He shudders and gags on choked tears. His legs quiver upon the floor I've removed him from. It must be the orbit of the earth. It must be the gravitational waves of colliding black holes. The man tries to wriggle free but I just stick him in the neck to watch a human turn back into a fish in whole blood. "Joseph—let's go!" Joseph fires his gun twice, out of sight, so I know he's coming. The cash registers are open and cleared. I put the bowie away. Joseph sweeps up to me in a hurry, but stops to look what I've done.

Fuck.

"What about the others?"

I locked 'em all in the back.

"Alright." We leave as I see an old woman pull into the parking-lot.

A great brush swept smooth across his mind, sweeping across it moving branches, children's voices, the shuffle of feet, and people passing, and humming traffic, rising and falling traffic. Down, down he sank into the plumes and feathers of sleep, sank, and was muffled over. ⁱⁱ

We've gone up the 1 to a smaller town just at the cliffs edge of the coast. Joseph's toying with a Camel cigarette, fresh and lit, rolling in his fingers. It goes all the way to his pinky then between his forefinger and thumb, hits it like a joint—exhales—then spits the cigarette back into place, index & ring, where it should be. He's like a magician; he's bewildering in his being human. And the smoke that he lets go of doesn't really leave: it channels itself up, cloudy, direct—the ash does leave, however,

with the cars. We always meet in the morning-time for curbside concrete, tobacco magic. He is a magician, and like one, never tells me how he does it. We nod ourselves away from the corner. I put my hands in my pockets. Crumbed ash, sanded windowsills—and the bank's behind us.

Want some? Joseph holds out some fruit in the tips of his fingers.

“Looks like little apples,” I say to his fingernails.

They're golden plums, he says. I bite into one: it's tart and its skin is tough; its taste is vainglorious in its contrast with cigarette smoke.

“It's good.” When your teeth pierce all the way through, the tartness vaporizes and swells with saccharine fruit innards.

We walk awake the rise of hill up and away in a street of small, tight-fitted houses. Some of the neighbored houses are unevenly touching each other. The concrete underfoot lives like the rich nights of summertime, the sidewalk in the distance less so. It is just how the linking space and my eyesight is, all of it buried in stunning crystalline. Most of the tires of the cars along the street are rooted inward to the curb. None of them want to move for Joseph. Firm timing is his thing; I want to give him time. Joseph's walk is mannered and weighted. He says it's like his Grandma's. His feet and legs are microscopically uneven—only noticeable in the way he passes in front. And both feet kick out to their respective sides of his body in slow repression of his movement. I copy him in his step just before we reach the top of the hill. He turns to look over his shoulder to the right of us, but does not see me mime. In this way, I'm reminded of his intuition.

I could go for a burger 'bout now, he suggests to me as he finishes the sentence to the street. He says the words in an Astatkeⁱⁱⁱ breath. I absorb them as a cover.

“Where?”

Doesn't matter to me. Joseph shrugs. He already wants to spend the new money we have. I'm a little more conservative than that. We've topped the hill by now and prepare to descend its side to find the boulevard in one of its skinnier sections. The descent is hard on my knees. I've been thinking my left one's gonna give out any time. I limp from the pain. Sometimes I find it hard to shoot hoop. My relationship with the sport is soulful; the plays have moved from the team to the streets, from squeaks and scuffs of indoor courts to gravel, blood, driveways, parks and weed. It isn't really painful at all; the slow burn helps me forget.

Joseph's on the sidewalk and I'm on its edge. He unwraps a peach Swisher Sweet—it's either that or white grape, maybe blueberry. Joseph takes the swisher in both hands and pinches a crease down the middle with his thumbs. He then pulls the swisher apart, empties the guts into the gutter.

The boulevard is paused. The boulevard is paused. I wanna restart my checkpoint. Joseph eyes a couple parked cars—meters are meagre and rare. Ahead, across the street, stands a tight, congested blue building. Joseph nods toward it—wanna get Mexican?

It's Playa Azul, and one side of the building exterior walls is long, bricked and alone: exposed to a sinkhole of a parking-lot, while the other side of the building is shared with a Chinese Jewelry store. “Sure,” I answer, but he's already half-way across the street. Joseph kicks into the building and I limp in after him. Inside, there's hardly anyone: One, two guys at the tequila bar. One of them leaves as

soon as we sit at our table. The bartender comes out from his alcohol fort to take our order.

Whassup, J? He nods up at Joseph, followed by the handshake of their youth. They might have been good friends once.

Not much, Joseph says, his grainy, strained voice is a little parched.

Tequila? The bartender asks.

Yeah—and two wet burritos.

Two?

“I'm not hungry.”

Never mind, bro.

“What's his name?”

Who? Oh—that's Juanito, he's the homie.

We eat fractures of silence.

Joseph always talks to me when the trees breathe. When they rise, open, fall and settle with the wind. It's as if my experience of nature is being narrated. And each leaf and their respective limbs are charmers of their own ripple in the sunlight—mid-dance for the rain to come. But, it doesn't. The sunlight stays, the rain stays away. I need it, though, to come and wash me away with overcast daydream. Joseph and I are on the street again, and I tell him I want to leave town. I don't think the reason will arrive till after I'm gone. It's easy to do.

In fact a swimming pool requires, once it has been filled and the filter has begun its process of cleaning and recirculating the water, virtually no water, but the symbolic content of swimming pools has always been interesting: a pool is misapprehended as a trapping affluence, real or pretend, and of a kind of hedonistic attention to the body.^{iv}

Sometimes Joseph cannot hold a pen for the notes he takes in the books he does not finish. He says he doesn't care to talk about efficient reading. He thinks he's a bad guy because of this. There's pain somewhere in the layers of stressed and shadowed skin under his eyes. Sadness seems to leave so many creases. I don't think he's ever sober. I don't think I am, either—but, Joseph will get there first. Even if it's just a couple dollars more. This week the book's Cormac McCarthy's, *Child of God*. He might do it this time—he's made it to page 101. I'd cry if he finished. Joseph plays the piano as if he

could pack concerts: the convoluted and jumbled composition of keys happens in a particular kind of nostalgic beauty. It's like when you remember something you just can't quite remember all the way. His fingers piece it out. The song's already there. It's cautious but deliberate. I just help Joseph with the money. That's when the pressure is relieved of permanence in mapped, dark circles and bags. Let's talk about business. That's what it comes to, right? Joseph's never dry. Ain't nothin' to worry 'bout.

I haven't been able to sleep lately, Joseph says.

“Really...?”

Yes.

“How come?” I ask.

I don't know, he says, pulling a cigarette up upon his lips.

“Is it the money?” I ask the cigarette.

He answers me by lighting the smoke while keeping eye-contact. He shakes his head and shrugs. He then grins but it's just another crease. The smoke unfurls itself onto his two fingers that pinch the cigarette, and stays there for a while. The last bit whispers away as Joseph goes for another drag.

What time is it? he asks.

“3:32”

Day went by quick.

“Yes it did,” I say, although, not so sure I agree with him. The afternoon seems to slow up around this time. It's the morning that's here and then gone, not half past three. It seems that Joseph and I disagree on this. Perhaps we always have. And I seem to be more okay with it than he is. That was not my intention. Joseph's finished his cigarette.

So, whaddya wanna do with the money? he asks me, spelling out each word in his head as they come out of his mouth.

“We cop weight, and flip it.” This we just might agree on.

Sounds good, he says. Seems like we do. He continues: remember Juaníto? I think he has some press pills.

“Like, ecstasy?”

Yeah—a little thizz ain't hurt nobody, he tells me.

“Whatever you say.”

...

I think it's the clanking of sheet metal semis. No, two commercial airplanes fly overhead—I look up to them to absorb their delayed sound. The freeway is louder. Clouds try to hold together; it may be awhile before they can hide us. We are free and open now. I'm in love with the way the sun blinds me: a lazy slap and a kiss as I regain sight. I am full and together. Farmland tree clumps are the islands to reach for. Perhaps it really is the cold black coffee. Liquid language is upon us when fresh kitchens arise in heat. I want to row out to sea. Perhaps I'd jump port-side into the twinkling reflection of the sun, right when the waves pick up toward the moon to catch me. I'd split the water the way the morning sun does. It's a secret being drawn aside the prospect of what every argument has been. No hint is powerless. Soon as evening states: angels on a gunwale.

I couldn't tell you where Joseph's from. He's not too particular about those kind of details. I'm sure he'd lie, anyway. It's funny because I'm sure he doesn't lie to me often—except for that. Perhaps it's best. He never questions where I came from...which is just fine.

Where we are now is where we're from, he says.

“I know.”

...

“...You like Donald Byrd?”

Don't know him personally.

“Well, sure—how bout his music?”

I don't mind it.

Joseph takes a second to let those words settle in, then nods with an almost inaudible 'yeah' to signal that he's finished.

I think he likes Byrd more than he lets on. I like Sonny Stitt. He's really nice.

The rain's come. Oh, the Pacific Ocean's in the sky. We sure enjoy such symbiosis. Dark side mossed trees; the rain's only falling where we walk. I thought I found a god somewhere in here—with goose-bumped pink and cocaine skin—but, Joseph hasn't: his forefathers were Pharaohs so he *is* god. I knew it when I first met him. Something in his profile. Especially in the hot days. I believe I fit better by maudlin in coastal mist—sharp with its witty pinches. Joseph's become paranoid that the law can tell our shoe-size from the trail we've left behind, but I tell him it's just 'cause they're picking out new shoes for their wide-footed children. “We're alright,” I tell him yet another time. And it calms his

balled hands a little. Joseph's draws his set eyes, which are noticeably older than the rest of him, from under his lids. The left one's blue and the other is reddish. It's really something. One eye's for his veins and the other his arteries. Joseph says that he doesn't know how to measure the girth of his dick. I tell him that I cannot imagine why he'd need to. I just want to, he's said many times. I tell him that all you need is a string, a pen and a ruler. Well, I knew that—is how he'll sometimes reply, but most often Joseph just shrugs out of comfort in not speaking. It's his favored, ritualistic expression. In fact, Joseph seems to have many rituals. Keeping me around is one of them. I told you, I help him with the money. Joseph's lost without me. He'd be in a constant state of autumn. Fall and death. Especially in the morning time. It's more penetrative then, death is...Joseph you're the one who killed that man. Stuck him well, and sat there talking to him while the color left his eyes. You'll talk to no one but me and the near dead? Okay. I understand.

The bend in the trees is inevitable. Must be gravity. It's clear that the droopiest of branches wants Joseph up there with them. But, he resists all too well. He's quite crafty at that. He breaks one of the skinnier limbs off, cleans it, shaves it and rests it between his thighs just under his balls, and thrusts at the trunk.

“Joseph—stop.”

Wha' f—?

“What are you doing?”

...

“Put the stick down.” I command this with my right index finger. Joseph obeys. He's like a dog.

“You fuckin' animal,” I mutter.

What?

“Nothing.”

The bend in the trees is inevitable. Must be gravity. The rain's back: the Pacific Ocean's in the sky. Okay. I understand. California isn't everything we thought it'd be. But, there's more to that. California isn't everything we thought because we didn't think of everything. We didn't think of *consequence*. California consequence. Sounds like a nice jazz album to me. A tired, but genius album: that one of that great composer at the end of his career. Great composer. End of his career. Repeat Breeze. I knew something would come back round again. Joseph lets me know he's about to talk with the particular way in his silent movement, and then does: How's Clara? He says this with refrain of pulses in downward rain. We're under an awning of a rest-stop on I-5, deciding whether we should continue North to the Redwoods.

“Yeah, I just saw her,” I tell him more than I let on to the interstate.

How's she doing?

“She looks well.”

Yeah?

“Yeah. She looks great, actually.”

Cool.

“Yeah.” We nod in unison to signify the end of that conversation. I'm not even sure what happened. I don't even think the rain is sure either, so it just keeps in rhythm with its steady undulation

of water and wind. Joseph's paranoia about the law turns out to be true. They're somewhere close behind. I knew it before he had to tell me. I knew it from his eyes, in their twinkling. We *have* to keep moving north. Perhaps beyond Oregon and up into Washington—maybe Canada, who knows. Cars pass in greenhouse gas and I can't help but think of myself. I've never been much of an environmentalist.

ⁱ“Please Set Me At Ease” by Bobbi Humphrey, from his fifth studio album, *Fancy Answer*.

ⁱⁱVirginia Woolf, *Mrs. Dalloway*, *Rev. ed.* (Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc), 51.

ⁱⁱⁱMulatu Astatke, jazz musician: one funky ass motherfucker.

^{iv}Joan Didion, *The White Album*. (Printed ...), 63-64.